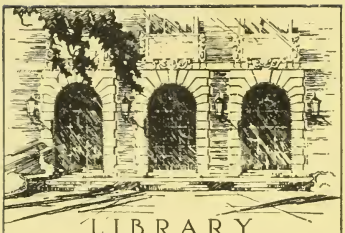

AT FAULT.

VOL. II.

AT FAULT.

A Novel.

BY

HAWLEY SMART,

AUTHOR OF
"BREEZIE LANGTON," "BROKEN BONDS," "SOCIAL SINNERS,"
"THE GREAT TONTINE," ETC., ETC.

"For the lords in whose keeping the door is
That opens on all who draw breath,
Gave the cypress to love, my Dolores,
The myrtle to death."

IN THREE VOLUMES.—VOL. II.

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CONTENTS OF VOLUME II.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

AT FAULT.

CHAPTER I.

MR. TOTTERDELL'S EXCITEMENT.

It was with a heavy heart that Phil Soames made the best of his way to Dyke in accordance with his promise to Dr. Ingleby. He was sincerely sorry for John Fossdyke, whom he had known before he, Phil, emerged from his teens, and had always liked. There had been something attractive to a young fellow in the Town Clerk's restless energy and go; in the keen way in which he threw himself into the promotion of all amusement for Baumborough. He had been the heart and

soul at one time of that very cricket club of which Phil Soames was now the captain; not that Mr. Fossdyke had ever played, but he had been a first-rate secretary, arranged matches, &c., and really made the club; had put them on a sound financial footing, and raised their cricketing status fifty per cent. in the county. Then again, this was a terrible story to have to tell a wife; and Phil Soames, who knew the *ménage* well, and was a shrewd observer, believed that though the Fossdykes might tiff a bit, the lady really loved her husband at bottom. However, as Dr. Ingleby had said, the story had to be told, and that quickly, and Phil Soames was not of the sort that blench when called on to face awkward work.

He rang the bell and looked at his watch when he arrived at Dyke. It was a little awkward, it was just about the time the ladies would be adjusting their toilettes for dinner. When the door opened, he said at

once to the man-servant who opened it, "I must see Miss Hyde at once, Robert. I'll step into the study and wait there. Tell Miss Hyde I am here, if you can see her alone, but say a person from Baumborough wants to see her if you can't. Not a word to any one else. I am the bearer of bad news, which you'll all know in half-an-hour."

Marvelling greatly, Robert left to do his errand, and found Miss Hyde and Mrs. Fossdyke just leaving the drawing-room to dress. Bessie, on learning the message, followed him at once; and Mrs. Fossdyke, supposing that the person from Baumborough was a tradesman of some sort, went up-stairs to her room.

"Philip!" exclaimed Miss Hyde, as she entered the study, even before the confidential Robert was out of hearing, so astounded was she at the appearance of Mr. Soames in this fashion. "What does this mean?"

"Sit down, please," he replied, after he had shaken hands. "Yes, in that big chair will be best. I have come over to break some terrible tidings to you. Mr. Fossdyke has met with a very severe accident."

"On the railway?" asked the girl, leaning forward as the colour died out of her cheeks· "Is it—is it dangerous?"

"Yes, Bessie, I am very much afraid fatal," he replied gently. "Of course there is hope while there is life," and then he dropped his eyes, unable longer to confront the eager, frightened gaze that met his own.

"There is no hope, Philip—none. I can read it in your face—he is dead, or dying. Which? tell me which, in pity's name."

"Dead," he rejoined in a low voice.

"It is very terrible," she murmured; "what will his poor wife do? She loved him, Philip, indeed she did, though they might not seem to quite hit it off at times. And, oh, how good they have both been to

me," and Bessie bowed her head, and sobbed audibly.

Soames let the girl's tears have full play; he felt that his task was but as yet only half accomplished, and felt dreadfully nervous about the telling how John Fossdyke really came to his end.

"I am better now," she said at length; "tell me where it happened, and how? Of course, I must break this to Mrs. Fossdyke, and she will naturally desire to know all particulars."

"Can you be very brave, Bessie? Can you bear to hear that there is something peculiarly sad about Mr. Fossdyke's death. It was no railway accident."

The girl's eyes dilated as she stared in expectant bewilderment at Soames.

"Nerve yourself," he continued; "remember we must look to you to support and comfort Mrs. Fossdyke under her trial."

"I understand," she said, faintly, "go on, please, quick."

"Mr. Fossdyke has been murdered," rejoined Soames, in slow, measured tones; "stabbed to the heart in his bed at Bunbury."

Bessie threw up her hands before her face as if blinded.

"Murdered," she said, in a low voice. "Good heavens, have they any suspicions as to who is the assassin and what his motive?"

"His motive! No; but there is strong presumption that a Mr. Foxborough, who invited him——"

"Oh, my God!" exclaimed the girl, as she fell back in her chair, blanched and all but senseless. She looked so like swooning that Phil was about to ring for assistance, when a rapid gesture of her hand stayed him.

"It only wanted this," she murmured, and then she apparently became unconscious.

For a second or two Soames once more fingered the bell, then glancing round the

room he rushed at a vase of flowers; quick as thought the blossoms lay scattered on the carpet, and half of the water in which they had stood was dashed into the fainting girl's face; then soaking his handkerchief in the remainder he proceeded to daub her temples after the only conventional fashion understood by male creatures. With a quick gasp or two she came round in a few minutes.

"Keep quiet and don't try to talk yet," said Phil, authoritatively. "Shall I ring, or would you rather I did not?"

A slight but emphatic shake of the head answered the question.

That the news of John Fossdyke's murder should upset Miss Hyde was only natural. She was a plucky girl, and had fought bravely against the shock to her nerves, no doubt; but what puzzled Phil Soames was her ejaculation just before she swooned—"It only wanted this!" What could she mean? It must be remembered that the mystery

which she declared rendered her marriage with him impossible was ever in the young man's mind. Did her exclamation in any way relate to that? He was still pondering on this when Bessie, having in some measure recovered herself, said: "Of course I must tell Mrs. Fossdyke; and now, Philip, I think you had better go. It will be a terrible night for us both; and when you get back to Bamborough tell Dr. Ingleby to look in about ten or so, if he can.

"Certainly I will, but he has gone over to Bunbury, and can scarcely be back so soon as that. I shall meet him at the station, and feel sure he means coming out before he goes to bed. It was he who sent me here to break it."

"He's always so thoughtful," replied Bessie, and as she spoke the door opened, and in came Mrs. Fossdyke.

"Well, upon my word," she exclaimed, laughing. "How do you do, Mr. Soames?

and so, Bessie, this is the person from Baumborough; really, Philip, I could never have believed in your obtaining entrance into my house under such remarkably false colours. What am I to think?—explain, young people, explain. Am I to ask him to dinner, Bessie, or not?"

It was so evident to the pair that, far from having the slightest inkling of the truth, Mrs. Fossdyke merely suspected them of having come to the understanding which she had set her heart upon, that they both looked so distressed the good lady could not but notice it.

"What is the matter with you both? Have you been quarrelling? What is it? You both look as if you had come to infinite grief."

To hear the poor woman thus jesting at what was in store for her was more than Phil Soames could bear. "No dinner tonight, thanks, Mrs. Fossdyke; good night. Good night, Bessie, Miss Hyde I mean. God

bless you," and with this somewhat incoherent speech, he took his departure.

No man could have been more curiously moved by the death of a fellow creature than was Mr. Totterdell when he first heard of the murder of John Fossdyke. He was a fussy, garrulous, and inquisitive old man, and had lately proved himself a rancorous old man to boot with regard to the luckless Town Clerk. He had fiercely resented the being literally turned out of Dyke, but to do him justice his enmity was not of that unsparing, malignant kind that refused to be buried in the grave. He was unfeignedly sorry for the past, and deeply regretted that ever he should have moved for an inquisition into the financial affairs of the town. He had lamented before that his wrath had moved him to that step, it was subject of still bitterer lamentation now. But as the details of the murder reached Baumborough, there stole across Mr. Totterdell a little glow of satisfac-

tion that he had in his writing-table drawer that bill of the Syringa Music-Hall, and was not only one of those who had actually held converse with the murderer, but was able to point out to the police where he might be found. Conscious of possessing this information, Mr. Totterdell positively swelled with importance. To a man of his disposition being the repository of the clue to a great crime was delicious. He (Totterdell) at all events now must come prominently before the public. His name would be in all the papers, and to one of his incalculable vanity this went for a good deal. To be pointed out as *the* Mr. Totterdell who led to the solution of the great Bunbury murder was fame. Questionable that perhaps, but for the time being it would undoubtedly be notoriety, a substitute that amply suffices most people in these days. Then Mr. Totterdell remembered how he had actually pointed out John Fossdyke to his supposed murderer,

and began to suffer agonies of remorse; but again it occurred to him that it was the stranger who had demanded who the Town Clerk might be, and that had he refused the required information his interlocutor would have experienced no difficulty in obtaining it from some one else; so he became more tranquil on this point. But to whom to disburthen himself of the mighty secret within his breast troubled him much. Another thing, too, which gave a singular titillation both to Mr. Totterdell's nerves and vanity, was the idea that he had sat next a veritable murderer at the theatre only twenty-four hours before he committed his crime. Of this he made no secret; indeed, dilated on the subject all over Baumborough. Mr. Totterdell never tired of describing the stranger nor improvising the discourse that took place between them, and that conversation so lengthened in proportion to the number of times that Mr. Totterdell recapitulated the story that it appeared im-

possible that either he or the stranger could have heard anything of the play.

Now there was one singular fact about all this easily accounted for if you bear in mind Mr. Totterdell's prevailing characteristics, insatiable curiosity combined, remember, with incalculable vanity, prompting him to obtain notoriety at all hazards. The result was that, freely as he talked of having met him in front of the house, he was perfectly mute about having come across Mr. Foxborough behind the scenes. He could, he thought, give all the information concerning the stranger the police could possibly require, and was jealous that any one else should intrude themselves on his platform. He proposed to pose as the main witness in the great Bunbury murder case—a mere matter of notoriety! Quite so, but men have risked their lives for nothing else time out of mind, notably in the year of grace 1882 concerning crossing the Channel in balloons.

When Dr. Ingleby, having returned from Bunbury, got out to Dyke, he found that he was most decidedly wanted. His old friend, Mrs. Fossdyke, was perfectly stunned by the news, and past anything but making one wild wail of remorse for what she was pleased to term her late unwifely behaviour. She reproached herself bitterly about her last quarrel with her husband, and wept piteously over some misty idea that she had in some sort contributed to the catastrophe. But what did surprise Dr. Ingleby was the excessive prostration of Miss Hyde. The girl struggled bravely against it, but her unutterable woe was as unmistakable as it was difficult to account for. Granted she had lost a very dear friend, still it was hard to understand a tolerably self-contained young lady like Miss Hyde being so completely upset by it. She did her best—she struggled hard to console and comfort poor Mrs. Fossdyke, but Dr. Ingleby was fain to confess that she seemed more in need

of comforting herself. A case this in which there was little to be done for either sufferer. Words of consolation at such times seem commonplace, and medical aid is superfluous.

But the next day Dr. Ingleby was astonished by the apparition of Sergeant Silas Usher in his surgery—that he entered unannounced it is almost unnecessary to say. Silas Usher usually turned up without any official announcement. He had a way of appearing at people's sides in a stealthy, ghost-like fashion positively appalling, and his very name caused terror to the tip-top professors of the art of burglary. It was related how one of the great artists in that line had been utterly paralyzed in his last exploit by having whispered into his ears as he was clearing out a countess's jewel-box, and greedily gloating over a diamond bracelet,—

"Very pretty, Bill Simmonds, ain't it? but it won't fit you anything like as well as these," and before the astonished robber could collect

his faculties the handcuffs snapped round his wrists, and his retirement from a world he had for some time adorned was an accomplished fact.

