

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Devlin the Barber



Benjamin Farjeon

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INTRODUCTION

IN WHICH REFERENCE IS MADE TO A STRANGE, UNFATHOMABLE BEING THROUGH WHOSE INSTRUMENTALITY AN AWFUL MYSTERY WAS SOLVED

The manner in which I became intimately associated with a fearful mystery with which not only all London but all England was ringing, and the strange, inexplicable Being whom the course of events brought to my knowledge, are so startling and wonderful, that I have grown to believe that by no effort of the imagination, however wild and bewildering the labyrinths into which it may lead a man, can the actual realism of our everyday life be outrivalled. What I am about to narrate is absolutely true-somewhat of an unnecessary statement, for the reason that human fancy could never have invented it. To a person unfamiliar with the wondrous life of a great city like London the story may appear impossible, but there are thousands of men and women who will immediately recognise in it features with which they became acquainted through the columns of the newspapers. I venture to say that the leading incident by which one morning-it was but yesterday-the great city was thrilled and horrified can never be entirely effaced from their memories. Dark crimes and deeds of heroism, in which the incidents are pathetic or pitiful, draw even strangers into sympathetic relation with each other. These events come home to us, as it were. What happened to one whose face we have never seen, whose hand we have never grasped, may happen to us who move in the same familiar grooves of humanity. Our hopes and fears, our joys and sorrows, our duties and temptations, are the same, because we are human; and it is this common tie of kinship that will cause the story of Devlin the Barber to be received with more than ordinary interest. Now, for the first time is revealed, in these pages, the strange manner in which the fearful mystery in which it was enshrouded was unravelled. The facts are as I shall relate them, and whatever the impression they may create, a shuddering curiosity must inevitably be aroused as to the nature and movements of the inscrutable Being through whose instrumentality I was made the agent in revealing what would otherwise have remained for ever hidden from human knowledge. By a few incredulous persons-I refer to those to whom nothing spiritual is demonstrable-the existence of this Being may be doubted; but none the less does he live and move among us this very day, pursuing his mission with a purpose and to an end which it is not in the power of mortal insight to fathom. It is not unlikely that some of my readers may have come unconsciously in contact with him within the last few hours.

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH AN ACCOUNT IS GIVEN OF THE GOOD FORTUNE WHICH BEFELL MR. MELLADEW

I am a struggling man-the phrase will be well understood, for the class to which I belong is a large one-and I reside in a neighbourhood which is neither very poor nor very fashionable. I have, of course, my friends and acquaintances, and among the most intimate of the former is a family of the name of Melladew.

Mr. Melladew is a reader in a printing-office in which a weekly newspaper is printed. Mrs. Melladew, with the assistance of one small servant, manages the home. They had two daughters, twins, eighteen years of age, named respectively Mary and Elizabeth. These girls were very beautiful, and were so much alike that they were frequently mistaken for one another. Mrs. Melladew has told me that when they were very young she was compelled to make some distinguishing mark in their dress to avoid confusion in her recognition of them, such as differently coloured socks or pieces of ribbon. The home of the Melladews was a happy one, and the sisters loved each other sincerely. They were both in outdoor employment, in the establishments of a general linendraper and a fashionable dressmaker. Mary was in the employment of the linendraper-Limbird's, in Regent Street. It is a firm of wide repute, and employs a great number of hands, some of whom sleep in the house. This was the case with Mary Melladew, who went to her work on Monday morning and did not return home until Saturday night. Elizabeth, or Lizzie as she was always called, was employed by Madame Michel, in Baker Street. She went to her work at half-past eight every morning and returned home at half-past seven every night.

The printing-office in which Mr. Melladew is engaged employs two readers, a night reader and a day reader. Mr. Melladew is the day reader, his hours being from nine in the morning till seven in the evening. But on Saturdays he has a much longer spell; he is due in the office at eight in the morning, and he remains until two or three hours past midnight-a stretch of eighteen or nineteen hours. By that time all the work for the Sunday edition of the weekly newspaper is done, and the outside pages are being worked off on the steam presses.

Now, upon the Saturday morning on which, so far as I am concerned, the enthralling interest of my story commences, certain important events had occurred in my career and in that of Mr. Melladew. Exactly one month previous to that day, the firm in which I had been employed for a great many years had given me a month's notice to leave. My dismissal was not caused by any lapse of duty on my part; it was simply that business had been for some time in a bad state, and that my employers found it necessary to reduce their staff. Among those who received notice to quit, I, unfortunately, was included. Therefore, when I rose on Saturday morning I was in the dismal position of a man out of work, my time having expired on the day before. This was of serious importance to me. With Mr. Melladew the case was different. In what unexpectedly occurred to him there was bright sunshine, to be succeeded by black darkness.

He had visited me on the Friday night, and I perceived at once that he was in a state of intense and pleasurable excitement.

"I have come to tell you some good news," he said.

For a moment I thought that this good news might affect myself, and might bring about a favourable turn in my affairs, but Mr. Melladew's next words dispelled the hope.

"I am the happiest man in London," he said.

I reflected gravely, but not enviously, upon my own position, and waited for Mr. Melladew to explain himself.

"Did I ever mention to you," he asked, "that I had a brother-in-law in Australia?"

"Yes," I replied, "you have spoken of him lately two or three times."

"So many years had passed," said Mr. Melladew, "since my wife heard from him that I had almost forgotten him. He is her brother, you know, and his name is Portland-Richard Portland. That was my wife's name before we were married-not Richard, of course, but Portland." He laughed, and rubbed his leg with his right hand; in his left hand was a letter. "It was about eight months ago that we received a letter from him, asking us to give him information about our family and circumstances. He did not say anything about his own, so we were left quite in the dark as to whether he was rich or poor, or a married man or a bachelor. However, my wife answered his letter, and sent him the pictures of our two girls, and in her letter she asked whether he was married and had a family, and said also that she would like him to send us their pictures. Well, we heard nothing further from him till to-day. Another letter came from him while I was at the office. You may read it; there is nothing private in it. It isn't from Australia; it is written from Southampton, you see. But that is not the only surprise in it."

I took the letter and read it. It was, indeed, a letter to give pleasurable surprise to the receiver. Without any announcement to Mr. Melladew of his intention, Mr. Portland had left Australia, and was now in Southampton. He intended to start by an early train on Saturday morning for London, and would come straight to his brother-in-law's house. In the letter he replied to the questions put by Mrs. Melladew. He was a bachelor, without family ties of any kind in Australia. Moreover, he had made his fortune, and it was the portraits of his two nieces which were the main cause of his return to England. Their beauty had evidently made a deep impression upon him. He spoke of them and of Mrs. Melladew in the most affectionate terms, and said it was a great pleasure to him to think that he was coming to a home which he hoped he might look upon as partly his own. He sent his warmest love to them all, and in pleasantly tender words, the meaning of which could scarcely be mistaken, he desired a message to be given to his "dear nieces," to the effect that "their ship had come home." I handed the letter back to Mr. Melladew, and expressed my gratification at the good news.

"It is good news," he said gleefully, "the best of news. I knew you would be pleased. I am wondering whether it is a large or a small fortune he has made. My wife says a large one."

"And *I* say a large one," I remarked.

"What makes you of that opinion?" inquired Mr. Melladew.

"Well, in the first place there are so many large fortunes made in Australia."

"That is true."

"Then, money being so much more plentiful there than here, a man gets to think less of a little than we do. His ideas become larger, I mean. At any time these last dozen years a hundred pounds would have been a God-send to me, and I should have thought of it so--"

"So would I," interposed Mr. Melladew.

"But if you and I were in a land of gold, we should, I daresay, think much more lightly of a hundred pounds. I wish I had emigrated when I was first married; I had the chance, and let it slip. But it's no use crying over spilt milk."

"Not a bit of use," said Mr. Melladew; "life's a perpetual grind here, and I am truly grateful for the light this letter has let in upon us. You've given me two reasons for thinking my brother-in-law's fortune a large one. Have you any others?"

"Well, he speaks of your daughters' ship having come home. That looks as if he meant to provide for them."

"It *does* look like it," said Mr. Melladew; and I saw that my arguments had given him pleasure. "My wife has a reason, also, for thinking so. She says, when Dick-that is her brother, you know-went away he declared he would never come back to England unless he could come back a very rich man. 'And,' says my wife, 'what Dick said, he'd stick to.' She is sure of that. It's wonderful, isn't it? He didn't

have a sovereign to bless himself with when he left England, and now-but it's no use speculating. We shall know everything soon. You will understand my feelings; you have children of your own."

