Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

The Mystery of M. Felix

Benjamin Farjeon

The Mystery of M. Felix

Farjeon B.

The Mystery of M. Felix / B. Farjeon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Farjeon B. L. Benjamin Leopold
The Mystery of M. Felix

THE MYSTERY OF M. FELIX

CHAPTER I.
A CRY FOR HELP FLOATS THROUGH THE NIGHT

"Help!"

Through the whole of the night, chopping, shifting winds had been tearing through the streets of London, now from the north, now from the south, now from the east, now from the west, now from all points of the compass at once; which last caprice-taking place for at least the twentieth time in the course of the hour which the bells of Big Ben were striking-was enough in itself to make the policeman on the beat doubtful of his senses.

"What a chap hears in weather like this," he muttered, "and what he fancies he hears, is enough to drive him mad."

He had sufficient justification for the remark, for there were not only the wild pranks of Boreas to torment and distract him, but there was the snow which, blown in fine particles from roofs and gables, and torn from nooks where it lay huddled up in little heaps against stone walls (for the reason that being blown there by previous winds it could get no further), seemed to take a spiteful pleasure in whirling into his face, which was tingling and smarting with cold, and as a matter of course into his eyes, which it caused to run over with tears. With a vague idea that some appeal had been made officially to him as a representative of law and order, he steadied himself and stood still for a few moments, with a spiritual cold freezing his heart, even as the temporal cold was freezing his marrow.

"Help!"

The bells of Big Ben were still proclaiming the hour of midnight. If a man at such a time might have reasonably been forgiven the fancy that old Westminster's tower had been invaded by an army of malicious witches, how much more readily might he have been forgiven for not being able to fix the direction from which this cry for help proceeded? Nay, he could scarcely have been blamed for doubting that the cry was human.

For the third time-

"Help!"

Then, so far as that appeal was concerned, silence. The cry was heard no more.

The policeman still labored under a vague impression that his duty lay somewhere in an undefined direction, and his attitude was one of strained yet bewildered attention. Suddenly he received a terrible shock. Something touched his foot. He started back, all his nerves thrilling with an unreasonable spasm of horror. Instinctively looking down, he discovered that he had been ridiculously alarmed by a miserable, half-starved, and nearly whole-frozen cat, which, with the scanty hairs on its back sticking up in sharp points, was creeping timorously along in quest of an open door. Recovering from his alarm, the policeman stamped his feet and clapped his hands vigorously to keep the circulation in them.

His beat was in the heart of Soho, and he was at that moment in Gerard Street, in which locality human life is represented in perhaps stranger variety than can be found in any other part of this gigantic city of darkness and light. As a protection against the fierce wind he had taken refuge within the portal of the closed door of an old house which lay a little back from the regular line of buildings

in the street. Little did he dream that the cry for help had proceeded from that very house, the upper portion of which was inhabited by a gentleman known as M. Felix by some, as Mr. Felix by others. Well named, apparently, for although he was not young, M. Felix was distinguished by a certain happy, light-hearted air, which marked him as one who held enjoyment of the pleasures of life as a kind of religion to be devoutly observed. The lower portion of the house was occupied by the landlady, Mrs. Middlemore, who acted as housekeeper to M. Felix. It was the nightly habit of this estimable woman to go for her supper beer at half-past eleven, and return, beaming, at a few minutes after twelve.

These late hours did not interfere with the performance of her duties, because M. Felix was by no means an early riser, seldom breakfasting, indeed, before noon. Despite the inclemency of the weather, Mrs. Middlemore had not deviated on this night from her usual custom. She was a widow, without responsibilities, and no person had a right to meddle with her affairs. Besides, as she frequently remarked, she was quite able to take care of herself.

A welcome diversion occurred to the constable who was stamping his feet within the portal of Mrs. Middlemore's street door. A brother constable sauntered up, and accosted him.

"Is that you, Wigg?"

"As much as there's left of me," replied Constable Wigg.

"You may well say that," observed the new-comer, who rejoiced in the name of Nightingale. "It's all a job to keep one's self together. What a night!"

"Bitter. I've been regularly blown off my feet."

"My case. I'm froze to a stone. The North Pole ain't in it with this, and whether I've got a nose on my face is more than I'd swear to. Anything up?"

"Nothing, except-"

"Except what?" asked Constable Nightingale, as his comrade paused. He put his hand to his nose as he asked the question, his reference to it having inspired doubts as to his being still in possession of the feature.

"A minute or two ago," said Constable Wigg, "I had half a fancy that I heard somebody cry out 'Help!'"

"Ah! Did you go?"

"How could I? I wasn't sure, you know."

"Who could be sure of anything," remarked Constable Nightingale, charitably, "on such a night?"

"Nobody. It must have been the wind."

"Not a doubt of it. If anybody told me he saw Polar bears about I shouldn't dispute with him." Then Constable Nightingale took a step forward, and glanced up at the windows of the front rooms occupied by M. Felix, in which shone a perfect blaze of light. "He must be jolly warm up there."

"Who?" inquired Constable Wigg, his eyes following his comrade's glance.

"Mr. Felix."

"And who's Mr. Felix when he's at home?"

"Why, you don't mean to say you don't know him!"

"Never heard of him. I've only been on the beat two nights."

"I forgot. He's a trump, a regular A-one-er. You're in for a good tip or two. I was on night duty here this time last year, and he behaved handsome. Tipped me at Christmas, and tipped me at New Year's. Half a sov. each time. And at other times, too. Altogether he was as good as between four and five pounds to me while I was here."

"That's something like," said Constable Wigg, with something of eager hope in his voice; "not many like him knocking around. But" – with sudden suspicion-"why should he be so free? Anything wrong about him?"

"Not a bit of it," replied Constable Nightingale, blowing on his ice-cold fingers. "He's a diamond of the first water-a tip-top swell, rolling in money. That's what's the matter with Mr. Felix. Don't you

wish you had the same complaint? 'Constable,' said he to me, when I came on this beat last year, 'you're on night duty here, eh?' 'Yes, sir,' I answers. 'Very good,' he says, acting like a gentleman; 'I live in this house'-we were standing at this very door-'and I always make it a point to look after them as looks after me.'"

"And a very good point it is," remarked Constable Wigg, with growing interest, "for a gentleman to make."

"I thought so myself, and I found it so. 'And I always make it a point,' says he, of 'looking after them as looks after me.' Fact is, Wigg, he comes home late sometimes, with a glass of wine to much in him, and he knows the usefulness of us. Carries a lump of money about him, and likes to feel himself safe. Never what you call drunk, you know. Just a bit sprung, as a real gentleman should be, and always with a pleasant word ready. So, whenever I met him coming home late, I'd walk behind him to his door here, and give him good-night; which he appreciated."

"Much obliged to you for the information, Nightingale."

"Ought to do these little turns for one another, Wigg. The man who was on the beat before me gave me the office, and it's only friendly for me to give it to you." Constable Nightingale looked pensively over the shoulder of his brother constable, and added, "I behaved liberal to him."

"I'll do likewise to you," said Constable Wigg, "if anything happens."

"Was sure you would, Wigg," responded Constable Nightingale, briskly. "What would the force be worth if we didn't stick together? When I see Mr. Felix I'll put in a good word for you. He took a regular fancy to me, and told me if I got the beat again to come to him immediate. Once you see him, you can't miss knowing him. Tall and slim, with hair getting gray. No whiskers; only a mustache, curled. Speaks with a foreign accent-parleyvooish. His clothes fit like a glove. Patent leather boots always, except when he wears shoes; white tie generally. I remember Mrs. Middlemore-"

"Who's she?"

"His landlady. A most respectable woman-made of the right stuff. Ah, a real good sort she is! Goes out every night for her supper beer between eleven and twelve."

"I must have seen her half an hour ago."

"Of course you did. If it was to rain cats and dogs or snowed for a month, she wouldn't miss going. Has she come back?"

"No."

"She stops out as a rule till about this time; fond of a gossip, you know. Most of us are. She'll be here soon, if she can keep her feet. The snow's getting thicker-and listen to the wind! Let's get close to the door. Well, I remember Mrs. Middlemore coming out to me one night, and saying, 'You're wanted up there,' meaning in Mr. Felix's rooms-"

Constable Wigg interposed. "Just now you said parleyvooish."

"So I did, and so I meant."

"Speaks with a foreign accent, you said."

"I don't deny it."

"And you keep on saying Mr. Felix."

"Well?"

"Shouldn't it be Monseer?"

"Well, perhaps; but not Monseer-Monshure."

"I give in to you, Nightingale; I'm not a French scholar."

"Let's call him Mr., for all that. Monshure twists the tongue unless you're born there."

"I'm agreeable. Call him Mr. if you like. Hallo!"

The exclamation was caused by Mrs. Middlemore's street door being suddenly opened without any preliminary warning from within, and with such swiftness and violence that the policemen almost fell through it into the passage. As they were recovering their equilibrium a man stepped out of the house, or rather stumbled out of it, in a state of great excitement. He had a crimson scarf round his

neck; it was loosely tied, and the ends floated in the wind. The little bit of color shone bright in the glare of white snow. Its wearer pulled the door after him and hurried along the street, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and taking no notice of the policemen, who strained their eyes after him. He walked very unsteadily, and was soon out of sight.

CHAPTER II.
THE SPECTRE CAT

"That's a rum start," said Constable Wigg. "Was it Mr. Felix?"

"No," replied Constable Nightingale, "Mr. Felix is altogether a different kind of man. Takes things more coolly. Walks slow, talks slow, thinks slow, looks at you slow. This fellow was like a flash of lightning. Did you catch sight of his face?"

"He was in such a devil of a hurry that there was no catching sight of anything except the red handkerchief round his neck. There was no mistaking that. Seemed a youngish man."

"Yes. Been on a visit to Mr. Felix, most likely."

"Or to some other lodger in the house," suggested Constable Wigg.

"There ain't no other," said Constable Nightingale. "Every room in it except the basement is let to Mr. Felix."

"A married man, then' with a large family?"

"No," said Constable Nightingale, with a little cough. "Single. Or, perhaps, a widower. No business of ours, Wigg."

"Certainly not. Go on with your story, Nightingale. 'You're wanted up there' says Mrs. Middlemore."

"Yes. 'You're wanted up there,' she says, meaning Mr. Felix's rooms. 'Did Mr. Felix send for me?' I ask. 'He did,' she answers. 'He rings his bell and says, "Go for a policeman." And he'll not be sorry it's you, Mr. Nightingale, because you're a man as can be trusted,' Mrs. Middlemore's precise words. You see, Wigg, me and her ain't exactly strangers. I'm a single man, and I'm mistook if she ain't got a bit of money put by."

"You're a knowing one, Nightingale,' said Constable Wigg, somewhat enviously, and it is not to the credit of human nature to state that there flashed into his mind the base idea of endeavoring to supplant his brother constable in Mrs. Middlemore's good graces. What should hinder him? He was a single man, many years younger than Constable Nightingale, and much better looking. All was fair in love and war. The "bit of money put by" was a temptation from Lucifer.

"That's what brings me round here now and then," continued Constable Nightingale, complacently. "A man might go a good deal further than Mrs. Middlemore, and fare a good deal worse. 'I suppose,' says I to her, 'there's somebody with Mr. Felix as he wants to get rid of, and as won't go?' 'I ain't at liberty to say,' she answers, 'but you're pretty near the mark. Come and see for yourself, and don't forget that Mr. Felix has got a liberal heart, and hates fuss.' Upon that, Wigg, I holds my tongue, because I'm a man as knows how to, and I follows Mrs. Middlemore into the house. I'd been inside before, of course, but never upstairs, always down and Mrs. Middlemore had told me such a lot about Mr. Felix's rooms that I was curious to see them. 'Furnished like a palace,' Mrs. Middlemore used to say; so up the stairs I steps, Mrs. Middlemore showing the way, and I don't mind confessing that before we got to the first landing I put my arm round Mrs. Middlemore's waist-but that's neither here nor there. She stops on the landing, and knocks at the door-"

But here Constable Nightingale was compelled to pause, and to hold on tight to his comrade. The storm quite suddenly reached such a pitch of fury that the men could scarcely keep their feet, and it would have been impossible to hear a word that was spoken. It was not a fitful display of temper; so fierce grew the wind that it blew the street door open with a crash, and as the policemen were leaning against it, the consequence was that they were precipitated into the passage, and fell flat upon their backs. The reason of the door being blown open so readily was probably, as Constable Nightingale afterward remarked, because the man who had recently left the house so hastily had not pulled it tight behind him, but the tempest was raging so furiously that it might well have made light of such an obstacle as an old street door. It was with difficulty the policemen recovered their feet, and the

strength of the wind as it rushed through the passage was so great that the idea that they would be safer inside the house than out occurred to both of them at once. To expose themselves to the fury of the elements in the open would undoubtedly have been attended with danger. Instinctively they advanced to the door, and after a struggle succeeded in shutting it. That being accomplished, they stood in the dark passage, mentally debating what they should do next.

"There's something moving," whispered Constable Wigg, trembling. He was not remarkable for courage, and had a horror of darkness.

Constable Nightingale was made of sterner stuff. He promptly pulled out his dark lantern, and cast its circle of light upon the floor; and there, creeping timidly along close to the wall, they saw the miserable half-starved cat which had shaken Constable Wigg's nerves earlier in the night. It had taken advantage of the open street door to obtain the shelter for which it had long been seeking.

"It ain't the first time," said Constable Wigg, in a vicious tone, "that this little beast has given me a turn. Just before you come up it run across me and almost sent my heart into my mouth."

But for a mournful, fear-stricken look in its yellow eyes, the light of the dark lantern seemed to deprive the wretched cat of the power of motion. It remained perfectly still, cowering to the ground. Even when Constable Wigg gave it a spiteful kick it did not move of its own volition, and it was only when the attention of the policeman was no longer directed toward it that it slunk slowly and stealthily away.

Meanwhile the tempest raged more furiously than ever outside. The shrieking wind tore through the streets, carrying devastation in its train, and the air was thick with whirling, blinding snow.

"Did you ever hear anything like it?" said Constable Nightingale.

"Never," said Constable Wigg.

"It would be madness to go out," said Constable Nightingale. "We should be dashed to pieces. Besides, what good could we do? Besides, who would be likely to want us? Besides, who's to know?"

* * * * * *

There was a world of philosophy in these reflections, which Constable Wigg was only too ready to acknowledge.

"What do you propose, Nightingale?" he asked.

"That we go down to Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen," replied Constable Nightingale, "and make ourselves comfortable. I know the way."

He led it, and Constable Wigg very cheerfully accompanied him. The kitchen was the coziest of apartments, and their hearts warmed within them as they entered it. Mrs. Middlemore, like a sensible woman, had taken the precaution to bank up the fire before she left the house, and it needed but one touch from the poker to cause it to spring into a bright glowing blaze. This touch was applied by Constable Nightingale, and the shadows upon walls and ceiling leapt into ruddy life.

"This is something like," said Constable Wigg, stooping and warming himself.

Having no further need for his dark lantern, Constable Nightingale tucked it snugly away, and then proceeded to light a candle which, in its flat tin candlestick and a box of matches handy, stood on the kitchen table. They were not the only articles on the table. There was no table-cloth, it is true, but what mattered that? The whitest of table-cloths would have made but a sorry supper, and in the present instance could not have added to the attractions which the lighted candle revealed. There was bread, there was butter, there was cheese, there were pickles, there was a plate of sausages, there was half a roast fowl, and there was a fine piece of cold pork. Constable Wigg's eyes wandered to the table, and became, so to speak, glued there. He was now standing with his back to the fire, and was being comfortably warmed through. Even a kitchen may become a veritable Aladdin's cave, and this was the case with Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen, in the estimation of Constable Wigg.

"If there's one thing I like better than another for supper," he said, meditatively, and with pathos in his voice, "it is cold pork and pickles. And there's enough for three, Nightingale, there's enough for three."

Constable Nightingale nodded genially, and, with the air of a man familiar with his surroundings, took up a piece of butter on a knife, and put it to his mouth.

"The best fresh," he observed.

"You don't say so?" exclaimed Constable Wigg, not contentiously, but in amiable wonder.

"Taste it," said Constable Nightingale, handing his comrade the knife with a new knob of butter on it.

"It *is* the best fresh," said Constable Wigg. "She lives on the fat of the land." This evidence of good living and the cheerful homeliness of the kitchen strengthened his notion of supplanting Constable Nightingale in the affections of Mrs. Middlemore, but he was careful not to betray himself. "You know your way about, Nightingale. It ain't the first time you've been in this here snuggery."

Constable Nightingale smiled knowingly, and said, "Cold pork and pickles ain't half a bad supper, to say nothing of sausages, roast fowl, and-and-." He sniffed intelligently and inquired, "Ain't there a baked tatery smell somewheres near?"

"Now you mention it," replied Constable Wigg, also sniffing, "I believe there is."

"And here they are, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, opening the door of the oven, and exposing four large, flowery potatoes baking in their skins. "Not yet quite done, not yet quite ready to burst, and all a-growing and a-blowing, and waiting for butter and pepper. They're relishy enough without butter and pepper, but with butter and pepper they're a feast for a emperor."

"Ah," sighed Constable Wigg, "it's better to be born lucky than rich. Now just cast your eye at the door, Nightingale. I'm blessed if that beastly cat ain't poking its nose in again." And as though there was within him a superabundance of vicious energy which required immediate working off, Constable Wigg threw his truncheon at the cat, which, without uttering a sound, fled from the kitchen. "What riles me about that cat is that it moves about like a ghost, without as much as a whine. It takes you all of a sudden, like a stab in the back. It'll be up to some mischief before the night is out."

"Why, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, with a laugh, "you talk of it as if it wasn't a cat at all."

"I don't believe it is. In my opinion it's a spectre cat, a spirit without a solid body. I lifted it with my foot in the street, and not a sound came from it. I kicked it in the passage, and it crept away like a ghost. I let fly my truncheon at it and hit it on the head, and off it went like a shadder, without a whine. It ain't natural. If it comes across me again I advise it to say its prayers."

Which, to say the least of it, was an absurd recommendation to offer to a cat. But Constable Wigg was in an unreasonable and spiteful temper, and he became morose and melancholy when he saw how thoroughly Constable Nightingale was making himself at home in Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen; or perhaps it was the sight of the tempting food on the table which, without lawful invitation, he dared not touch. However it was, he was not allowed much time for gloomy reflection, his thoughts being diverted by the violent slamming of the street door, and by the further sound of a person breathing heavily in her course downstairs.

"It's Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Nightingale, in a low tone. "I never thought she'd be able to open the door alone with such a wind blowing. We'll give her a surprise."

They heard Mrs. Middlemore stop outside the kitchen, and exclaim, "Well! To think I should 'ave been so foolish as to leave the candle alight! I could 'ave swore I blowed it out before I left the room!" Then she opened the door, and it was well that Constable Nightingale darted forward to her support, for if he had not she would have fallen to the ground in affright, and the supper beer would have been lost to taste, if not to sight. It was as well, too, that he put his face close enough to her lips to partially stifle a kind of a hysterical gurgle which was escaping therefrom. It was, however, a proceeding of which Constable Wigg did not inwardly approve.

"Pluck up, Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Nightingale, cheerily, "there's nothing wrong. It's only me and my mate, Wigg, who's on night duty here. Everything's as right as a fiddle. Take a pull at the beer-a long pull. Now you feel better, don't you?"

Mrs. Middlemore-her movements being enviously watched by Constable Wigg, whose thirst was growing almost unbearable-removed her lips from the jug, and said:

"Ever so much. But how did you get in?"

"Didn't get in at all," said Constable Nightingale, jocosely; "we were blown in."

"Blown in!"

"Yes, my dear. We was standing outside, Wigg and me, leaning against the door, when the wind come like a clap of thunder, and blew it clean open, and of course we went with it, flat on our backs the pair of us. When we got on our feet again the wind was tearing so, and the snow was pelting down that fierce, that I thought we might venture to take a liberty, and we come down here to warm ourselves. And that's the long and the short of it, my dear."

He still had his arm round Mrs. Middlemore's waist, and now he gave her a hug. She was a pleasant-faced, round-bodied woman, some forty years of age, and she looked up smilingly as the constable-her favorite constable-hugged her, and said,

"Well, now, I declare you did startle me. When I opened the door, and sor two men a-standing in my kitchen, I thought of burglars, and you might 'ave knocked me down with a feather.

"And now we're here," said Constable Nightingale, "I don't suppose you'd have the heart to turn us out."

"Turn you out!" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, "I wouldn't turn a cat out on such a night as this!"

"More cats," thought Constable Wigg, with his eyes on the cold pork and pickles.

CHAPTER III.
A THRILLING INCIDENT

"The wonder is," said Constable Nightingale, while Mrs. Middlemore shook the snow out of her clothes, "how you had the courage to venture out in such weather."

"It's 'abit, Mr. Nightingale, that's what it is. Once I get to doing a thing regular, done it must be if I want to keep my peace of mind. There wouldn't be a wink of sleep for me if I didn't go and fetch my supper beer myself every night. I don't keep a gal, Mr. Winks-"

"Wigg," said that gentleman in correction, with a dreamy look at the beer-jug.