"I have just run down, sir, to make a few inquiries in Baumborough, and you're the man I want in the first instance. I don't want to intrude on the family at Dyke, of course, but it is essential I should get answers from them to these two questions: Did they ever know a Mr. Foxborough, or hear of him? and did they ever see this in Mr. Fossdyke's possession?" and Sergeant Usher produced the fatal weapon which had been found in John Fossdyke's breast?

A slight shiver ran through Dr. Ingleby's frame, not at the sight of the weapon, for his medical training had steeled his nerves to all that sort of thing, but he did think it would be a gruesome task to show that ghastly toy to the mourners at Dyke.

"Now don't you run away, doctor, with the

idea, that I'm a man of no feeling," exclaimed the sergeant, who saw at a glance what was passing through Dr. Ingleby's mind. "Nobody understands the susceptibilities more than I do, and, bless you, nobody humours them more. Now these are important questions, and answers to 'em quite invaluable. But, of course, you'll introduce this," he continued, tapping the dagger, "as a paper knife found in a half-cut novel which Mr. Foxborough left inadvertently behind him. It is to spare all unpleasantness I come to you. Introduce me as what seems best to yourself, but you shall make the inquiries. I only want to be present when they are made, but I think you had best admit at once I'm a police agent. As I told you before, I'm in charge of this murder, and it's a matter of professional pride to bring it home to some one."

"You seem pretty indifferent whom you hang," rejoined Dr. Ingleby sharply.

"Nothing of the kind, sir," replied Sergeant

65

Usher, "but it is a sort of reproach to my professional reputation not to pick up the perpetrator of a big crime like this. More especially because it seems so simple. Who but Mr. Foxborough could have committed this murder? I told you, sir, I am always candid myself on principle, but we must have the links in the chain complete, and that is the reason I am compelled to disturb the ladies at Dyke, almost in the first agonies of their grief."

"To-morrow, I might, Sergeant Usher, but as the medical adviser of the family, I emphatically say Mrs. Fossdyke and Miss Hyde are too thoroughly crushed by this blow for you to see them to-day. There are probably one or two more points you would like to question them over, and on the whole you will benefit by the delay."

Silas Usher mused for a little, and then said, "Well, it may be so. I, of course, am very anxious to know what induced Mr.

Fossdyke to go over to Bunbury. We know Foxborough came here on Monday night. He probably met the deceased and asked him to dine, which from motives we have as yet no clue to Mr. Fossdyke accepted; but from the witnesses at the Hopbine, it does not appear to have been simply a dinner between two old friends. If the invitation was given verbally it is very likely that some one heard it given. At all events there must be people in Baumborough who noticed this stranger. If, which may be possible, the man wrote, there's a chance that the ladies at Dyke know something about it, and that the letter is not as yet destroyed. You see, Doctor, if you can get hold of a man's handwriting, and this Foxborough was undoubtedly an educated man, or if you can get hold of an accurate description of him, you are pretty much upon his track."

"All of which makes it quite clear to me that you won't altogether waste a day in

Baumborough, Sergeant Usher. At all events, I'll not sanction you going out to Dyke to-day."

"It may be you're right, sir," rejoined the detective. "Anyhow, it seems I have got to pass the day here, and therefore I must just make the best of it. I'll call in to-morrow, Doctor, to see what you can do for me. Good morning."

That Sergeant Usher went about seeking information would not at all describe that worthy's proceedings, he simply pervaded the town, he had something to say to every one, and it was highly creditable to his versatility and universal knowledge that the people with whom he conversed differed largely about the little grey man's calling. The ostler at the King's Arms, where Mr. Usher was located, had no doubt whatever that he was somehow connected with horses. At the principal stationer's they put him down as having something to do with theatricals, while other people

differed as to whether it was corn or cattle the little gentleman at the King's Arms had come down to buy. But that in the course of three or four hours' gossiping with everybody he came across, Sergeant Usher had arrived at the fact that Mr. Foxborough had sat next Mr. Totterdell in the stalls upon the opening night of the theatre, and that nobody in Baumborough knew so much about the whole affair as that gentleman may easily be conceived. Clearly Mr. Totterdell was the man the Sergeant wanted, and to ascertain where Mr. Totterdell lived was, of course, easy. Who he was had been fully explained also—his connection with Mrs. Fossdyke, his quarrel with her husband, &c. All such local gossip is easily picked up in an incredibly short time in a country town by such a practised hand as Sergeant Usher; and further, the detective had got a very fair inkling of what manner of man Mr. Totterdell was.

The fussy town councillor dwelt in a

prim-looking house standing in an equally prim-looking garden, situated in the outskirts of the town, and thither towards the afternoon Sergeant Usher made his way. He was in exceeding good humour with himself, for he considered he had done a very fair morning's work, although most of his informants had been fain to admit they had not noticed the stranger themselves; while even those that professed to have remarked him were so vague and vacillating in their description that the shrewd Sergeant Usher speedily came to the conclusion that "they thought they'd seen him," was about what their testimony really amounted to, but they were all clear and confident that Mr. Totterdell had conversed with the stranger, and could describe his personal appearance, manner, &c.; indeed, it was he who had been asked to point out Mr. Fossdyke by this Mr. Foxborough.

Mr. Totterdell was at home, and the Sergeant was at once shown into his pre-

sence. "Mr. Silas Usher," he repeated, reading the name written on an envelope, which had been sent into him. "May I ask what your business is with me?"

"I thought maybe, sir, the name might have told you. Silas Usher is pretty well known at Scotland Yard, and you might have come across the name in biggish murder cases before now."

"Of course, of course," exclaimed Mr. Totterdell, wriggling in his chair, after his custom when excited about anything. "Pray sit down, Mr. Usher."

He had been turning over in his mind with whom he was to disburden himself of the mighty secret hidden in his breast, and here was the very man he wanted come to his door.

"I have every reason to believe, Mr. Totterdell, that you can give me some very important information, and as this murder is put in my charge, I come to learn all you have to tell me concerning it."

"And you couldn't have come to any one in Baumborough who can tell you half so much about it. I was an intimate friend of the poor fellow that's gone, you know, godfather to his wife and all that sort of thing, and though he behaved very badly and ungratefully to me at last, I bore him no malice."

What poor John Fossdyke had to be grateful about was not quite so clear.

"Dear me," continued the old impostor, "I little thought when I slaved so to get up the Baumborough Theatre that I was, so to speak, digging John Fossdyke's grave, but that was his fault; he never was open with any one. If he had only been candid, Mr. Usher; if he had only been candid—"

"Ah! Mr. Totterdell, then he never mentioned Foxborough's name to you?"

"No, nor to any one else, or I must have heard of it. I hear everything that goes on in Baumborough."

"And you actually sat next this man in

the theatre on Monday night," interposed the Sergeant rather hurriedly, for he already saw that the newly-elected town councillor was not one of those who narrate their story briefly.

"That was just what I was going to tell you," rejoined Mr. Totterdell, testily, "only you interrupted me. Yes, I sat near the miscreant at the theatre; a dark-complexioned man, dressed in evening clothes, as unlike a murderer as could be," and the old gentleman paused, and looked at the Sergeant as much as to say, "What do you think of that?"

Mr. Usher vouchsafed no opinion, his professional knowledge told him that men of all classes had taken their fellow's lives at times.

"Well," continued Mr. Totterdell, "the villain was very affable. Said he was in the theatrical line himself. He asked who two or three people were, amongst others John Fossdyke."

"Give any reason?" interposed the Sergeant,

in a curt rat-trap sort of way that made the old gentleman start.

"Yes, he said he thought he had met him somewhere, had been at school with him, perhaps, but he didn't seem to recognize the name at all. He thought I said Mossdyke, and when I repeated Fossdyke, asked me to spell it, which I did. Then he asked me if Miss Hyde was his daughter, and I told him no, that she was one of our great mysteries, that no one knew exactly who she was. We don't, you know; it's very curious that, Mr. Usher. Baumborough cannot get at who she is exactly."

"And, of course, sir, you had no idea of what this stranger's name was?"

"Well, I had and I hadn't. It so happens I am in possession of a singular piece of evidence, which, though it told nothing then, is valuable now, as it tells you where to find James Foxborough."

"James!" exclaimed the Sergeant. "You've

got at his Christian name then, Mr. Totterdell?"

"Yes," exclaimed the old gentleman, with an asthmatic chuckle, as he got out of his chair, and went across to the writing-table. "When," he continued, as he opened a drawer, "the stranger got up to leave he pulled a silk muffler out of his pocket to put round his throat, and as he did so he dropped this," and Mr. Totterdell held up the music-hall bill he had picked up in the theatre. "Look at it."

"Syringa Music-Hall! Yes, I know the place well; but any one might go there; this don't tell us much. Ha! Lessee, Mr. James Foxborough. Yes, stupid of me not to remember it before. I know all about it now. Wife, handsome woman, sings rather well. I don't think I ever saw Foxborough. Can't have done. I never forget any one I've once seen. You can keep that, Mr. Totterdell, it's a valuable clue, but excuse my observing it's

no evidence. It is open to any one to have a Syringa bill in his coat-pocket."

The old gentleman gasped with indignation. He had held that bill to be a most damning piece of testimony.

"You see," continued the Sergeant, who saw what was passing through Mr. Totterdell's mind, "beyond that it recalled to my mind that James Foxborough is lessee of the Syringa, a fact some of our people in town are sure to have remembered, that bill tells us nothing. I've no doubt a man calling himself Foxborough sat next you in the stalls on Monday night, and when we apprehend James Foxborough you will know at a glance whether that's the man."

"Undoubtedly," returned Mr. Totterdell, somewhat reviving as it dawned upon him that after all he was destined to play the *rôle* of a leading witness.

"Well, sir, I don't think I need trespass any longer on your valuable time. I'm a

candid man myself, Mr. Totterdell, and I have no doubt that—thanks to the valuable clue you have placed in my hands—we shall soon know all about James Foxborough, and where to find him when we want him. Good day, sir."

"If his time is valuable he loses a mint of money per annum," muttered Sergeant Usher, as he walked away. "Such a long-winded old chump at telling a story one don't often see, thank goodness. Now, if this is James Foxborough of the Syringa, what on earth could be his quarrel with Mr. Fossdyke? That is a thing has to be got at in some sort. Secondly, it all looks too plain sailing. Men don't take rooms at hotels in the country in their own name, ask their enemy to dinner, murder him, and return quietly to town by the first train in the morning; and yet that's what this comes to. Outside my experience that is a long way. No; it looks so simple that I'd bet it turns out a complicated case. I suppose I'd

best go out to Dyke to-morrow, if the Doctor will let me, and ask the ladies two or three questions, though I don't suppose much will come of it."

The next morning Sergeant Usher wended his way to Dr. Ingleby's, to learn if it was possible for him to ask those two or three questions of Mrs. Fossdyke and Miss Hyde that he was so anxious to put.

"I have been out to see them already, and have arranged that, painful though it be, it shall be done. But I must manage this business in my own way. The interview must be as brief as you can possibly make it. The questions will have to be put by me, and I have guaranteed you shall not open your lips, although you are to be present. They understand who you are, and that they are answering my questions for your benefit."

At first Sergeant Usher looked somewhat disappointed, then brightening up a bit, said, "It won't take five minutes, Doctor. There

are only three questions, but I want as distinct answers to them as possible, please. I had better write them down."

"Do, while I order the trap. There are writing things."

A few minutes later and Dr. Ingleby and the Sergeant were driving towards Dyke. On their arrival they were at once shown into the drawing-room, where the two ladies were waiting to receive them. They welcomed Dr. Ingleby with a faint smile, and acknowledged Sergeant Usher's bow with a slight bend of the head.