I had indeed, and it made me rueful to think of them. Getting another situation in such hard times was no easy matter.

"It isn't for myself," resumed Mr. Melladew, "that I am overjoyed at the better prospect before us: it is for my girls. Perhaps it means that they will not have to go out to work any longer. They are good girls, but they are so pretty, and have such engaging ways, that I have often been disturbed by the circumstance of their not being so much under my own and their mother's eyes as we would wish them to be. It could not be helped hitherto. There's the question of dress, now. You can manage tolerably well when they're little girls; a clever woman like my wife can turn and twist, and cut up old things in a way to make the little ones look quite nice; but when they become young women, with all sorts of new ideas in their pretty heads, it is another pair of shoes. It's natural, too, that they should want a little pocket money to spend upon innocent pleasures and harmless vanities. We were young ourselves once, weren't we? We found we couldn't afford to give the girls what they wanted. They saw it, too, so they made up their minds, without saying a word to us, to look out for situations for themselves, and for months they haven't been a farthing's expense to us. They even give their mother a trifle a week towards the home. Good girls, the best of girls; I should be a miserable man without them. Still, as I said, I have been uneasy about them: there are so many scoundrels in the world ready with honeyed words to turn a girl's head; and it hurts me to think that they have their little secrets which they don't ask us to share. Now, thank God, it will be all right. My brother-in-law will be here to-morrow, and when he sees Lizzie and Mary he will be confirmed in his kind intentions towards them. They can leave their situations; and if any man wishes to pay them attentions he can do so in a straightforward manner in the home in which they were brought up."

He was in the blithest of spirits, and I cordially renewed my congratulations on his good fortune. In return, he condoled with me on the unpromising change in my own prospects. I was not very cheerful-no man could be in such a position-but I am not in the habit of magnifying my misfortunes to my friends, and I plucked up my spirits.

"You will soon get another situation," said Mr. Melladew.

"I hope so," I replied; "I cannot afford to keep long out of one."

"It may be in my power to give you a lift," he said kindly. "Who knows what may turn up in the course of the next few hours?"

I attached no signification to this not uncommon remark at the time it was uttered, but it recurred to me afterwards, charged with sad and terrible import. We fell to again discussing the matter of which he was full.

"I am almost ashamed of my good luck," said Mr. Melladew, "when I think what has happened to you."

"A man must accept the ups and downs of life with courage," I said, "and must put the best face he can upon them."

We were true friends, and I had a sincere respect for him as a worthy fellow who had faithfully performed his duties to his family and employers. He was passionately fond of his two daughters, and frequently spoke of them as the greatest blessing in his life. It was, indeed, delightful to witness the affection he bestowed upon them in the happy home of which he was the head. They were girls of which any man might have been proud, being not only beautiful, but bright and witty, and full of animation.

Mr. Melladew and I chatted together for another half-hour, and then he wished me good-night.

"It is fortunate," he said, "that I got away from the office an hour earlier than usual. I shall be at home when Lizzie returns from her work, and I want to be the first to tell her the good news. How excited she will be! There was a friend at the house last night, who told us our fortunes. Lizzie is very fond of having her fortune told. 'There, father,' she says, 'didn't my fortune say that I was to receive

a letter? And I've got one.' As if there was anything out of the way in receiving a letter! Last night she was told that a great and wonderful surprise was in store for her. Well, there is, but I am certain the fortune-teller knew as much about its nature as the man in the moon."

"And Mary?" I said. "Will you tell her to-night?"

"No," replied Mr. Melladew, "we will wait till she comes home to-morrow. When she sees her uncle from Australia sitting in my arm-chair, she won't know what to think of it. Happy girls, happy girls!"

"And happy father and mother, too," I said.

"Yes, yes," he said, with great feeling, "and happy father and mother too."

It was in no envious spirit that I contrasted his good luck with my bad, but had I suspected what the next few hours had in store for him, I should have thanked God for my lot. We have reason to be profoundly grateful for the ills we escape.

CHAPTER II

I AM THE RECIPIENT OF TERRIBLE NEWS

On Saturday morning I rose early, with the strange feelings of a man whose habits of life had been suddenly and violently wrenched out of their usual course. I wandered up and down the stairs and into all the rooms in the house, and to the street-door, where I stood looking vacantly along the street, perhaps for the situation I had lost, as though it were something I had dropped by accident and could pick up again. Two or three neighbours passed and gave me good-morning, and one paused and asked if I was not well.

"Not well?" I echoed, somewhat irritably; "I am well, quite well. What makes you think otherwise?"

"O," he answered apologetically, "only seeing you here, that's all. It's so unusual."

He passed on, looking once or twice behind him. Unusual? Of course it was unusual. Everything was unusual, everything in the world, which seemed to be turned topsy-turvy. If the people in the street had walked on their heads instead of their feet it would not have surprised me very much. I should have regarded it as quite in keeping with the fact that I was standing at my own street-door in idleness at half-past eight o'clock on a Saturday morning; I could not remember the time when such a thing had occurred to me.

Standing thus in a state of semi-stupefaction, the postman came up and gave me a letter. This recalled me to myself.

"Now," thought I, as I turned the envelope over in my hand, "whom is it from, and what does it contain?"

At first I had an unreasonable hope that it was from my employers, imploring me to come back, but a glance at the address convinced me that it was a foolish hope. The writing was strange to me, and the envelope was a common one, and was fastened with sealing-wax bearing the impression of a thimble. I opened and read the letter, and although it did not contain the offer of a situation, or hold out the prospect of one, the contents interested me. I shall have occasion presently to refer to this letter more particularly, and shall at present content myself with saying that had it not arrived this story would never have been written. While my wife and I were at breakfast we spoke of it, and I said it was my intention to comply with the request it contained.

Over breakfast, also, we reviewed our position. During my years of employment I had managed to save very little money, and upon reckoning up what I had in my purse and what I owed, I arrived at a balance in my favour of a little less than four pounds, which represented the whole of my worldly wealth. A poor look-out, and I was reflecting upon it gloomily, when my good little wife, with a tender deprecatory smile, laid before me on the table a Post Office savings-book.

"What is this?" I asked.

"Look," she replied.

The book was made out in her name, and the small deposits, extending over a number of years, made therein showed a credit of more than twenty pounds.

"Yours?" I said, in wonder. "Really yours?"

"No," said my wife. "Yours."

My heart beat with joy; these twenty pounds were like a reprieve. I should have time to look about, without being tortured by fears of immediate want. I drew my wife to my side, and embraced her. Twenty pounds, with which to commence over again the battle of life! Why it was a fortune! How the little woman had contrived to save so much out of her scanty housekeeping money was a

mystery to me, but she had done it by hook or by crook, as the saying is, and she now experienced a true and sweet delight in handing it over to me.

"Well," said I, rubbing my hands cheerfully, "things might look worse than they do—a great deal worse. We have a little store to help us over compulsorily idle days, and, thank God, all the children are well."

It was much to be grateful for, and we kissed each other in token of our gratitude, and also as a pledge that we would not lose heart, but would battle bravely on.

I had just finished my second cup of tea when the street-door was hastily opened, and my friend Mr. Melladew staggered, or rather fell, into the room, with a face as white as a ghost. His limbs were trembling so that he could not stand, and my wife, much alarmed, started up and helped him into a chair.

On this special morning we had breakfasted late, and as my wife was assisting Mr. Melladew the clock struck ten.

It sometimes happens that the most ordinary occurrences become of unusual importance by reason of circumstances with which they have no connection. Thus it was that the striking of ten o'clock, as I gazed upon the white face of my visitor, filled me with an apprehension of impending evil.

"Good God!" I cried. "What has happened?" My thought was that there had been an accident to the train by which Mr. Melladew expected his brother-in-law from Southampton, but I was soon undeceived. It was difficult to extract anything intelligible from Mr. Melladew in his terrible state of agitation; but eventually I was placed in possession of the following particulars.