"I beg you a thousand pardons, Mr. Wigg, I'm sure. I don't keep a gal, and that's why my place is always nice and clean, as you see it now. If you want your work done, do it yourself-that's my motter. Not that I can't afford to keep a gal, but Mr. Felix he ses when he come to me about the rooms when I didn't 'ave a blessed lodger in the 'ouse, 'I'll take 'em,' he ses, 'conditionally. You mustn't let a room in the place to anybody but me.' 'But I make my living out of the rooms, sir,' ses I, 'and I can't afford to let 'em remain empty.' 'You *can* afford,' ses Mr. Felix, 'if I pay for 'em remaining empty. What rent do you arks for the whole 'ouse with the exception of the basement?' I opened my mouth wide, I don't mind telling you that, Mr. Wigg, when I put a price upon the 'ouse. All he ses is, 'Agreed.' 'Then there's attendance, sir,' I ses. 'How much for that?' he arks. I opens my mouth wide agin, and all he ses is, 'Agreed.' You see, Mr. Wigg, seeing as' ow you're a friend of Mr. Nightingale's, and as no friend of his'n can be anything but a gentleman, there's no 'arm in my telling you a thing or two about Mr. Felix, more especially as you're on night duty 'ere."

"Here's to our better acquaintance," said Constable Wigg, laying hands on the beer-jug in an absent kind of way, and raising it to his mouth. When, after a long interval, he put it down again with a sigh of intense satisfaction, he met the reproachful gaze of Constable Nightingale, who gasped:

"Well, of all the cheek! Without ever being asked!"

"Love your heart," said Mrs. Middlemore, "what does that matter? He's as welcome as the flowers in May, being a friend of your'n." She handed the jug to Constable Nightingale, asking, as she did so, "Did you ever 'ave a inspiration, Mr. Nightingale?"

Constable Nightingale did not immediately reply, his face being buried in the jug. When it was free, and he had wiped his mouth, he said, in a mild tone-any harsh judgment he may have harbored against Constable Wigg being softened by the refreshing draught-

"I must have had one to-night when I come this way, out of my beat, to have a talk with Wigg, and to see that you was all right. The taters in the oven'll be burnt to a cinder if they're not took out immediate."

"You've got a nose for baked taters, you 'ave," said Mrs. Middlemore, admiringly. "Trust you for finding out things without eyes! But you always can smell what I've got in the oven."

Constable Wigg rubbed his hands joyously when he saw Mrs. Middlemore lay three plates and draw three chairs up to the table. Then she whipped the baked potatoes out of the oven, saying,

"Done to a turn. Now we can talk and 'ave supper at the same time. Make yourself at 'ome, Mr. Wigg, and 'elp yourself to what you like. I'll 'ave a bit of fowl, Mr. Nightingale, and jest a thin slice of the cold pork, if you please Mr. Wigg. It's a favorite dish of yours, I can see. Mr. Nightingale, *you* won't make compliments, I'm sure. You're the last man as ought to in this 'ouse." Constable Nightingale pressed her foot under the table, and she smiled at him, and continued, "I was going to tell you about my inspiration when I got the supper beer. A pint and a half won't be enough,' ses I to myself; a pint and a half's my regular allowance, Mr. Wigg, and I don't find it too much, because I don't drink sperrits. 'A pint and a half won't be enough,' ses I to myself; 'I shouldn't be surprised if a friend dropped in, so I'll double it.' And I did."

"That's something like an inspiration," said Constable Nightingale, looking amorously at Mrs. Middlemore, who smiled amorously at him in return.

Constable Wigg cut these amorous inclinings short by remarking, "We was talking of Mr. Felix. Nightingale commenced twice to-night telling a story about him, and it's not told yet."

"Not my fault, Wigg," Constable Nightingale managed to say, with his mouth full.

"I'll tell my story first," said Mrs. Middlemore, "and he can tell his afterward. Try them sausages, Mr. Wigg. Mr. Felix always 'as the best of everythink. I buy 'em at Wall's. So when he ses 'Agreed' to the rent and attendance, he ses, 'And about servants?' 'I can't afford to keep more than one, sir,' I ses. 'You can, ses he; 'you can afford to keep none. You'll find me the best tenant you ever 'ad, and what you've got to do is to foller my instructions. 'I'll do my best, sir,' ses I. 'It'll pay you,' ses he, 'to let me do exactly as I please, and never to cross me.' And I'm bound to say, Mr. Wigg, that it 'as paid me never to cross 'im and never to arks questions. 'We shall git along capitally together,' ses he, 'without servants. They're a prying, idle lot, and I won't 'ave 'em creeping up the stairs on welwet toes to find out what I'm doing. So keep none, Mrs. Middlemore,' he ses, 'not the ghost of one. You can wait on me without assistance. If I want to entertain a visitor or two I'll 'ave the meals brought in ready cooked, and if we want hextra attendance I'll git Gunter to send in a man as knows 'is business and can 'old 'is tongue.' Of course I was agreeable to that, and he pays me down a month in advance, like the gentleman he is. Though I don't drink sperrits, Mr. Nightingale, that's no reason why you should deny yourself. You know where the bottle is, and per'aps Mr. Wigg will jine you."

"Mrs. Middlemore," said Constable Wigg, "you're a lady after my own heart, and I'm glad I'm alive. Here's looking toward you."

"Thank you, Mr. Wigg," said Mrs. Middlemore, "and what I say is it's a shame that men like you and Mr. Nightingale should be trapesing the streets with the snow coming down and the wind a-blowing as it is now. Jest listen to it; it's going on worse than ever. Might I take the liberty of inquiring-you being on the beat, Mr. Wigg-whether you sor a lady come out of the house while I was gone for the supper beer?"

"No lady came out of the house," replied Constable Wigg. "A man did."

"A man!" cried Mrs. Middlemore. "Not Mr. Felix, surely!"

"No, not him," said Constable Nightingale. "A strange-looking man with a red handkercher round his neck."

"A strange-looking man, with a red 'andkercher round 'is neck?" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore. "'Ow did he git in?"

"That's not for us to say," said Constable Nightingale. "Perhaps Mr. Felix let him in when you was away."

"Yes, most likely," said Mrs. Middlemore, with an air of confusion which she strove vainly to conceal from the observation of her visitors; "of course, that must be. Mr. Felix often lets people in 'isself. 'Mrs. Middlemore,' he ses sometimes, 'if there's a ring or a knock at the door, I'll attend to it. You needn't trouble yourself.' And I don't-knowing 'im, and knowing it'll pay me better to foller 'is instructions. For there's never a time that sech a thing 'appens that Mr. Felix doesn't say to me afterward, 'Here's a half-sovering for you, Mrs. Middlemore.'"

"You're in for one to-morrow morning, then," observed Constable Wigg, "because it was a man we saw and not a woman."

"He won't forgit it," said Mrs. Middlemore, "not 'im. He's too free and generous with 'is money, so long as he's let alone, and not pry'd upon. What he does is no business of mine, and I'm not going to make it mine."

"Ah," Mrs. Middlemore, said Constable Wigg, emptying his second glass of whiskey, "you know which side your bread is buttered."

"I wasn't born yesterday," said Mrs. Middlemore, with a shrewd smile, "and I've seed things that I keep to myself. Why not? You'd do the same if you was in my shoes, wouldn't you?"

"That we would," replied both the policeman in one breath; and Constable Wigg added, "You're a lucky woman to have such a lodger."

"Well," said Mrs. Middlemore, "I don't deny it. I never met with such a man as Mr. Felix, and I don't believe there is another. Why, when he took possession, he ses, 'Clear out every bit of furniture there is in the rooms. Send it to auction if you like and sell it, and pocket the money. When I leave you shall either 'ave all my furniture, or I'll furnish the rooms over agin according to your fancy, and it shan't cost you a penny.' I was agreeable. Because why? Because he give me forty pound on account, to show that he was in earnest. Then he begins to furnish, and if you was to see 'is rooms, Mr. Wigg, you'd be that took aback that you wouldn't know what to say. All sorts of wonderful woods, satings, picters, swords and daggers, strange rugs and carpets, painted plates and dishes, 'angings, old lamps, and goodness only knows what I don't understand 'arf of 'em. There! I've talked enough about Mr. Felix for once. Let's talk of something else."

"Do you keep cats, Mrs. Middlemore?" asked Constable Nightingale, brewing another grog for himself and Constable Wigg.

"I don't," replied Mrs. Middlemore. "Mr. Felix won't 'ave one in the 'ouse."

"There's one in the house now, though," said Constable Nightingale. "It come in when the wind burst open the street door, and Wigg and me fell into the passage. He says it's not a cat, but a spectre, a ghost."

"Lord save us!" ejaculated Mrs. Middlemore. "If Mr. Felix sees it he'll never forgive me. He 'as a 'atred of 'em. And the ghost of a cat, too!" She was so impressed that she edged closer to Constable Nightingale.

"It was a spectre cat," said Constable Wigg, desirous to do something to divert Mrs. Middlemore's thoughts from Mr. Felix, and also from her leaning toward his comrade. "And then there was that cry for 'Help' I fancied I heard."

"What cry for help?" asked Mrs. Middlemore.

"I thought I heard it three times," said Constable Wigg-but he was prevented from going further by an incident which was followed by a startling picture. Constable Nightingale, rather thrown off his balance by the drink he had imbibed, and desirous to meet the advances of Mrs. Middlemore, slyly put his arm round her waist, and to hide the movement from the observation of his brother constable, made a clumsy movement over the table, and overturned the candle, the effect of which was to put out the light and to leave them in darkness. He was not sorry for it, for the reason that he was hugging Mrs. Middlemore close. But Constable Wigg started up in fear, and cried:

"Somebody has pushed open the door!"

In point of fact the kitchen-door had been quietly pushed open, and the other two observed it when their attention was directed toward it.

"What is it?" whispered Mrs. Middlemore, shaking like a jelly, "Oh, what is it?"

Constable Nightingale, for the second time that night pulled out his dark lantern, and cast its light upon the door. And there, imbedded in the circle of light, was the cat which had already twice before alarmed Constable Wigg. They uttered a cry of horror, and indeed they were justified by the picture which presented itself. The cat was *red*. Every bristle, sticking up on its skin, was luminous with horrible color. It was a perfect ball of blood.

CHAPTER IV.
A DISCUSSION ABOUT RED CATS AND WHITE SNOW

In a fit of terror the constable dropped the lantern, and the cat, unseen by the occupants of the kitchen, scuttled away.

"If you don't light the candle," gasped Mrs. Middlemore, "I shall go off." And she forthwith proceeded to demonstrate by screaming, "Oh, oh, oh!"

"She's done it, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale. "Strike a light, there's a good fellow, and pick up the lantern. I can't do it myself; I've got my arms full."

Constable Wigg had now recovered his courage, and inspired by jealousy, quickly struck a match and lit the candle. Mrs. Middlemore lay comfortably in the arms of Constable Nightingale, who did not seem anxious to rid himself of his burden. Stirred to emulative sympathy, Constable Wigg took possession of one of Mrs. Middlemore's hands, and pressed and patted it with a soothing, "There, there, there! What has made you come over like this? There's nothing to be frightened of, is there, Nightingale?"

"Nothing at all," replied Constable Nightingale, irascibly, for he by no means relished his comrade's insidious attempt to slide into Mrs. Middlemore's affections. "You're better now, ain't you?"

"A little," murmured Mrs. Middlemore, "a very little."

"Take a sip of this," said Constable Wigg, holding a glass to her lips, "it'll bring you round."

Ignoring her previous declaration that she did not "drink sperrits," Mrs. Middlemore sipped the glass of whiskey, and continued to sip, with intermittent shudders, till she had drained the last drop. Then she summoned sufficient strength to raise herself languidly from Constable Nightingale's arms, and look toward the door.

"Where's it gone to?" she asked, in a trembling voice. "What's become of the 'orrid creature?"

"What horrid creature, my dear?" inquired Constable Nightingale, winking at his comrade.

"The cat! The red cat!"

"A red cat!" exclaimed Constable Nightingale, in a jocular voice; "who ever heard of such a thing? Who ever saw such a thing?"

"Why, I did-and you did, too."

"Not me," said Constable Nightingale, with another wink at Constable Wigg.

"Nor me," said that officer, following the lead.

"Do you mean to tell me you didn't see a cat, and that the cat you sor wasn't red?"

"I saw a cat, yes," said Constable Nightingale, "but not a red 'un-no, not a red un'. What do you say, Wigg?"

"I say as you says, Nightingale."

"There's lobsters, now," said Constable Nightingale; "we know what color they are when they're boiled, but we don't boil cats, that I know of, and if we did they wouldn't turn red. You learned natural history when you was at school, Wigg. What did they say about red cats?"

"It's against nature," said Constable Wigg, adding, with an unconscious imitation of Macbeth, "there's no such thing."

"I must take your word for it," said Mrs. Middlemore, only half convinced, "but if ever my eyes deceived me they deceived me jest now. If you two gentlemen wasn't here, I'd be ready to take my oath the cat was red. And now I come to think of it, what made the pair of you cry out as you did?"

"What made us cry out?" repeated Constable Nightingale, who, in this discussion, proved himself much superior to his brother officer in the matter of invention. "It was natural, that's what it was, natural. I'm free to confess I was a bit startled. First, there's the night-listen to it; it's going on

worse than ever-ain't that enough to startle one? I've been out in bad nights, but I never remember such a one-er as this. Did you, Wigg?"

"Never. If it goes on much longer, it'll beat that American blizzard they talked so much of."

"That's enough to startle a chap," continued Constable Nightingale, "letting alone anything else. But then, there was that talk about a spectre cat. I ain't frightened of much that I know of. Put a man before me, or a dog, or a horse, and I'm ready to tackle 'em, one down and the other come up, or altogether if they like; but when you come to spectres, I ain't ashamed to say I'm not up to 'em. Its constitootional, Mrs. Middlemore; I was that way when I was little. There was a cupboard at home, and my mother used to say, 'Don't you ever open it, Jimmy; there's a ghost hiding behind the door.' I wouldn't have put my hand on the knob for untold gold. It's the same now. Anything that's alive I don't give way to; but when it comes to ghosts and spectres I take a back seat, and I don't care who knows it. Then there was that cry for 'Help,' that Wigg was speaking of. Then there was the candle going out" – he gave Mrs. Middlemore a nudge as he referred to this incident-"and the sudden opening of the door there. It was all them things together that made me cry out; and if brother Wigg's got any other explanation to give I shall be glad to hear it."

"No, Nightingale," said the prudent and unimaginative Wigg, "I couldn't improve on you. You've spoke like a man, and I hope our good-looking, good-natured landlady is satisfied."

This complimentary allusion served to dispel Mrs. Middlemore's fears, and in a more contented frame of mind she resumed her seat at the table, the constables following her example.

"May the present moment," said Constable Nightingale, lifting his glass and looking affectionately at Mrs. Middlemore, "be the worst of our lives; and here's my regards to you."

"And mine, my good creature," said Constable Wigg.

"Gents both," said Mrs. Middlemore, now thoroughly restored, "I looks toward yer."

Whereupon they all drank, and settled themselves comfortably in their chairs.

"What was in that cupboard," asked Mrs. Middlemore, "that your mother told you there was a ghost in?"

"What was in it? Now, that shows how a body may be frightened at nothing. I didn't find it out till I was a man, and it was as much a ghost as I am. But there's a lady present, and I'd better not go on."

"Yes, you must," said Mrs. Middlemore, positively. "You've made me that curious that I'll never speak another word to you if you don't tell me."

"Rather than that should happen, I must let you into the secret, I suppose. But you won't mind me mentioning it?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Nightingale. Speak free."

"Well, if you must know, it was where she kept a spare bustle, and a bit or two of hair, and some other little vanities that she didn't want us young 'uns to pull about. There, the murder's out, and I wouldn't have mentioned the things if you hadn't been so curious; but it's a privilege of your sex, Mrs. Middlemore, one of your amiable weaknesses that we're bound to respect."

Mrs. Middlemore laughed, and asked Constable Wigg what he was thinking of. That worthy had, indeed, put on his considering cap, as the saying is; he felt that Constable Nightingale was making the running too fast, and that he should be left hopelessly in the rear unless he made an attempt to assert himself, and to show that he knew a thing or two.

"I was thinking of the red cat," he said.

"Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, in a tone of reproof, "I'm astonished at you. When everything's been made smooth!"

"For the moment, Nightingale, for the moment," said Constable Wigg, complacently. "But there's by and by to reckon with. It ain't to be expected that Mrs. Middlemore can have us always with her, though I'm sure I should ask for nothing better. What could a man want better than this? Outside snow and blow, inside wine and shine."

"You're quite a poet, Mr. Wigg," said Mrs. Middlemore, admiringly.

"I don't see it," grumbled Constable Nightingale; "where's the wine?"

"If this," said Constable Wigg, raising his glass and looking at its contents with the eye of a connoisseur, "ain't as good as the best of wine, I stand corrected. Did you never hear of a poet's license, Nightingale?" He asked this question banteringly.

"No, I didn't, and I don't believe you know where to get one, and what the Government charges for it."

"I'm afraid, Nightingale," said Constable Wigg, beginning to feel the effects of the drink, "that you've no soul for poetry."

"Never you mind whether I have or haven't," retorted Constable Nightingale.

"Gents both," interposed Mrs. Middlemore, "whatever you do, don't fall out. You're as welcome as welcome can be, but don't fall out."

"I bear no malice," said Constable Nightingale, who was really a simple-minded, good-hearted fellow; "shake hands, Wigg, and let bygones be bygones. All I want you to do is to let the red cat alone, or to stick to the point, and have done with it once and for all."

"Very good, Nightingale," said Constable Wigg, assuming the lofty air of a man who had established his claim to pre-eminence. "I'll stick to the point, and if I don't make Mrs. Middlemore's mind easy, I'll give up. Not easy as long as we're here, but easy when we're gone, as gone we must be some time or other, because it don't stand to reason that this storm's going to last forever. I'm only thinking of you, I give you my word, ma'am."

"You're very kind, I'm sure," murmured Mrs. Middlemore, inclining, with the proverbial fickleness of her sex, now to Constable, Nightingale and now to Constable Wigg.

"It's the least I can do," proceeded Constable Wigg, addressing himself solely to his hostess, "after the way I've been treated here. Not for the last time, I hope."

"Not by a many," said Mrs. Middlemore, smirking at the flatterer, "if it remains with me."

"You're monarch of all you survey, ma'am," observed the wily Wigg, smirking back at her, "and remain with you it must, as long as you remain single."

"Oh, Mr. Wigg!"

"It's nobody's fault but your own if you do; there's not many as can pick and choose, but you're one as can. Perhaps you're hard to please, ma'am-"

"I ain't," said Mrs. Middlemore, so energetically that Constable Nightingale began to think it time to interfere.

"You're forgetting the red cat, Wigg," he said.

"Not at all," said Constable Wigg, blandly; "I'm coming to it, but I don't forget that Mrs. Middlemore has nerves. It amounts to this, ma'am. I've read a bit in my time, and I'm going to give you-*and* Nightingale, if he ain't too proud-the benefit of it. You *did* see a red cat, ma'am."

"Did I?" said Mrs. Middlemore, looking around with a shiver.

"You did, ma'am, and yet the cat wasn't red. I thought it was red, and so did Nightingale, if he'll speak the truth. I'll wait for him to say."

"I won't keep you waiting long," said Constable Nightingale, in a surly tone. "As you and Mrs. Middlemore seem to be of one mind, I'll make a clean breast of it. I thought it was red, and when I made light of it I did it for her sake."

He said this so tenderly that Mrs. Middlemore rewarded him with a look of gratitude; but she kept her eyes averted from the kitchen door.

"Now we can get on like a house on fire," said Constable Wigg. "When you winked at me, Nightingale, I didn't contradict you, but I fell a-thinking, and then what I read come to my mind. You've been out in the snow, Mrs. Middlemore, and you saw nothing but white. We've been out in the snow, ma'am, and we saw nothing but white. Not for a minute, not for five, not for ten but for hours I may say. I remember reading somewhere that when you've looked for a longish time upon nothing but white, that it's as likely as not the next thing you see will be red, never mind what the color really

is. That's the way with us. The cat's been haunting me, in a manner of speaking, the whole livelong night, and what with that and the snow, and being all of a sudden shoved into darkness, the minute a light shines on the wretched thing it comes to me as red as a ball of fire; and it comes to you the same, because the snow's got into your eyes and affected your sight."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Constable Nightingale.

"What's that you say, Nightingale?" asked Constable Wigg.

"Bosh! I didn't want to frighten Mrs. Middlemore, and that's the reason I wouldn't harp on it, but now you've raked it up again I'll have the matter settled."

So saying, Constable Nightingale rose from his chair.

"Where are you going?" cried Mrs. Middlemore. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to find that cat," replied Constable Nightingale, "if it's in the house. If it isn't red, I give in and apologize. If it is, I shall take the liberty of saying for the third time, Bosh!"

He walked toward the door, but started back before he reached it, and pointing to the floor, asked,

"What do you call that, Wigg? Is that a deloosion!"

Constable Wigg advanced, looked down, rubbed his eyes, looked down again, and answered,

"I'm bound to say there's no mistaking the color. Have you got any red ochre in the house, ma'am?"

"Not a bit," gasped Mrs. Middlemore, "as I knows on."

"These," said Constable Nightingale, kneeling, and examining the floor, "are marks of the cat's paws, and they're red. Look for yourself, Wigg."

"There's no denying it," said the baffled Wigg.

"You're on duty here, Wigg."

"What do you advise, Nightingale? You've been longer in the force than me."

"It's got to be looked into by somebody. It ain't for me to do it, because I'm out of my beat, and I don't want to be made an example of. Would you oblige me by going to the door and giving the alarm?"

"What for?"

"For me, being at a distance, to hear it. For me hearing it, to run to your assistance. Do you twig? My being on your beat must be accounted for. That will account for it."

This ingenious suggestion relieved Constable Wigg's mind as well as his comrade's.

"That's a good idea," he said; "and it'll account, too, for our being in the house, supposing anything should be said about it."