"My dear Mrs. Fossdyke, we shan't worry you for more than a few minutes, but in the interests of justice I am going to ask you three questions. First, did you ever see this fanciful toy before?" and he exhibited the weapon that had bereft John Fossdyke of life.

A decided negative from both ladies.

"Secondly, did your husband to your knowledge know anything of a Mr. Foxborough?"

"I never heard of such a person," replied Mrs. Fossdyke, briefly.

"I never knew a Mr. Foxborough," faltered Miss Hyde, with visible emotion.

"Lastly, are you aware what induced your husband to go over to Bunbury on Tuesday?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Fossdyke, "he went in consequence of a letter which he received by the morning post, and by which he was evidently much put out. We both noticed it, Bessie, did we not?"

Miss Hyde bent her head in token of assent.

"So much so," continued Mrs. Fossdyke, "that I asked him if he was ill, and afterwards urged him not to stay the night at Bunbury, but come home to dinner. Oh, why, why did he not follow my advice?" and the good lady's tears flowed afresh.

"There, there, my dear friend," said the Doctor, soothingly, "we need trouble you no more. Good-bye for the present—good-bye,

Miss Hyde. I shall be up again in the evening."

Sergeant Usher had already glided noiselessly out of the room in accordance with his covenant.

"Well," said the Doctor, as he joined him in the hall, "I trust you have learnt all you want to know."

"Not quite," rejoined Serjeant Usher. "I want to know when Miss Hyde heard of Mr. Foxborough."

"Why, she said she never had."

"Excuse me, she said she had never seen him, and I believe her; but from the way she said it I have a strong idea she's heard of him."

"That idea never would have entered my head."

"I dare say not, Doctor. You're not accustomed to weigh people's words as I am," replied Serjeant Usher, as they got into the trap.

"Were you satisfied with the result of your questions?" asked Doctor Ingleby, after a few moments, during which his companion seemed plunged in a brown study.

"I'd give a hundred pounds for that letter," quoth Sergeant Usher, moodily.

CHAPTER II.

CLUB GOSSIP.

Herbert Morant, with his things neatly packed, including that valuable clock with an alarum, is casting a cursory eye round his rooms to make sure that nothing is forgotten, when there is a tap at the door, followed by the entrance of Mrs. Marriott with a telegram. It was from Phil Soames, and ran as follows :—"Sorry to put you off, but cannot receive you at present; particulars by post." Mr. Morant read the telegram attentively, and then observed in a moralizing mood, "This is in accordance with the ordering of things by a perverse providence. No sooner do I plant the ladder that tends to fortune

and turn to collect my effects than the malignant fairy whose glass the butler neglected to fill on the occasion of the festival of my christening, cuts up rough and kicks it down. Phil Soames," continued the ever sanguine Morant, "told me the ball was at my foot; they always do tell you that, but what's the use when you're not good at the game, and don't understand a drop-kick. But old Phil, I know him so well, he'd have kicked off the ball, and I should have nothing to do but to run after it. Well, there's nothing for it but to await the arrival of the post, and in the mean time man must dine, and in the case of a fellow holding my 'high-resolve,' improve his mind afterwards, but whether that shall be done by the pursuit of whist, billiards, or dramatic representation accident must determine."

The next morning brought Mr. Morant a letter from Soames. It was as follows:—

"Dear Herbert,—I am sorry to put you off, but the sad tragedy that has befallen Baumborough must be my excuse. It has cast a temporary gloom over the whole town, and many of us who knew and loved John Fossdyke feel it deeply. I have known him for the last fourteen years, from a boy, in short. He was a great friend of all my family, and we were inexpressively grieved when the news came of his sad fate. As soon as we have a little got over the shock you must come as arranged. For the present adieu.

"Ever yours,

"Philip Soames."

"P.S.—The papers will give you all the details of the Bunbury murder, and spare me the pain of relating them."

To say that Mr. Morant sat up in bed after reading this epistle would faintly characterize that young gentleman's movements. He bounced out of bed and dashed

into his sitting-room in search of the morning paper. A great murder always exercises a curious fascination upon the public, and that fascination is increased when we are connected, however faintly, with the crime. Mr. Morant's intimate friend on this occasion had been an intimate friend of the murdered man. But Herbert Morant is destined to find himself more intimately connected with the crime than that; another minute and the columns of the *Standard* will disclose to him that the supposed murderer is the father of the girl he wishes to marry.

Morant tore the paper open, glanced his eye rapidly over its pages, and for a little failed to discover what he sought.

"Ha! here it is," he exclaimed, as "Mysterious Murder at Bunbury" met his gaze, and he proceeded to peruse the account with no little interest. The murder had taken place on the Tuesday night presumably, though it was not till Wednesday afternoon

that it had been discovered. It was now Friday morning, so the papers by this had obtained very detailed accounts of the crime, and the writer for the *Standard* had told his story in very dramatic fashion. But when after reading all the preliminaries with which we are already acquainted, Morant came to this pithy line, "On the Tuesday the friend of No. 11 appeared in the person of John Fossdyke, a gentleman well-known in Bunbury, and asked for Mr. Foxborough," he dropped the paper with a cry of horror; then he took heart. Foxborough might not be a common name, but there were doubtless more Foxboroughs than one in the world. He picked the paper up and read on: the particulars of the murder were told clearly and faithfully; but the last paragraph bore a later date than the remainder of the report, and had evidently been transmitted by telegraph. "I have just heard that evidence has been discovered this day in Baumborough

which would appear to indicate that Mr. James Foxborough, the well-known lessee of the Syringa Music-Hall, is the Mr. Foxborough who was staying at the Hopbine."

Once more he dropped the paper, and remained staring into vacancy. Was it possible that the man he knew, Nid's father, could have risen in the night and deliberately slain his guest? It was too horrible. A more deliberate murder, apparently, had never been committed, and whatever the motive might have been, it was as yet perfectly unfathomable. Not the slightest suggestion was made by the correspondent of the paper as to the cause of the crime, and the more he thought of it the more bewildered Herbert Morant became. He read that account over and over again in the intervals of dressing; the ghastly story had a weird fascination for him. He felt already growing upon him that morbid feeling, which makes all other things seem tame in comparison with

the solution of a mystery of this kind. There are always a small proportion of imaginative people who are held spell-bound by the contemplation of a great crime. For the time being they think of nothing else, they read all the papers for fear the slightest detail should escape them, they build ingenious theories concerning the affair with more or less cleverness in proportion to their reasoning capabilities, and the proportion of educated people who understand what is actually evidence is surprisingly small.

His breakfast finished, Herbert Morant went down to his club. He wanted to see what the other papers might have to say about it; to hear what mankind were saying about this Bunbury murder. The papers varied little in their accounts, some of course were rather more meagre than others, but the leading journals were all pretty much in accordance with the story he had at first read. With humanity it was different. Not

only had men much to say and said it, but they improvised knowledge and enumerated theories which made poor Herbert stand aghast.

"Good Lord, sir, there's not much to be astonished at," said old Sir Cranbury Pye, a wicked old man, who had been about town for half a century or thereabouts. "Know all about that fellow Foxborough, real name Ikey Solomon, begun life in the prize ring, in the last days of that noble institution, clever light-weight, but couldn't be trusted, more often on the cross than the square. When that pillar of the constitution, the P. R., came to an end, Ikey started a silver hell at the East-end, got on, and went round the races, Brighton, Doncaster, you know, a little chicken *hot*, as well as cold chicken for supper; found that game rather drying up, so went into the music-hall line, and started the Syringa. Good little chap, Ikey, don't know whether he stuck the other fellow, not proved

yet anyhow, but don't suppose Ikey would stick at murder, as a matter of business, any more than he would at crossing a fight or *quêêring* a flat:" the whole of which farrago was listened to and accepted by some of the younger members of "the Theatinê" with much reverence and interest. Sir Cranbury having no more knowledge of James Foxborough than he had of the Emperor of China.

"Never read a mòre conclusive case in my life," grunted old Major Borrobosh; "poor fellow didn't want watch or money, of course. Papers of some kind; deeds very likely. What did they quarrel about? Something of that sort, of course—this fellow Fossdyke, you see, wouldn't give 'em up. Foxborough goes at night to steal 'em, means having 'em somehow — the other fellow wakes. Foxborough gives him a dig in the ribs with his dagger, bones the papers, locks the door, and slopes next morning, plain as a pikestaff.

What say, hey? Premeditated, hey? No, no, not premeditated——"

"Look here, you fellows needn't go bellowing it about, you know," said Lacquers, "but I heard all about it from a fellow who has got a friend who corresponds with a chap down at Baumborough. The fellow Foxborough had a daughter who went as nursery governess to John Fossdyke. Fossdyke brought her to grief, and her father killed Fossdyke out of revenge. That's the real story of the affair."

Pleasant all this for poor Herbert Morant, whose chivalrous disposition led him strongly to stand up for his new friends, but he hadn't knocked about London the last half-dozen years without acquiring some knowledge of the world, and that warned him the confronting of the club gossip was like tilting at windmills in these days. Even in the old duelling days, and credited with wielding a deadly pistol, to curb the tongues of one of

our great monachal caravansaries was hopeless. To attempt it in these times would be ridiculous. Then the young man could but acknowledge to himself that he knew next to nothing of Foxborough. Of Mrs. Foxborough and Nid, yes, that was different; but Herbert was aware that consummate scoundrels before now have been blessed with charming feminine belongings. He felt very miserable as he walked out of the Theatinê; true, he believed very little of all these rumours he had heard, but there was no getting away from the fact that James Foxborough stood in imminent danger of being charged with murder, and, guilty or not guilty, that must occasion infinite agony to the girl he loved and her mother, and Herbert was very fond of Mrs. Foxborough as well as Nid, although not quite in the same proportion. At last it occurred to Herbert he would walk out to Tapton Cottage, and inquire after its inmates —if possible, see them. It would show, at

all events, both his sympathy and disbelief in the charge, and having come to this resolution he stepped out manfully, and without further vacillation, in the direction of Regent's Park.

That the papers should so soon have got at the connection between James Foxborough and the Syringa was due chiefly to Mr. Totterdell. That garrulous old gentleman, having once parted with his hardly-kept secret, thought it was as well to derive as much enjoyment as possible from it, and to that end confidentially showed the music-hall bill, and confided the story of how he came by it to every friend or acquaintance he came across. To Mr. Totterdell Baumborough owed the knowledge that the eminent Sergeant Usher had spent a day in their midst, and according to Mr. Totterdell, the Sergeant had admitted that but for his assistance he would not yet have been on the track of the murderer.

As he neared Tapton Cottage, Herbert Morant's feet imperceptibly lagged. It was not that he faltered for one moment in his purpose, he longed to express his deep sympathy with them in their anguish, his utter disbelief in Mr. Foxborough being capable of the atrocious crime ascribed to him; but what was he to say to these stricken women. Words are so weak, and come so unreadily to our lips on these occasions of bitter sorrow, especially, perhaps, to men. However, if his pace had slackened, Morant had still held steadily on, and consequently was now within a few yards of the cottage. Suddenly his eye fell mechanically upon a shabbily-dressed man, who was lounging slowly along on the other side of the road, at a pace that implied, at all events, time was no object to him. Morant took little notice of him; the man had merely attracted his gaze, not caught his attention, and all street-strollers, or, as the French would term them, *flaneurs*,

know what that distinction is. With a nervous hand Morant knocked, and the answering damsel he noticed was not the parlour-maid who usually officiated in that respect. She was a servant he knew though, well enough, being Mrs. Foxborough's own maid; and in answer to his inquiry she replied that her mistress was at home, but saw no one. The girl's face was grave enough, and she seemed to think there was no more to be said.

"But, Jenny," pleaded Morant, "I think she would see me; at all events, take my name in, like a good girl;" and mindful of sundry *douceurs* that had fallen to her lot since Mr. Morant had become a visitor at Tapton Cottage, she thought, well perhaps missis might make an exception in his favour; at all events, if he would wait she would go and see.