Mr. Melladew had risen early and had left his wife abed, and, as he supposed, his daughter Lizzie. It was Mrs. Melladew's custom on Saturday mornings to take half-an-hour extra in the way of sleep, and Mr. Melladew would prepare his own breakfast on these occasions. He did so on this morning, and left his house at twenty minutes to eight. At eight o'clock punctually he was sitting at his desk in the printing-office, reading proofs. Everything was going on as usual, the only pleasant difference being the extraordinary lightness of Mr. Melladew's heart as he thought of his rich brother-in-law from Australia, perhaps at that very hour stepping into the train for London, and of his two darling children, Lizzie and Mary. He did not, however, allow this contemplation to interfere with the faithful and steady discharge of his duties, and his work proceeded uninterrupted until half-past nine, when he sent his young assistant, a reading boy, into the composing-room with the last proofs he had read, telling him to bring back any more that were ready. A workman at the galley-press had just pulled off a column of newly set-up matter, and the lad, without waiting for it to be delivered to him, took the slip from the printer's hand, and returned quickly to the reading-room. Mr. Melladew, receiving the slip from his assistant, was about to commence arranging the "copy," which the lad had also brought with him, when a compositor rushed in, and, snatching both slip and "copy" from Mr. Melladew's desk, hurriedly left the room.

"What's that for?" inquired Mr. Melladew.

"I don't know, sir," replied the lad; "but there's something 'up' in the composing-room. The men are all standing talking in a regular fluster."

"What about?"

"Ain't got a notion, sir; but they seem regular upset."

Curious to ascertain what was going on, Mr. Melladew strolled into the composing-room, and was struck by the sudden silence which ensued upon his entrance. It was all the more singular because Mr. Melladew, as he pushed the door open, heard the men speaking in excited voices, and had half a fancy that he heard his own name uttered in tones of pity. "Poor Melladew!" Yes, it was not a fancy. The words had been uttered at the moment of his entrance. The silence of the compositors, their pitying looks, confirmed it. But why should they speak of him as "poor Melladew" at a time when life had never been so bright and fair? What was the meaning of the pitying glances directed towards him? The composing-room, especially on Saturdays, was a scene of lively bustle and animation, but

now the men were standing idle, stick in hand, at the corners of their frames, or tip-toeing over their cases, and the eyes of every man there were fixed upon Mr. Melladew. Had he been in trouble, had his wife or one of his darling daughters been ill, his thoughts would have immediately flown to his home, and he would have seen in the pitying glances of the composers a sign of some dread misfortune; but in his happy mood he received no such impression.

"What on earth is the matter with you all?" he said in a light tone.

He saw the compositor who had snatched the slip of new matter from his desk, and before he could be prevented he took it from the man's hand.

The composers found their voices.

"No, Mr. Melladew!" they cried. "No; don't, don't!"

"Nonsense!" he said, and keeping possession of the slip, he left the composing-room for his own.

"Go and get the copy," he said to the lad who had followed him.

When the lad was gone he spread the slip on the desk before him. The first words he saw formed the title of the column he was about to read: "Horrible Murder in Victoria Park!" Beneath it were the sub-headings, "Stabbed to the Heart!" and "A Bunch of Blood-stained Daisies!" To a newspaper reader such events, shocking though they be, are unhappily no novelties, and Mr. Melladew looked down the column, I will not say mechanically, for he was a humane man, but steadily, and stirred no doubt by pity and indignation. But before he had got half-way down the pulsations of his heart seemed to stop, and the words swam before his eyes. His eyes lighted on the name of the girl who had been murdered.

It was that of his own daughter, Lizzie Melladew!

CHAPTER III

A SHOAL OF VISITORS FOLLOWED BY ANOTHER MYSTERY

In an agony of horror and despair he had flown from the printing-office to my house.

I cannot say whether he chose my house premeditatedly; it is likely that it was done without distinct intention, but it was a proof that he regarded my friendship as genuine, and that he knew he could depend upon my sympathy in times of trouble. As indeed he could. My heart bled as I gazed upon him. The words issued with difficulty from his trembling lips; his features were convulsed; he shook like a man in an ague.

"O, my Lizzie!" he moaned. "My poor, poor Lizzie! O, my child, my child!"

I took in regularly a penny daily newspaper, and I had read it on this morning, but there was no mention in its columns of the dreadful occurrence. The discovery had been made too late for the first editions of the daily journals.

Mr. Melladew's story being told, disjointedly, and in fragments which I had to piece together in order to arrive at an intelligible comprehension of it, the unhappy man sat before me, moaning.

"O, my Lizzie! O, my poor child!"

"Was she at home?" I asked gently; I did not attempt to console him. Of what avail were mere words at such a moment? "Was she at home when you went from here last night?"

"Yes, she was there," he moaned. "When she went to bed I kissed her. For the last time! For the last, last time!"

And then he broke down utterly. I could get nothing further from him.

When she went to bed, he kissed her. What kind of riddle was here, in the midst of the horrible tragedy, that the hapless girl should have wished her parents good-night and retired to rest, and be found ruthlessly murdered a few hours afterwards in an open park at some distance from her house? With such joyful news as Mr. Melladew had to communicate to his daughter, the probability was that they had kept up later than usual, talking of the brighter future that then seemed spread before them. It made the tragic riddle all the more difficult.

There came a knock at the street-door, and a gentleman was admitted, upon most urgent business he said. It turned out that he was a newspaper reporter, who, in advance of the police, had tracked Mr. Melladew to my house, and had come to obtain information from him for his newspaper. I, pointed out to him the condition of Mr. Melladew, and said something to the effect that it was scarcely decent to intrude upon him at such a time.

The reporter, who evidently felt deeply for the bereaved father, and whose considerate manner was such as to completely disarm me, said aside to me,

"Pray do not think that I am devoid of feeling; I am a father myself, and have a daughter of the age of his poor girl. My mission is not one of idle curiosity. A ruthless murder has been committed, and the murderer is at large. I am not working only for my paper; I am assisting the cause of justice. Every scrap of information we can obtain will hasten the arrest of the wretch who has been guilty of a crime so diabolical."

"He can tell you nothing," I said, compelled to admit that he was right. "Look at him as he sits there, crushed and broken down by the blow."

"I pity him from my heart," said the reporter. "Can you assist me in any way? Did the poor girl live at home?"

"She lived at home certainly, but she had employment at Madame Michel's, in Baker Street."

"Madame Michel's, in Baker Street. I must go there. Did she sleep out?"

"No; she came home every night at half-past seven."

"Did she do so last night?"

"Yes."

"Did she not go to some place of amusement?"

"Not to my knowledge. Her father told me that before she went to bed he kissed her good-night."

"Do you know at what hour?"

"I do not."

"But presumably not early."

"Not so early as usual, I should say, because her father had some good news to communicate to her, and they would stop up late talking of it. Understand, much of what I say is presumptive."

"But reasonable," said the reporter. "Did the poor girl have a sweetheart?"

Words which Mr. Melladew had spoken on the previous night recurred to me here. "There are so many scoundrels in the world ready with honeyed words to turn a girl's head; and it hurts me to think that they have their little secrets which they don't ask us to share." Did not this point to a secret which was hidden from her parents? I said nothing of this to the reporter, but answered that I was not aware that the poor girl had a sweetheart.

"Some one must have been in love with her," said the reporter.

"Many, perhaps," I rejoined; "but not one courted her openly, I believe—that is, to her parents' knowledge."

"That counts for very little. She was a beautiful girl."

"How?" I exclaimed. "Have you seen her?"

"I saw her this morning," he answered gravely, "within the last two hours. She looked like an angel."

"Was there no trace of suffering in her face?" I asked wistfully.

"None. She was stabbed to the heart—only one, sharp, swift, devilish blow, and death must have been instantaneous. To my unprofessional eye it almost seems as if she must have died in sleep—in happy sleep."

"That, at least, is merciful. Hush!"

Mr. Melladew was rocking to and fro murmuring, "O, my Lizzie, my darling child! O, my poor, poor Lizzie!" We had spoken in low tones, and he evinced no consciousness of having heard what we said. During our conversation the reporter was jotting down notes unobtrusively. The conversation would doubtless have been continued had it not been for the appearance of other persons, following rapidly upon each other, policemen, and additional reporters, who had discovered that Mr. Melladew was in my house. The last to appear was Mrs. Melladew, who had heard rumours of the frightful crime, and who flew round to me, not knowing that her husband was in the room. What passed from that moment, while all these persons were buzzing around me, was so confusing that I cannot hope to give an intelligible transcript of it. I was, as it were, in the background, as one who had no immediate interest in the unravelling of the terrible mystery. It was a most agitating time to me and my wife, and when my visitors had all departed I felt like a man who had been afflicted by a horrible nightmare. How little did I imagine that the letter I had received by the early morning's post, and which I had in my pocket, was vitally connected with it, and that of all those present I was the man who was destined to bring the mystery to light!