"Exactly. Being here with Mrs. Middlemore's permission. You've got a lot to learn, Wigg, and one of the lessons I'd advise you to take to heart" – here he looked significantly at Mrs. Middlemore-"is not to poach on a pal's preserves."

Constable Wigg may have felt the reproach, but he took no notice of it. "You may as well come to the door with me, Nightingale."

"I've no objections."

"I'll come too," said Mrs. Middlemore, nervously. "I wouldn't be left alone here for anythink you could orfer me."

The three walked upstairs to the passage, Mrs. Middlemore needing the support of Constable Nightingale's arm round her waist; but the moment the fastenings of the street-door were unloosed, it flew open as though a battering ram had been applied to it, and the wind and snow swept in upon them with undiminished fury.

"Hanged if it ain't getting worse and worse!" muttered Constable Nightingale, helping the others to shut the door, which was accomplished with great difficulty.

"Don't make a noise in the passage," whispered Mrs. Middlemore to Constable Wigg. "Mr. Felix 'll 'ear it, and he'd never forgive me."

"We'll take it for granted, then, that the alarm is given," said Constable Nightingale, "and we'll go downstairs, and consider what ought to be done."

CHAPTER V.
DR. LAMB TELLS THE CONSTABLES AND MRS. MIDDLEMORE WHAT IS THE MATTER WITH MR. FELIX

Arrived once more in that comfortable apartment, they shook off the snow dust which had blown in upon them from the street. Then Constable Nightingale assumed a judicial attitude.

"In case of anything being wrong," he said, "we must all be agreed upon what has took place before it's discovered."

"Before what's discovered?" cried Mrs. Middlemore.

"That we've got to find out."

"It's ten to one there's nothing to find out," said Constable Wigg.

"It's ten to one there is," retorted Constable Nightingale. "I go a bit deeper than you, Wigg; but whether there is or there ain't, it's always well to be prepared with a story. I've got something in my mind that you don't seem to have in yours; what it is you shall hear presently. Mrs. Middlemore, going out for her supper-beer at her usual hour, about half-past eleven shuts the street-door behind her, and does not return till past twelve. Is that correct, ma'am?"

"Quite correct, Mr. Nightingale; but what are you driving at?"

"All in good time, my dear. You leave the house safe, and you are sure you shut the street-door tight?"

"I'll take my oath of it."

"It may come to that; I don't want to scare you, but it may come to that. When you come back with the supper-beer you find the street-door open?"

"But I don't."

"Excuse me, you do; it's necessary."

"Oh!"

"And I'll tell you why. When you come home you find Wigg and me here, don't you?"

"Yes."

"You've heard how we got in, but it's a fact that we had no business here unless we was called in. We must have been called in by somebody, and whoever it was must have had a reason for inviting us. Is that sound, Wigg?"

"As sound as a rock, Nightingale."

"Mr. Felix didn't call us in, and there's no one else in the house while you've gone for your supper-beer?" Mrs. Middlemore coughed, which caused Constable Nightingale to ask, "What's that for?"

"It ain't for me to say," replied Mrs. Middlemore. "What you want to git at is that there's only two people living regularly in the 'ouse, Mr. Felix and me. If Mr. Felix makes it worth my while to keep my own counsel, I'm going to keep it, and I don't care what happens."

"I wouldn't persuade you otherwise. Gentlemen that's so liberal with their money as him ain't to be met with every day. Very well, then. There's only you and Mr. Felix living in the house, and he don't call us in. It's you that does that. Why? You shut the street-door tight when you went out; you find it open when you come back, and at the same time you see a man with a red handkercher round his neck run out of the house. Of course you're alarmed; Wigg happens to be near, and you call him; he, thinking he may want assistance, calls me; and that's how it is we're both here at the present moment. That's pretty straight, isn't it?"

Both his hearers agreed that it was, and he proceeded:

"But we mustn't forget that we've been here some time already. I make it, by my silver watch that I won in a raffle, twenty minutes to two. Your kitchen clock, Mrs. Middlemore, is a little slow."

"Do what I will," said Mrs. Middlemore, "I can't make it go right."

"Some clocks," observed Constable Nightingale, with a touch of humor-he was on the best of terms with himself, having, in a certain sense, snuffed out Constable Wigg-"are like some men and women; they're either too slow or too fast, and try your hardest you can't alter 'em. We must be able to account for a little time between past twelve o'clock and now; there's no need to be too particular; such a night as this is 'll excuse a lot. I'll take the liberty of stopping your clock and putting the hands back to twelve, so that you won't be fixed to a half-hour or so. The clock stopped while you was getting your supper-beer, of course. Likewise I stop my watch, and put the hands back to about the same time. Now, what do I do when Wigg calls me here? I hear what you, ma'am, have to say about the street-door being open and a man running out and almost upsetting you, and I make tracks after him. I don't catch him, and then I come back here, and that brings us up to this very minute. Plain sailing, so far. You'll bear it in mind, you and Wigg, won't you?"

"I've got it," said Wigg, "at my fingers' ends."

"So 'ave I," said Mrs. Middlemore.

"But what are you going to do now?" asked Constable Wigg.

"To find the cat," replied Constable Nightingale.

"Going to take it up?" This, with a fine touch of sarcasm.

"No, Wigg," said Constable Nightingale, speaking very seriously. "I want to make sure where it got that red color from, because, not to put too fine a point on it, it's blood."

Mrs. Middlemore uttered a stifled scream, and clapped her hands on her hips.

"That," continued Constable Nightingale, in a tone of severity to his brother constable, "is what I had in my mind and you didn't have in yours. Why, if you look with only half an eye at them stains on the floor, you can't mistake 'em."

"Oh, dear, oh, dear," moaned Mrs. Middlemore, "we shall all be murdered in our beds?"

"Nothing of the sort, my dear," said Constable Nightingale; "we'll look after you. Pull yourself together, there's a good soul, and answer me one or two questions. I know that Mr. Felix comes home late sometimes."

"Very often, very often."

"And that, as well as being generous with his money, he likes his pleasures. Now, are you sure he was at home when you went out for your beer?"

"I'm certain of it."

"And that he did not go out before you come back?"

"How can I tell you that?"

"Of course. A stupid question. But, at all events, he ain't the sort of man to go out in such a storm as this?"

"Not 'im. He's too fond of his comforts."

"Does he ever ring for you in the middle of the night-at such a time as this, for instance?"

"Never."

"Has he ever been took ill in the night, and rung you up?"

"Never."

"Do you ever go up to his room without being summoned?"

"It's more than I dare. I should lose the best customer I ever had in my life. He made things as clear as can be when he first come into the 'ouse. 'Never,' he ses to me, 'under any circumstances whatever, let me see you going upstairs to my rooms unless I call you. Never let me ketch you prying about. If I do, you shall 'ear of it in a way you won't like.'"

Constable Nightingale was silent a few moments, and then he said, briskly, "Let's us go and hunt up that cat."

But although they searched the basement through they could not find it.

"Perhaps," suggested Constable Wigg, "it got out of the house when we opened the street-door just now."

"Perhaps," assented Constable Nightingale, laconically.

Then they ascended the stairs to the ground floor, Constable Nightingale examining very carefully the marks of the cat's paws on the oilcloth.

"Do you see, Mrs. Middlemore? Blood. There's no mistaking it. And I'm hanged if it doesn't go upstairs to the first floor."

"You're not going up, Mr. Nightingale?" asked Mrs. Middlemore, under her breath, laying her hand on his arm.

"If I know myself," said Constable Nightingale, patting her hand, "I am. Whatever happens, it's my duty and Wigg's to get at the bottom of this. What else did you call us in for?"

"To be sure," said Mrs. Middlemore, helplessly, "but if you have any feeling for me, speak low."

"I will, my dear. My feelings for you well you must know, but this is not the time. Look here at this stain, and this, and this. The spectre cat has been up these stairs. Puss, puss, puss, puss! Not likely that it'll answer; it's got the cunning of a fox. That's Mr. Felix's room, if my eyes don't deceive me."

"Yes, it is."

"But it don't look the same door as the one I have been through; it ain't the first time I've been here, you know. Where's the keyhole? I'll take my oath there was a keyhole when I last saw the door."

"The key 'ole's 'id. That brass plate covers it; it's a patent spring, and he fixes it some'ow from the inside; he presses something, and it slides down; then he turns a screw, and makes it tight."

"Can anyone do it but him?"

"I don't think they can; it's 'is own idea, he ses."

"See how we're getting on, Wigg. No one can work that brass plate but him; that shows he's at home." He knocked at the door, and called "Mr. Felix, Mr. Felix!"

"He'll give me notice to leave," said Mrs. Middlemore, "I'm sure he will. He's the last man in the world to be broke in upon like this."

"Leave it to me, my dear," said Constable Nightingale, "I'll make it all right with him. What did he say to me when I was on this beat? I told you, you remember, Wigg. 'Constable,' says he, 'you're on night duty here.' 'Yes, sir,' I answers. 'Very good,' says he, 'I live in this house, and I always make it a point to look after them as looks after me.' That was a straight tip, and I'm looking after him now. Mr. Felix, Mr. Felix!"

But though he called again and again, and rapped at the door twenty times, he received no answer from within the room.

"It's singular," he said, knitting his brows. "He must be a sound sleeper, must Mr. Felix. I'll try again."

He continued to knock and call "loud enough," as he declared, "to rouse the dead," but no response came to the anxious little group on the landing.

"There's not only no keyhole," said Constable Nightingale, "but there's no handle to take hold of. The door's for all the world like a safe without a knob. Mr. Felix, Mr. Felix, Mr. Felix! Don't you hear us, sir? I've got something particular to say to you."

For all the effect he produced he might have spoken to a stone wall, and he and Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore stood looking helplessly at each other.

"I tell you what it is," he said, tightening his belt, "this has got beyond a joke. What with the silence, and the bloodstains, and the man with the red handkercher round his neck as run out of the house while Wigg and me was talking together outside, there's more in this than meets the eye. Now, Mrs. Middlemore, there's no occasion for us to speak low any more; it's wearing to the throat. Have you got any doubt at all that the brass plate there couldn't be fixed as it is unless somebody was inside the room?"

"I'm certain of it, Mr. Nightingale, I'm certain of it."

"Then Mr. Felix, or somebody else, must be there, and if he's alive couldn't help hearing us, unless he's took a sleeping draught of twenty-horse power. There's a bell wire up there; Wigg, give me a back."

Constable Wigg stooped, and Constable Nightingale stood on his back and reached the wire, which he pulled smartly for so long a time that Constable Wigg's back gave way, and brought Constable Nightingale to the ground somewhat unexpectedly. Certainly every person in the house possessed of the sense of hearing must have heard the bell, which had a peculiar resonant ring, and seemed on this occasion to have a hundred ghostly echoes which proclaimed themselves incontinently from attic to basement. No well-behaved echo would have displayed such a lack of method.

"Oughtn't that to rouse him?" asked Constable Nightingale.

"It ought to," replied Mrs. Middlemore, "if-" and then suddenly paused, the "if" frozen on her tongue.

"Ah," said Constable Nightingale, gravely, "if!"

There was a window on the landing, and he opened it. The snow dust floated through it, but in less quantities, and there was a perceptible abatement in the violence of the storm. He closed the window.

"It ain't so bad as it was. Mrs. Middlemore, do you think I could force this door open?"

"Not without tools," said Mrs. Middlemore. "It's made of oak."

"No harm in trying," said Constable Nightingale. "Here, Wigg, give us a pound."

They applied their shoulders with a will, but their united efforts produced no impression.

"It's got to be opened," said Constable Nightingale, "by fair means or foul. Wigg, do you know of a locksmith about here?"

"I don't."

In point of fact Constable Nightingale knew of one, but it was at some little distance, and he did not want to leave Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore alone.

"There's one in Wardour Street," he said.

"Is there?" said Constable Wigg. "I'm new to the neighborhood, and I'm certain I shouldn't be able to find it."

"All right," said Constable Nightingale, briskly, seeing his way out of the difficulty, "we'll go together."

"And leave me alone 'ere after what's happened!" cried Mrs. Middlemore. "Not if you was to fill my lap with dymens! That 'orrid cat 'd come and scare the life out of me!"

"We can't all go," mused Constable Nightingale, with a stern eye on his comrade, "and I ain't a man to shirk a duty; but don't go back on a pal, Wigg, whatever you do."

"Nobody could ever bring that against me, Nightingale," said Constable Wigg, in an injured tone; "and I don't know what you're driving at."

"I hope you don't," said Constable Nightingale, by no means softened, "that's all I've got to say. I hope you don't. You'd better both see me to the door, and shut it after me. And mind you keep your ears open to let me in when I come back."

Constable Nightingale, a victim to duty, was presently battling with the storm through the deserted streets, while Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore, at the housekeeper's suggestion, made their way to the warm kitchen, where she brewed for her companion a stiff glass of grog. "What did Mr. Nightingale mean," asked Mrs. Middlemore, "when he said never go back on a pal?"

"I'd rather not say," replied Constable Wigg, and then appeared suddenly to come to a different conclusion.

"But why not? The last of my wishes would be to vex you, and when you're curious you like to know, don't you, my-I beg you a thousand pardons-don't you, ma'am?"

"Mr. Wigg," observed Mrs. Middlemore, "I'm a woman, and I do like to know. Oh!" she cried, with a little shriek, "was that somebody moving upstairs?"

"No, my dear, no. Keep close to me; I will protect you and proud of the chance, as who wouldn't be? When Nightingale threw out that hint, he meant, if I'm not mistook, that a lady should have only one admirer, hisself."

"Well, I'm sure!"

"He's not a bad sort of fellow, is Nightingale-it ain't for me to say anything against him-but when he wants a monopoly of something very precious" – and Constable Wigg looked languishingly at Mrs. Middlemore-"when he wants that, and as good as says it belongs to him and no one else, he touches a tender point. There's no harm in my admiring you, my dear; who could help it, that's what I'd like to know? Thank you-I *will* take another lump of sugar. Yes, who could help it? Charms like yours-if you'll forgive me for mentioning 'em-ain't to be met with every day, and a man with a heart would have to be blind not to be struck. There! I wouldn't have spoke so free if it hadn't been for Nightingale and for your asking me what he meant. But a man can't always restrain his feelings, and I hope I haven't hurt yours, my dear."

"Not a bit, Mr. Wigg," said Mrs. Middlemore, and the tone would have been amorous had it not been for the mysterious trouble in her house; "you've spoke beautiful, and Mr. Nightingale ought to be ashamed of 'isself."

"Don't tell him I said anything, my dear."

"I won't. I give you my 'and on it."

He took it and squeezed it, and said, "What's passed we'll keep to ourselves."

"We will, Mr. Wigg."

"Here's to our better acquaintance, my dear."

"I'm sure you're kindness itself. Oh, Mr. Wigg, I 'ope nothing 'as 'appened to Mr. Felix."

"I hope so, too. My opinion is that he's out, and that the brass plate over the keyhole has got there by accident. But Nightingale always makes the worst of things. That's not my way. Wait till the worst comes, I say; it's time enough. You may worrit yourself to death, and be no better off for it after all."

In this strain they continued their conversation, Mrs. Middlemore declaring that it was quite a comfort to have Constable Wigg with her. She confided to him that she had a bit of money saved, and that Mr. Felix had said more than once that he would remember her in his will, which elicited from Constable Wigg the remark that he hoped Mr. Felix had made his will and had behaved as he ought to; "though, mind you," he added, "I don't believe anything's the matter with him, or that he's at home. It's all through that spectre cat, and as for bloodstains, they've got to be proved." A knocking and rattling at the street-door caused Mrs. Middlemore to cling very closely to him, and when she recovered her fright, they both went upstairs to let Constable Nightingale in.

"Is that you, Nightingale?" Constable Wigg called out before he turned the key.

"Yes, it's me," cried Constable Nightingale, without: "don't keep us waiting all night."

"He's got the locksmith with him," whispered Constable Wigg, with his lips very close to Mrs. Middlemore's ear. Then he threw open the street-door.

Constable Nightingale had somebody else with him besides the locksmith. Accompanying them was a tall, thin, gentlemanly-looking, but rather seedy young gentleman, who stepped quickly into the passage.

"Has anything took place?" inquired Constable Nightingale, glancing suspiciously from Constable Wigg to Mrs. Middlemore.

"Nothing," replied Constable Wigg. "There ain't been a sound in the house."

"Just as we turned the corner," said Constable Nightingale, with a motion of his hand toward the seedy young gentleman, "we met Dr. Lamb, who was coming home from a case, and as there's no knowing what might be wanted, I asked him to favor us with his company."

Mrs. Middlemore knew Dr. Lamb, who kept a chemist's shop in the neighborhood, and she gave him a friendly nod. It must have been a trying case that the young gentleman had come from,

for he looked particularly shaky, and was rather unsteady on his legs. The locksmith now made some sensible remarks to the effect that he had been awakened from a sound sleep, and would like to get back to bed again; therefore, had they not better get to work at once? His suggestion was acted upon, and they all proceeded upstairs.

"I'll give him another chance," said Constable Nightingale, and he forthwith exerted the full strength of his lungs and hammered away at the door, to as little purpose as he had previously done. "There's nothing for it," he said, very red in the face, "but to force open the door in the name of the law."

The locksmith, who had brought a basket of tools with him, declared he would make short work of it, but after examining the door was forced to confess inwardly that this was an idle boast. It was of stout oak, and to remove the brass plate and pick the lock occupied him much longer than he expected. However, in the course of about twenty minutes the task was accomplished, and the door stood open for them to enter. Standing for a moment irresolutely on the threshold they were greeted by a blast of cold air. Constable Nightingale was the first to notice that the window was open, and he stepped into the room and closed it. The others followed, and were treading close on his heels when he waved them back, and pointed downward. There, on the floor, was a little pool of blood. They shuddered as they gazed upon it.

"I thought as much," said Constable Nightingale, the first to speak. "There's been foul play here. Who opened that window, and left it open on such a night? The cry for help you heard, Wigg, came from this room."

"But there's nobody here," said Constable Wigg.

"That's his bedroom," said Mrs. Middlemore, in an awestruck voice, pointing to a room the door of which was ajar.

They stepped softly toward it, Dr. Lamb now taking the lead. In an arm-chair by the side of the bed sat a man, his arms hanging listlessly down. Dr. Lamb shook him roughly.

"Wake up!"

But the figure did not move. Dr. Lamb leant over the recumbent form, and thrust his hand inside the man's waistcoat. Then, with his fingers under the man's chin, he raised the head, so that the face was visible.

"Good Lord!" cried Mrs. Middlemore. "It's Mr. Felix! What's the matter with him?"

Dr. Lamb put his finger to his lips, and did not immediately reply. When he removed his hand the head dropped down again, hiding the face.

"If you want to know what's the matter with the man," he said, presently, "he's dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore.

"As a doornail," said Dr. Lamb.

CHAPTER VI.
THE "EVENING MOON" INDULGES IN A BOMBASTIC RETROSPECT, IN WHICH SOME VERY TALL AND VERY FINE WRITING WILL BE DETECTED BY THE OBSERVANT READER

"In pursuance of the policy which we inaugurated some four years since by the romance known as 'Great Porter Square,' we now present our readers with a story of today, which we with confidence declare to be as strange and exciting as that thrilling mystery, which may be regarded as the starting-point of a new and captivating description of journalism for the people. We use the term 'romance' advisedly, and are prepared to justify it, although the incidents which we set before hundreds of thousands of readers were true in every particular, and occurred in a locality with which every Londoner is familiar. We recall with pride the extraordinary variety of opinions which our publication of that story of real life, and the means we pursued to get at the heart of it, elicited. By many we were inordinately praised, by some we were mercilessly condemned. There were critics who declared that it was derogatory to the legitimate functions of a newspaper to present any matter of public interest in the garb in which we clothed it; there were others who, with a juster sense of the altered conditions of society by which we are ruled, and to which we are compelled to submit, declared that the new departure we made in the Great Porter Square Mystery was, to the general mass of readers, as wholesome as it was entertaining. Judging by results, these latter critics were most certainly in the right. The public read with eager avidity the details of that remarkable case as we published them, in our own original fashion, from day to day. The demand for copies of our several editions was so great that we were absolutely unable to satisfy it, and we are afraid that thousands of newspaper readers were compelled to pay exorbitant prices to the ragamuffins who vend the daily journals in the public streets. We made strong endeavors to put a stop to this extortion, but our efforts were vain, chiefly because the people themselves were content to pay three and four times the established price of the *Evening Moon* rather than be deprived of the pleasure of reading the tempting morsels with which its columns were filled. Letters of congratulation poured in upon us from all quarters, written by persons occupying the highest positions in society, as well as by others moving in the lowest stations, and from that time the success of the *Evening Moon*, as a journal which had firmly fixed itself in the affections of the people, was assured. If any excuse is needed for the system of journalism of which we were the first bold exponents, we might find it in the trite axiom that the ends justify the means, but we deny that any excuse whatever is required. It was no sentimental experiment that we were trying; we had carefully watched the currents of public opinion, and we started on our crusade to satisfy a need. The present state of society is such that the public insist upon their right to be made acquainted with the innermost details of cases which are brought before the tribunals; the moment these cases come before the public they are public property. There was a time when seemly and closed doors were the rule, and under the cloak of that pernicious system the most flagrant wrongs were committed; it is not so in the present day, and it is right that it should not be so. Public matters belong to the people, and so long as a proper and necessary measure of decency is observed, so long as private characters are not defamed, so long as homes and those who occupy them are not made wretched by infamous innuendoes, so long as the pen of the literary journalist is not employed for the purpose of scandal and blackmail-too often, we regret to say, convertible terms-the people's rights in this respect must be observed.