After some delay, Jenny returned with the information that Mrs. Foxborough would see

Mr. Morant, and marshalled him to the drawing-room forthwith.

Mrs. Foxborough came forward to greet him with head erect, and a dignity of manner he had never seen in her before.

"You have heard of course, Mr. Morant," she said, extending her hand, "of the shame that has come upon us. Shame! What am I saying! Scandalous, scurrilous accusation, that will bring more shame upon those that make it. But you have heard the infamous charge launched at my husband? This it is to live in a free country, and enjoy the benefits of civilization; where a ribald press can even state such slander as this without fear of pains and penalties."

"Mrs. Foxborough, I only heard of this terrible charge this morning, and have come out at once to assure you of my utter disbelief in it, and to ask if there is any possible use I can be to you——"

"Ah! I thought you would stand by us,

Mr. Morant," she replied, in slightly softened tones. "You have met my dear husband, and know that he was incapable of wilfully injuring any human being, much more of such a crime as this——"

"It is impossible, of course; but where is he? Does he know of the horrible allegation against him. Surely he ought to be informed of it at once—to come forward and confute it at once," replied Morant, hurriedly. "I don't go by what the papers say, but surely if he did ask this Mr. Fossdyke to dine with him at the Hopbine, he had best come forward and tell his plain story of the business."

"I never heard him mention the name of Fossdyke in my life," replied Mrs. Foxborough as she sank into a chair.

"Then it is very possible that he is not the Mr. Foxborough who stayed at the Hopbine. Have you written to him?"

"No, I cannot. I don't know exactly where he is. We never correspond much

when he is away. The last letter I had from him was from a place called Slackford."

"Great heavens! Why, that is no great distance from Bunbury."

"Indeed! But what has that to do with it?" retorted Mrs. Foxborough, rearing her head proudly.

"I don't know; nothing, I suppose," rejoined Herbert, no little discomposed.

"No; it is perhaps a little unfortunate that I do not know his address, but it can matter very little. The papers must ere this have told him of the infamy they have dared to lay to his door, and I am expecting a telegram every moment to say that he is at Bunbury."

"Ah, that would be most satisfactory. How does Nid bear it?"

"Well, poor child, it was impossible to keep it from her, or else I would have done; but I reflected she was sure to learn it in the course of two or three days, and thought she'd best hear it from me. Indeed, it was quite

a chance she did not see it in the paper before I did. She's terribly knocked down. There is very little of the Roman maiden about Nid, I fear," said Mrs. Foxborough, with a faint smile.

"May I see her?"

"No, I think not to-day. My doors are closed to every one, but I mean to make an exception in your favour, Mr. Morant. You have offered to serve me. I wonder whether you will undertake the first thing I ask you to do for me."

"Certainly, Mrs. Foxborough," exclaimed the young man eagerly.

"Well, listen. The inquest commenced to-day, and will I am told extend over to-morrow. Will you go down and bring me a faithful account of the proceedings?" and even proud and plucky Mrs. Foxborough's lips trembled a little as she spoke.

"They have summoned Ellen. You saw she did not open the door for you. What

they can want with her I have no idea. And more, Mr. Morant, we are a marked house. We are under surveillance. A spy lurks opposite our gate night and day to watch who comes and goes. You may not have noticed him, but he was there, and it is quite possible that you also may find yourself dogged on account of your visit here."

"It'll perhaps be bad for the dogger if I do," replied Morant, with no little savage elation at the idea of taking it out of some one. "I will do your errand willingly, Mrs. Foxborough, and be off to Bunbury by to-night's train. I even thank you for trusting me with it, not so much as a mark of your friendship as for the relief it is that I am doing something to aid you in this terrible trial. Give my love to Nid, and now I'll wish you goodbye, trusting to bring you back good news from Bunbury to-morrow night." As Herbert Morant left the cottage he became conscious of that same lounging individual upon whom

his eye had before mechanically rested, now apparently leisurely pursuing his way towards the West-End, and at once awoke to the fact that this man was keeping watch and ward over Mrs. Foxborough's house. At first he thought the man's intention was to follow him, and Morant only waited to convince himself of this, to turn pretty fiercely upon his attendant, but ere they had gone three hundred yards, the shabbily-dressed one turned back again, and it was clear that watching Tapton Cottage was his sole business.

As Herbert Morant walked home, he could not but reflect that the accumulation of evidence against Mr. Foxborough certainly was awkward. That he should be in the neighbourhood of Bunbury, as confessedly by his wife he was at the time of the murder, that somebody of his name should have invited the unfortunate Fossdyke to dinner at the Hopbine, and that he, Foxborough, was still not to be heard of, constituted an un-

fortunate concatenation of facts that might suffice to cast suspicion upon any one so circumstanced. Of course, he would see the papers, and then naturally would appear at the inquest and give an account of himself, and there would be an end of the whole business as far as he was concerned. But Morant could not help reflecting gravely, how very easy it may be for a man to fall under the shadow of crime, when circumstances could so array themselves against one as they had against James Foxborough.

CHAPTER III.

"MURDER ON THE MIND."

VERY curious are the ripples cast upon life's stream by a great crime; as the circles thrown upon the stream by the sudden plunge of the big stone you have thrown in widen and get gradually fainter, so does the suddenly-snatched life, especially if one amongst the middle or higher classes, move men more or less as their connection with the dead man was small or great; whether they move in the more immediate radius or the outer circles of the sped man's existence, so are they affected by his untimely end.

Philip Soames was within the inner radius, and so much affected by the Bunbury murder

as to be quite incapable of paying ordinary attention to business. The dead man and his wife had not only, as before said, been very dear friends of his family for a long while, but he had taken it into his head to connect Bessie's secret somehow with the catastrophe. What connection the two could have even Phil could hazard no opinion about; but he could not forget the expression that escaped her when he broke the murder of John Fossdyke to her. "It only wanted this," she had murmured, half unconsciously. Also she had asked him at the theatre if Mr. Fossdyke had said anything about her to him. He utterly discredited the scandalous tattle which Mr. Totterdell had circulated concerning Miss Hyde in Baumborough, and it was well for that familiar old gentleman that he was as old as inquisitive, or else it was quite likely he might have met rough chastisement at Phil's hands; but he had come to the conclusion that Mr. Fossdyke knew something

of Miss Hyde previous to her appearance in Baumborough, something more a good deal than Bessie had acknowledged to. Looking back coolly over the past, Philip called to mind that Miss Hyde had undoubtedly made her *début* among them as Mrs. Fossdyke's companion; that her brightness, good looks, and the way the Fossdykes treated her, had made people forget this, and gradually suppose her a relation. He further remembered, that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Fossdyke had ever endorsed this assumption. He was firmly convinced, as men are at times, that with the investigation of this murder would also be disclosed this secret of Bessie's which so distressed her, and which he verily believed to be a mere bugbear; that there was something about the girl's relatives or antecedents to which she attached a disgrace, in all probability much over-estimated, he thought probable; but that any disgrace attached to Bessie on her own account he would have

scorned to believe. The consequence was that Phil Soames listened to every scrap of gossip, and read the different versions of the event in the papers with feverish interest.

And the reading, although this was in the first forty-eight hours since the discovery of the crime, already waxed considerable; this was a murder that had attracted the papers, and had also excited the public. The local position of the murdered man, the status of the supposed murderer; and, moreover, the extraordinary audacity of the affair, if Mr. Foxborough really was the murderer. To ask an excessively well-known man to dine at a first-class hotel, stab him during the night time, pay the bill, and quietly depart by the first train in the morning, was a cynicism of crime that made people shiver. Under such circumstances what life was safe. Another thing which still more inflamed public curiosity concerning the business was that, despite the usual stereotyped phrase "that the police

are understood to be in possession of a clue to the whereabouts of the supposed criminal," it was quite patent that they had as yet laid no hand upon him, and some outspoken sceptical journals, which maintained their footing chiefly by taking up bold and rather startling views about most things, did not hesitate to avow that they had failed to discover the slightest trace of him. Be that as it might, it was quite clear that Mr. Foxborough had not as yet come to the front, loudly protesting his innocence, as might be looked for in an innocent man.

It was true there were a far smaller but more logical section of the public who agreed it looked very much more like suicide than murder; only to meet with the vehement retort from their excited fellows: "If it's not murder, where is Foxborough? Why doesn't he come forward and tell his story like a man?" To which the logical minority contending for suicide retorted, of course, he

would come forward at the proper time, which would be at the inquest.

These last arguments *pro* and *con* were in men's mouths and not in the papers, not but what plenty of rhetoricians would have been glad to see them there had time or editors permitted.

Another atom of humanity, who, although he has never seen John Fossdyke, yet finds himself involved in the swirl occasioned by his tumultuous plunge into the waters of Lethe, is Mr. Sturton, the eminent Bond Street tailor. He, it may be remembered, assisted Mr. Cudemore to provide money for the presumed murderer's necessities on the security of the Syringa Music-Hall. It is no anxiety about his money, it is the curious fascination cast over people by an extraordinary murder, intensified tenfold if connected indirectly even with one of the actors in the tragedy. Mr. Sturton almost felt compelled to apologize for taking interest

in such a plebeian murder; grand democrat though he was, and useless as in his speech he professed the House of Peers to be, in his heart he grovelled at a coronet. And yet these objects of his reverence tried him hard at times. One of his noble customers only lately in ordering a suit of clothes had expressed his approbation of a certain material.

"You'll find it charming, my lord," said Mr. Sturton. "I can answer for it, because I have tried it myself."

"You!" replied the ruthless young Baron. "You have! damme, show me something else; you don't suppose I want to dress like my tailor, do you?"

Candour compels me to add that that young nobleman would have been infinitely better dressed if he had. But Mr. Sturton was more impressed that night than ever with the necessity of disestablishing the House of Lords. Still he also has caught the epidemic,

the fascination of crime, and hurries down to Bunbury to be present at the inquest.

All Baumborough and Bunbury have caught the infection and talk of nothing else, every rumour is listened to with feverish impatience, the railway bookstall is stripped of the evening papers in less than half an hour, and the proprietor writes for a double supply for the morrow. All London trains are waylaid as they pass through to know if they bring any news about the murder, and the question on all men's lips in those parts is, "Have they taken Foxborough?" Still though the papers all concur in representing him as unheard of so far, whatever information the police may have they keep strictly to themselves. Mr. Totterdell, as might be supposed, is a sight to behold; he haunts the station and buys papers with utter recklessness; he reads them, he recapitulates every rumour, and he pretends to be in possession of the most astounding information if he were only

permitted to divulge it. He writes letter after letter of suggestions to Sergeant Usher at Scotland Yard, and is no whit discouraged at getting no replies. I am afraid at this time he might have been not inaptly described as going about with his mouth full of lies and his pockets full of halfpence; these latter for the purchase of journals.

The first day of the inquest is over, and, as was generally understood, only the preliminaries were got through, such as viewing the body, the identification of the deceased, &c.; the real interest was to centre on the second day's proceedings, when some important evidence would be probably produced, and all Baumborough had made up its mind to be present. Another person too who took an absorbing interest in the proceedings, as may well be supposed, was Dr. Ingleby. He had been one of the deceased's most intimate friends, and was the first to become acquainted with the tragic death that had

befallen him. It was only natural that he should be influenced by the weird fascination of this mysterious crime, for, granting it was conclusively proved that James Foxborough was the criminal, where had the two men met, and what deadly quarrel was there between them to provoke Foxborough to commit such a cold-blooded murder? Another thing, too, calculated to excite any person's curiosity was a short conversation he (the Doctor) had held with Sergeant Usher on their return from Dyke.

"Now, Dr. Ingleby," said the detective, "I am not going beating about the bush with you. I'm naturally a candid man."