Before the day was over fresh surprises were in store for me in connection with the dreadful deed. Needless to say that the whole neighbourhood was in a state of great excitement; so numerous were my idle visitors that I was compelled to tell my wife to admit into the house no person but the Melladews, or relatives of theirs. In the afternoon, however, one visitor called who would not be denied. He sent in his card, which bore the name of George Carton, and I said I would see him.

He was a young man, whose age I judged to be between twenty and twenty-five, well dressed, and remarkably good-looking. His manners were those of one who was accustomed to move in good society, and both his speech and behaviour during the interview impressed me favourably. I observed when he entered the room that he was greatly agitated.

"I have intruded myself upon you, sir," he said, "because I felt that I should go mad if I did not speak to some person who was a friend of-or-"

He could not proceed, and I finished the sentence for him. "Of the poor girl who has been so cruelly murdered?"

He nodded his head, and, when he could control his voice, said, "You were an intimate friend of hers, sir?"

"Mr. Melladew's family and mine," I replied, "have been on terms of friendship for many years. I have known the poor girl and her sister since their infancy."

"I did not dare to call upon Mr. Melladew," he said, and then he faltered again and paused.

"Are you acquainted with him?" I asked.

"No," he said, "but I hoped to be. If I went now and told him what I wish to impart to you, he might look upon me as responsible for what has occurred." He put his hand over his eyes, from which the tears were flowing.

"What is it you wish to impart to me?" I inquired, "and why should you suppose you would be held responsible for so horrible a crime?"

"I scarcely know what I am saying," he replied. "But my secret intimacy with Lizzie" – I caught my breath at his familiar utterance of the name- "becoming known to him now for the first time, might put wrong ideas into his head."

"Your secret intimacy with Lizzie?" I exclaimed.

"We have known each other for more than four months," he said.

"Secretly?"

"Yes, secretly."

"And the poor girl's parents were not aware of it?"

"They were not. It was partly my poor Lizzie's wish, and partly my own, I think, until I was sure that I possessed her love. She kept it from me for a long time. 'Wait,' she used to say, smiling-pardon me, sir; my heart seems as if it would break when I speak of her-'Wait,' she used to say, 'I am not certain yet whether I really, really love you.' But she did, sir, all along."

"How do you know that?" I asked, in doubt now whether I should regard him with favour or suspicion.

"She confessed it to me last Tuesday night as she walked home from Baker Street."

"You were in the habit of meeting her, then?"

"Yes. I beg you to believe, sir, there was nothing wrong in it. I loved and honoured her sincerely. I wanted then to accompany her home and ask her parents' permission to pay my addresses to her openly: but she said no, and that she would speak to them first herself. It was arranged so. She was to tell them to-night, and I was to call and see her father and mother to-morrow. And now-and now-" Again he paused, overpowered by grief. Presently he spoke again. "See here, sir."

He detached a locket from his chain, and opening it, showed me the sweet and beautiful face of Lizzie Melladew.

"It was taken for me," he said, "on Wednesday morning. She obtained permission from her employers for an hour's absence, and we went together to get it taken. The photographer hurried the picture on for me, I was so anxious for it. I had my picture taken for her, and put into a locket, which I was to give her to-morrow with this ring in the presence of her parents." He produced both the locket and the ring. The locket was a handsome gold ornament, set with pearls; the ring was a half-hoop, set with diamonds. The gifts were such as only a man in a good position could afford to give. "I

shall never be happy again," he said mournfully, as he replaced the locket on his chain, after gazing on the beautiful face with eyes of pitiful love.

"Were you in the habit of writing to her?" I asked.

"No, sir. No letters passed between us; there was no need to write, I saw her so often-four or five times a week. 'When father and mother know everything,' she said on Tuesday night, 'you shall write to me every day.' I promised that I would."

"I am not sorry you confided in me," I said, completely won over by the young man's ingenuousness and undoubted sincerity; "but I can offer you no words of comfort. You will have to make this known to others."

"I shall do what is right, sir. It is not in your power, nor in any man's, to give me any comfort or consolation. The happiness of my life is destroyed-but there is still one thing left me, and I will not rest till it is accomplished. As God is my judge, I will not!" He did not give me time to ask his meaning, but continued: "You can do me the greatest favour, sir."

"What is it?"

"I must see Mary-her sister, sir. Can you send round to the house, and ask her to come and see me here? She *will* come when she gets my message. Will you do this for me, sir?"

"Yes," I replied, "there is no harm in it."

I called my wife, and bade her go to Mr. Melladew's house, and contrive to see Mary Melladew privately, and give her the young man's message. During my wife's absence George Carton and I exchanged but few words. He sat for the chief part of the time with his head resting on his hand, and I was busy thinking whether the information he had imparted to me would be likely to afford a clue to the discovery of the murderer. My wife returned with consternation depicted on her face.

"Mary is not at home," she said.

"Where has she gone?" cried George Carton, starting up.

To my astonishment my wife replied, "They are in the greatest trouble about her. She has not been home all the day."

"Have they not seen anything of her?" I asked, also rising to my feet.

"No," said my wife, "they have seen nothing whatever of her."

"Is it possible," I exclaimed, "that she can be still at her place of business, in ignorance of what has taken place?"

"No," cried George Carton, in great excitement, "she is not there. I have been to inquire. She went out last night, and never returned. Great God! What can be the meaning of it?"

I strove in vain to calm him. He paced the room with flashing eyes, muttering to himself words so wild that I could not arrive at the least understanding of them.

"Gone! Gone!" he cried at last. "But where, where? I will not sleep, I will not rest, till I find her! Neither will I rest till I discover the murderer of my darling girl! And when I discover him, when he stands before me, as there is a living God, I will kill him with my own hands!"

His passion was so intense that I feared he would there and then commit some act of violence, and I made an endeavour to restrain and calm him by throwing my arms around him; but he broke from me with a torrent of frantic words, and rushed out of the house.

Here was another mystery, added to the tragedy of the last few hours. What was to be the outcome of it? From what quarter was light to come?

CHAPTER IV

MR. RICHARD PORTLAND MAKES A SINGULAR PROPOSITION TO ME

In the evening I received another visitor, in the person of Mr. Richard Portland, Mr. Melladew's brother-in-law. A shrewd, hard-headed man, but much cast down at present. It was clear to me, after a little conversation with him, that his nieces, Mary and the hapless Lizzie, had been the great inducement of his coming home to England, and I learnt from him that there was no doubt about the news of Mary Melladew's mysterious disappearance.

Mr. Portland was a thoroughly practical man, even in matters of sentiment. It was sentiment truly that had brought him home, but his expectations had been blasted by the news of the tragedy which had greeted him on his arrival. He was deeply moved by the affliction which had fallen upon his sister's family; his indignation was aroused against the monster who had brought this fearful blow upon them; and, in addition, he was bitterly angry at being deprived of the society of two lovely, interesting girls, in whose hearts he had naturally hoped to find a place.

"My brother is fit for nothing," he said. "He is prostrate, and cannot be roused to action. He moans and moans, and clasps his head. My sister is no better; she goes out of one fainting fit into another."

"What can they do?" I asked. "What would you have them do?"

"Not sit idly down," he replied curtly. "That is not the way to discover the murderer; and discovered he must and shall be, if it costs me my fortune."

"There have been murders," I remarked, "in the very heart of London, and though years have passed, the murderers still walk the streets undetected."

"It is incredible," he said.

"It is true," was my rejoinder.

"But surely," he urged, "this will not be classed among them?"

"I trust not."

"Money will do much."

"Much, but not everything. You have been many years in Australia. Have not such crimes been committed even there without the perpetrators being brought to justice?"

"Yes," he replied, "but Australia and London are not to be spoken of in the same breath. There, a man may succeed in making himself lost in wild and vast tracts of country. He can walk for days without meeting a living soul. Here he is surrounded by his fellow-creatures."

"Your argument," I said, "tells against yourself. Here, in the crush and turmoil of millions, each atom with its own individual and overwhelming cares and anxieties, the murderer is comparatively safe. No one notices him. Why should they, in such a seething crowd? In the bush he is the central figure; he walks along with a hang-dog look; he *must* halt at certain places for food, and his guilty manner draws attention upon him. In that lies his danger. But this is profitless argument. For my part, I see no reason why the murderer of your unfortunate niece should not be discovered."