"We point with justifiable pride to the manner in which our example has been followed. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and, we may add, also of approval, and the columns of

numberless newspapers with which we have no connection testify to the approval which our new system of journalism has won. We mention no names, and have no intention of complaining because the credit of initiating the new system has been withheld from us; we accept the compliment which has been paid to us, and we wish our contemporaries good luck. At the same time we point out to our hundreds of thousands of readers that no journal has, up to this day, succeeded in presenting public news in as tempting a manner as we are enabled to do. The reason for this lies in the extraordinary intelligence of our staff. Our writers are picked men, who could earn celebrity in other channels than those of newspaper columns, but who are content to serve us because they are paid as capable journalists ought to be paid, with a liberality which other newspaper proprietors would deem excessive, but which we do not. This is one of the secrets of our astonishing and unprecedented success. Our editors, sub-editors, special correspondents, and reporters are zealous as no others are because they are devoted to our cause, because they have regular and tangible proof that our welfare is theirs, because they share in the profits of our enterprise. Thus it is that we are now in possession of particulars relating to 'The Mystery of Monsieur Felix,' which not one of our contemporaries has been able to obtain, and thus it is that we are in a position to present to our readers a romance as thrilling as any that has ever emanated from the printing press. It presents features of novelty and surprise which can be found in no other *cause célèbre*, and our readers may rest assured that we shall follow up every clew in our possession with an intelligence frequently wanting in the officials of Scotland Yard. And, moreover, we have every right to maintain, and we shall establish the fact, that what we do is done in the sacred cause of justice. The wronged shall be righted, and the mystery clearly brought to light, before we have finished with the case of M. Felix.

"For a long period of time the term 'romance' has been misunderstood. Romance was supposed to lie outside the regions of the ordinary occurrences of everyday life. There was a glamour about the word, a kind of lustre which lifted it above and beyond the commonplace features of human struggle. It was, as it were, a castle built upon an eminence, with spires, and turrets, and gables, whose points shone brightly in the sun; it was, as it were, a species of ideal garden in which grew only rare flowers and stately trees; or a land of enchantment peopled by knights in silver armor, and by dainty ladies flinging kisses to their lords and lovers as they rode forth to the tournament or the battle. This was the bygone notion of Romance, the false idea which, thanks in a great measure to our efforts, is now utterly exploded. It has been found and proved that the truest regions of romance lie in humble courts and alleys, where the commonest flowers grow, where the air is not perfumed by odorous blossoms, where people dwell not in turreted castle or stately palace, but in the humblest homes and narrowest spaces, where common fustian and dimity, not glittering armor and silken sheen, are the ordinary wear; where faces are thin and anxious from the daily cares of toil, where the battle is not for vast tracts of country worth millions, but for the daily loaf of bread worth fourpence halfpenny. It has been found and proved that the police courts are a veritable hot-bed in which romance is forever springing up. When we contemplate the shattering of old false idols and ideals, it would almost seem as if we were living in an age of topsy-turvydom, but the sober fact is that the world is healthfully setting itself right, and is daily and hourly stripping off the veneer which lay thick upon what have been ridiculously called the good old times. We were the first to practically recognize this truth, and we have done our best to make it popular. It is from lowly annals that we culled the romance of 'Great Porter Square,' and it is from somewhat similar annals that we cull the present 'Mystery of M. Felix.' The story will be found as strange as it is true. All the passions of human nature are expressed in it, and there is one episode at least-even up to the point which it has already reached-so singular and startling as to be absolutely unique.

"We draw special attention to the words in our last sentence, 'even up to the point which it has already reached,' and we beg our readers to bear them well in mind. It may be in their remembrance that when we commenced to unravel the mystery of 'Great Porter Square' we had no knowledge of its conclusion. We held in our hands certain slight threads which we followed patiently up, and of

which we kept firm hold, until we had woven them into a strand which villainy and duplicity could not break. We championed the cause of a man who, upon no evidence whatever-simply from the officious and mistaken zeal of a few policemen-was brought up to the police court on the suspicion of being in some undiscovered way connected with a crime with which all England was ringing. He was remanded day after day for the production of evidence which was never forthcoming, and day after day we protested against the injustice of which it was sought to make him a victim. The slender threads in our possession we held fast, as we have said, until at length we were rewarded with a gratifying success, until at length we brought the guilt home to the guilty parties. We ourselves were misled by the specious statements of one of the miscreants, a woman, we regret to say, who was one of the two principal actors in a plot which was very nearly successful, and which, indeed, did for a certain time succeed. We are in a similar position with respect to the 'Mystery of M. Felix.' The information already in our possession leads us to a point of great interest, and there strangely breaks off. But we pledge ourselves to pursue the story to an end, and to unearth what is at present hidden in darkness. Our agents are at work in this country and elsewhere, and we are satisfied that they will succeed in removing the veil from a mystery which is a common topic of conversation and discussion in all classes of society."

CHAPTER VII.
AN EXAMINATION OF CERTAIN DISCREPANCIES IN THE STATEMENTS OF THE THREE PRINCIPAL WITNESSES

"The night of the 16th of January will be long remembered. For three weeks the snow had fallen, intermittently, it is true, but for hours together. The roads were almost blockaded, and traffic was carried on under exceptional difficulties. The season, which in the early part of December had promised to be unusually mild, suddenly vindicated its reputation, and we were treated to an old-fashioned, bitter winter of great severity. On the evening of the 15th of January the frost was most severe, its intensity lasting until some time after daybreak, the thermometer showing at eight o'clock A.M. close upon sixteen degrees of frost. When it began to snow again people, congratulated themselves that a thaw was setting in. They were mistaken. Had it been possible the snow would have frozen as soon as it reached the ground, but it fell in too great quantities for such a result. In the evening a piercing wind raged through the thoroughfares, and the snow continued to fall more heavily than during the day. In some places there was a drift almost, if not quite, man high, and our columns on the morning of the 17th recorded the discovery of three lifeless persons, one man and two women, who had been frozen to death during the night. With these unfortunates we have nothing to do; what concerns us and our story is that on the night of the 16th, Mrs. Middlemore, a housekeeper in one of the old houses in Gerard Street, Soho, very imprudently went out just before midnight to fetch her supper-beer. Even the raging storm did not prevent her from indulging in her usual habit, the temptation of beer being too strong for her, and the prospect of going to bed without it being too appalling to risk. She saw that the street door was secure when she left the house, and was surprised, upon her return, to find it open. These, and many other particulars which will be duly recorded, are statements which have already appeared in public print, and we are not responsible for them. At the moment of her reaching the street door the circumstance of its being open was impressed upon her by the appearance of a man hurriedly leaving the house. He did not stop to address her, and she had no opportunity of asking his business there, because he flew by her 'like a flash of lightning,' she says. Naturally alarmed, she raised her voice and cried, 'Police!' One, Constable Wigg, happened to be not far distant, and he responded to her summons. Having heard what Mrs. Middlemore had to say, he saw that there were two things to attend to-one, to ascertain whether anything had occurred within the house; the other, to follow the man who had escaped from it with such celerity. As he could not fulfil these two duties at one and the same time, he in his turn summoned to his assistance a brother constable of the name of Nightingale. This officer pursued the man, and Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore entered the house.

"Now, with the exception of Mrs. Middlemore, there was only one regular tenant in the house, M. Felix, who had lived there for nearly two years, and concerning whom, up to the night of January 16th, very little appears to have been known, except that he was a retired gentleman, living on his means, fond of pleasure, and of a generous disposition to those who served him well. Mrs. Middlemore speaks in the highest terms of him, but she judges only from one point of view, that of a landlady who has a liberal lodger. Otherwise, she has no knowledge of him, and cannot say where he came from, whether he was married or single (the circumstance of his living a bachelor life would not definitely decide this question), or whether he has any relations in any part of the world. There are many gentlemen of the description of M. Felix pursuing their mysterious careers in this great city, a goodly number of them under false names.

"M. Felix was a very peculiar gentleman. He paid for the entire house, although he occupied only three rooms, a sitting-room, a dining-room, and a bedroom. His stipulation when he first entered into possession was that under no circumstances should any other tenant but himself be allowed to

occupy a room, and he went so far as to refuse permission to Mrs. Middlemore for any friends of hers to sleep in the building. Her duties consisted in attending to him and to his rooms, which she entered and set in order only when he directed her, and for these slight services she was extravagantly paid. Such a tenant was a treasure, and she appreciated him accordingly, not venturing to disobey him in the slightest particular. He had taken the greatest pains to impress upon her that she was never, under any circumstances whatever, to come to his rooms unless she was summoned, and from what we have gathered of his character, M. Felix was a gentleman who could be stern as well as pleasant, and was not a person who would allow his orders to be disobeyed without making the delinquent suffer for it. These imperative instructions rendered Constable Wigg's course difficult. Mrs. Middlemore had left M. Felix in the house when she went to fetch her supper-beer, and it was in the highest degree improbable that he should have quitted it during her absence. He was not a young man, he was fond of his ease, and the storm was raging furiously. Nothing less than a matter of life or death would tempt a man of M. Felix's disposition from his cosy fireside on such a night. Constable Wigg suggested that he should go up-stairs to M. Felix's rooms, and ascertain whether he was in and safe, but Mrs. Middlemore would not listen to the suggestion, and of course without her consent Constable Wigg could not carry his proposition into effect. In a casual examination of those parts of the premises which Mrs. Middlemore allowed him to enter he saw nothing to excite his suspicions, and he decided to wait for the return of Constable Nightingale before he proceeded further.

"We break off here for a moment for the purpose of making brief mention of one or two peculiar features in this singular affair, leaving Constable Wigg and Mrs. Middlemore standing in the passage or the kitchen-(*they* say the passage, we presume to say the kitchen, where doubtless a cheerful fire was blazing; policemen are human) – at half-past twelve or a quarter to one in the middle of the night, waiting for Constable Nightingale to report progress. Curiously enough, the time cannot be exactly fixed, because the kitchen clock had stopped, because Constable Nightingale's watch had stopped also, and because Constable Wigg did not wear one. In an affair of this description it is as well not to lose sight of the smallest details. We arrive at the time, half-past twelve or a quarter to one, approximately. Even in such a storm as was then raging through the streets, Big Ben of Westminster made itself heard, and it transpires, from a statement volunteered by Constable Wigg, that the great bell was proclaiming the hour of midnight when, tramping half-frozen on his beat, he heard a cry for help. Three times was this cry sent forth into the night, and, faithful guardian as he was, according to his own averment, he endeavored to ascertain the direction from which the appeal proceeded. It may well be believed that, with the wind blowing seemingly from all points of the compass at once, he failed to make the necessary discovery; but it strikes us as singular that when he was talking matters over with Mrs. Middlemore it did not occur to him that the cry for help may have proceeded from the very house in which he was standing. We make no comment upon this singular lapse of memory. It strikes us also as by no means unimportant that in the statements of Mrs. Middlemore and the two constables there is something very like contradiction and confusion. Mrs. Middlemore gives an answer to a question as to her movements in connection with those of the constables, and presently, being pressed to be definite, says something which throws doubt upon her first answer. She excuses herself by saying that she was upset and worried, but to us this explanation is not satisfactory, if only for the reason that her subsequent correction throws doubt upon certain answers given by the two constables to certain questions put to them. However, in the present aspect of the matter, these contradictions may simply point to some dereliction of duty on the part of the constables which they may wish should not be known, and perhaps to some agreement on the part of these three witnesses to an invented story which, believed, would exculpate the constables from any such dereliction. This is mere supposition, and we present it for what it is worth.

"It is difficult to ascertain the precise time at which Constable Nightingale returned to the house in Gerard Street after his fruitless search for the man who had alarmed Mrs. Middlemore by his sudden rush from the premises. Truly he must have had the greatest difficulty in making his way

through the streets. In explanation of our remark that in the statements of Mrs. Middlemore and the two constables there is something very like contradiction and confusion, we append their answers to a few of the questions put to them. We will deal with Constable Nightingale first:

"'When you left the house in Gerard Street in pursuit of the man what direction did you take?'
"'I went in the direction of Oxford Street.'
"'That is, you went to the right?'
"'Yes.'
"'Why not to the left?'
"'That would have led me to Leicester Square and Charing Cross.'
"'Did you choose the Oxford Street route at haphazard?'
"'No.'
"'What induced you to take it?'
"'I was told by Constable Wigg that the man went that way.'
"'Did you meet any person on the road?'
"'No one.'
"'Absolutely no one?'
"'Absolutely no one.'
"'How long were you engaged upon your search for the man?'
"'I can't exactly fix it.'
"'May we say an hour?'
"'That would be near the length of time.'
"We will now deal with Constable Wigg. He was asked-
"'How did you summon Constable Nightingale to your assistance?'
"'I blew my police whistle.'
"'Many times?'
"'Not many. He must have been very near.'
"'But he did not make his appearance immediately?'
"'No; not immediately.'
"'Shall we say that two or three minutes elapsed before he joined you?'
"'About that.'
"'You explained to him what had occurred?'
"'Yes, with the assistance of Mrs. Middlemore.'
"'You both explained it together?'
"'Well, first one spoke, then the other.'
"'Did you tell Nightingale that the man had fled in the direction of Oxford Street?'
"'No.'
"'In point of fact, you did not see the man come out of the house?'
"'No.'
"'And? therefore, could not have given Nightingale the direction?'
"'No, of course I could not.'
"Now for Mrs. Middlemore:
"'When the man rushed by you from the house, you screamed loudly for the police?'
"'As loud as I could.'
"'How many times did you call?'
"'I kep' on calling till Constable Wigg came up.'
"'He did not come the moment you raised your voice?'
"'No, not immediate. Per'aps in two or three minutes.'
"'If we say two minutes we shall be within the mark?'
"'Yes.'

"'Did you inform Constable Nightingale that the man ran away in the direction of Oxford Street?'

"'No; I was so flustered that I didn't see which way he run.'

"These are all the extracts we need give for the purpose of our illustration, merely asking the reader to bear in mind that each witness was examined without the others being present. Is it quite unreasonable to infer that, had they been examined in each other's presence, their answers would not have been exactly as they are reported in the public prints?

"Constable Nightingale has since given an explanation of this discrepancy by the admission that he must have made a mistake in supposing that he received from Constable Wigg the information of the route the man took when he scurried off; but we submit that this explanation is not entirely satisfactory.

"Another thing. Constable Nightingale states that he was engaged in the search for an hour, and that during the whole of that time he did not meet a single person on the road. How is that statement to be received? He was hunting in some of the busiest thoroughfares in London, and it bears the form of an accusation that he did not for a whole hour observe one policeman on his beat. He was on his, he declares, at the time he heard Constable Wigg's whistle. Constable Wigg was on his beat, according to his own declaration, when he blew it. Were they the only two constables in a thronged locality who were faithfully performing their duty? Doubtless the other constables on duty would indignantly repudiate the allegation, but Constable Nightingale distinctly implies as much. We do not wish to be hard on this officer, who bears a good character in the force. His movements and proceedings between the hours of twelve and two on the night of the 16th may have been innocent enough, or, if not quite blameless, excusable enough on such a tempestuous night, but we unhesitatingly say that his evidence is suspicious, and that we are not inclined to accept it as veracious.

"Still another thing. We have ascertained from persons acquainted with Constable Nightingale, that he was very proud of his silver watch, which he was lucky enough to win in a raffle, and that he was in the habit of boasting that it never stopped, and never lost or gained a minute. It is singular, therefore, that on this eventful night it should have stopped for the first time, and at a time when it might be most important to fix the occurrence of events to a minute. Perhaps Constable Nightingale's watch stopped in sympathy with the stoppage of Mrs. Middlemore's kitchen clock.

"We are anxious to do justice to the parties, and we hasten to say that at our request they have allowed a competent watchmaker to examine Constable Nightingale's watch and Mrs. Middlemore's clock; but this watchmaker reports that they are in perfect order, and that he can find no reason why they should both have stopped almost at the same moment.

"If any of our readers consider that we are straining too hard on trifles, we reply that the importance of so-called trifles cannot be over-estimated. The world's greatest poet has said, 'Trifles light as air are in their confirmation strong as proofs of Holy Writ.'"

CHAPTER VIII.
A STARTLING PHASE IN THE MYSTERY

"We hark back now to the point at which we left Constable Nightingale. He had returned to Gerard Street without having found the man. During his absence nothing further had occurred to alarm the housekeeper and the constable who kept her company, and they were in doubt as to what was best to be done. There was no evidence that the man had entered the house with the intention of robbing it, but he might have done so, and being disturbed before he effected his purpose, thought it expedient to make his escape as quickly as possible. They were debating this view when they were startled by what they declare was an 'apparition.' It was the apparition of a half-starved cat, which in some way must have found an entrance into the house before Mrs. Middlemore came back with her supper-beer. The cat did not belong to the house, for M. Felix had a horror of such creatures, and would not allow one to be kept on the premises. It was not the cat that startled them, but the color of the cat, which seemed to have been rolling itself in blood. They saw it only for an instant, and then it disappeared, and has not since been seen again; but it left its marks behind it. On the oil-cloth were marks of blood, made by the cat's paws. These signs decided their course of action, and they proceeded upstairs to the apartments occupied by M. Felix. They knocked and called out loudly to him, but received no answer. By an ingenious arrangement, devised presumably by M. Felix himself, the keyhole of the door by which they stood was masked by a brass plate, the secret of which was known only to M. Felix. The silence strengthened their apprehensions of foul play, and they determined to force the door open. To effect this it was necessary to obtain the assistance of a locksmith, and Constable Nightingale issued forth once more, and brought back with him not only a locksmith, but a doctor in the neighborhood, Dr. Lamb, who was coming home late from a professional visit. With some difficulty the door was forced open, and the first thing that met their eyes was a pool of blood on the floor of the sitting-room. They describe it as such, although subsequent examination proved that there was a decided exaggeration in calling it a pool, the quantity of blood which had fallen not being very serious. M. Felix was not in this room, but when they entered the bedroom adjoining they discovered him in an arm-chair, bearing the appearance of a man who had fallen asleep. He was not asleep, however; he was dead. The natural presumption was that he had been murdered, and that the blood on the floor was his, but Dr. Lamb very soon declared that this was not the case. M. Felix was dead, certainly, but his death was produced by natural causes, heart disease. In this conclusion Dr. Lamb was supported by other medical evidence which was sought on the following day, and this being supposed to be sufficiently established, the necessity of a post-mortem was not immediately recognized. The body was lifted on the bed, and there lay, dressed, as it had fallen into the arm-chair.

"Accounts of these strange occurrences did not appear in the morning newspapers of January 17th, and the first intimation the public received of them was through the evening papers of that date. Even in this initial stage we scented a mystery, and we despatched our reporters to Mrs. Middlemore to obtain such information as would prove interesting to our readers. Our reporters, however, were not able to see Mrs. Middlemore; neither were they able to get access to the house; some absurd orders on the part of the police were being carried out, which converted the house into a kind of safe. But such ridiculous methods are not difficult to circumvent, and we determined that the public should not be robbed of their privileges. On January 18th, that is, some thirty-four hours after the death of M. Felix, we inserted the following advertisement in the first edition of the *Evening Moon*, and repeated it in all our subsequent editions. We printed it in such bold type, and placed it in such a prominent position, that it could not fail to reach the eyes of persons who were interested in the case:

"'The Strange Death of M. Felix in Gerard Street, Soho. Persons who had private or other interviews with M. Felix between the hours of eight in the morning and twelve at night on January

16th, or who are in possession of information which will throw light upon the circumstances surrounding his death, are urgently requested to call at the office of the *Evening Moon* at any time after the appearance of this advertisement. Liberal rewards will be paid to all who give such information, and the best legal assistance is offered by the proprietors of this journal, entirely at their own expense, to all who may desire it and who are in any way interested in M. Felix's death.'

"Meanwhile, so far as the police were concerned, matters remained in abeyance. They seemed to do nothing, and certainly discovered nothing. One of our contemporaries, in a leading article, has suggested that the insertion of this advertisement in our columns was an attempt to tamper with justice, or, if not to tamper, to defeat its ends. We can afford to smile at such an insinuation. There was no case before the public courts, and no person was accused of anything whatever in connection with the strange affair. The action we took was taken in the cause of justice, to arouse it to action and assist it. In the lighted torch of publicity there is an irresistible moral force. It would be well if material light were thrown upon the black spaces in this mighty city-upon the black spaces in which crimes are committed, the perpetrators of which are enabled to escape because of the convenient darkness in which they carry their horrible plans to a successful issue. If old-time officialism refuses to stir out of the old routine of useless and pernicious methods, forces which are not amenable to red tapeism must take the reins, must take into their own hands the plain duties of lawful authority, duties which they neglect and evade to the injury of society at large. We do not preach socialism, we preach justice-and light.

"Thus far in our narrative we have brought matters up to the night of January 18th. The house in Gerard Street is dark and silent; the body of M. Felix is lying on the bed to which it was lifted from the arm-chair in which it was discovered.

"The night was unusually dark. The snow-storm had ceased on the previous day, and the reflected light of white thoroughfares no longer helped to dispel the pervading gloom.

"The morning newspapers of the 19th contained no items of particular interest in connection with the death of M. Felix. We were the first to announce an extraordinary and apparently inexplicable move in the mystery. In order to do this we published our first edition two hours earlier than usual.

"At nine o'clock on this morning one of our reporters, in the exercise of his duty, was outside the house in Gerard Street, looking up at the window of the sitting-room which M. Felix had occupied. He had exchanged a few words with a policeman in the street.