The Doctor's eye twinkled.

"Well," continued Sergeant Usher, with a chuckle quite as candid as is good for people, "but you can keep your mouth shut, and I can't do without your help. First, I want to ask you a question. Did you ever hear a rumour of Mr. Fossdyke having an intrigue

with any woman either before or since his marriage?"

"Certainly not! Why?"

"You see this murder looks uncommon like a piece of bitter revenge. What do you know about Miss Hyde, sir? I heard in the town there was a mystery about her?"

"She came here as Mrs. Fossdyke's companion, and I don't believe there is any mystery about her at all. That old fool Totterdell set that story afloat, simply because the girl declined to recite her biography to him."

"Now, Doctor, I want you to move the ladies at Dyke to search high and low for that letter."

"The letter which took poor Fossdyke to Bunbury?"

"Just so. I have an idea that letter might change the whole aspect of the case. I take it Mr. Fossdyke knew the writing and the writer, and if the handwriting is that of

James Foxborough it will begin to look excessively awkward for that gentleman. If he is innocent, he will most likely give himself up after the inquest, and in any case we shall hear of him in two or three days, I fancy; but, mark me, Doctor Ingleby, if by any chance it should turn out that James Foxborough is not guilty, then the murderer is a real artist, and has left a blind track and not a trace of his own footsteps. He will be difficult to lay hold of. Good-bye, sir, for the present. I may see you at the inquest perhaps," and so saying, Sergeant Usher took his departure.

CHAPTER IV.

THE INQUEST.

THERE was a bustle in the streets of Bunbury, such as might betoken a market day, and yet it was neither the buying nor the selling of corn or vegetables, neither the chaffering for fruit nor poultry, that had thronged Bunbury on this occasion. To learn how a man came by his end was the matter that brought most people into the town this bright autumn morning. The people surged about the railway station, eddied about the streets, but sooner or later flowed up the hill and gravitated towards the Hopbine, where the inquest was being held. Getting into the room had been hopeless half an hour after the

coroner had taken his seat, but we all know how persistently a crowd will hang about locked doors with some indefinite idea of seeing or learning something. Old Joe Marlinson sits in the bar-parlour almost speechless with indignation. A crowd permeate the Hopbine, whom Mr. Marlinson in his wrath designates as "scum"; they order spirits and water in jocund and plentiful fashion, laugh at the head-waiter's remonstrance anent their smoking in the coffee-room, and not only smoke there, but about all the lower part of the hotel generally: they lunch freely, and seem to look upon the whole thing in the light of "a bean feast" or some such festivity, instead of the investigation of a presumed murder.

Old Marlinson is in a state of mind bordering on distraction. He devoutly trusts James Foxborough will be captured and endure the extreme penalty of the law; not so much for the crime he is supposed to have committed, but for his disgusting presumption in having

selected the Hopbine in which to accomplish his purpose. The old man has appealed to Inspector Thresher to clear the house, and given a confused opinion in support of his application that they were all drunk and disorderly, and that he wanted no riff-raff at the Hopbine. In vain did the Inspector laughingly observe, if they weren't all county families, they were a good-humoured, orderly crowd enough, that there was a certain amount of license allowable on these occasions, that the Hopbine was, after all, a house of call, and could not refuse to serve guests in canonical hours, and that it was right good for trade.

"House of call," gasped old Marlinson, "well I'm dashed!—the Hopbine a house of call just like any hedge alehouse,—well I'm d——d. Clear the house, Thresher, clear the house," and he continued at intervals to call upon the good-natured Inspector to "clear the house" with the same obstinate incongruity

as "Mrs. F.'s aunt" demanded Arthur Clenman's ejection through the window.

The big room up-stairs in which the inquest was sitting was as full as it was allowed to be, for the coroner had long ago given stringent orders against further admission thereto. The preliminaries had been got over as narrated in the last chapter the day before, and the medical testimony had been then taken. Both Drs. Duncome and Ingleby were clear and consistent in their testimony that John Fossdyke met his death from the dagger-wound in his chest, they had neither of them the slightest doubt the blade had pierced the heart, and death must have been almost instantaneous; that it was possible the wound was self-inflicted they both concurred, but about its probability they differed. Dr. Duncome gave his opinion that it was probable Mr. Fossdyke had himself dealt the blow that killed him. Dr. Ingleby, on the contrary, while not denying that it was

quite possible it was so, pointed out that in the case of a man stabbing himself the wound would usually have a downward direction, as it would be natural to him to deal the blow overhand. In this case the wound ran slightly upwards, as a man might deliver it with a foil or in a duel with swords. To him it appeared that the wound was the result of a lunge rather than a stab. He did not deny that it might have been self-inflicted, but he considered that it was improbable. Dr. Ingleby's testimony had of course thrown a strong suspicion of "wilful murder" around the case, and the excitement concerning the second day's inquiry was very great. It was rumoured, as it so often is rumoured under these circumstances, that startling disclosures would be made in the course of the day, that some extremely trenchant evidence would be come by, that a lady had been brought down from London who could throw most important light upon the case, &c. It was quite clear

that this second day of the inquiry would be of much interest.

Phil Soames, with face grave and stern, is there in company with Doctor Ingleby, to see what the result of the day may be. Hardly has the former taken his seat when he feels a hand upon his shoulder, and a voice familiar in days gone by, exclaim—"How are you, Phil?" He turns, and recognizing Morant, wrings his hand heartily as he asks, "Good heavens, Herbert, what brought you here?"

"It's odd, Phil, very," replies the latter quietly, as he sat down beside his old university chum, "but I have as deep an interest in this case as you. If the murdered man was a dear friend of yours, the supposed murderer is a friend of mine. I don't know so very much about him, but with his wife and daughter I am very intimate, and you may easily imagine the terrible state of mind they are in about the whole business.

I no more believe Foxborough capable of such a crime than I do you: that appearances look horribly against him I'll admit, but I fully expect to see him turn up to-day and explain everything."

"I trust he may," replied Soames; "but Thresher, the head of the police here, gave me to understand just now, that the accumulated evidence against Foxborough is terribly strong. It is a mysterious case, and at present incomprehensible. My own idea is that some old quarrel existed between the pair, and also some money transactions which has been the reason of their meeting, that the old feud was renewed, and maddened by wine and probably having had the worst of the altercation with poor Fossdyke, in a moment of passion Foxborough slew him."

"Good heavens, Phil, according to what I have read the man was stabbed in his sleep!"

"That that was not the case, my friend Dr.

Ingleby can vouch for. Allow me to introduce you."

The two gentlemen bowed.

"No," said Dr. Ingleby, "poor Fossdyke was not murdered in his sleep; he was out of bed and in his shirt and trousers, and, moreover, the bed had never been slept in. My theory, Mr. Morant, is that he was killed in the sitting-room adjoining, and carried to the bed-room after he was dead; but we shall hear what Inspector Thresher has got to bring before us to-day."

"You are conclusive, Dr. Ingleby, as to its being murder then, and not a case of suicide?" said Morant.

"Yes, I am, and I have told you my theory of the whole crime; but please remember that though I can set forth arguments against its being self-murder, and though the evidence will show you clearly that Fossdyke was never slain in his bed, yet I am bound to say my idea that he was killed in the sitting-room

is utterly unwarranted by any evidence as yet produced."

And now the Coroner re-opens the inquiry, and the jury shuffle into their places. A well-known solicitor of much experience in criminal cases has been sent down to watch the case for the Crown, and the first witness on the day's list is Eliza Salter, the chambermaid. She recapitulates the evidence she has already given as to her unavailing attempts to rouse Mr. Fossdyke, how as the day wore on she gently turned the door-handle with a view of peeping into the room, thinking something might have befallen him, and found the door locked; then she called her master, and after once more knocking very loudly, William Gibbons, the boots, by Mr. Marlinson's orders, broke the door open, and they found the deceased gentleman lying on the floor with a curious dagger planted in his breast. The writing-table in the room and the chair were upset; the bed had evidently not been occupied.

Mr. Trail, the gentleman watching the case on behalf of the Crown, obtained permission from the Coroner to put a few questions to the witness, and elicited the following facts:— Mr. Fossdyke was attired in his shirt and trousers, yes, and boots; he had dressed for dinner, and when discovered had his neck-cloth on also. He had taken off nothing but his coat. The waistcoat had certainly not been pierced by the dagger, but it was a low-cut dress waistcoat, and the stab was dealt outside it, nearly in the centre of the chest. The key was not in the lock, nor had they been able to find it as yet, though the room had been searched closely.

Mr. Trail had enjoyed a quarter of an hour's conversation with Serjeant Usher, who had suggested the points that in his opinion required clearing up.

Mr. Marlinson followed and gave corroborative evidence to Eliza Salter, the chambermaid. Further questioned by Mr. Trail, he said that

every bed-room in the Hopbine had a key to it invariably kept in the inside of the door. Mr. Fossdyke's room being locked was conclusive evidence that the key had been in the lock as it should be, but what had become of the key he could not say. Inspector Thresher had given him to understand that the discovery of this key was a matter of importance. Couldn't see it mattered much himself, but all the same he had given orders it was to be found if possible. Search high, search low, they could find nothing of that key. Here the witness expressed himself in an excited and somewhat incoherent speech to the effect that this was a pretty thing to happen in a first-class hotel, that some people ought to feel ashamed of themselves, winding up with a request to the Coroner to clear the house; after which he was led gently away by Inspector Thresher, murmuring repeated blessings upon the assembly generally, and spent the remainder of the after-

noon in confidentially cursing and tasting the liqueurs at the back of the bar-parlour. Dr. Ingleby had not failed to notice that though Inspector Thresher, of the Bunbury police, apparently controlled the production of evidence, he now and again referred to a quiet little grey man, who seemed almost to deprecate being noticed at all, and whom probably few other people regarded, much less recognized as Sergeant Usher.

The next witness was William Gibbons, the boots. William proved what is termed rather a flippant witness. He had in his humble way that misty idea that accident had given him that opportunity of distinguishing himself which was permeating the brain of Mr. Totterdell. William Gibbons had little doubt in his own mind that the whole key to the mystery lay with him, and that when his testimony had been taken there would be merely the trifling addenda of arresting and hanging Foxborough to follow. He deposed how he had

called Mr. Foxborough on Wednesday, the 4th of September, about seven o'clock. Mr. Foxborough had arrived at the Hopbine on Saturday, August 31st, had gone over to Baumborough on Monday, September 2nd, had received Mr. Fossdyke to dinner on Tuesday the 3rd, and left on the following day. He called Mr. Foxborough at the time mentioned by his own order, as he wished to catch the 8.30 train for town, which was a through train, and stopped nowhere between Bunbury and London. He saw Mr. Foxborough off by that train, and put his portmanteau into the carriage with him. In the afternoon he was called by his master to break open Mr. Fossdyke's door, had heard from Eliza Salter previously how late that gentleman was sleeping; how she could get no answer to her knocks, and how she went so far as to say she thought "something must have happened to him, a fit or such like," continued the witness, "which it had; when

we got the door open the poor gentleman was lying on his back with a fanciful dagger buried in his chest, that was the fit he had, poor soul, and it's my opinion, gentlemen, that a more slimy, cold-blooded viper—"

Mr. Gibbons was sharply pulled up by the Coroner, who informed him they should not require his opinion, simply his account of what he had seen, and that he appeared to have already narrated all he knew from personal observation.

Further questioned by Mr. Trail, William Gibbons said they had none of them known Mr. Foxborough's name until Mr. Fossdyke had asked for him by it. He had himself thought there was something suspicious in a guest keeping his name dark. In all his experience, and as—

Here once more the Coroner ruthlessly interposed, and curtly informed Mr. Gibbons they required neither his thoughts nor the results of his experience, and that unless Mr.

Trail had any further question to ask him he might retire.