"Sensibly said. It must be a man who committed the deed."

"That has to be proved," I remarked.

"Surely you don't believe it was a woman?" exclaimed Mr. Portland.

"Such things have been. In these cases of mystery it is always an error to rush at a conclusion and to set to work upon it, to the exclusion of all others. It is as great an error to reject a theory because of its improbability. My dear sir, nothing is improbable in this city of ours; I am almost

tempted to say that nothing is impossible. The columns of our newspapers teem with romance which once upon a time would have been regarded as fables."

Mr. Portland looked at me thoughtfully as he said, "You are doubtless right. It needs such a mind as yours to bring the matter to light—a mind both comprehensive and microscopic. There is some satisfaction in speaking to you; a man hears things worth listening to. The unpractical stuff that has been buzzing in my ears ever since I arrived from Southampton has almost driven me crazy. Give me your careful attention for a few moments; it may be something in your pocket."

He paused awhile, as though considering a point, before he resumed.

"My coming home to the old country has been a bitter disappointment to me. Quite apart from the sympathy I feel for the parents upon whom such a dreadful blow has fallen, the news which greeted me on my arrival has upset the plans I had formed. Over there" — with a jerk of his thumb over his right shoulder, as though Australia lay immediately in the rear of his chair—"where I made a pretty considerable fortune, I had no family ties, and was often chewing the cud of loneliness, lamenting that I had no one to care for, and no one to care for me. When I received the portraits of my nieces I was captivated by them, and I thought of them continually. Here was the very thing I was sighing for, a human tie to banish the devil of loneliness from my heart. The beautiful young girls belonged to me in a measure, and would welcome and love me. I should have a home to go to where I should be greeted with affection. I won't dwell upon what I thought, because I hate a man who spins a thing out threadbare, but you will understand it. I came home to enjoy the society of my two beautiful nieces, and I find what you know of. Well, one poor girl has gone, and cannot be recalled; but the other, Mary, so far as we know, is alive; and yet she, too, disappeared last night, and nothing has been heard of her. She must be found; if she is in danger she must be rescued; she must be restored to her parents' arms, and to mine. Something else. The murderer of my poor niece Lizzie must be discovered and brought to justice—must be, I say! There shall be no miscarriage here; the villain shall not escape. Now, you—excuse me if I speak abruptly, I mean no disrespect by it; it is only my way of speaking; and I don't wish to be rude or to pry into your private affairs, far from it. What I mean is, money?"

I stared at him in amazement; he had stated his meaning in one pregnant word, but he had failed in conveying to my mind any comprehension of it.

"Now, I put it to you," he said, "and I hope you'll take it kindly. I give you my word that my intentions are good. You are not a rich man, are you?"

"No," I answered promptly; for he was so frank and open, and was speaking in a tone of such deep concern, that I could not take offence at a question which at other times I should have resented. "I am not."

"And you wouldn't turn your nose up at a thousand pounds?"

"No, indeed I would not," I said heartily, wondering what on earth the rich Australian was driving at.

"Well, then," he said, touching my breast with his forefinger, "you discover the murderer of my poor niece Lizzie, and the thousand pounds are yours. I will give the money to you. Something else: find my niece Mary, and restore her to her parents and to me, and I'll make it two thousand. Come, you don't have such a chance every day."

"That is true," I said, and I could not help liking the old fellow for this display of heart. "But it is too remote for consideration."

"Not at all, my dear sir, not at all," and again he touched my breast with his forefinger; "there is nothing remote in it."

"But why," I asked, not at all convinced by his insistence, "do you offer *me* such a reward, instead of going to the police?"

"Partly because of what you said, confirmed—though I didn't think of it at the time you mentioned it—by what I have read, about murders being committed in the very heart of London, without the murderers ever being discovered."

"I was simply stating a fact."

"Exactly; and it speaks well for the police, doesn't it? But I have only explained part of my reason for offering you the reward. It isn't alone what you said about undiscovered murderers, it is because you spoke like a sensible man, who, once having his finger on a clue, wouldn't let it slip till he'd worked it right out; and like a man who, while he was working that clue, wouldn't let others slip that might happen to come in his way. I've opened my mind to you, and I've nothing more to say until you come to me to say something on your own account. O, yes I have, though; I was forgetting that we're strangers to one another, and that it wouldn't be reasonable for me to expect you to take my word for a thousand pounds. Well, then, to show you that I am in earnest, I lay on the table Bank of England notes for a hundred pounds. Here they are, on account."

To my astonishment he had pulled out his pocket-book and extracted ten ten-pound notes, and there they lay on the table before me. I would have entreated him to take them back, feeling that it would be the falsest of false pretences to accept them, but before I could speak again he was gone.

I called my wife into the room, and told her what had passed. She regarded it in the same light as myself, but I noted a little wistful look in her eyes as she glanced at the bank-notes.

"A thousand pounds!" she sighed, half-longingly, half-humorously. "If we could only call it ours! Why, it would make our fortune!"

"It would, my dear," I said, wishing in my heart of hearts that I had a thousand pounds of my own to throw into her lap. "But this particular thousand pounds which the good old fellow has so generously offered will never come into our possession. So let us dismiss it from our minds."

"Mr. Portland," said my wife, "evidently thinks you would make a good detective."

"That may or may not be, though his opinion of me is altogether too flattering. Certainly, if I had a clue to the discovery of this terrible mystery--"

"You would follow it up," said my wife, finishing the sentence for me.

"Undoubtedly I would, with courage and determination. With such a reward in view, nothing should shake me off. I would prove myself a very bloodhound. But there," I said, half ashamed at being led away, "I am sailing in the clouds. Let's talk no more about it. As for Mr. Portland's hundred pounds I will put the notes carefully by, and return them to him at the first opportunity. Poor Mrs. Melladew! How I pity her and Melladew! I shall never forget the picture of the father sitting in that chair, moaning, 'My poor, poor Lizzie! O, my child, my child!' It was heartbreaking."

My wife and I talked a great deal of it during the night, and before we went to bed I had purchased at least seven or eight newspapers of the newsboys who passed through the street crying out new editions and latest news of the dreadful deed. But there was nothing really new. Matters were in the same state as when the body of the hapless girl was found in Victoria Park early in the morning. I recognised how dangerous was the delay. Every additional hour increased the chances of the murderer's escape from the hands of justice.

I did not sleep well; my slumbers were disturbed by fantastic, horrible dreams. It was eleven o'clock on Sunday morning before I quitted my bed.

CHAPTER V

I PAY A VISIT TO MRS. LEMON

I must now speak of the letter which I received on the morning of the murder, as I stood at my street-door. It was from a Mrs. Lemon, entreating me to call upon her at any hour most convenient to me on this Sunday, and it was couched in terms so imploring that it would have been cruel on my part to refuse, more especially as the writer had some slight claim upon me. Mrs. Lemon had been for many years a nurse and servant in my parents' house, and the children were fond of her. She was then a spinster, and her name was Fanny Peel. We used to make jokes upon it, and call her Fancy Peel, Orange Peel, Candied Peel, Lemon Peel-and we little dreamt, when we called her Lemon Peel, that we were unconsciously moved by the spirit of prophecy. For though she was thirty years of age she succeeded in captivating a widower a few years older than herself, Ephraim Lemon, a master barber and hairdresser, who used to haunt the area. We youngsters were in the habit of watching for him and playing him tricks, I am afraid, but nothing daunted his ardour. He proposed for Fanny, and she accepted him. Some enterprising tradesmen, when their stock is stale or old-fashioned, put bills in their windows announcing that no reasonable offer will be refused. Fanny Peel, having been long on the shelf, may have thought of this when she accepted Ephraim Lemon's hand. After her marriage she came to see me once a year to pay her respects; but suddenly her visits became less frequent, until they ceased altogether. For a long time past I had heard nothing of my old nurse.

"It is a fine morning," I said to my wife, "and I shall walk to Fanny's house."

In the course of an hour I presented myself at Mrs. Lemon's street-door, and knocked. She herself opened it to me, and after an anxious scrutiny asked me eagerly to walk in. There was trouble in her face, tempered by an expression of relief when she fully recognised me. She preceded me into her little parlour, and I sat down, awaiting the communication she desired to make. Up to the point of my sitting down the only words exchanged between us were-

From her: "O, sir, it *is* you, and you *have* come!"