"'I am on the staff of the *Evening Moon*,' he said to the policeman. 'Is there anything new concerning M. Felix?'

"'Nothing,' replied the policeman, quite civilly, and passed on.

"Our reporter remained outside the house. Patient and persevering, he hoped to pick up some item of interest which he might be able to weave into a paragraph.

"Suddenly the street door was opened from within, and Mrs. Middlemore appeared. Her face was flushed, and in her eyes was a wandering look as she turned them this way and that. The moment our reporter observed these symptoms of distress he came to the conclusion that there was some interesting item of which he could avail himself. He stepped up to Mrs. Middlemore.

"'What is the matter?' he asked.

"'He's gone!' gasped Mrs. Middlemore, wringing her hands. 'He's vanished!'

"'Who has gone? Who has vanished?' inquired our reporter.

"'M. Felix,' said Mrs. Middlemore, in a faint tone.

"'My good creature,' said our reporter, 'you must be dreaming.'

"'I'm not dreaming,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'He's vanished. If you don't believe me, go up and look for yourself. Where are the police. Oh, where are the police?'

"'Don't make a disturbance,' said our reporter, soothingly. 'Let us see if you're not mistaken.'

"Gladly availing himself of the invitation to go up and look for himself, our reporter entered the house, and ascended the stairs, followed by Mrs. Middlemore, moaning in a helpless, distracted fashion.

"The door of the sitting-room was open, and also the inner door, leading to the bedroom. There was no person, living or dead, in either of the rooms.

"'Where was he?' asked our reporter.

"'There, on the bed,' moaned Mrs. Middlemore. 'He was there last night before I locked the door; and when I looked in a minute ago he was gone.'

"It was undeniably true. The bed bore the impression of a human form, but that was all. The body of M. Felix had, indeed, disappeared!"

CHAPTER IX.
INTRODUCES SOPHY

"Our reporter gazed at the bed in astonishment, while Mrs. Middlemore continued to move her hands and eyes helplessly around, and moan for the police. Our reporter is a man of resource, quick-witted, ready-minded, and ever ready to take advantage of an opportunity. He took advantage of this.

"'My good creature,' he said, 'what is the use of crying for the police? Have they assisted you in any way in this mysterious affair?'

"'No, they 'aven't,' replied Mrs. Middlemore, adding inconsequentially, 'but where are they-Oh! where are they?'

"'What have they done already for you?' continued our reporter. 'Brought you into trouble with the newspapers because of their evidence contradicting yours; and whatever other people may say, I am sure you spoke the truth.' Our reporter observed something frightened in the look she cast at him as he made this assertion. 'The best thing for you is to confide in a friend who is really anxious to serve you, and whose purpose is to get at the truth of the matter.'

"'That's all I want. But where's the friend?'

"'Here. I am on the staff of the *Evening Moon*, which is ready to spend any amount of money in clearing the innocent and bringing the guilty to justice. They haven't any interested motives to serve; they didn't know the dead man, who some people say was murdered, and some people say wasn't. If you are an innocent woman you would jump at the chance I offer you; if you're guilty, it's a different pair of shoes, and I wash my hands of you.'

"The threat cowed Mrs. Middlemore.

"'I'm innocent, you know I am,' she gasped.

"'Of course I know you are, and I should like the opportunity to silence the wretches who speak of you in a suspicious way.'

"'What 'ave they said of me? What 'ave they dared to say?'

"'What you wouldn't like to hear; but never mind them just now. We'll soon take the sting out of their tails. Besides, while you are working in the cause of innocence your time will not be wasted. You will be well paid for the information you give.'

"This appeal to her cupidity settled the point.

"'I'll do it,' she said, 'whatever it is. I'm a innocent woman, and I want the world to know it.'

"'The world shall know it,' said our reporter, with inward satisfaction at the success of his arguments; 'and when the whole thing is made clear through you you'll be looked upon as a heroine, and everybody will be running to shake hands with you. People will say, "There, that's the woman that brought to light the truth about M. Felix. If it hadn't been for her we should never have known it. She's a real true woman; no nonsense about her." Why, I shouldn't wonder if they got up a subscription for you.'

("We have no doubt, when this meets the eyes of our contemporaries, that some of them will be ready to take us severely to task for the tactics adopted by our reporter. Let them. We are thoroughly satisfied with the means he employed, and we offer him our sincere thanks. There is not a move we make in this mystery which is not made in the interests of justice, and that we are not ashamed of our methods is proved by the absolutely frank manner in which we place before our readers every word that passes.)

"'What is it you want me to do?' asked Mrs. Middlemore.

"'Merely,' replied our reporter, to answer a few simple questions. I have my reasons for believing that the police have advised you to say nothing to anyone but themselves.'

"'They 'ave, sir, they 'ave.'

"'What better are you off for it? Here are people ready to say anything against you, while you are advised to sit in a corner without uttering a single word in your own defence. It's monstrous. Upon my word, my dear Mrs. Middlemore, it's nothing less than monstrous.'

"'So it is,' said Mrs. Middlemore, all of whose scruples seemed to have vanished. 'I'll answer anything you put to me.'

"I shall ask you nothing improper. You say that you locked the door before you went to bed last night. Which door? There are two, one leading to the first floor landing, one communicating between the bedroom and sitting-room. Which of these doors did you lock? Or did you lock both?'

"'I won't tell you a lie, sir. When I said I locked the door I thought you'd understand me. I mean that I fastened both of 'em. I couldn't lock 'em because the bedroom door key's been taken away, and the door on the landing's been cut into.'

"'That was done by the locksmith. Who took away the key of the bedroom?'

"'I don't know. Perhaps the police.'

"'Without your knowledge?'

"'I didn't know nothing of it.'

"'How badly they are behaving to you! Anyway, the two doors were closed?'

"'Yes, I saw to that myself. I ain't in the house without company, don't you think that. I wouldn't stop in it alone if you was to offer me Queen Victoria's golden crown. My niece is downstairs abed, and once she gets between the sheets she's that difficult to rouse that it's as much as a regiment of soldiers can do to wake 'er.' (This, our reporter thought, was comic, implying that Mrs. Middlemore had engaged the services of a regiment of soldiers to get her niece out of bed every morning.) 'Come up-stairs by myself in the dark,' continued Mrs. Middlemore, 'is more than I dare do. In the daylight I venture if I'm forced to, as I did a minute or two ago, because, though I shook Sophy till I almost shook 'er to pieces, and lifted 'er up in bed and let 'er fall back again, it had no more effect on 'er than water on a duck's back. All she did was to turn round, and bring 'er knees up to 'er chin, and keep 'old of the bedclothes as if she was a vice. She's that aggravating there's 'ardly any bearing with 'er. So as I couldn't get 'er out of bed, I come up 'ere without 'er. And that's 'ow I found out Mr. Felix was gone.'

"'You were speaking of what took place last night?' said our reporter. 'Your niece, Sophy, came up with you, I understand?'

"'Yes, she did, though she had 'old of me that tight I could 'ardly shake myself free.'

"'Did she come into this room with you?'

"'No, she didn't; she wouldn't put her foot inside it. I left her in the passage while I peeped in. She ain't got the courage of a mouse.'

"'Then she cannot corroborate your statement that the body of M. Felix was here before you went to bed?'

"'Ain't my word enough?'

"'For me it is, but it's different with the police and the public. It is a good job you've put yourself in our hands; there's no telling what trouble you might have got into if you hadn't.'

"'I'll do anything you want me to, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, in great distress. 'It's a providence you come up when I opened the street door.'

"'It is. You are positive the body was on the bed?'

"'If it was the last word I ever had to speak I'd swear to it.'

"'I believe you without swearing,' said our reporter, opening a cupboard door.

"'What are you looking in there for?' asked Mrs. Middlemore. 'Do you think a dead man 'd be able to get up and put 'isself on one of the shelves?'

"'No,' said our reporter, with a smile, 'but let us make sure the body is not in either of the rooms.'

"He looked thoroughly through the apartments, under the bed and the couches, and in every cupboard. Mrs. Middlemore followed his movements with her eyes almost starting out of her head.

"'Even up the chimneys,' he said genially, and he thrust the poker up, and then lit some paper in the stoves to see that the smoke ascended freely and that there was no obstruction.

"'The thoughts you put in one's 'ead,' remarked Mrs. Middlemore, in a terrified voice, is enough to congeal one's blood.'

"'My dear madam,' said our reporter, 'I am only doing what prudence dictates, so that there may be no possible chance of your getting into trouble. Suppose the body should be found in any other part of the house-'

"'But 'ow could it get there?' interrupted Mrs. Middlemore, excitedly.

"'That is more than either you or I can say, any more than we can say how it got out of this room; but out of it it has got, hasn't it?'

"'Nobody can't say nothing different,' assented Mrs. Middlemore.

"'This is altogether such a mysterious affair,' proceeded our reporter, 'that there's no telling what it will lead to. I don't remember a case like it ever occurring in London before. Where was I when you interrupted me? Oh, I was saying, suppose the body should be found in any other part of the house, what would the police say? Why, that for some reason or other-and you may be sure they would put it down to a bad reason-you had removed it for the purpose of concealing it.'

"'Me!' gasped Mrs. Middlemore. What would I do that for?'

"'You wouldn't do it at all, but that's the construction the police would put on it, and after that you wouldn't have a moment's peace. My dear madam, we'll not give them a chance to take away your character; not a stone shall be left unturned. There are rooms above these?'

"'Yes, a lot.'

"'We will have a look through them, and, indeed, through the whole house. It's what the police would do, with the idea that you were a party to some vile plot; it's what I will do, knowing you to be perfectly innocent.'

"He put his design into execution. Accompanied by Mrs. Middlemore, who always kept in the rear, he made a thorough examination of the entire house, from attic to basement, but, as he anticipated, discovered nothing. The last rooms he examined were at the bottom of the house, and it was there he made acquaintance with Mrs. Middlemore's niece Sophy.

"'Is that you, aunt?' the girl called out, from a room adjoining the kitchen.

"'Yes, it's me,' answered Mrs. Middlemore, irascibly. You're a nice lazy slut, you are, to be 'ulking in bed this time of the morning.'

"'I ain't abed, aunt,' said Sophy, making her appearance, 'I'm up; but oh, I'm so sleepy!'

"She came into the kitchen rubbing her eyes, and presenting a general appearance of untidiness which did not speak well for her social training. Her short hair was uncombed, her face unwashed, her frock open at the back, and she had no boots on. She stared hard at our reporter, but was not at all abashed at his presence.

"'I'm a friend of aunt's,' said our reporter. 'You had better finish dressing, light the fire, and give yourself a good wash, and then get breakfast ready. You needn't come upstairs till you're called.'

"He beckoned Mrs. Middlemore out of the room, and they proceeded upstairs to the apartments on the first floor.

"'It will be as well to say nothing before Sophy,' he said. 'Now, if you please, we will go on. It is plain that the body of M. Felix is not in the house; but it must be somewhere. The question is-Where, and how it got there? These rooms were fairly secure before you went to bed last night. Is there a chain on the street door?'

"'Yes.'

"'Did you put it up before you went down to your bedroom?'

"'I puts it up regularly every night.'

"'And you did so last night?'

"'Yes.'

"'And turned the key?'

"'Yes.'

"'Was the door locked and the chain up the first thing this morning?'

"'Yes-no!'

"'What do you mean by that?'

"'I mean I can't remember. I must be sure, mustn't I, sir?'

"'You must be sure, there must not be the possibility of a mistake; this putting up of the chain is one of the points upon which a great deal may hang. Do you mean to tell me that you have any doubt on the subject?'

"'I can't say for certain. I was that upset and bewildered when I found M. Felix gone that I don't remember nothing till you came up to me at the street door. 'Ow I opened it, or 'ow I got it open, I don't remember no more than the dead.'

"'Think a little; it is not longer than half-an-hour since I saw you. Your memory cannot have deserted you in so short a time.'

"'I've got no more memory about it than the babe unborn.'

"'But you must try to have. It is a fact that the chain either was or was not up, that the door either was or was not locked. Sit down and think about it for a minute or two; I will keep quiet while you think.'

"But though the woman obeyed our reporter, and sat down and thought of the matter, or said she did, she declared she could make nothing of it, and had to give it up in despair.

"'It is awkward,' said our reporter, 'to say the least of it. There is no telling what construction may be put upon your loss of memory.'

"'I'm a honest woman, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, looking imploringly at our reporter; 'you'll put in a good word for me?'

"'You may depend upon that, for I am convinced you are honest and innocent, but it is unfortunate. If you *should* happen to remember, you had best let me know before you tell anyone else.'

"'Yes, sir, I'll promise that. I don't know what I should do without you.'

"'Get yourself into serious trouble, for a certainty, Mrs. Middlemore. You go out for your supper-beer every night?'

"'Yes, every night; I can't do without it.'

"'Beer is a wholesome beverage, if taken in moderation, which I know is the case with you. Did you go out for it last night?'

"'Yes, I did.'

"'Before or after you paid your last visit to these rooms?'

"'Before, sir, before. You think of everything.'

"'It shows that I am doing the best I can for you. Before you came up to these rooms, you had your supper?'

"'Yes.'

"'Sophy had some with you?'

"'Yes. She's got a twist on her has Sophy.'

"'A twist?'

"'An appetite. She eats as much as a Grenadier.'

"'All growing girls do. How old is Sophy?'

"'Fourteen.'

"'Then, when you went downstairs, you and Sophy went to bed?'

"'Yes.'

"'You both sleep in the same room?'

"'Yes.'

"'In the same bed, most likely?'

"'Yes, we do; and the way that girl pulls the clothes off you is a caution.'

"'Did you both go to bed at the same time?'

"'No, I sent 'er before me, and when I went in she was as sound as a top.'

"'Are you a sound sleeper yourself?'

"'I was before this dreadful thing 'appened, but now I pass the most fearful nights.'

"'Dreams?'

"'Awful.'

"'How about last light? Don't answer hastily. This is another important point.'

"Thus admonished, Mrs. Middlemore took time to consider; and no doubt it was with a certain regret that she felt constrained to say, 'I think I must 'ave slept better than ordinary. I was that tired that my legs was fit to drop off me.'

"'You slept very soundly?'

"'I must 'ave done, mustn't I, sir?'

"'That is for you to say. You see, Mrs. Middlemore, the body of M. Felix could not have been removed without a certain noise. Now, if you were awake you must have heard it.'

"'I didn't 'ear nothing. I'll take my Bible oath of it.'

"'At what hour did you wake this morning?'

"'At 'alf-past eight, and I got up at once.'

"'Isn't that rather late for you?'

"'It is, sir, but I've got no one to attend to now.'

"'You were not in any way disturbed in the night?'

"'No, sir.'

"'You positively heard nothing?'

"'Nothing at all.'

"'Did Sophy?'

"'Love your 'eart, sir! Sophy wouldn't wake up if cannon-balls was firing all round her!'

"'As a matter of fact, has she told you she heard nothing last night?'

"'I won't say that. I ain't 'ad time to arks her.'

"'I'll ask her myself if you've no objection. Stop here for me; I shall not be gone long.'

"'I can't stop 'ere alone, sir. I'll come down, and keep in the passage while you speak to Sophy.'

"They went down together, and Mrs. Middlemore remained outside while our reporter entered the kitchen.

"His entrance aroused Sophy, who had been sitting in a chair, apparently asleep, in the same state of untidiness as he had left her. She fell on her knees with a guilty air, and began to rake out the stove, making a great rattle with the poker.

"'Fire not lit yet, Sophy?' said our reporter, much amused.

"She looked up with a sly look, and seeing that he was not going to scold her, rubbed her nose with the poker and smiled boldly at him.

"'Not yet, old 'un,' she replied, making no attempt to continue her work.

"To be addressed as 'old 'un' must have been especially humiliating to our reporter, who is a good-looking fellow of eight-and-twenty, but he did not resent it.

"'Wood won't catch, I suppose,' he said. 'Too damp, eh?'

"'Soppin',' said Sophy, though as a matter of fact there was no wood before her.

"'What are you looking so hard at me for?' asked our reporter. 'You'll make me blush presently.'

"'*You* blush!' laughed Sophy. 'I like that, I do. Look 'ere, old 'un. When you wants to blush, you'd better 'ire somebody to do it for you. *I'll* do it for tuppence a time.'

"'You would have to wash your face first,' said our reporter, entering into the humor of the situation.

"'I wouldn't mind doing that,' said Sophy, staring harder than ever at him, 'if you'd make it wuth my while. As for lookin' at you, a cat may look at a king.'

"'I'm not a king,' observed our reporter, 'and you're not a cat.'

"'Call me one, and you'll feel my clors. I'm reckonin' of you up, that's what I'm doing of.'

"'And what do you make of me, Sophy?'

"'I sha'n't tell if you're going to act mean. 'Ansom is that 'ansom does.'

"Our reporter took the hint, and gave the girl a sixpenny-piece.

"'I say,' cried Sophy, greatly excited, as she tried the coin with her teeth. 'Stow larks, you know. Is it a good 'un?'

"'Upon my honor,' said our reporter, placing his hand on his heart, with a mock heroic air.

"'Say upon your soul.'

"'Upon my soul, if you prefer it.'

"'Change it for me, then. I'd sooner 'ave coppers.'

"Our reporter had some in his pocket, and he counted out six into Sophy's grimy palm. A seventh, by accident, fell to the floor. Sophy instantly picked it up.

"'Findin's keepin's,' she said.

"'I'm agreeable. And now what do you make of me?'

"'Wait a bit,' said Sophy. Unblushingly she lifted her frock, and tied the coppers in her ragged petticoat, tightening the knots with her teeth, which were as white as snow. 'That's my money-box, and I've got some more in it. What do I make of you? Oh, I knows what you are. You can't gammon me.'

"'What am I?'

"'You belong to the *Perlice Noos*, that's what you do. You've come to make pickchers. Pickcher of the 'ouse where the body was found. Pickcher of the room where the body was laid. Pickcher of the body's bed. Pickcher of the body's slippers. Pickcher of Mrs. Middlemore, the body's 'ousekeeper. Oh, I say, make a pickcher of me, will you? I'll buy a copy.'

"'Perhaps, if you're good. But you must answer a question or two first.'

"'All serene. Fire away!'

"'You went upstairs last night with your aunt after you had your supper?'

"'Yes, I did.'

"'You did not go into the rooms?'

"'No, I didn't.'

"'Because you were frightened?'

"'Gammon! It'd take more than that to frighten Sophy.' She added, with a sly look, 'Aunty's easily kidded, she is.'

"'Ah,' said reporter, somewhat mystified, 'then you came down and went to bed?'

"'Yes, I did, and precious glad to get there.'

"'You like your bed, Sophy?'

"'Rather.'

"'And you sleep well?'

"'You bet!'

"'Did you sleep better or worse than usual last night?'

"'No better, and no wus.'

"'Did you wake up in the night?'

"'Not me!'

"'Then you heard no noise?'

"'Where?'

"'Anywhere.'

"'I didn't 'ear nothink. 'Ow could I?'

"'Thank you, Sophy. That is all for the present.'

"'I say,' cried Sophy, as our reporter was about to leave the kitchen, 'you'll take my pickcher, won't you?'

"'I'll think about it. I'll see you another time, Sophy; and look here,' added our reporter, who is never known to throw a chance away, 'here's my card; take care of it, and if you find out anything that you think I'd like to know about M. Felix, come and tell me, and you shall be well paid for it. You'll not forget?'

"'No, I won't forgit. Anythink about M. Felix, do you mean?'

"'Yes, anything.'

"'All right, old 'un. I'll choo it over.' Here Sophy dropped her voice, and asked, 'Is Aunt outside?'

"'Yes. Can you keep a secret?'

"'Try me,' said Sophy, holding out the little finger of her left hand.

"'What am I to do with this?'

"'Pinch my nail as 'ard as you can. Never mind 'urting me. As 'ard as ever you can.

"Our reporter complied, and Sophy went audibly through the entire alphabet, from A to Y Z.

"'There,' said Sophy, 'did I scream when I came to O?'

"'You did not,' said our reporter, remembering the child's game. 'You bore it like a brick.'

"'Don't that show I can keep a secret?'

"'It does. Well, then, don't tell your aunt that I gave you my card, or asked you to come and see me.'

"'I'm fly.'

"Giving him a friendly wink, Sophy went on her knees, and made a pretence of being very hard at work cleaning the grate. The last words he heard were:

"'Pickcher of Sophy wearin' 'erself to skin and bone. Ain't I busy?'"

CHAPTER X.
OUR REPORTER GIVES MRS. MIDDLEMORE SOME SENSIBLE ADVICE

"Rejoining Mrs. Middlemore, our reporter informed her that he was satisfied that Sophy had heard nothing in the night.

"'Of course she didn't,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'Once she's in bed she lays like a log.'

"'She's a sharp little thing,' observed our reporter.

"'Sharp ain't the word, sir. What's going to be the end of her is more than I can fathom.'

"'Has she a mother?'

"'No.'

"'Father?'

"'If he can be called one. Drunk half his time, in trouble the other half.'

"'So that poor Sophy has to look after herself?'

"'Pretty well. She does odd jobs, and picks up a bit 'ere and a bit there. When M. Felix first come to live 'ere I'd made up my mind to 'ave 'er altogether with me, though she'd 'ave worrited the life out of me, I know she would; but he wouldn't let me 'ave nobody in the house but 'im, and wouldn't let nobody sleep in it a single night, so I 'ad to disappoint the child. I did take 'er in once or twice when she came round to me almost black and bloo with the way 'er brute of a father had served 'er, but I 'ad to be careful that M. Felix shouldn't see 'er-smuggling 'er into the kitchen when he was away, and letting 'er out very early in the morning-or I should never 'ave 'eard the last of it.'