Mr. Trail having declined to attempt the extraction of further evidence from the redoubtable William, that worthy withdrew murmuring, "If this was the way these here murders was sifted, if the opinions of sensible men who had, so to speak, been in a way almost in it, weren't to be thought of any account, how did any crowners or juries or blessed peelers think they was going to get at the rights of things?"

"I wouldn't for the world, Phil, say a word against the poor fellow that's gone, but it really seems to me there is next to no evidence of murder," whispered Morant. "Dr. Ingleby says that his opinion is theory only."

"Yes, but not with regard to the wound; that he holds decidedly was not self-inflicted. Still so far there is not much to implicate Foxborough beyond this: If it is murder, and not Foxborough, who on earth can it be?"

Thomas Jenkinson, the waiter, was now brought forward by Inspector Thresher. He bore witness to the arrival of No. 11 on the Saturday, to his sudden interest in the opening of the Baumborough theatre, how on his return from there on Monday he announced that he had a friend coming to dine with him next day; how the following morning he gave rather elaborate directions about this dinner to Mr. Marlinson, and how eventually Mr. Fossdyke arrived, and asked for No. 11 under the name of Foxborough; they had not known his name at the Hopbine previously. Further questioned by Mr. Trail, Jenkinson said the two gentlemen drank a good deal of wine, but were neither of them the least the worse for liquor when he left them. Took up a tray according to order at half-past ten with a small decanter of brandy and four bottles of seltzer. Two bottles of the seltzer only were drunk, but all the brandy was gone when the chambermaid brought it down the next

morning. Heard the voices of both gentlemen raised as if in dispute as he brought up the tray, and as he entered the room heard Mr. Foxborough say, "The game is in my hands, and they are my terms," or words to that effect. The gentlemen stopped talking the minute they saw him. Had never seen Mr. Fossdyke before, and should not have known who he was, but was told by his master and Salter, who both it appeared knew him.

The next witness was Inspector Thresher, whose evidence was brief and business-like. He simply testified to having been sent for by Marlinson, and finding Mr. Fossdyke stabbed through the heart, and stone dead, as described by three of the previous witnesses. He at once took charge of the room and everything it, and telegraphed a brief account of the affair to Scotland-yard. The unfortunate gentleman's rings, watch, and some ten pounds odd, consisting of a five-pound note, gold, and

silver, lay on the dressing-table. He knew Mr. Fossdyke perfectly; he was often over in Bunbury for a day or so; but usually got back to Baumborough to sleep."

And now, wheezing and puffing with excitement, Mr. Totterdell appears. He is a splendid specimen of that very aggravating species, the discursive witness; convinced too at this present that the eyes of England are upon him, and will continue on him for no little time, for the evidence he is about to give before the Coroner will but whet the curiosity of the public for the disclosures he will be likely to make at the trial, when everything he wishes to tell is drawn from him by the acute questioning of counsel. Mr. Totterdell is happily oblivious of that other side of tendering important evidence—namely, the being turned inside out by a sharp cross-examiner, a process that usually gives a witness of his description a literal approximation to what a cockchafer's feelings must be with a pin

through him. No buzz left in him, but as deadly gnawing at the vitals as ever Prometheus endured on his rock.

Now, the Coroner—who thoroughly understood his work, and was a tolerably firm, decisive man to boot, generally kept his jury in excellent order for instance, and promptly put a stop to irrelevant tendencies in Marlinsons or Bill Gibbonses—had this one weakness, he couldn't quite harden his heart to cut a gentleman short in similar fashion. Mr. Totterdell, Town Councillor of Baumborough, in his eyes claimed indulgence not to be granted to witnesses of more plebeian positions, and that worthy gentleman commenced his evidence with a little homily concerning his regret that he and the lamented deceased had not of late been on intimate terms. Nobody regretted it more than he did, but it was not his fault; it all arose from that fatal reticence that was the blot in poor Fossdyke's character; and here Mr. Totterdell looked around, as if to

point out to the spectators the flood of light he was letting in upon the case.

The Coroner, who had been fidgetting in his chair for some minutes, took advantage of the pause to say, "You must pardon my remarking, Mr. Totterdell, that all this has nothing to do with the inquiry, and that I must request you to confine your evidence as to what you may know of Mr. Foxborough."

"I am beginning my story, sir, from the first; it is not probable that any one can throw such light upon this awful crime as myself, and I must request—" continued Mr. Totterdell.

"You're perfectly right, Mr. Coroner," struck in Mr. Trail; "as watching the case for the Crown I have no hesitation in pointing out first, that the witness's evidence so far is utterly irrelevant to the matter in hand; and, in the second place, I am requested to say that these details are likely to be peculiarly painful to the deceased's family."

"As I said before, Mr. Totterdell," remarked

the Coroner, "I must beg you to restrict your evidence to your personal knowledge of Mr. Foxborough for the present, and what took place between you at Baumborough. If you have nothing to tell us on this point we will not detain you any longer."

If the Coroner had studied for weeks how to extinguish the discursive Totterdell he could have set upon nothing so effectual. The bare idea that his evidence might be dispensed with gave that gentleman a cold shiver. It was in a much more submissive manner that he rejoined, "I was only anxious to make things as clear as possible, and am sorry that the truth should be offensive to my god-daughter, Mrs. Fossdyke; but if, sir, in a preliminary inquiry like this, you desire condensed evidence, of course I can give you a sketch of what I have to tell."

"Preliminary inquiry," "Sketch of what he had to tell"—these two phrases put the Coroner on his mettle. He had no idea of

his court being looked at in that light, and the impertinence of suggesting that an outline of evidence was sufficient for his inquiry, made that official modify his views about treating Mr. Totterdell with much consideration not a little.

"I have only to say, Mr. Totterdell, that this investigation cannot go on for ever," he remarked sharply. "If you have anything to tell us perhaps you will be kind enough to do so at once without further rambling; if not I will hear the next witness."

The fear of not being allowed to tell his story at once coerced Mr. Totterdell into telling it as far as in him lay without amplifications, and supported by Mr. Trail, the Coroner determined to pull the garrulous old gentleman up sharply if he attempted any such wild digression as he had commenced with; but to narrate what we know or have seen succinctly is only given to the few, and men of the Totterdell stamp can no more

help being diffuse on an occasion of this kind than they can help breathing. The clear, concise account, so prized by lawyers, scientific inquirers, medical men, &c.—all, in short, who wish to arrive at facts as quickly as may be—is not possible to many from whom they are compelled to collect evidence. Mr. Totterdell, in vague, wandering fashion, disclosed how he had made the acquaintance of the stranger at the opening of the Baumborough theatre, his curiosity about who people were, his especial curiosity with regard to the deceased, how the stranger had even requested him to spell the name of Fossdyke, how he had asked who Miss Hyde was, and here Mr. Totterdell would have been wildly discursive if the Coroner had not intervened. Pulled up abruptly on this point, the old gentleman narrated, with sundry shrugs and grimaces, how he had picked up the music-hall bill, and so arrived at the stranger's name, "and thus," he added, looking round

for applause and posing as if receiving the freedom of the city in a gold box, "was enabled to give valuable information to the police and be of inestimable service to my country." And neither the goose that saved the Capitol, nor the first Stuart discovering the Gunpowder Plot, ever looked half so sagacious as Mr. Totterdell at this juncture. Nobody in the room had listened more closely to Mr. Totterdell's evidence than Sergeant Usher; indeed, although keeping himself sedulously in the background, not even Mr. Trail was keeping a keener watch over the case.

"Pretty conclusive, that, I should say," remarked Inspector Thresher, as he crossed over to where the Sergeant was seated.

"He told all he knew, and was very anxious to tell a deal more he didn't. What a wasteful creature of time it is. It was well the Coroner responded so quickly to Mr. Trail, just to curb him up a bit."

"What does this next witness know about it?"

"Well, to tell you the plain truth, Thresher, that's just what I am a little curious to see," rejoined the Sergeant.

"I can't see how a young woman from London can throw much light on it."

"Lord! there's no knowing," rejoined the Sergeant, quietly. "It's astonishing the light I've seen thrown upon things by young women in my time."

Ellen Maitland, a nice-looking, quietly-dressed girl, here stepped forward and answered to her name. She seemed very nervous, and was obviously much distressed. She was parlour-maid, she said, to Mrs. Foxborough, at Tapton Cottage, Regent's Park. Did not know what she had been summoned here for. Had heard of the murder, but knew nothing whatever of Mr. Fossdyke. Had never seen or even heard of him till the last two days. Her master was much away from

home; had last seen him about a week ago at Tapton Cottage. Knew that he was suspected of this crime, but felt sure that he had nothing to do with it."

The Coroner looked a little impatiently at Inspector Thresher, as much as to say, "Producing witnesses like this is simply frittering away the time of the court." Inspector Thresher on his part looked round for Sergeant Usher, who in reality was responsible for Ellen Maitland's appearance, but that worthy was nowhere to be seen. The Coroner signified that he had no further occasion for the witness; and she was about to leave the table, when Mr. Trail suddenly rose and said, "With your permission, Mr. Coroner, I have a question or two to put to this young woman."

The Coroner signified his assent.

Then almost with the dexterity of a conjurer, Mr. Trail produced that quaint Eastern dagger that has played so prominent a part in the history of this crime, and turning abruptly on

Ellen Maitland asked—"Had she ever seen that before?"

The girl half uttered a low cry of dismay, for she had read enough in the papers to know what that weapon was. She hesitated for a moment, and then faltered forth a reluctant "Yes."

"Where had she seen it?"

"At Tapton Cottage. It was sometimes in the drawing-room, but more generally in Mr. Foxborough's own room."

"Good heavens, Phil!" whispered Herbert Morant, "I know that dagger well. I've played with it often. Its nominal use was that of a paper-cutter, but a knick-knack more described its status than any other term."

"I am sorry for you," returned Soames, as he gripped his friend's hand. "I begin to fear your trouble is like to prove worse than mine own."

"What do you think?" asked Herbert, in an awe-struck whisper.

"Hush," replied Phil. "I only know that

things are looking very ugly for Mr. Foxborough. Where can he be? It is almost preposterous to suppose in these days he can possibly be ignorant of the awful indictment against him; of the awful crime with which he is charged."

"It will be terrible news for me to take back to London," murmured Morant in tremulous tones.

"It looks bad," rejoined Phil, "but we haven't heard it out yet."

"Do you know," resumed Mr. Trail, "whether Mr. Foxborough took this away with him when he last left London?"

The witness could not say, not to her knowledge at all events.

"When did you first miss it?"

"I have never missed it. I didn't notice that it had disappeared."

"Then for all you know positively," observed Mr. Trail, "that dagger might be actually in Tapton Cottage at this moment?"

"It might," but the witness remembered that she had not seen it lately; "if that was not the same dagger it was the very ditto of it."

Mr. Trail then intimated that he had no other questions to put and Inspector Thresher informed the Coroner that he had no further evidence to produce. Poor Ellen Maitland retired in a somewhat tearful state, produced by the fear that she had somehow worked woe to her mistress, for whom she had the greatest admiration and respect. And then the Coroner proceeded to sum up. He commented first on the medical testimony, which, as he pointed out, was at variance, whereas Doctor Duncome rather inclined to believe it was a case of suicide, Doctor Ingleby was strongly of opinion that the wound was not self-inflicted. It was quite clear that, whoever No. 11 might be, the deceased recognized him under the name of Foxborough, and asked for him by that appellation. The evidence of

Mr. Totterdell was as yet of small account, as he could not identify the stranger as James Foxborough, the dropped music-hall bill of course going for nothing; but, if in consequence of their verdict Foxborough should be apprehended, then Mr. Totterdell's evidence as to his identity or not with the stranger at the theatre would be of the highest importance. He was only calling the attention of the jury to the more salient points of the evidence, and the testimony of the last witness perhaps tended more to implicate Foxborough than anything else. Ellen Maitland identified the weapon with which the crime had been committed as her master's property. The motive for this murder, if murder you consider it, was so far unapparent, but that is by no means uncommon in crimes of this description. The facts were briefly these: "Mr. Fossdyke comes to the Hopbine to dine with a strange gentleman, whom he before the landlord and waiter recognized as Mr. Foxborough; they undoubt-

edly have some dispute in the course of the evening. Mr. Foxborough leaves the first thing next morning, and has not since been heard of, while in the afternoon his guest is found stabbed through the heart, and the somewhat peculiar weapon with which the crime was accomplished is proved to be the property of the still absent Foxborough. Of course, gentlemen, you may find it suicide, but in the event of your finding it murder, I would submit to your consideration whether you are not justified in returning a verdict of wilful murder against James Foxborough."