From me: "Yes, Fanny; I hope I am not later than you expected?"

From her: "Not at all, sir. You always was that punkchel that I used to time myself by you."

It is a detail to state that I had not the remotest idea what she meant by this compliment, especially as I had not made an appointment for any particular hour. However, I did not ask her for an explanation. I addressed her as Fanny quite naturally, and when I followed her into the parlour an odd impression came upon me that I had gone right back into the past, and that I was once more a little boy in pinafores.

The house Mrs. Lemon inhabits is situated in the north of London, in a sadly resigned neighbourhood, which bears a shabby genteel reputation. If I may be allowed such a form of expression I may say that it is respectable in a demi-semi kind of way. I do not mean in respect of its morals, which are unexceptionable, but in respect of its social position. It is situated in a square, and is one of a cluster of tenements so exactly alike in their frontage appearance that were it not for the numbers on the doors a man, that way inclined, might hope for forgiveness for walking in and taking tea with his neighbour's wife instead of with his own. In the centre of the square is an enclosure, bounded by iron railings, which once may have been intended for the cultivation of flowers; at the present time it contains a few ancient shrubs which nobody ever waters, and which are, therefore, always shabby and dusty in dry weather. Even when it rains they do not attempt to put on an air of liveliness; it is as though they had settled down to the conviction that their day is over. To this enclosed rural mockery, each tenant in the square is supposed to have a key, but the only use the

ground is put to is to shake carpets in, and every person in or out of the neighbourhood is made free of it, by reason of there being no lock to the gate. There are no signs of absolute poverty in the square. Vagrant children do not play at "shops" on the doorsteps and window-sills; organ men avoid it with a shudder; beggars walk slowly through, and do not linger; peripatetic vendors of food never venture there; and the donkey of the period is unfamiliar with the region. Amusement is provided twice a week by a lanky old gentleman in a long tail coat and a frayed black stock reaching to his ears, whose instrument is a wheezy flute, and whose repertoire consists of "The Last Rose of Summer" and "Away with Melancholy," which he blows out in a fashion so unutterably mournful and dismal as to suggest to the ingenious mind that his nightly wanderings are part of a punishment inflicted upon him at some remote period for the commission of a dark, mysterious crime.

"It's very good of you to come, sir," said Mrs. Lemon, working her right hand slowly backwards and forwards on a faded black silk dress, which I judged had been put on in honour of my visit. "I hope you are well, sir, and your lady, and your precious family."

I replied that my wife and children were quite well, and that we should be glad to see her at any time. When she heard this she burst into tears.

"You always *was* the kindest-hearted gentleman!" she sobbed. "You never *did* object to being put upon, and you give away your toys that free that all the other children used to take advantage of you. But you didn't mind, sir, not you. Over and over agin have your blessed father said when he was alive, 'That boy'll never git along in the world, he's so soft!'" Mrs. Lemon's tears at this reminiscence flowed more freely. "I can't believe, sir, no, I can't believe as time has flown so quick since those happy, happy days!"

The happy days referred to were, of course, the days of my childhood; and my father's prophecy, which I heard now for the first time, respecting my future, brought a contemplative smile to my lips.

"Ah, sir," said Mrs. Lemon, with a sigh, "if we only knew when we was well off, what a lot of troubles we shouldn't have!"

I nodded assent to this little bit of philosophy, and looked round the room, not dreaming that in the humble apartment I was to receive a clue to the mystery of the murder of pretty Lizzie Melladew.

CHAPTER VI

I AM HAUNTED BY THREE EVIL-LOOKING OBJECTS IN MRS. LEMON'S ROOM

It was plentifully furnished: stuffed chairs and couch, the latter with a guilty air about it which seemed to say, "I am not what I seem;" a mahogany table in the centre, upon which was an album which had seen very much better days; ornaments on the mantelshelf, bounded on each corner by a lustre with broken pendants; a faded green carpet on the floor; two pictures on the walls; and on a small table near the window a glass case with an evil-looking bird in it. The pictures were portraits of Mr. and Mrs. Lemon in oil-colour. They appeared to have been recently painted, and I made a remark to that effect.

"Yes, sir," said Mrs. Lemon, in a voice which struck me as being uneasy. "They was done only a few weeks ago." And then, as though the words were forced from her against her will, "Do you see a likeness, sir?"

When she asked this question she was gazing at the portrait of herself.

As a work of art, the painting was a shocking exhibition; as a likeness, it was unmistakable.

"It is," I said, "your very image. Is the portrait of your husband-if that is your husband hanging there-"

She interrupted me with a shudder. "*Hanging* there, sir?"

"I mean on the wall. *It is* a picture of Mr. Lemon, I presume."

"Yes, sir, it's him."

"Is it as faithful a portrait as your own?"

"It's as like him, sir, as two peas. Eggscept-" but she suddenly paused.

"Except what, Fanny?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing," she said hurriedly.

If, thought I, it is as like him as two peas, there must be something extraordinarily strange and odd in Mr. Lemon. That he was not a good-looking man could be borne with; but that, of his own free will, he should have submitted to be painted and exhibited with such a sly, sinister expression on his face, was decidedly not in his favour. With his thought in my mind I turned involuntarily to the evil-looking bird in the glass case, and, singularly enough, was struck by an absurd and fearful resemblance between the bird's beak and the man's face. Mrs. Lemon's eyes followed mine.

"Have you had that bird long?" I asked.

"Not long, sir," she replied, and her voice trembled. "About as long as the pictures."

"Did your husband buy it in England? It is a strange bird, and I can't find a name for it."

"Lemon didn't buy it, sir. It was give to him."

I hazarded a guess. "By the artist who painted your husband's portrait?"

"Yes, sir."

Turning from the stuffed bird to the fireplace, I received a shock. In the centre of the mantelshelf was the stone figure of a creature, half monster and half man, with a face bearing such a singular resemblance to Mr. Lemon's and the bird's beak that I rubbed my eyes in bewilderment, believing myself to have suddenly fallen under the influence of a devilish enchantment. But rub my eyes as I might, I could not rub away the strange resemblance. It was no delusion of the senses.

"Was that-that figure, Fanny, given to you by the artist who painted your husband's portrait, and who presented him with that stuffed bird?"

"Yes, sir; he give it to Lemon." And then, in a timorous voice, she asked, "Do you see anything odd in it, sir?"

"It is not only that it's odd," I replied; "but, if you will excuse me for saying so, Fanny, there is really something horrible about it."

In a low tone Mrs. Lemon said, "That's egsactly as I feel, sir."

"Then, why don't you get rid of it?"

"It's more than I dare do, sir. There it is, and there it must remain."

"And there that evil-looking bird is, I suppose, and there that must remain."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah, well," I said, thinking it time to get upon the track, "and now let us talk about something else. You appear to be in trouble."

"You may well say that, sir. I'm worn to skin and bone."

"I'm sorry to hear it, Fanny. Money troubles, I suppose?"

"O, no, sir! We can manage on what we've got, Lemon and me, though he *has* made ducks and drakes with the best part of his savings. Not money troubles, sir; a good deal worser than that."

"Your husband is well, I trust."

"I wish I could say so, sir. No, sir, he's a long way from well, and I didn't know who else to call in, for poor dear Lemon wouldn't stand anybody but you."

Why poor dear Lemon wouldn't stand anybody but me was, to say the least of it, inexplicable; as, since I used to catch indistinct views of his legs when he came courting Fanny in my father's house, I had never set eyes on him. I made no remark, however, but waited quietly for developments.

"He took to his bed, sir," said Mrs. Lemon, "at a quarter to four o'clock yesterday afternoon; and it's my opinion he'll never git up from it."

"That is bad news, Fanny. But your letter to me was written before yesterday afternoon."

"Yes, sir; because I felt that things mustn't be allowed to go on as they *are* going on without trying to alter 'em. They was bad enough when I posted my letter to you, sir; but they're a million times worse now. My blood's a-curdling, sir."

"Eh?" I cried, much startled by this solemn matter-of-fact description of the condition of her blood.

"It's curdling inside me, sir, to think of what is going to happen to Lemon!"

"Come, come, Fanny," I expostulated, "you mustn't take things so seriously; it will not mend them. What does the doctor say?"

"Doctor, sir? Love your heart! If I was to take a doctor into Lemon's room now, I wouldn't answer for the consequences."

"That is all nonsense," I said; "he must be reasoned with."