"'You are the only friend the girl has, it seems?'

"'She ain't got many more.'

"'Mind what I tell you, Mrs. Middlemore,' said our reporter, with the kindest intentions, 'there's capital stuff in Sophy. Now that M. Felix is gone it would be a charity to adopt her, if you haven't any of your own.'

"'I ain't got none of my own,' said Mrs. Middlemore, shaking her head dubiously, 'but since I arksed 'er whether she'd like to live with me, and she said she would, she's got into ways that I don't think I could abide. You see, sir, she wasn't so old then, and I might 'ave moulded her. I don't know as I could do it now.'

"'What ways do you refer to?'

"'Well, sir, I've seen her selling papers in the streets-'

"'That's not a crime,' interposed our reporter; 'especially if she does it for food.'

"'If you won't mind my saying so,' said Mrs. Middlemore, with considerable dignity, 'I consider it low; but that's not so bad as selling matches, which is next door to begging.'

"'But she doesn't beg?'

"'No, I don't think she goes as low as that.'

"'Nor steal?'

"'No,' replied Mrs. Middlemore, with spirit, 'she'll take anything that's give to her, but's as honest as the sun, I'll say that of her.'

"'All that you've told me of Sophy, Mrs. Middlemore, is in her favor, and I have already a sneaking regard for her.'

"'Lord, sir!' exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, misconstruing the sentiment, 'and you the gentleman that you are!'

"'Yes,' repeated our reporter, complacently, 'a sneaking regard for her. Hawking papers and matches is not the loftiest occupation, but it is a form of commerce; and commerce, my dear madam, has made England what it is.'

"It was not entirely without a selfish motive, although he was favorably disposed toward the poor waif, that our reporter wandered for a few moments from the engrossing subject of M. Felix's disappearance to the less eventful consideration of Sophy's welfare. By one of those processes of intuition which come to observant men by inspiration, as it were, he was impressed with the idea that Sophy might be useful to him and to us in the elucidation of the mystery concerning M. Felix. We will not weaken the interest of what is to follow by divulging whether this idea was or was not justified by results; our readers will be able to judge for themselves later on. His views regarding Sophy had their weight with Mrs. Middlemore.

"'I mean to keep Sophy with me,' said that lady, 'for a little while at all events, and if she'll only keep away from the theaytres I'll do what I can for 'er.'

"'Does she frequent theatres?'

"'Does she?' exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, and immediately answered herself after a favorite fashion with certain of her class. 'Doesn't she? Why she saves every copper she can get to go to the galleries, and when she ain't got no money she hangs round the stage doors to see the actors and actresses go in and out. I don't believe she could stay away if it was to save her life.'

"'Persons in a much higher social position than ourselves,' said our reporter, turning every point to Sophy's advantage, 'are in the habit of hanging round stage doors. The stage is a great institution, Mrs. Middlemore, greater than ever it was before, and is courted-yes, my dear madam, courted-by the highest as well as the lowest in the land, from the Prince of Wales at the top to poor little Sophy at the bottom. Every fresh thing you tell me of Sophy makes me think better of her. But let us return to M. Felix. He would not allow you to have any person in the house, you say. What was his motive?'

"'I can't say, sir, except that he wanted to keep 'isself to 'isself.'

"'Did you expostulate with him?'

"'Did I what, sir?'

"'Did you tell him you would feel lonely without a companion occasionally?'

"'Not me, sir. M. Felix wasn't the kind of gentleman you could cross. He 'ad a way of speaking, when he was giving orders you couldn't mistake. His word was lore, and he meant it to be. You ain't forgetting, sir, that he was master 'ere?'

"'No, I'm not forgetting that. His orders, then, were to be obeyed without question?'

"'They was, sir. He said to me, "When people don't do as I tell 'em, Mrs. Middlemore, I get rid of 'em."'

"'A very dictatorial gentleman.'

"'Only when he was saying, "This is to be," or, "That is to be." At other times he was as smooth as marble, and always passed a pleasant word.'

"'He had visitors occasionally, I suppose?'

"'Oh, yes, sir, but I scarcely ever sor them. Nearly always he let 'em in and out 'isself.'

"'In a manner of speaking, then, he led a secret life?'

"'Some might call it so. Gentlemen living in chambers do all sorts of things.'

"'So I believe,' said our reporter, dryly.

"'And it ain't for the likes of us to question 'em. We've got our living to make, and if it pays us to be mum, mum we must be.'

"'I understand that. From what I can gather, Mrs. Middlemore, M. Felix had no family?'

"'Not that I know of, sir.'

"'As to his visitors, now, were they mostly ladies or gentlemen?'

"'Mostly ladies, sir.'

"'Have any of them been here to see his body?'

"'Not one, sir.'

"'That is strange. He might almost as well have died on a desert island.'

"'Yes, sir. That's the reason why we've been all at sea what to do. There was nobody to give directions.'

"'It is certainly a perplexing situation, unprecedented in my experience. Should you happen to meet any of the persons who were in the habit of visiting him, would you be able to identify them?'

"'I don't think I should, sir.'

"'Supposing that he came by his death in a violent way-I don't say it is so, because the medical evidence does not favor that conclusion-but supposing that this evidence was misleading, and was proved to be so, there is nobody to take up the matter authoritatively, to take measures, I mean, to bring the guilty party to justice?'

"'Nobody, sir.'

"'Only the police?'

"'Yes, sir, only the police?'

"'And all they have succeeded in doing is to make things uncomfortable for you?'

"'Yes, sir,' sighed Mrs. Middlemore, 'that's all they've done. I said to Mr. Nightingale, "A nice friend you've been," I said. I couldn't 'elp saying it after all I've gone through.'

"'Is it Constable Nightingale you are speaking of?'

"'Yes, it is.'

"'Is he an old friend of yours?'

"'He was on the beat 'ere before Mr. Wigg.'

"'Ah; and that is how you got to know him?'

"'Yes.'

"'He knew M. Felix, probably?'

"'Mr. Felix made a point of being always friendly with the policemen on the beat.'

"'Sensible man. Tipped them, I daresay?'

"'They'd best answer that theirselves. He never give *me* nothing to give 'em.'

"'What did Constable Nightingale say when you made that remark to him?'

"'Nothing,' replied Mrs. Middlemore, with sudden reserve.

"'Surely he must have made some remark, to the effect that he *was* your friend, or words bearing the same meaning?'

"'He didn't say nothing.'

"Our reporter gave up the point; it was his cue to keep Mrs. Middlemore in a good humor.

"'I'll have one more look in the bedroom,' he said.

"At first his scrutiny was not rewarded by any discovery, but, passing his hand over the pillows on the bed, he felt something hard beneath them, and upon lifting them up he saw a six-chambered revolver, loaded in every barrel.

"'Lord save us!' cried Mrs. Middlemore, starting back.

"'Did you not know it was here?'

"'No, sir, this is the first time I ever saw it. I never knew he kep' one.'

"'Do the police know?'

"'They didn't mention it, sir.'

"'Well, we will leave it where it is. Don't touch it, Mrs. Middlemore; it's loaded.'

"Before he replaced it, however, he made the following note in his pocket-book: 'A Colt's double-action revolver, nickel plated, six shots, No. 819.' And, unseen by Mrs. Middlemore, he scratched on the metal with his penknife the initial F. Then he looked at his watch, and said-

"'It is nearly ten o'clock. My advice now is that you go and give the alarm to the police that the body of M. Felix has vanished.'

"'You'll go along with me, sir?'

"'No, for your sake I had better not be seen. Give me two minutes to get away, and then go for the police at once. I will come and see you again, and help you in every way I can.'

"Shaking her hand, and leaving half a sovereign in it, our reporter, accompanied by Mrs. Middlemore, went to the street door, and left her standing there."

CHAPTER XI.
THE "EVENING MOON" IS INUNDATED WITH CORRESPONDENCE CONCERNING THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BODY OF M. FELIX

"As was to be expected, the news of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix caused the greatest excitement. In small villages trifling incidents are sufficient to create an interest; in great cities events of magnitude are required to stir the pulses of the people; and in both village and city, to arouse the public from their normal condition of apathy, it is necessary that the incidents must have local color. Soho was sufficiently central, and, it may be added, sufficiently mixed and mysterious in the character of its population, to fulfil this imperative condition of popularity. Every resident in London knows the locality, and is to some extent familiar with it; it is contiguous to the most fashionable thoroughfares; it is within a stone's throw of theatres of magnificent proportions; it gives shelter to foreign princes deposed for a time from their high estate, and to foreign votaries of vice of both sexes who, being outlaws, cannot pursue their infamous courses in their native lands. If we were asked which part of London contains the most varied material for the weaving of modern romance we should unhesitatingly point to the region of Soho. A careless stroller through those thoroughfares little dreams of the strange and wondrous life which beats beneath the apparently placid, the undeniably squalid, aspect of this pregnant locality. The elderly woman, poorly clad and closely veiled, who glides past him is a prominent member of a Royal family who for a long period held the reins of power in one of the greatest European nations; she lives now in a garret upon dry bread and German sausage, and makes her own bed and fire. Yesterday she wore a crown of diamonds, to-day she wears a crown of sorrow. The attenuated man, whose worn-out garments hang loosely upon his spare body, and who is now studying *carte du jour* in the window of a low French restaurant, nervously fumbling at the same moment the few loose coins in his pocket, was, in years gone by, one of the greatest financiers in the world; yesterday he dealt in millions, had scores of carriages and hundreds of servants, paid fabulous prices for rare gems and pictures, and provided funds for mighty wars; to-day he is debating whether he can afford an eighteen-penny dinner. The man with an overhanging forehead, who strides onward with teeth closely set, and the fingers of whose hands are continually clinching and unclinching, is the head of a secret society whose members number hundreds of thousands, and whose deed of blood shall next week convulse the world with horror. We could dwell long upon this fascinating theme, but our business is with M. Felix, and we must not wander from him.

"As we have already stated, we were the first to give the public the intelligence of his strange disappearance, and so intense was the interest the news excited that our printing-machines could not supply one-fourth of the demand for the various editions of our journal. The letters we received upon the subject would form a curious chapter in a new 'Curiosities of Literature.'

"'Dear sir' (wrote one correspondent), 'you speak of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix as an unparalleled incident. Allow me to correct you, and from my own experience to furnish your readers with an identical case. It is now ten years ago since I formed the acquaintance of a gentleman of great attainments and peculiar habits, and whose nationality was always a matter of curiosity with me. Once or twice I delicately approached the subject, but he skilfully evaded it, and I did not feel warranted in pressing it. He was a wonderful chess-player, an accomplished linguist, and his knowledge of the niceties of every new discovery in science was simply marvellous. He had only one failing-he drank and smoked too much. In those days I also was a free liver. We were both single men, I certainly, he presumably; there are topics upon which it is good breeding to preserve a friendly delicacy. We met frequently, and dined together at least twice a week, at my expense. He was a good judge of wine and liquor, and very choice in his food. Being much superior to me in this respect,

I invariably left it to him to decide where to dine and to arrange the courses. Perhaps occasionally we took half a bottle of wine too much, but that is neither here nor there. It was no one's business but our own. He took a peculiar interest in all new inventions, and was in the habit of throwing out hints of an extraordinary invention of his own which one day was to revolutionize the world. He told me very little of his discovery of which anyone could make use, but he was so jealous of his secret that he bound me down to solemn secrecy on the point; and I trust I am too much of a gentleman to violate the confidence he reposed in me. I may, however, without scruple, reveal that his invention related to combustion. One evening, when we had arranged to dine as usual together at the Royal, in Regent Street, he confided to me that he was in temporary want of funds, and I lent him all the money I had about me, some fifteen or sixteen pounds. Then we dined, and he paid for the dinner. Over the meal he talked more frequently than he was in the habit of doing of his invention. "It is near completion," he said, "and before I go to bed I intend to make some experiments which I am in hopes will put the finishing touch to it." Then he looked at me searchingly and thoughtfully, and said I might accompany him home if I liked, and assist in the experiments. Burning with curiosity, and delighted at this mark of his confidence, I gladly consented, and we issued forth and proceeded to his rooms, which, singularly enough, were in Glasshouse Street, at no very great distance from the house in which M. Felix lived. On our way he purchased two bottles of brandy, remarking that even when the soul was in its highest state of exaltation the body required nourishment and sustaining. I acquiesced. He lived on the second floor, in two rooms, one his bedroom, the other the room in which he conducted his experiments. There was no evidences of the nature of these experiments visible, and he explained this to me by stating that, distrusting his housekeeper, he kept them in his cupboard. The first thing he did was to light a large fire; then he brought forth a brass frying-pan, upon which he emptied a packet of powder. "You must not be frightened at what I am about to do," he said. "There is no very great danger in it, but it needs courage." Being already primed with the wine we had at dinner, and with three glasses of the brandy he had purchased, I told him I was prepared for anything. Then he informed me that his experiments must be made without light from candle or lamp; so that, with the exception of the fire, we were in darkness. Then he put the brass frying-pan on the fire, and a blue vapor floated through the room. I felt a little nervous, but I would not confess it, and I helped myself to another glass of brandy, and puffed away at a very large and very strong cigar with which he presented me. He bade me sit in a particular chair by a little table (upon which he considerately placed the two bottles of brandy, one by this time half empty), and he drew around me upon the floor, which was destitute of carpet, a circle with a piece of billiard chalk, and said that as long as I did not move outside that charmed circle I should be safe. "Help yourself to some more brandy," he said, "and do not be frightened." I obeyed him as to the brandy, but I must confess I was in great trepidation, more especially as the dim objects in the room appeared to be going round and round. He threw some more powder into the brass frying-pan, and this time the vapor was green. He then asked me if I had anything in the shape of metal upon my person, and I answered yes, of course; upon which he stated that I might be in danger unless I divested myself of them, as he was about to do. At a little distance from me, between me and the fire, he drew upon the floor a smaller circle with his piece of billiard chalk, and within it placed a trinket or two of his own. I handed him my gold watch and chain, my diamond ring, my pearl and ruby pin, and a valuable charm of gold which I kept in my pocket for luck. These he placed with his own trinkets within the smaller circle, and said that now no harm could befall me. The objects in the room went round more and more as he muttered some cabalistic words, and to prevent myself from being overcome by terror I took some more brandy. Then he threw about half a dozen little packets of powder into the fire, one after another, and all sorts of colors appeared, and filled the room with a peculiar smell, which so affected me that I helped myself to brandy. I must not forget to mention that he had locked the door and put the key in his pocket. "If what I am doing alarms you," he said, "you may close your eyes. You have great courage, and to prove my friendship for you I shall present you with half the profits of my invention." I tried to thank him, but to my

surprise my words were not very clearly spoken. Presently my eyes began to close, and I fell asleep. When I awoke the room was in darkness. I called to my friend, but he did not answer me. Fearful lest he himself should have fallen a victim to his hazardous experiments, I rose unsteadily to my feet and felt around till my hands reached the door, which, of course, was locked. Luckily I had in my pocket a box of matches, and striking one I lit the candle. My friend was gone; I was alone in the room; but upon the floor was a small heap of ashes. Not only was my poor friend gone, but all his trinkets as well as my own were also gone. But there upon the floor was the fatal heap of ashes. I could arrive at but one conclusion, namely, that the combustion which was the kernel of his great invention had reduced him to ashes and destroyed him. There could be no other explanation of the extraordinary occurrence, because the door was still locked. Fearful lest I might be accused of his death, I forced the door open and fled, and from that day to this the affair has remained wrapped in mystery. This is the first time I have mentioned it, and I do so now in the interests of justice, lest some unfortunate person should be accused, as I might have been in the case of my friend, of spiriting M. Felix away. May not his disappearance be set down to combustion? Are there any charred marks upon the floor of the room where his body lay? Were any ashes left? Was he given to dangerous experiments? My own experiences may lead you, sir, to the proper solution of the mystery which hangs around his fate. I shall follow the further developments of the case of M. Felix with interest, and am, Yours, etc.'

"Another correspondent wrote:

"'Sir-I am a Spiritualist, and I possess the power of summoning from the Caverns of the Unseen and Unknown the spirits of any individual upon whom I may call. There is but one way of arriving at the truth of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix, and I offer to you the exclusive privilege of revealing this truth to an anxious and eager public. My fee will be five guineas. Upon your remitting to me this sum I undertake to summon the spirit of M. Felix, and to ascertain from his own lips what has become of his body. The power I possess is worth considerably more than the sum I name, and you, with this exclusive information in your possession, will obtain an advertisement for your valued newspaper which you could not otherwise obtain for five hundred times the amount. I enclose you my name and address, which you may or may not publish as you please, and upon the receipt of the five guineas I will set to work at once. If you decline my offer the disappearance of this particular body will forever remain a mystery. I urge you, in your own interests, not to neglect this opportunity.

"Another correspondent wrote:

"'Honored Sir-I have been reading all about M. Felix, and now comes the cruel news of his disappearance. Just as I was going to see his body and identify it! Just as I was going to realize a life-long dream! Will you allow me to explain, and will you render an inestimable service to a poor widow? I feel that you will, for you have a heart. Thirty-two years ago my husband left me suddenly. We were having tea, and in the middle of it he got up and said, "I'm off, and you'll never see me again." We had had a dispute about something (I beg you not ask me what; it was a private matter), when he acted thus. He was a most overbearing man, and I had enough to do to bear with him. He left the house there and then, and I have never set eyes on him since. His name was not Felix, but are you sure that was M. Felix's proper name. I advertised for him, and said all would be forgiven and forgotten, but he didn't turn up. I heard he had gone to Australia, and no doubt he made his fortune there, and came home to England to enjoy it; and as *he* was a man who never forgot and never forgave, he took the name? of Felix, and lived the lonely life he did. It was only yesterday the idea flashed across me that he was my long lost husband, and that, if he did not make a will disinheriting me, his lawful wife, his fortune belongs to me by every legal and moral right. I would put two or three questions to you, sir, to you who are always ready to help the oppressed. Did the supposed M. Felix make a will? If he did, where is it? Is there any portrait of him extant? I have a portrait of my poor husband-alas! much faded-but it stands to reason that it must differ considerably from the late portraits taken of the deceased. Show me M. Felix's portrait and I am ready to swear to my husband. I put only one more question. In the absence of any evidence whatever, and failing the discovery of

the deceased's mortal remains, is it not competent for me to make oath that he was my husband, and thus establish my claim to any property he may have left behind him. In deep grief, I am, honored sir, your obliged and obedient servant, A LONELY WIDOW.'

"We could fill pages with letters of this description, but the three we have given are a sufficient indication of the interest excited by the incident. Among all these letters there was only one which offered any suggestion likely to be of practical value, and that was the letter we have printed, signed 'A LONELY WIDOW.' Her interesting hypothesis that M. Felix was her long lost husband was, of course, ridiculous, but she made mention of two subjects worthy of consideration. The first was did M. Felix make a will; the second, was there any portrait of him extant. If a will were in existence, it would probably be in the care of a firm of lawyers who could have no good reason for keeping it in the background. We set to work at once upon this trail, but it led to nothing. No lawyers were found in possession of such a document, and it was not forthcoming from other quarters. Nor were we more successful with respect to a portrait of M. Felix. Mrs. Middlemore had never seen one, and a private search through his rooms was futile. Indeed, it is a further proof of the strange secrecy in which M. Felix's life was conducted that not a document or written paper of any description was discovered in his apartments, not even a letter. Some important statements upon this head will be presented further on.

"In pursuance of the advice our reporter gave Mrs. Middlemore, she communicated to the police the fact of the disappearance of the body of M. Felix. There the matter rested, and would have been likely to rest but for the initiatory steps we had already taken to throw a light upon the mystery. It is all very well to say that nobody's business is everybody's business; it is not the case. People talked and wrote letters, but we acted. It must be admitted that the police were not in a position to move actively in the affair. No definite charge had been offered for their investigation; no person was accused of a crime; it had not even been proved that a crime had been committed. Conjecture was theirs, and that was all. The law cannot move, cannot act upon conjecture; facts of a crime, or even of a supposed crime, are necessary before the administration of justice can be called upon to adjudicate. Suggestions were thrown out as to the advisability of offering a reward for the discovery of the body, but who was to offer it? Even in the case of a deliberate and ascertained murder where the criminal is at large, the Government is notoriously slow in issuing such a proclamation, and the full weight of public opinion has frequently failed in inducing the authorities to offer a reward. It was not, therefore, to be expected that they would do so in this instance. Meanwhile there was one feature in the case which we desire to emphasize, and of which we never lost sight. Between the hours of twelve and one o'clock on the night of the 16th-17th January a man with a red scarf round his neck was seen to issue from the house in Gerard Street, in which M. Felix resided. The man still remained undiscovered. It matters not who saw him, whether Mrs. Middlemore, or Constables Wigg or Nightingale, or all three together. The fact seemed to be established that he had been in the house for some purpose, and had been seen to issue from it.

"Where was that man, and what motive had he for not coming forward?"

CHAPTER XII.
THE REPORTER OF THE "EVENING MOON" MAKES A DISCOVERY

"On the evening of the 19th our reporter paid a visit to Mrs. Middlemore. Sophy opened the street door for him.

"'Hallo, old 'un,' said the girl, 'it's you, is it?'

"'Yes, Sophy,' said our reporter, 'here I am again.'

"'As large as life,' remarked Sophy, vivaciously, 'and twice as-no, I won't say that; you ain't arf a bad sort. What's yer little game this time, old 'un?'

"'Is Mrs. Middlemore in?' asked our reporter.