There was a brief consultation amongst the jury, and then the foreman intimated to the Coroner that they had arrived at a conclusion, and, in response to the customary interrogatory on his part, the foreman returned, on behalf of himself and brethren, a verdict of "Wilful murder against James Foxborough."

The verdict was quite in accordance with popular expectation, and yet the day's pro-

ceedings had influenced some of the lookers-on in a way they little expected. Mr. Sturton, for instance, now that a verdict of wilful murder was actually recorded against the missing Foxborough, was perturbed in his mind about that loan of £6000 of which he found the major part not a fortnight ago. It is not that he is anxious about his money, that he knows is well secured, but he is not clear whether it is not his duty to communicate with the police, and let them know how well furnished with funds the fugitive is. He has as much horror of being mixed up in a case of this kind as Mr. Totterdell has pride, and yet he would fain, as a law-abiding citizen, do his duty to the State; still he thinks, as he wends his way to the station, there is no necessity for immediate action. It will be time enough to communicate with Scotland Yard a day or two hence.

"It's of course useless asking you to come back with me, Herbert," said Soames, "but

remember, in a week or two, when we have a little got over all this trouble, I shall expect you to pay me your deferred visit."

"I am only too anxious to do so, but I must go back to-night. You were saying it was a cruel task the having to break the sad tidings of her husband's death to Mrs. Fossdyke, but think, Phil, the story I have got to tell when I reach London; to tell these unfortunate ladies what a coroner's inquest has branded their husband and father."

"It's hard—cruel hard," replied Soames, as he gripped his friend's hand. "God send you well through it, old man."

"One moment, Dr. Ingleby," said a voice in his ear, as he was about to follow Phil into the Bunbury train, "but have you made out anything about that letter?"

"No, I am sorry to tell you that so far all search for it has proved fruitless; you still attach great importance to its discovery?"

"I told you that, sir," replied Sergeant

Usher, "I told you that letter was worth a hundred pounds a few days ago. Well, sir, I tell you it's worth two hundred now," and with that mysterious commentary on the result of the day's proceedings the Sergeant disappeared.

CHAPTER V.

SERGEANT USHER VISITS THE HOPBINE.

SERGEANT USHER occupies a second floor in Spring Gardens. It is handy to the Yard and to a good many other places which are in the ordinary routine of the Serjeant's business; railway stations like Charing Cross and Victoria within easy distance, Marylebone, Bow Street, and Westminster police courts specially come-atable, to say nothing of the Seven Dials, Drury Lane, Short's Gardens, Bedfordbury, and the slums of Westminster, all, so to speak, being under the Sergeant's own eye. Mr. Usher is a bachelor, he has a mean opinion of the other sex, probably consequent on bad treatment

received at the hands of one of them, although he professes it to be founded on professional experience. A profound believer Mr. Usher in the theory of *cherchez la femme*. A woman, he contends, is at the bottom of most crimes, and when puzzled by an intricate case the Serjeant invariably takes it that a woman, as yet undiscovered, is the probable motive-factor.

"Having no fair partner to share his home, the Sergeant is constrained in a great measure to do for himself," and a defter bachelor is seldom come across. Having let himself into his lodgings with his latch-key, after his usually noiseless fashion, on his return from Bunbury, the Serjeant proceeded to light the fire, throw off his boots, and then in the easy deshabille of slippers and shirt sleeves, looked in the cupboard for a gridiron and a couple of chops; these obtained, and the fire by this having sufficiently burnt up, Mr. Usher proceeded first to broil his chops, and then to

consume them with the adjuncts of bread, pickles, &c., all furnished by the same inexhaustible cupboard. Leaving the clearing up to the charwoman next morning, Mr. Usher next produced a bottle of whiskey, put the kettle on the fire, and having lit a long clay pipe, sat down to smoke and ruminate over this Bunbury case as far as he had carried it.

"It is a queer business this," he muttered to himself, "and it certainly begins to look awkward for Foxborough, and yet, after all, the strongest evidence against him is himself. If he is not guilty, where is he? and, Usher, my friend, I don't mind owning to you in confidence, that's 'a rum 'un.' If anybody had told me a man like James Foxborough could openly leave Bunbury for London, be wanted within twelve hours, and have apparently vanished into space, I'd have called him a noddy; but we can't find a trace of him from the time he left Bunbury platform. Until that girl recognized the dagger

to-day, I was beginning to suspect we were in search of the wrong Foxborough; and yet, if that is so, why does not James Foxborough come forward? Every one's talking about this murder; he must have heard he's accused of it, and to prove an *alibi* if he was not the man at Bunbury must be as simple as falling off a log. It's perhaps a little early to speak, but it strikes me as somewhat odd that the theatrical agents seem all abroad about him as the manager of touring country companies; they seem to know nothing about him in that line, and yet any man who has anything to do with that sort of business is pretty well known right through the profession.

"No, this murder—and I feel pretty clear now that it is a murder—is, as Mr. Squeers said of natur', 'a rum 'un.' The why of it and the where of it? for it is not at all clear to me that Fossdyke was killed in his bed-room. I'm candid, very; but I did not let on to Dr. Ingleby that my theory

coincided with his, and that the man was stabbed in the sitting-room. I reckoned up that room, too, but could make nothing out of it; the leaving the dagger in the wound, whether done by accident or design, of course stopped the effusion of blood; still it is curious there were no traces whatever of it. Shrewd man, old Ingleby; his theory about the direction of the wound had stuff in it." And here Mr. Usher refilled his pipe and mixed himself a jorum of hot whiskey and water.

Staring into the glowing coals, and puffing forth heavy clouds of smoke, the sergeant resumed his argument:

"There's that letter, the key to the whole business I'd lay my life if I could but come by it, but that's not likely now; Fossdyke probably destroyed it. Miss Hyde, now—I shouldn't wonder if that girl could throw some light upon the affair if she chose. She had heard and knew something of James

Foxborough before the murder, I'd bet my life, but she's not the young woman to commit herself, I fancy. Once we lay hold of Foxborough, and he is identified with the man at the Hopbine, it is simple enough, but as things stand at present no jury would find him guilty of murder, in my opinion. To think him so, and find him so, are two different things in the mind of a juror, and in this case he'd be right. The evidence, if awkward, is not conclusive as yet. But how are we to get at Foxborough?—privately I own I'm beat. Watching the house in the Regent's Park neighbourhood is no good—he has never been near it yet, and is not likely to make for that now. I'll see the watch is taken off to-morrow—it's useless, and leaving the nest unguarded might perchance ensnare our bird. A man like Foxborough would be well supplied with money and brains, and with them a man ought to beat all Scotland Yard in London. If we don't come upon

James Foxborough in a few days I shall begin to feel pretty confident that he is the man we want, but as yet I've not quite made up my mind about it. Nice old man about a town that Totterdell. Shouldn't wonder if he don't cause a murder or so before he dies. A daft, diffuse gabbler like that sets people pretty wild at times, and leads to the cutting of the wrong throat. Rough, rough, very rough—just like turkeys—we never kill the old gobbler who makes all the cackle, but some of his unfortunate followers who are weak enough to listen to him;" and with this profound moral reflection, Sergeant Usher knocked the ashes out of his pipe, finished his whiskey and water, and took himself off to bed.

That a coroner's jury had returned a verdict of "Wilful murder against James Foxborough" did not go for much in the eyes of Sergeant Usher; people were neither hung nor sentenced on the direction of a coroner's

jury, and a conviction that had not that result was a mere blank cartridge affair compared to a regular battle in the Sergeant's eyes. This man was an enthusiast in his vocation—he was not one whit bloodthirsty, he had no craving for any extreme sentence against the unfortunate he had brought face to face with the gallows, but he was keen for a conviction. It was the pride of a logician who desires to see his carefully thought-out argument endorsed. He was like that famous historical dog—the pointer who in a game-abounding country did his *devoir* so nobly, but whose miserable employer missed shot after shot and brought nothing to hand. How that animal at last put its tail between its legs, roused the welkin (whatever that may be) with its howl, and fled disgusted to its kennel, is it not recorded in the 'Lies about Dogs,' lately published by the Society of 'Animated Fiction.'

Sergeant Usher was much like that noble

and hardly-tried pointer; when juries refused to "run straight" and convict the quarry he had marked down and brought to their notice, the gallant officer also betook himself to his private apartments in deep dudgeon, not, as I have already said, from any fierce thirst for his victim's annihilation, but that his carefully-worked-out chain of reasoning should be deemed inconclusive was gall and wormwood. Was it not Hazlitt who said in reference to the tumultuous ending of some stormy disputation, "The blow was nothing, and you'll admit I had the best of the argument." That was Sergeant Usher's case exactly; if you refused to put faith in his inductive theory he was disgusted, but to do him justice no man ever was more sceptical of evidence or sifted it closer, and if that done he had satisfied himself, that he was unmistakably annoyed if others did not arrive at a similar conclusion.

The Press and the public meanwhile have

no little to say about the lethargy and inefficiency of the police. No allowance is made for the difficulty of tracking a culprit who has once gained the shelter of this gigantic warren of London with its multiplicity of burrows. The hunted deer is usually safe when he gains the herd, and that is pretty much the case of the criminal who has once reached the metropolis, always premising two things, that he has command of money, and is no recognized unit of the Bedouins of Babylon, in which latter case he suffers under the great disadvantage of his haunts, habits, and person being known to the police in the first place, and the chance of being *realized* by his comrades in the second, that is, betrayed for the reward. Still the public, and the Press as the echo of the public thought, are ever feverishly anxious for the apprehension of the hero of a sensational crime, and no journal has yet even hinted that has taken place.

The Sergeant next morning awoke clear and cool-headed as ever. Having dressed and finished his breakfast he sat down to carefully study the report of the inquest in the morning paper, and as he smoked his pipe and thought over this he slowly arrived at a definite conclusion. Placing the arrest of Foxborough on one side, where was there any probability of obtaining a clue to the true story of this crime? Was it to be discovered in Tapton Cottage? He thought not; if Foxborough was the murderer he fancied his wife and daughter were in complete ignorance of any motive that could have possibly led to it. No, it was not to Tapton Cottage that he must look for information. He could hardly expect to derive assistance from them in any case, but the Sergeant came to the conclusion that they could tell him little even if they would. There were four channels he reckoned from which it was possible inspiration might spring.

First and foremost, that letter, which had taken John Fossdyke to Bunbury, could it but be come by; secondly, he had a strong idea that Miss Hyde could tell something about James Foxborough if she would; thirdly, he could not help imagining that those rooms of the Hopbine must be able to tell something if closely interrogated. He was haunted with the idea that they had not as yet been thoroughly investigated, and yet he himself had examined them narrowly; and, lastly, he had a vague idea that the wearisome creature Totterdell, as Mr. Usher mentally dubbed him, might have something of importance to tell, could one but get at it; only to be arrived at, thinks the Sergeant, by listening to some hours of blethering and by much judicious questioning.