Mrs. Lemon shook her head triumphantly. "You may reason with some men, sir, and you may delood a child; but reason with Lemon-I defy you, sir!"

There was really no occasion for her to do that, as I was there in the capacity of a friend. While we were conversing I made continual unsuccessful attempts to avoid sight of the objects which had produced upon me so disagreeable an impression, but I could not place myself in such a position as to escape the whole three at one and the same time. If I turned my back upon the evil-looking bird and the portrait of Mr. Lemon, the hideous stone figure on the mantelshelf met my gaze; if I turned my back upon that, I not only had a side view of the bird's beak, but a full-faced view of my friend Lemon. Familiarity with these objects intensified my first impressions of them, and at times I could almost fancy that their sinister features moved in mockery of me. There was in them a fiend-like magnetism I found it impossible to resist.

"Does your husband eat well?" I asked.

"Not so well as he used to do, sir."

"Perhaps," I said, hazarding a guess, "he drinks a little too much."

"No, sir, you're wrong there. He likes a glass-we none of us despise it, sir-but he never exceeds."

"Then, in the name of all that's reasonable, Fanny, what is the matter with him?"

Mrs. Lemon turned to her husband's portrait, turned to the stone figure on the mantelshelf, turned to the evil-looking bird; and her frame was shaken by a strong shuddering.

"Is it anything to do with those objects?" I inquired, my wonder and perplexity growing.

"That's what I want you to find out for me, sir, if I can so far trespass. Don't refuse me, sir, don't! It's a deal to ask you to do, I know, but I shall be everlastingly grateful."

"I am ready to serve you, Fanny," I said gravely, "but at present I am completely in the dark. For instance, this is the first time I have seen those Mephistophelian-looking objects with which you have chosen to decorate your room."

"I didn't choose, sir. It was done, and I daredn't go agin it."

"I have nothing to say to that; I must wait for your explanation. What I was about to remark was, why that evil-beaked bird-"

"Which I wish," she interposed, "had been burnt before it was stuffed."

" – Should bear so strange a resemblance," I continued, "to the portrait of your husband, and why both should bear so strange a resemblance to the stone monster on your mantelshelf, is so very much beyond me, that I cannot for the life of me arrive at a satisfactory solution of the mystery. Surely it cannot spring from a diseased imagination, for you have the same fancy as myself."

"It ain't fancy, sir; it's fact. And the sing'lar part of it is that the party as brought them all three into the house is as much like them as they are to each other."

"We're getting on solid ground," I said. "The party who brought them into the house-who gave you the stone monster, who painted your husband's portrait and yours, who stuffed the bird; for, doubtless, he was the taxidermist. An Admirable Crichton, indeed, in the way of accomplishments! You see, Fanny, you are introducing me to new acquaintances. You have not mentioned this party before. A man, I presume."

"I suppose so, sir," she said, with an awestruck look.

"Why suppose?" I asked. "In such a case, supposition is absurd. He is, or is not, a man."

"Let us call him so, sir. It'll make things easier."

"Very much easier, and they will be easier still if you will be more explicit. I seem to be getting more and more in the dark. In looking again upon your portrait, Fanny-"

"Yes, sir?"

"I can almost discern a likeness to-"

"For the merciful Lord's sake, sir," she cried, "don't say that! If I thought so, I should go mad. I'm scared enough already with what has occurred and the trouble I'm in-and Lemon talking in his sleep all the night through, and having the most horrible nightmares-and me trembling and shaking in my bed with what I'm forced to hear-it's unbearable, sir; it's unbearable!"

I was becoming very excited. Unless Mrs. Lemon had lost her senses, there was in this common house a frightful and awful mystery. And Mrs. Lemon had sent for me to fathom it! What was I about to hear-what to discover?

I strove to speak in a calm voice.

"You say your husband took to his bed yesterday, and that you fear he will never rise from it. Then he is in bed at this moment?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is his bedroom?"

"On the first floor back, sir."

"Can he hear us talking?"

"No, sir."

"And you want me to see him?"

"Before you go, sir, if you have no objections. I sha'n't know how to thank you."

"I will do what I can for you, Fanny. First for your own sake, and next because there appears to be something going on in this house that ought to be brought to light."

"You may well say that, sir. Not only in this house, but out of this house. The good Lord above only knows what *is* going on! But Lemon's done nothing wrong, sir. I won't have him thought badly of, and I won't have him hurt. He's been weak, yes, sir, but he ain't been guilty of a wicked, horrible crime. It ain't in his nature, sir. When I first begun to hear things that he used to say in his sleep, and sometimes when he was awake and lost to everything, my hair used to stand on end. I could feel it stirring up, giving me the creeps all over my skin, and my heart'd beat that quick that it was a mercy it didn't jump out of my body. But after a time, frightened as I was, and getting no satisfaction out of Lemon, who only glared at me when I spoke to him, I thought the time might come-and I ain't sure it won't be this blessed day-when I should have to come forward as a witness to save him from the gallows. I am his wife, sir, and if he ain't fit to look after hisself, it's for me to look after him, and so, sir, I thought the best thing for me to do was to keep a dairy."

"A dairy!" I echoed, in wonder.

"Yes, sir, a dairy-to put down in writing everything what happened at the very time."

"O," I said, "you mean a diary!"

"If that's what you call it, sir. I got an old lodger's book that wasn't all filled up. I keep it locked in my desk, sir. Perhaps you'd like to look at it?"

"It may be as well, Fanny."

"If," she said, fumbling in her pocket for a key, and placing one by one upon the table the most extraordinary collection of oddments that female pocket was ever called upon to hold, "if, when we come into this house to retire and live genteel, after Lemon had sold his business, I'd have known what was to come out of my notion to let the second floor front to a single man, I'd have had my feet cut off before I'd done it. But I did it for the best, to keep down the egspenses. Here it is, sir."

CHAPTER VII

DEVLIN'S FIRST INTRODUCTION INTO THE MYSTERY

She had found the key she had been searching for, and now she opened a mahogany desk, from which she took a penny memorandum-book. She handed it to me in silence, and I turned over the leaves. Most of the pages were filled with weekly accounts of her lodgers, in which "ham and eggs, 8d .;" "a rasher, 5d .;" "chop, 8d .;" "two boyled eggs, 3d .;" "bloater, 2d .;" "crewet, 4d .;" and other such-like items appeared again and again. There was also, at the foot of pages, receipts for payment, "Paid, Fanny Lemon." And this, in the midst of the presumably tragic business upon which we were engaged, brought to my mind an anomaly which had often occurred to me, namely, that landladies should present their accounts to their lodgers in penny memorandum-books, should receive the money, should sign a receipt, and then take away the books containing their acknowledgment of payment. In view of the grave issues impending, it is a trivial matter to comment upon, but it was really a relief to me to dwell for a moment or two upon it. At the end of the memorandum-book which I was looking through were five or six leaves which had not been utilised for lodgers' accounts, and these Mrs. Lemon had pressed into service for her diary. She was a bad writer and an indifferent speller, and the entries were brief, and, to me, at that point, incomprehensible.

"I see, Fanny," I said "that your first entry is made on a Thursday, a good many weeks ago."

"Yes, sir."

"I must confess I can make nothing of it. It states that Lemon rose at eight o'clock on that morning, that he had breakfast at half-past eight, that he ate four slices of bread and butter, two rashers of bacon, and two eggs--"

"Ah!" sighed Mrs. Lemon, interrupting me. "He had his appetite then, had Lemon! He ain't got none now to speak of."

"And," I continued, "that he went out of the house at nine o'clock with a person whose name is unintelligible. It commences, I think, with a D."

"D-e-v-l-i-n," said Mrs. Lemon, her eyes almost starting out of her head as she spelt the name, letter by letter.

"I can make it out now. That is it, Devlin. A peculiar name, Fanny."

"Everything about him is that, sir, and worse."

"Had it been a common name, I daresay I should have made it out at once. Now, Fanny, who is this Devlin?"

"You called him a man, sir," said Mrs. Lemon, striving unsuccessfully to keep her eyes from the portrait of her husband, from the evil-beaked bird, and from the image of the stone monster on the mantelshelf.

The magnetism was not in her, it was in the objects, and as she turned from one to the other I also turned-as though I were a piece of machinery and she was setting me in motion. But it is likely that my eyes would have wandered in those directions without her silent prompting. One peculiarity of the fascination-growing more horrible every moment-exercised by the three objects, was that I could not look upon the one without being compelled to complete the triangle formed by the positions in which they were placed-the wall, the window, the mantelshelf.