"'Yes, aunt's at 'ome. Do you want to see 'er?'

"'That's what I've come for, Sophy.'

"'Who's that, Sophy?' cried Mrs. Middlemore, from the bottom of the basement stairs.

"'It's the old 'un, aunt,' screamed Sophy.

"'Don't be absurd,' said our reporter, pinching Sophy's cheek. 'It is I, Mrs. Middlemore, the reporter from the *Evening Moon*.'

"'Come down, sir,' cried Mrs. Middlemore, 'if come you must. Don't stop talking to that 'uzzy.'

"Sophy put her tongue in her cheek, and whispering, 'Ain't she a treat?' preceded our reporter to the kitchen.

"'Good-evening, Mrs. Middlemore,' said our reporter.

"'Good-evening, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, 'Sophy, 'ave you shut the street door tight?'

"'As tight as a drum,' replied Sophy.

"'Mrs. Middlemore sank into a chair with a heavy sigh, and our reporter took a seat opposite her. There was a jug of beer on the table.

"'Will you 'ave a glass, sir?' asked Mrs. Middlemore, hospitably.

"'No, thank you; I have just dined, and I thought I would come and have a chat with you in a general way.'

"'Thank 'eaven it's about nothing particular,' said Mrs. Middlemore, in a tone of manifest relief.

"'It may lead to something particular,' observed our reporter, genially. 'We're only on the threshold as yet.'

"'Stop a bit, sir, please. Sophy!'

"'Yes, aunty dear,' responded the girl, in a tone of simulated sweetness.

"'If I let you go out for a walk, will you come back in arf an hour?'

"Sophy hesitated. Between her longing for a run in the streets and her longing to hear what our reporter had to say, she felt herself in a difficulty.

"'Well, now,' exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, sharply.

"'Oh, aunty dear,' said Sophy, pressing the bosom of her frock, and pretending to be greatly startled at her aunt's sharp voice, you send my 'eart into my mouth.'

"'Will you promise not to stop out longer than an hour?'

"Mrs. Middlemore's anxiety to get rid of her decided the girl. For once she would forego the temptations of the streets.

"'Don't want to go out,' she said, shortly.

"'But you've got to go,' said Mrs. Middlemore, resenting this opposition to her authority, 'or I'll bundle you out for good, neck and crop. Promise, like a good girl.'

"'Shan't promise,' said Sophy, rebelliously.

"'Oh, dear, oh, dear,' moaned Mrs. Middlemore. 'What am I to do with her? And after all the nice things you said of her this morning, sir?'

"'Did you say nice things of me?' asked Sophy, of our reporter.

"'I did, Sophy,' he replied, 'and I'm sure you will do as your aunt tells you.'

"'That settles it. I'll go. 'Ow long for, aunty?'

"'An hour. Not a minute more.'

"'I say'-to our reporter-'you might lend us yer watch. Then I shouldn't make any mistake.'

"'Get along with you,' said our reporter, laughing. 'The shops are full of clocks.'

"'Thank yer for nothing,' said Sophy, proceeding to array herself. Spitting on the palm of her hand, she made a pretence of smoothing her hair. Then she looked at herself in a piece of looking-glass that was hanging on the wall, and turned her head this way and that, smirking most comically. Then she shook out her skirts, and looked over her shoulder to see that they hung becomingly. Then she tied a piece of string round one yawning boot. Then she put on her head something in straw that once might have been called a hat, but which had long since forfeited all claims to respectability. Then she fished out a poor little scarf, about six inches square, and pinned it round her shoulders with a coquettishness not devoid of grace. Her toilette completed, she asked-

"'Will I do?'

"'Very nicely, Sophy,' said our reporter. But although he spoke gayly he was stirred by a certain pity for this little waif, who was so conspicuously animated by a spirit to make the best of things-a spirit which might with advantage be emulated by her betters-and who made a joke even of her poverty and rags.

"'Much obliged,' said Sophy. 'Give us a kiss, aunty. Now I'm off.'

"And off she was, but not without saluting our reporter with an elaborate courtesy.

"Mrs. Middlemore waited till she heard the street-door slam, and then said,

"'Did you ever see the likes of her?'

"'I declare to you, my dear madam,' said our reporter, 'that the more I see of Sophy the more I like her. What have the police done? Anything?'

"'Nothing, sir. I went and told 'em what 'ad 'appened, and two policemen came and looked at the bed, looked under it, looked in every room as you said they would, looked at me, and went away.'

"'And they have not been here again?'

"'No, sir.'

"'Mrs. Middlemore, may I have another peep in M. Felix's rooms?'

"'Certainly, sir.'

"They went up together, Mrs. Middlemore breathing heavily, perfuming the air with a flavor of beer. There was an escritoire in the sitting-room, and our reporter examined it.

"'I'll tell you what I'm looking for,' he said. 'I see pens, ink, and paper, denoting that M. Felix was occasionally in the habit of using them, but there is not a scrap of paper about with his writing on it. There is not even a monogram on the note paper. If we could find something, it might furnish a clue. He received letters, I suppose?'

"'Oh, yes, sir.'

"'And the presumption is that he answered them. Did you ever post any of his letters?'

"'Never once, sir.'

"'Here is a waste-paper basket; there must have been in it, at odd times, scraps of the letters he received and spoilt sheets of his own. Has your dust bin been emptied this week?'

"'No, sir, but you wouldn't find anything of Mr. Felix's in it. It was one of his orders that whatever was in the waste-paper basket should be burnt here in his own fireplace. I used to sweep this room in the morning when he was in bed, and he always said I did my work so quietly that he was never disturbed by any noise.'

"'Look round the room, Mrs. Middlemore, and see if you miss anything. You would be pretty well acquainted with everything in it. What is the meaning of that gasp? You *do* miss something?'

"'There was another desk, sir, and I don't see it.'

"'What kind of desk?'

"'A small one, sir, that used to smell quite nice.'

"'Ah, made of cedar wood, no doubt. Did M. Felix keep his papers in this desk?'

"'Some of his papers, sir.'

"'How do you know that?'

"'I've come into the room when he's rung for me, and saw the desk open.'

"'Ocular proof, Mrs. Middlemore.'

"'What sort's that, sir?'

"'Visible to the eye-*your* eye, my dear madam.'

"'Yes, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, dubiously.

"'Now, Mrs. Middlemore, can you inform me whether those papers you saw in the missing desk were private papers?'

"'It ain't possible for me to say, sir.'

"'Neither can you say, I suppose, whether M. Felix set any particular store upon them?'

"'Well, sir, now you bring me to it, things come to my mind.'

"'Exactly.'

"'Whenever I come into the room,' said Mrs. Middlemore, 'and the desk was open, Mr. Felix used to shut it up quick.'

"'Lest you should see them too closely?'

"'I'm sure I shouldn't 'ave made no use of 'em; least of all, bad use.'

"'That is not the point. He closed the desk quickly when another person was by, with an evident wish to keep all possible knowledge of them to himself.'

"'It looks like that. You *do* push a thing close.'

"Our reporter accepted this as a compliment, and continued:

"'That appears to establish the fact that this desk-which probably was brought from India, Mrs. Middlemore-contained M. Felix's private papers?'

"'It do, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, admiringly.

"'And, therefore, papers of importance. The desk was inlaid with silver, Mrs. Middlemore.'

"'Lor', sir!' exclaimed Mrs. Middlemore, doubtless regarding our reporter as a man who dealt in enchantments. 'How did you find out that?'

"'It was, was it not?'

"'Yes, sir, it was.'

"'When M. Felix had visitors, was this desk ever allowed to lie carelessly about?'

"'No, sir. At them times he used to keep it in 'is bedroom, on a little table by the side of 'is bed.'

"'Let us look through the bedroom, and see if it is there.'

"They searched the bedroom thoroughly, without finding it.

"'It is undoubtedly gone,' said our reporter.

"'It do look like it, sir.'

"'Mrs. Middlemore, when M. Felix was found dead in his chair, was this desk in either of the rooms?'

"'I didn't see it, sir.'

"'You could not swear it was not here?'

"'I shouldn't like to, sir.'

"'The probability, however, is that it had gone when the door was forced open?'

"'Yes, sir.'

"'The police could scarcely take it away without your knowledge?'

"'They'd 'ave been clever to do it.'

"'Had they done so, they would certainly have been exceeding their duties. Now, do not answer the questions I put to you too quickly. Were you in these rooms on the day before M. Felix's death?'

"'I were, sir.'

"'Was the desk here then?'

"'It were; I can swear to that.'

"'You saw it with your own eyes?'

"'I couldn't see it with no others,' replied Mrs. Middlemore, smirking, in approval of her small wit.

"'Of course, you could not. Is there any particular reason why you are so positive of this?'

"'Well, sir, Mr. Felix wanted something, and rung for me; and when I come into the room he was sitting at this table with the desk open before him, and all the papers scattered about.'

"'That fixes it. Did he seem to be searching for, or examining with more than usual interest, any special document?'

"'He seemed flustered and excited, sir. I can't say no more than that.'

"'He was not generally of an excitable temperament?'

"'Not at all. He was easy going, and always with a pleasant word.'

"'A model man. I observe that you call him Mr. and not Monsieur?'

"'I can't bring myself to foreign languages, sir. My tongue gits into a knot.'

"'He *was* a foreigner, I suppose?'

"'I suppose so, sir. I ain't the best of judges.'

"'A Frenchman?'

"'So I thought, sir.'

"'Or an Italian?'

"'Perhaps, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, wavering.

"'Or a Spaniard?'

"'Perhaps, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, growing more undecided.

"'Or a Russian?'

"'How *can* I say, sir?' said Mrs. Middlemore, now quite at sea as to M. Felix's nationality.

"'He spoke the English language well?'

"'As well as me, sir.'

"'So that, after all, he might have been an Englishman?'

"'He might,' said Mrs. Middlemore, declining to commit herself, 'and he mightn't.'

"Our reporter did not press the point, as to which Mrs. Middlemore had evidently disclosed all she knew.

"'If we could find the missing desk, Mrs. Middlemore, it might throw a light upon the mystery.'

"Again did Mrs. Middlemore decline to commit herself; again did she answer, 'It might, and it mightn't, sir.'

"'I presume there was nothing in the desk that attracted your attention besides the papers?'

"'Only one thing, sir-a curious sort of knife.'

"'A paper knife, most likely.'

"'It was more like a dagger,' said Mrs. Middlemore. 'It 'ad a 'andle like a twisted snake, with a' open mouth and a colored stone in its eye. It 'ad a sharp pint, too?'

"'How did you become aware of that? Did you ever try it?'

"'Not me, sir; but once I come in when Mr. Felix 'ad it in 'is 'and, playing with it, and all at once he dropped it like a 'ot pertater. He pricked 'isself with it, and there was blood on 'is 'and.'

"'You have furnished me with a valuable piece of evidence, Mrs. Middlemore. Papers are easily burnt, and a desk broken up and destroyed. It would not be so easy to get rid of that knife, which,

from your description, must be a foreign dagger, and the identification of which would be a simple matter. For instance, you could swear to it, and so could I, who have never seen it.'

"'Anybody could swear to it, sir; it couldn't be mistook.'

"'Did M. Felix keep this dagger always in his desk?'

"'I should say he did, sir. I never saw it laying about loose, and never saw it at all unless the desk was open.'

"'Did you see it on the last occasion you saw the desk open, a few hours before M. Felix's death?'

"'Yes, sir, it was among 'is papers.'

"'Have you any suspicion, Mrs. Middlemore, who at this present moment has possession of the desk and the dagger?'

"'Not the least, sir. 'Ave you?'

"'I have. A suspicion amounting to a certainty. Have you forgotten the man with a red handkerchief round his neck who escaped from the house on the night of the eventful discovery?'

"'I'm not likely to forget 'im,' said Mrs. Middlemore, and then added, in an excited tone, 'do you think it was 'im as took it?'

"'Him, and no other. Now we arrive at the motive of his visit; it was robbery. Not a vulgar robbery such as an ordinary thief would have committed, but one of a particular nature, and committed with a knowledge that M. Felix's Indian desk contained a secret or secrets of value, which no doubt he could turn to good account. We are getting on, Mrs. Middlemore, we are getting on,' said our reporter, rubbing his hands in satisfaction. 'In these affairs there is nothing like patience.'

"'You're as good as a detective, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, 'and you've got the patience of Job. You won't mind my saying that I've thought lots of your questions foolish, and only put for the sake of saying something. I don't think so now, sir.'

"'Thank you for the compliment. I assure you I have not asked you one idle question. Recall to mind whether the man with the red handkerchief round his neck carried anything away with him that looked like a desk as he escaped from the house.'

"'I don't believe, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, with evident reluctance, 'as that will ever be known.'

"'Oh, yes, it will. Answer my question.'

"'I didn't notice nothing,' replied Mrs. Middlemore.

"We pause a moment here to observe that it was these reserved replies, when any question relating to this man was asked, as well as the conflicting testimony of the constables Wigg and Nightingale, that led us to the conclusion, already recorded, that the precise truth was not revealed as to which one of the three witnesses actually saw the man. Having committed themselves to a certain statement for the purpose of exonerating the constables from official blame, they could not afterward contradict themselves, because such a contradiction would have thrown grave doubt upon the whole of their evidence.

"'He could not,' said our reporter, 'very well have carried away an article of this description without its being noticed by any one who saw him.'

"'Ain't it excusable, sir,' observed Mrs. Middlemore, nervously, 'when you think of the storm and the confusion we was in?'

"'Well, perhaps, but it is a pity we cannot obtain definite information on the point. Isn't that a knock at the street door?'

"'Yes, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, making no attempt to move from the room.

"'You had better go down and see who it is. I will remain here. There is really nothing to be frightened at. It might be Sophy come back.'

"At this suggestion Mrs. Middlemore left the room, and went to the street door. Being alone, our reporter looked about him, and almost immediately made an important discovery. Against the wall, on the right hand side of the door as he entered, stood a massive sideboard, a very handsome

piece of furniture. The lower part of this sideboard was close against the waistcoat, above which there was a space between the back of the sideboard and the wall of about an inch in width. Happening to glance at the back of the sideboard, the light of the candle which our reporter held in his hand fell upon something bright. Stooping, he drew the object out, and was excited to find it was the identical dagger about which he and Mrs. Middlemore had been conversing. There could not be the possibility of a mistake. Its handle, as Mrs. Middlemore had described, resembled a twisted snake; the mouth was open, and in its head was a ruby to represent an eye. A dangerous instrument, with a very sharp point, the metal of which it was composed being bright steel. But it was not the peculiar shape of the handle, nor the bright steel of the blade, nor the ruby eye, which excited our reporter. It was the fact that there was rust upon the blade, and that this rust was caused by blood, of which there were light stains plainly visible on the handle of the dagger."

CHAPTER XIII.
THE REPORTER OF THE "EVENING MOON" GIVES SOPHY A TREAT

"In the elucidation of a mystery there are facts which have to be slowly and laboriously built up; there are others which need no such process but establish themselves instantly in the analytical and well-balanced mind. Our reporter is gifted with such a mind, and certain facts connected with the case of M. Felix took instant form and order. We will set these facts before our readers briefly and concisely:

"It is necessary to premise-

"First, that M. Felix kept a loaded revolver beneath the pillows of his bed.

"Second, that when Constables Wigg and Nightingale, Mrs. Middlemore, and Dr. Lamb entered M. Felix's sitting-room after the door was forced open, the window was open.

"We now proceed to the sequence of events.

"Shortly before his death M. Felix, being alone in the house in Gerard Street, received a visitor. Whether expected or unexpected, whether welcome or unwelcome, we are not prepared to state; nor are we prepared to state how this visitor obtained entrance to the house. Obtain entrance by some means he undoubtedly did, and mounting the stairs, he knocked at the door of M. Felix's sitting-room. At the moment M. Felix heard the knock he had his Indian desk open before him, and it was in connection with a secret which this desk contained, or to which a document in the desk could afford a clue, that the visit was made. M. Felix, supposing that it was his housekeeper who knocked, opened the door and admitted the intruder. A stormy scene ensued, and M. Felix, throwing open his window, screamed for help. The appeal was sent forth into the wild night more from the fear that he was about to be robbed of this secret than from the fear that his life was in danger. The hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that there were no marks of personal violence on the body of M. Felix. The visitor laid hands upon the desk, and as he did so M. Felix turned from the window, snatched up the dagger, and hurled it with all his force at the robber. The sharp point struck into the flesh of the intruder, and it was his blood which was discovered on the floor of the room. The agitation produced by the scene brought on the attack of heart disease which caused M. Felix's death. The blind and momentary delirium which ensued did not prevent M. Felix from thinking of the revolver beneath his pillows; he staggered into his bedroom, but before he reached his bed he fell lifeless in a chair. While this was going on the robber had seized the desk, and, conscious that to carry away with him the evidence of a dagger dripping with blood might lead to his detection, he threw it swiftly from him behind the sideboard. He threw it with his right hand, his back being toward the door, which accounts for the place and position in which our reporter found the weapon. Then, with the desk in his possession, he escaped from the house-ignorant of the tragedy that had occurred, ignorant that M. Felix was lying dead within a few feet of him. He left the door open, but the fierce wind through the window blew it shut. It was while it was open that the cat which alarmed Mrs. Middlemore and the two constables crept into the room, became besmeared with blood, and crept out.

"The departure of the thief was like the falling of the curtain upon a pregnant act in an exciting drama. Imagination follows the man as he flies with his stolen treasure through the deserted streets; imagination wanders to the dead form of M. Felix lying in the chair by the bedside. When the curtain rises again, what will be disclosed?

"These thoughts came to the mind of our reporter with lightning rapidity. Mrs. Middlemore had opened the street door, had closed it again, and was now ascending the stairs. What should he do with the dagger?

"To retain it would be an unwarranted act, and might be construed into a theft. To take Mrs. Middlemore into his confidence might thwart his operations in the future. He put his hand behind the sideboard, and let the dagger fall. It was now safely hidden from sight, and its presence behind the sideboard could only be discovered, by any other person than himself, by the shifting of that piece of furniture.

"Mrs. Middlemore re-entered the room.

"'It was a runaway knock,' she said, 'The boys and girls take a pleasure in it. If I could ketch one of 'em I'd bang their head agin the wall.'

"'Did you see no one at all?' asked our reporter.

"'Only some people staring up at the winders,' replied Mrs. Middlemore. 'The 'ouse 'as become a regular show since that dreadful night. What do they expect to see?'

"'Perhaps the ghost of M. Felix,' suggested our reporter, with, it must be confessed, a rather feeble attempt at humor.

"'Don't mention sech a thing, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, piteously. 'It makes my flesh creep.'

"'I only said it in joke; there are no such things as ghosts and spirits.'

"'Some people believe otherwise sir.'

"'The more fools they. Well, Mrs. Middlemore, there is nothing more I wish to ask you just now; I must get back to my duties. But I must not waste your time for nothing.'

"He pressed into her willing palm another half-sovereign, making the second he had given her.

"'I'm sure you're very kind, sir,' said Mrs. Middlemore, after furtively glancing at the coin, to see that it was not a sixpence. 'Shall I see you agin?'

"'Yes. Good-night, Mrs. Middlemore.'

"'Good-night, sir,' she responded, as they went down-stairs. 'I 'ope Sophy won't be gone long.'

"'She'll be back soon, I daresay.' He paused in the passage. 'Mrs. Middlemore, are you satisfied that I am your friend?'

"'Yes, sir, I am.'

"'Then, if anything new occurs, you will let me know at once.'

"'I will, sir.'

"'And if it should happen,' said our reporter, 'that you remember anything you have forgotten to tell me, you will come and let me know it?'

"'I'll be sure to, sir.'

"Wishing her good-night again, he left the house, and heard her close the street door behind him with a bang.

"It was not without a motive that our reporter had addressed his last words to her. He had an idea that she had not been quite frank with him respecting M. Felix's visitors feeling assured that she could not be so entirely in the dark regarding them as she professed to be. His visit had not been fruitless; he had become acquainted with the loss of the desk, and he had discovered the dagger with its curiously shaped handle. Two steps advanced in the mystery, which might lead to something of importance.

"He walked slowly on, revolving these matters in his mind, and debating whether he could make any present use of them when his coat was plucked by a small hand. Looking down, he saw Sophy.

"'Ah, Sophy,' he said, 'what do you want?'

"'I've been waiting for yer,' said Sophy. 'I've got somethink to tell.'

"'Good. Where shall we talk?'

"Sophy's reply was a strange one. 'I know,' she said, where they sells fried fish and fried 'taters.' She smacked her lips.

"'You would like some?'

"'Wouldn't I? Jest?'

"'Lead the way, Sophy.'

"'You're a brick, old 'un, that's what you are.'

"She walked close to him, rubbing against him after the fashion of a friendly cat, and conducted him toward the purlieus of Drury Lane.

"'You're going to stand treat, ain't yer?'

"'Yes, Sophy, to as many fried potatoes and as much fried fish as you can comfortably tuck away.'

"'No gammon, yer know?'

"'I mean what I say, Sophy.'

"'Then there's stooed eels?'

"'All right; you shall have some.'

"'Don't say afterwards as I took you in. My inside's made of injer rubber. The more I puts in it the more it stretches.'

"'I don't mind, Sophy.'

"'You're somethink like a gent. I say, was aunty riled at the runaway knock?'

"'Oh, it was you, was it?'

"'Yes, it was me; I was gitting tired of waiting for yer. She's close, ain't she?'

"'Who? Your aunt?'

"'Yes; but I'm closer, I am. I could tell 'er somethink as 'd make 'er 'air stand on end.'

"'And you are going to tell it to me?'

"'Per'aps. If yer make it wuth my while.'

"'You shall have no reason to complain, Sophy. Is it about M. Felix?'

"'You wait till I've 'ad my tuck out.'

"Burning as he was with curiosity, our reporter wisely restrained his impatience. They had now arrived at the fried-potato shop, and Sophy stood before the open window with eager eyes. The potatoes were frizzling in the pan, and were being served out hot by a greasy Italian. His customers were of the very poorest sort, and most of them received the smoking hot potatoes in the street, and went away to eat them. You could purchase a half-penny's worth or a penny's worth the paper bags in which they were delivered being of different sizes. On the open slab in the window were pieces of fried plaice, tails, heads, and middles, the price varying according to the size. A few aristocratic customers were inside the shop, sitting upon narrow wooden benches, and eating away with an air of great enjoyment.

"'Don't they smell prime?' whispered Sophy.

"Our reporter assented, although the odor of fat which floated from the pan left, to the fastidious taste, something to be desired.

"'Will you eat your supper outside or in, Sophy?'

"Inside, old 'un,' said Sophy.

"They went into the shop and took their seats. There were no plates or knives or forks, but there was a plentiful supply of salt and pepper.

"'Can you manage without a plate?' asked our reporter.

"With her superior knowledge of the ways of this free-and-easy restaurant, Sophy replied, 'Plates be blowed!'

"'But you will certainly want a knife.'

"'No I shan't,' said Sophy, 'fingers was made before knives.'

"With two large middle slices of fried fish and a penny's worth of fried potatoes spread upon a piece of newspaper before her, Sophy fell to with a voracious appetite. In his position of host our reporter was compelled to make a sacrifice, and he therefore toyed with a small heap of fried potatoes, and put a piece occasionally into his mouth. His critical report is that they were not at all bad food; it was the overpowering smell of fat that discouraged this martyr to duty.

"'I say,' said Sophy, 'ain't yer going to 'ave some fried fish? Do 'ave some! You don't know 'ow good it is.'

"'I am eating only out of politeness, Sophy,' said our reporter, watching the child with wonder; she had disposed of her first batch and was now busy upon a second supply. 'I have not long had my dinner.'

"'Ain't we proud?' observed the happy girl. '*I* like *my* dinner-when I can git it, old 'un-in the middle of the day, not in the middle of the night.'

"'You eat as if you were hungry, Sophy.'

"'I'm allus 'ungry. You try and ketch me when I ain't!'

"'Doesn't your aunt give you enough?'

"'She 'lowances me, and ses I mustn't over-eat myself. As if I could! I ses to 'er sometimes, "Give me a chance, aunt!" I ses; and she ups and ses she knows wot's good for me better than I do myself, and all the while she's eating and drinking till she's fit to bust. She's fond of her innards, is aunt. Never mind, it'll be my turn one day, you see if it won't. There, I'm done. Oh, don't you stare! I could eat a lot more, but there's stooed eels to come, I *do* like stooed eels, I do!'

"Our reporter had no reason to complain of Sophy's extravagance; though she had disposed of four slices of fried fish and two helpings of fried potatoes, his disbursement amounted to no more than tenpence half-penny. Upon leaving the shop Sophy again assumed the command, and conducted our reporter to the stewed-eel establishment, where she disposed of three portions, which the proprietor ladled out in very thick basins. The host of this magnificent entertainment was somewhat comforted to find that although fingers were made before knives (and presumably, therefore, before spoons), Sophy was provided with a very substantial iron spoon to eat her succulent food with. As in the fried-potato establishment there was a plentiful supply of salt and pepper, so here there was a plentiful supply of pepper and vinegar, of which Sophy liberally availed herself. At the end of her third basin Sophy raised her eyes heavenward and sighed ecstatically.

"'Have you had enough?' asked our reporter.

"'Enough for once,' replied Sophy, with a prudent eye to the future. 'I wouldn't call the Queen my aunt.'

"Our reporter did not ask why, Sophy's tone convincing him that the observation was intended to express a state of infinite content, and had no reference whatever to Mrs. Middlemore.

"'Now, Sophy,' he said, 'are you ready to tell me all you know?'

"'I'll tell yer a lot,' said Sophy, and if you ain't sapparized-well, there!'

"Another colloquialism, which our reporter perfectly understood.

"'What will your aunt say?' he asked-they had left the shop, and were walking side by side-'to your coming home late?'

"'Wot she likes,' replied Sophy, with a disdainful disregard of consequences. 'If she don't like it she may lump it. Don't frighten yerself; she's used to it by this time. Where are you going to take me?'

"Our reporter had settled this in his mind. 'To my rooms, where we can talk without interruption.'

"'Oh, but I say,' exclaimed Sophy, 'won't they stare!'

"'There will be no one to do that, Sophy, and you will be quite safe.'

"Sophy nodded, and kept step with him as well as she could. It was not easy, by reason of her boots being odd, and not only too large for her feet, but in a woful state of dilapidation. In one of the narrow streets through which they passed, a second-hand clothing shop was open, in the window of which were displayed some half-dozen pairs of children's boots. A good idea occurred to him.

"'Your boots are worn out, Sophy.'

"'There's 'ardly any sole to 'em,' remarked Sophy.

"'Would a pair of those fit you?'

"'Oh, come along. I don't want to be made game of.'

"'I am not doing so, Sophy,' said our reporter, slipping three half-crowns into her hand. 'Go in, and buy the nicest pair you can; and mind they fit you properly.'

"Sophy raised her eyes to his face, and our reporter observed, without making any remark thereon, that they were quite pretty eyes, large, and of a beautiful shade of brown, and now with a soft light in them. She went into the shop silently, and returned, radiant and grateful, shod as a human being ought to be.

"'Do yer like 'em?' she asked, putting one foot on the ledge of the shop window.

"'They look very nice,' he said. 'I hope they're a good fit?'

"'They're proper. 'Ere's yer change, and I'm ever so much obliged to yer.'

"The words were commonplace, but her voice was not. There was in it a note of tearful gratefulness which was abundant payment for an act of simple kindness. Utilitarians and political economists may smile at our statement that we owe the poor a great deal, and that but for them we should not enjoy some of the sweetest emotions by which the human heart can be stirred."

CHAPTER XIV.
SOPHY IMPARTS STRANGE NEWS TO THE REPORTER OF THE "EVENING MOON."

"The chambers occupied by our reporter are situated at the extreme river end of one of the streets leading from the Strand to the Embankment. They are at the top of the house, on the third floor, and a capacious bow-window in his sitting-room affords a good view of the river and the Embankment gardens. He describes his chambers as an ideal residence, and declares he would not exchange it for a palace. In daytime the view from his bow-window is varied and animated, in night-time the lights and shadows on the Thames are replete with suggestion. From this window he has drawn the inspiration for many admirable articles which have appeared in our columns, in which his play of fancy illumines his depiction of a busy city's life.

"He let himself in with his latch-key, and Sophy followed close on his heels up the silent stairs. On the third floor another latch-key admitted them to the privacy of his chambers.

"'It will be dark for a moment, Sophy,' he said; 'you are not frightened, I hope?'

"'Not a bit,' replied Sophy.

"It may not be unworthy of remark that she never again addressed him as 'old 'un, which he ascribed to the little incident of the purchase of the pair of boots. It had raised him to an altitude which rendered so familiar an appellation out of place.

"In less than a minute he had lit the gas in his sitting-room, and Sophy stood gazing around in wonder and delight. Our reporter is a gentleman of taste, no mere grub working from hand to mouth. He entered the ranks of journalism from choice, and possesses a private income which renders him independent of it; thus he is enabled to surround himself with luxuries which are out of the reach of the ordinary rank and file of his brother workers, who one and all have a good word for him because of the kindnesses they have on numerous occasions received at his hands.

"Sophy looked round on the books and pictures and valuable objects with which the room was literally packed, and her appreciation-little as she understood them-was expressed in her eyes.

"'This is my den, Sophy,' said our reporter. 'What do you think of it?'

"As he spoke he applied a lighted match to a couple of bachelor's wheels in the stove, and in an instant a cheerful fire was glowing.

"'Well, I never!' exclaimed Sophy. 'It's magic.'

"'No, Sophy, sober fact. Single life nowadays is filled with innumerable conveniences to keep a fellow from the path of matrimony. This little bachelor's wheel'-holding one up-'is a formidable foe to anxious mammas with marriageable daughters. But I am talking above you, Sophy; pardon the flight. Go to the window there; you will see the river from it.'

"He stood by her side while she gazed upon the wonderful sight, too little appreciated by those who are familiar with it. The moon was shining brightly, and the heavens were dotted with stars; long lines of lights were shining in the water, animated as it were with a mysterious spiritual life by the shifting currents of the river. It was at this moment that Sophy gave expression to a remarkable effort at grammar.

"'I say, 'ow 'igh the Thames are!'

"Our reporter was amused, and did not correct her. 'Yes, Sophy, the river has reached an unusual height. And now, little one, as time is flying, let us proceed to business.'

"Sophy, brought down to earth, retired from the window, and stood by the table, at which our reporter seated himself. He could not prevail upon her to take a chair.

"'I can talk better standing,' she said. 'Before I tell what I got to tell, I'd like to know wot aunt said of me when you and 'er was up in Mr. Felix's rooms this morning. You know. When I'd jest got out of bed.'

"'Nothing very particular, Sophy,' said our reporter, 'except that you were a sound sleeper.'

"'You arksed 'er that?' said Sophy, shrewdly.

"'Yes, You see, Sophy, I was naturally anxious to learn all I could of the strange disappearance of M. Felix's body. It was there last night when you and your aunt went to bed; it was not there this morning when you got up.'

"'Aunt couldn't tell yer much.'

"'She could tell me nothing. She went to bed, and though she has passed bad nights this week-'

"'Oh, she sed that, did she?'

"'Yes.'

"'Meaning that she don't sleep much?'

"'Yes, that undoubtedly was her meaning.'

"'Well, go on, please,' said Sophy.

"'Though she has passed bad nights lately, it was a fact that last night she slept very soundly. Then the idea occurred to me to come down and ask you whether you had heard anything in the night-because, you know, Sophy, that M. Felix's body could not have disappeared from the house without some sound being made. We do not live in an age of miracles. The body could not have flown up the chimney, or made its way through thick walls. There is only one way it could have been got out, and that was through the street door.'

"'Right you are,' said Sophy.

"'Now, Sophy, I am sure you are a sensible little girl, and that I can open my mind freely to you.'

"'You can that. I ain't much to look at, but I ain't quite a fool neither.'

"'I am certain you are not. I cannot tell you how deeply I am interested in this mysterious affair, and how much I desire to get at the bottom of it. Whoever assists me to do this will not repent it, and somehow or other I have an idea that you can help me. If you can, I will be a real good friend to you.'

"You've been that already, the best I ever sor. I took you in once this morning, and I ain't going to do it agin.'

"'How did you take me in, Sophy?'

"'I told yer I didn't wake up last night, didn't I?'

"'You did, Sophy.'

"'And that I didn't 'ear no noise?'

"'Yes.'

"'They was crammers. I did wake up in the middle of the night, and I did 'ear a noise.'

"'Sophy,' said our reporter, repressing his excitement as well as he could, 'I feel that you are going to do me a good turn.'

"'Aunt's a awful liar,' said Sophy.

"'Is she?'

"'She ses she sleeps light, and I sleep sound. It's all the other way. She goes to bed and drops off like the snuff of a candle, and she snores like a pig. I sleep on and off like. I don't let aunt know it, 'cause I don't want to be rushed out of bed till I've a mind to git up, so I pretend to be fast asleep, and I let her shake me as much as she likes. I do not lay snuggled up; and I was laying like that last night all the while aunt was snoring fit to shake the 'ouse down, when I 'eerd wot sounded like somethink movin' upstairs. I wasn't scared-yer don't know Sophy if yer think that. "I'll see what it is," thinks I, "if I die for it." So I creeps out of bed, and stands quiet a bit in the dark, without moving.'

"'You are a brave little girl, Sophy, and I am proud of you.'

"'I stands listening and wondering, and the sound of somethink moving upstairs goes on. Moving quite soft, sir, jest as if it didn't want to be 'eerd. "Blowed if I don't go up," thinks I, "and

find out wot it's all about." I wouldn't light a candle, 'cause that might wake aunt, and I wanted to 'ave it all to myself. Well, sir, I creeps to the door in my bare feet and opens it, and goes into the passage. Sure enough, I ain't deceived; there is somethink on the stairs. Up I creeps, as soft as a cat, feeling my way by the bannisters, till I git to the passage that leads to the street-door. Then somethink 'appens to me that upsets the applecart. I ketches my toe agin a nail, and I screams out. But that's nothink to what follers. A 'and claps itself on my mouth, and somebody ses, "If yer move or speak out loud I'll kill yer!" If I sed I wasn't frightened at that I'd be telling yer the biggest crammer of the lot, but I pulls myself together, and I whispers under my breath, "Wot is it? Burgulers?" "Yes," ses the voice, "burgulers, as'll 'ave yer blood if yer don't do as yer told." "I'll do everythink yer want," I ses, "if yer don't 'urt me. My blood won't do yer a bit o' good; it ain't much good to me as I knows on. Is there more than one of yer?" "There's a band of us," ses the voice. "Who's downstairs?" "Only aunt," I ses. "Ain't there nobody else in the 'ouse?" arsks the voice. "Not a blessed soul," ses I, "excep' the corpse on the fust floor." "Take yer oath on it," ses the voice. "I 'ope I may never move from this spot alive," ses I, "if it ain't the truth I'm telling of yer!"

"Now jest listen to me," ses the voice. "You do as yer told, or you'll be chopped into ten thousan' little bits. Set down on the stairs there, and shut yer eyes, and don't move or speak till you 'ear a whistle; it won't be a loud 'un, but loud enough for you to 'ear. Then you git up, and shut the street-door softly-you'll find it open-and lock it and put up the chain. Then go downstairs without speaking a word, and if yer aunt's awake and arsks yer wot's the matter, say nothink; if she's asleep, don't wake her. When she gits up in the morning don't say nothink to 'er, and don't answer no questions about us. You understand all that?" "Every word on it," I ses. "And yer'll do as yer ordered?" ses the voice. "Yes, I will," I ses. "Mind yer do," ses the voice, "or somethink orful 'll 'appen to yer. You'll be watched the 'ole day long, and if yer let on, look out for yerself. Now set yerself down on the stairs." I did, sir, and though I was froze almost to a stone, I never moved or spoke. It was that dark that I couldn't see a inch before my nose, even when I opened my eyes slyly, but I couldn't 'elp 'earing wot was going on. There was a creeping, and a bumping, and the sound of the street-door being unlocked and the chain being took down. Then everythink was quiet agin inside, and all I 'eerd was a policeman in the street outside, trying the doors as he passed on. When he'd got well out of the street, as near as I could tell, the street-door was opened without as much as a creak, and in another minute I 'eerd a low whistle. Then I got up; it was all a job, sir, 'cause I was cramped, but I managed it, and I crep' to the street-door, and shut it, and locked it, and put the chain up. I was glad enough to do it, I can tell yer, and I felt my way downstairs and got into bed. Aunt 'adn't as much as moved, and nobody knew nothink but me and the burgulers. That's all I know about last night.'

"It was enough, in all conscience; a strange story indeed, and related by such a common little waif as Sophy. Our reporter had not interrupted her once, but allowed her to proceed, in her own quaint and original way, to the end.

"'And you have told nobody but me, Sophy?' asked our reporter.

"'It ain't crossed my lips till this minute,' replied Sophy. 'I don't know wot I might 'ave done if I 'adn't seed you this morning. You spoke civil and nice to me, and I took to yer in a minute. Yer might 'ave knocked me down with a feather when I 'eered arter you'd gone wot the burgulers' little game was, and it come to me in a jiffy that you'd like to know wot 'ad become of Mr. Felix's body. "I'll wait till I see 'im agin," ses I to myself, "and then I'll tell 'im all about it." If you 'adn't come to aunt's to-night I should 'ave come to you.'

"'I am infinitely obliged to you,' said our reporter, 'We'll keep the matter to ourselves at present, and if there's any reward offered for the recovery of the body, or for any information that may lead to its recovery, it shall be yours, Sophy, every farthing of it.'

"Sophy's eyes glistened as she said, 'If they arsks me, then, why I adn't spoke before, I'll tell 'em I was too frightened by wot the burguler sed he'd do to me if I sed anythink about it.'

"'That excuse will do nicely. Did you hear the sound of many feet?'

"'I think it was only one man as was moving about,' replied Sophy, after a little consideration.

"'How do we account, then, for there being more than one man concerned in this singular robbery?'

"'Per'aps there wasn't more than one,' suggested Sophy quickly, 'and in course he 'ad to carry the body. It couldn't walk of itself, being dead.'

"'Quite so, my young logician-a compliment Sophy. Before you put up the chain, did you look out into the street?'

"'I didn't dare to.'

"'Then you don't know if there was a cab or a cart waiting at the door?'

"'I don't, sir.'

"'Did you hear the sound of wheels moving away after the door was secured?'

"'No, I didn't. Everythink was as still as still can be, inside and out.'

"'There must have been a vehicle of some sort, however, stationed near. A man couldn't carry a dead body through the streets very far without being caught. Perhaps he would not allow it to stand too near your aunt's house for fear of suspicion being excited. The natural conclusion is that a growler was engaged, and that it walked slowly to and fro in a given direction till he came up to it.'

"'That must 'ave been it, sir.'

"'If I give you five shillings, Sophy, can you take care of it?'

"'Rather! But you've done enough for me to-night, sir.'

"'Not half enough, my girl. Here's the money.'

"From the expression on Sophy's face she would have liked to resist the temptation, but it was too strong for her, so she took the two half-crowns, saying gleefully as she tied them in her money-box, I shall soon 'ave enough to buy wot I want.'

"'What is it you desire so particularly, Sophy? A new frock?'

"'No,' she replied. 'I want a pair of tights.'

"'In heaven's name, what for?'

"'To see 'ow I look in 'em.' Sophy glanced down at her legs, then stood straight up and walked a few steps this way and a few steps that, in glowing anticipation of the delights in store for her.

"'You would like to be an actress, Sophy?'

"'Wouldn't I? Jest! I can do a lot of steps, sir. Would you like to see me dance?'

"'Not to-night, Sophy,' said our reporter, thinking of the proprieties; 'I haven't time, and you had best get back as quick as you can to your aunt. I'll see you part of the way. I don't know what excuse you will give her for being absent so long.'

"'Let me alone for that. It ain't the fust time, and won't be the last.'

"'Well, come along, my girl.'

"They left the house without being observed, and our reporter saw Sophy as far as St. Martin's Lane, and then bade her good night. Before returning to his chambers he walked in the direction of the Embankment with the intention of taking a stroll there. It was a favorite promenade of his on fine nights, and on this night in particular he desired it, in order that he might think in the quietude of that grand avenue of the information he had gained. Elated as he was at the progress he was making in the elucidation of the mystery, he could not but be conscious that every new discovery he had made seemed to add to its difficulty. What he wanted now was a tangible clew, however slight, which he could follow up in a practical way. Little did he dream that everything was working in his favor, and that time and circumstance were leading him to the clew he was so anxious to possess.

"There was one thing in the story related to him by Sophy which greatly perplexed him. The child could not have assisted him to a satisfactory solution, for he was satisfied that she had disclosed all she knew of the events of the night, and he therefore had made no mention to her of the perplexing point. It was this. Sophy had told him that while she was sitting on the stairs with her eyes closed she heard the man unlock the street door and take the chain down. That being so, the question remained-

how had he got into the house? Scarcely through the street door, for it was hardly likely that, having got in through it, he would have locked it and put the chain up, and thus created for himself a serious obstacle to his escape in the event of his being discovered before he had accomplished his work. Our reporter could think of no satisfactory answer to this question, and it had to take its place among other questions to which, in the present aspect of the case, no answers could be found.

"He had turned on to the Embankment by way of Westminster Bridge, and passing under the arch of the Charing Cross Railway bridge, was proceeding onward toward Waterloo when he saw something that caused him to quicken his steps in its direction. Fate or chance was about to place in his hands the link for which he was yearning-a link but for which the mystery of M. Felix might forever have remained unravelled."

CHAPTER XV.
A SINGULAR ADVENTURE ON THE THAMES EMBANKMENT

"He saw before him, at a distance of some thirty yards, as nearly as he could judge, the figure of a woman standing upon the stone ramparts of the Embankment, close to Cleopatra's Needle. The light of a lamp was shining upon her form, which was stooping forward in the direction of the river.

"It had already been mentioned that the tide on this night was unusually high, and our reporter was apprehensive, from the position of the woman, that she was contemplating suicide. If so she had chosen a favorable moment to put her sad design into execution, for there was no person near enough to prevent her had she been expeditious. She looked neither to the right nor to the left, but down before her on the rolling river. Our reporter hastened his steps, in fear least he should be too late to arrest her purpose.

"Unseen by them another man was approaching the woman, but not so rapidly as our reporter. This was a policeman who had emerged from the shadows of the Waterloo steps on the opposite side, and as, when he started, he was nearer to her than our reporter, they both reached her at the same moment. Each becoming aware of the other's presence, they would have shown recognition of it had not their attention been diverted by a sufficiently startling proceeding on the part of the woman. Still unaware that there were witnesses of her movements, she leaned forward at a perilous angle, and with all her strength threw some heavy object into the water. The force she used destroyed her balance, and she would have fallen into the river had not the policeman and our reporter laid violent hands upon her, and dragged her from her dangerous position on the ramparts.

"'Just in time, thank God!' said our reporter.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.