"It was Devlin, then," I said, "who painted the portraits and stuffed the bird and gave you the stone monster?"

"You've guessed it, sir. It was him."

Referring to the entry in the memorandum-book, I asked, "Did this Devlin call for your husband on the Thursday morning that they went out together?"

"No, sir, he lodged here."

"Does he lodge here now?"

"Yes, sir, I am sorry to say. If I could only see the last of him I'd give thanks on my bended knees morning, noon, and night."

"Why don't you get rid of him, then?"

"I can't, sir."

I accepted this as part of the mystery, and did not press her on the point, but I asked why she would feel so grateful if he were gone from the house.

"Because," she replied, "it's all through him that Lemon is as he is."

"Am I to see this man before I leave?"

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

"Is he in the house now?"

"No, sir."

I inwardly resolved if he came into the house before I left it, that I would see the man of whom Mrs. Lemon so evidently stood in dread.

"I suppose, Fanny, you will tell me something more of him."

"That is why I asked you to come, sir. If you're to do any good in this dreadful affair, you must know as much as I do about him."

"Very well, Fanny." I referred again to the first entry in the diary. "After stating that your husband went out with Devlin at nine o'clock in the morning, you say that he returned alone at six o'clock in the evening, and that he did not stir out of the house again on that night."

"Yes, sir."

"I see that you have made a record of the time Lemon went to bed and the time he rose next morning."

"To which, sir, I am ready to take my gospel oath."

"Supposing your gospel oath to be necessary."

"It might be. God only knows!"

I stared at her, beginning to doubt whether she was sane; but there was nothing in her face to justify my suspicion. The expression I saw on it was one of solemn, painful, intense earnestness.

"Go on, sir," she said, "if you please."

I turned again to the concluding words of the first entry, and read them aloud:

"Devlin did not come home all night. I locked the street-door myself, and put up the chain. I went down at seven in the morning, when Lemon was asleep, and the chain was up. I went to Devlin's room, the second floor front, and Devlin was not there!"

"That's true, sir. I can take my gospel oath of that."

"Fanny," I said, with the little book in my hand, closed, but keeping my forefinger between the leaves upon which the first entry was made, "I cannot go any farther until you tell me what all this means."

"After you've finished what I wrote, sir," was her reply, "I'll make a clean breast of it, and tell you everything, or as much of it as I can remember, from the time you saw me last—a good many years ago, wasn't it, sir? — up to this very day."

I thought it best to humour her, and I looked through the remaining entries. They were all of the same kind. Mr. Lemon rose in the morning at such a time; he had breakfast at such a time; he went out at such a time, with or without Devlin; he came home at such a time, with or without Devlin; and so on, and so on. It was a peculiar feature in these entries that Lemon never went out or came home without Devlin's name being mentioned.

I handed the book back to her; she took it irresolutely, and asked,

"Did you read what I last wrote, sir?"

"Yes, Fanny, the usual thing."

"Perhaps, sir, but the time I wrote it; that is what I mean."

"No, Fanny, I don't think I noticed that."

"It was wrote yesterday, sir, and it fixes the time that Lemon came home on Friday, and that he didn't stir out of the house all the night. If I can swear to anything, sir, I can swear to that. Lemon never crossed the street-door from the minute he came in on Friday to the minute he went out agin yesterday. If it was the last word I spoke, I'd swear to it, and it's the truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God!"

I was about to inquire why she laid such particular stress upon these recent movements of her husband, when there flashed into her eyes an expression of such absolute terror and horror that my first thought was that a spectre had entered the room noiselessly, and was standing at my back. Before I had time to turn and look, Mrs. Lemon clutched my arm, and gasped,

"Do you hear that? Do you hear that?"

CHAPTER VIII

I MAKE THE ACQUAINTANCE OF GEORGE CARTON'S GUARDIAN, MR. KENNETH DOWSETT

I heard something certainly which by this time, unhappily, was neither new nor strange. It was the voice of a newsboy calling out the last edition of a newspaper which, he asserted with stentorian lungs, contained further particulars of the awful murder in Victoria Park. Amid all the jargon he was bawling out, there were really only three words clearly distinguishable. "Murder! Awful murder! Discoveries! Awful discoveries!"

"Are you alarmed, Fanny," I asked, "by what that boy is calling out?"

"Yes," she replied in a whisper, "it is that, it is that!"

"But you must be familiar with the cry," I observed. "There isn't a street in London that was not ringing with it all yesterday."

"It don't matter, it don't matter!" she gasped, in the most inexplicable state of agitation I had ever beheld. "Lemon never stirred out of the house. I'll take my solemn oath of it-my solemn oath."

I released myself from her grasp, and, running into the square, caught up with the newsvendor and bought a paper. Before I returned to the house I satisfied myself that the paper contained nothing new in the shape of intelligence relating to the murder of my friend Melladew's daughter. What the man had bawled out was merely a trick to dispose of his wares. I had reached the doorstep of Fanny's house when my attention was arrested by the figures of two men on the opposite side of the road. One was a man of middle age, and was a stranger to me. In his companion I immediately recognised George Carton. The elder man appeared to be endeavouring to prevail upon George Carton to leave the square, but his arguments had no effect upon Carton, who, shaking him off, hurried across the road to speak to me. His companion followed him.

"Any news, sir?" cried George Carton. "Have you discovered anything?"

"Nothing," I replied, not pausing to inquire why he should put a question so direct to me.

"Nothing!" he muttered. "Nothing! But it shall be brought to light-it shall, or I will not live!"

"Come, come, my dear boy," said the elder man. "What is the use of going on in this frantic manner? It won't better things."

"How am I to be sure of that?" retorted Carton. "It won't better things to stand idly aside, and think and think about it without ever moving a step."

"My ward knows you, sir," said Carton's friend, "and I confess I was endeavouring to persuade him to come home with me when you were running after the newspaper boy. He insisted that your sudden appearance in this square was a strange and eventful coincidence."

"A strange and eventful coincidence!" I exclaimed, and thought, without giving my thought expression, that there was something strange in the circumstance of my being in Fanny Lemon's house, about to listen to a revelation which was not unlikely to have some bearing upon the tragic event, and in being thus unexpectedly confronted by the young man who was to have been married to the murdered girl.

"Yes, that is his idea," said Carton's friend; "but I am really forgetting my manners. Allow me to introduce myself. You are acquainted with my ward, George Carton, the dearest, most generous-hearted, most magnanimous young fellow in the world. I have the happiness to be his guardian. My name is Kenneth Dowsett."

He was a smiling, fair-faced man, with blue, dreamy eyes, and his voice and manners were most agreeable. I murmured that I was very pleased to make his acquaintance.

"My ward," continued Mr. Dowsett, laying his hand affectionately on Carton's shoulder, "has also an odd idea in reference to this dreadful affair, that something significant and pregnant will be discovered in an odd and unaccountable fashion. Heaven knows, I don't want to deprive him of any consolation he can derive from his imaginings. I have too sincere a love for him; but I am a man of the world, and it grieves me to see him indulge in fancies which can lead to no good result. To tell you the honest truth," Mr. Dowsett whispered to me, "I am afraid to let him out of my sight for fear he should do violence to himself."

"My dear guardian," said Carton, "who should know better than I how kind and good you are to me? Who should be better able to appreciate the tenderness and consideration I have always received at your hands? I may be wilful, headstrong, but I am not ungrateful. Indeed, sir" – turning to me – "I am wild with grief and despair, and my guardian has the best of reasons for chiding me. He has only my good at heart, and I am truly sorry to distress him; but I have my ideas-call them fancies if you like-and I must have something to cling to. I will not abandon my pursuit till the murderer is brought to justice, or till I kill him with my own hands!"

"That is how he has been going on," said Mr. Dowsett, "all day yesterday, and the whole live-long night. He hasn't had a moment's sleep."

"Sleep!" cried Carton. "Who could sleep under such agony as I am suffering?"

"But," I said to the young man, whose intense earnestness deepened my sympathy for him, "sleep is necessary. It isn't possible to work without it. There are limits to human strength, and if you wish to be of any service in the clearing up of this mystery, you must conduct yourself with some kind of human wisdom."

"There, my dear lad," said Mr. Dowsett, "doesn't that tally with my advice? I tried to prevail upon him last night to take an opiate-"

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