It therefore became quite evident to Sergeant Usher that Baumborough must be his head-quarters for the present. The apprehension of Foxborough he must leave to his

brethren as far as London went, but the niceties of the case he feels convinced are only to be worked out through the four channels indicated, and he is fain to confess that they seem to promise but little information. Still, the Sergeant has unravelled skeins tangled as this in his time, when the key of the puzzle looked quite as unattainable. He possesses the chief qualities of a scientific investigator, patience, coolness, and a natural faculty for inductive reasoning; and though admitting to himself that things do not look promising, resolves to start for Baumborough as soon as he has conferred with his chiefs in Scotland Yard. Sergeant Usher's arrangements are speedily made, and that evening sees him once more in Baumborough. One of the first visits he pays is to Dr. Ingleby. He is admitted at once, but the Doctor receives him with a shake of the head.

"You have come in the vain hope that

letter might have been discovered, but I am sorry to say it has not, and I tell you fairly, that I think that there is little or no chance of coming upon it now. All likely places have been closely overhauled without a sign of it. Mrs. Fossdyke and Miss Hyde, although neither of them read it over, were both positive it was quite a short note and agree in thinking it was probably destroyed. From the account of the scene at the breakfast-table," continued Doctor Ingleby, "I have no doubt you are quite right in the estimate you put upon that note. It was a good deal more than an invitation to dinner, no doubt: men are not agitated in the way poor Fossdyke is described to have been by notes of that kind. I presume that if he had it about him it would have been found at the Hopbine."

"His clothes and effects, you see, sir, were searched by Inspector Thresher before I got there, and bear in mind, it was not till I went

over to Dyke with you that I ever heard of that letter. I looked the room pretty carefully over, but it is true it was more with a view to discovering some trace of a struggle or obtaining some evidence bearing on the actual perpetration of the crime. It is possible, of course, he may have had the letter about him, but I can't think Thresher would have overlooked it. He may not be a practised officer like myself at these inquiries, but his search would be thorough, and he would be quite able to judge of the importance of such a document if he had found it. Not likely, I'm afraid, we shall come across it now, but mark me, Doctor, that letter would have thrown a good deal of light upon this case, which is at present as queer a puzzle as ever I had set me."

"Yes," rejoined Dr. Ingleby, musingly. "What the connection was between the two men is at present a complete mystery. Still, I recollect hearing Totterdell, when we had

considerable discussion about the erection of the Baumborough theatre, say that he had heard Fossdyke claim to having had much experience of theatrical matters in his younger days; indeed he asked him a question something to the effect at the Council one day."

"Ah!" ejaculated the Sergeant.

"However, Fossdyke brusquely declined to answer him. They didn't hit it off very well, as you know?"

"No; thank you very much for that hint, sir. It would quite probably be the bond between them;" and although the open-hearted Sergeant did not think that there was any necessity for informing Dr. Ingleby of his intention, he then and there determined to attempt the solution of the mystery by tracing back John Fossdyke's early career.

"One thing more. Would it be possible for me to have a talk with Miss Hyde?"

"No; not at present. Besides, what can

you want with her?" inquired the doctor, in no little astonishment.

"Well, I am convinced she knows something of James Foxborough. Will you question her about him for me? She has said she has never seen him, but she has knowledge of him in some shape."

"I have no objection to do that, letting her know beforehand that it is for your information, mind."

"Quite so; quite so; and now I'll say good night. I'll call in before leaving Baumborough to-morrow and hear anything you may have to tell me. Once more, good night, sir;" and so saying Sergeant Usher vanished in the darkness.

He busied himself about Baumborough in that sort of desultory fashion in which the Sergeant always pursued his inquiries. He seemed the veriest lounger about, ready to gossip with anybody upon any subject, or even to drink with any one; but though free

enough in the matter of paying for other people's liquor, it was little Mr. Usher consumed himself. Similarly, though he was addicted apparently to holding the most idle converse, yet both eye and ear were ever on the alert; and let him discourse about trade, politics, horse-racing, the weather, or, in a a town like Baumborough, about the price of corn or oxen, the talk invariably gravitated towards the murder. Mr. Usher had no objection to advance some vague view of his own upon the subject, but noted keenly what other people might say. That there was much winnowing of chaff inevitable in such investigation no one knew better than Mr. Usher. No one had a keener eye for that grain of evidence or information when he crossed it than the Sergeant, but he had talked through many a long day and deemed the words of his fellow-men idle.

Mr. Usher had laid down his programme and intended to adhere rigidly to it; he was

by no means sanguine, but the four channels from which he conceived inspiration with regard to the crime might come he resolved should be honestly dredged. The recovery of the letter seemed hopeless; he had picked up nothing more of any use to him in the town; he had only to see whether Dr. Ingleby had been more successful at Dyke, and then he was off to Bunbury to spend a night or so at the Hopbine. An afternoon with Mr. Totterdell he reserved to the last. Detective officers are human, and may be pardoned for hesitating to resort to desperate endeavours in their vocation until extremity compels.

"Well, sir, have you any tidings for me?" asked the Sergeant, as he entered Doctor Ingleby's library late in the afternoon.

"Yes, in one sense; but what you will I fancy term none. I questioned Miss Hyde on the subject of James Foxborough. She admits she knows him by name, and as the proprietor of the Syringa Music-Hall perfectly

well, but says she never saw him in her life, and cannot connect him in any way with Mr. Fossdyke. She further declares her knowledge of Mr. Foxborough can have no bearing on this case and would be excessively painful for her to explain."

"There is no more then to be said, sir. I rather fancy I should be a better judge than Miss Hyde of how far her knowledge of James Foxborough might tend to connect him with the deceased, but of course if the young lady does not wish to tell what she knows, there is nothing so far to justify our annoying her. I'm off, so we'll say good-bye."

"Good-bye, Sergeant Usher," replied the Doctor, a little crisply. He rather liked the Sergeant, but he was indignant that he should imagine Miss Hyde would keep back anything that could possibly tend to throw light upon the catastrophe they were all lamenting.

"Good sort, the Doctor," murmured Mr.

Usher, when he found himself in the street- Not worth a cent in my business, though; lets his feelings run away with him, as if sifting evidence and feelings could possibly go together. That Miss Hyde could throw a deal of light on the business, I'll bet my life, if she could be persuaded to speak out. She has nothing to do with it, nor is she aware that what she can testify bears in the slightest degree on the affair, but I am convinced it does. Now a real, good overhaul of the rooms at the Hopbine, and then— then, I suppose, a long afternoon with that wearisome creature Totterdell will have to be got through. The only way to get at what the likes of him has to say is simply to let him talk and give him time."

* * * * *

That night, an elderly gentleman pulled up at the door of the Hopbine, and demanded rooms. He was a gentleman apparently of the old school, small in stature, formal in

manner, as well as slightly irritable. A curious combination, that even awed Mr. Marlinson when he came in contact with him. Formal and polite in the first instance, but unmistakably waspish when he didn't get his own way, and he proved hard to satisfy in the matter of rooms. They must be on the first floor he asserted, and to those allotted to him he expressed the strongest aversion. At length Mr. Marlinson said boldly he should regret very much not being able to accommodate the gentleman, but that unless those rooms suited him he had no others vacant on that floor, except a set just at present out of use. If the gentleman ever looked at a paper he had no doubt read of the awful calamity that had befallen the Hopbine, and here Mr. Marlinson paused to give the stranger an opportunity of condoling with him.

"You mean," said the old gentleman, "the set in which the murder was committed. But I have no superstitions; interviewed, tried,

and hung too many murderers in India to have any compunctions about apartments because some little difference of opinion was quietly disposed of in them. No, no, my good friend, in all my experience it's the dead men alone you can rely upon not turning up again. Give them long spells of imprisonment and still the scoundrels come before you again, but once dead they are done with and bother you no more. Let's see the rooms."

"He ain't a sticker at trifles apparently," muttered Mr. Marlinson, "but at the same time it flashed across him what an excellent person the old gentleman would be to sit in judgment on James Foxborough, wherever he should be laid hands on. The new-comer professed himself perfectly satisfied with these rooms, ordered a snug little dinner and a fire in the sitting-room, remarking that long residence in India was apt to make one somewhat chilly when once more encountering the climate of one's native land. It was a raw

evening, and a blaze in the grate was unmistakably cheerful, and Sergeant Usher, for, of course, the *ci-devant* Indian judge was that functionary, his dinner satisfactorily disposed of, thought as he sat sipping his port and cracking his walnuts that the Hopbine was a very comfortable and well-conducted house. He had metamorphosed himself so as to have an unrestricted investigation of the rooms, not sanguine about obtaining a result by any means, but he wished to look these rooms over and pick up what he might in the hotel without taking the Hopbine into his confidence. He had not even let Inspector Thresher know of his presence, but determined to work out this business by himself. It might be, perhaps, the swagger of a well-known London officer, or it might be genuine disbelief in his professional colleague, but certain it is that the Sergeant was not prepared to give much credence to Inspector Thresher in this business.

No sooner did he have the room to himself than Mr. Usher commenced his course of investigation. He had questioned the waiter no little during dinner concerning the murder, and Jenkinson, after the manner of his class, was only too delighted to tell his story, and readily led into the relation of all the minor details. Not an article in the room but was closely scrutinized, and to aid him in his task the Sergeant drew from his breast-pocket a strong magnifying-glass. Through this, and even going down on his knees for the purpose, he carefully examined the carpet and also the furniture, but no tell-tale stain supported the theory of both Dr. Ingleby and himself, that it was in that room James Foxborough came by his death. Neither on carpet nor furniture could Mr. Usher's well-trained eyes detect the sign of a struggle nor the deep-hued spots he sought. The theory might be just, but there was nothing whatever to corroborate it.

Mr. Usher sat down, lit his pipe, ordered some spirits and water, and proceeded to reflect over the affair generally.

If Fossdyke was killed here, he said to himself, either by accident or design, it was an uncommonly well-managed assassination. Not a trace of it is to be found. If he was killed in the bed-room, how did it come about? or is it, despite Dr. Ingleby's opinion, a mere ordinary case of suicide. No, I don't believe it is a matter of self-murder; that the quarrel should arise here, and Foxborough in his anger slay him, is intelligible enough, but that he should have followed him to his bed-room and killed him without creating a disturbance seems almost incredible. In his sleep, yes, but Mr. Fossdyke evidently met his death before he had undressed, before he had hardly begun to throw his clothes off. I've no craving to see ghosts, but if John Fossdyke's spirit would give me a wrinkle to-night I'd be obliged to it, and

I don't think I'd be too much agitated to take down the evidence. However, the Sergeant's sleep proved as dreamless as a healthy man's after a moderate modicum of grog and tobacco should do. No inspiration came to him from the world of shadows, and as he sprang out of bed next day he exclaimed, "the sitting room won't speak; I wonder whether this room will disclose the secret of that September evening. The key of the door, for instance, if it was suicide, where is it? If it is murder, it may be anywhere; but if the former, it must be here," and Mr. Usher began an eager and searching investigation of the apartment. It was one of the best bed-rooms in the Hopbine, and so somewhat extensively furnished. Not an inch of the old-fashioned mahogany wardrobe did the sergeant leave unexplored; he turned out the drawers, pulling them out and looking behind them, seeking principally for this missing key. The man had been found dead,

stabbed to death in his room, there was no necessity to prove that—but whether it was his own doing or another's was matter of grave inquiry, and to this fact the Sergeant was now confining himself, not altogether incapable of noting anything that might bear upon the case, but concentrating himself, as great scientific discoverers usually do, for the time upon the one point. He searched the drawers of the dressing-table, he moved the washing-stand, he moved the bed, he felt the carpet all over with his hands and bare feet, he withdrew the gaudy-cut paper device that masked the fireplace, disclosing some few crumpled scraps of paper behind it, but no key. He peered up the chimney, and even felt on either side of the flue, but he discovered nothing. He opened the window, examined the sill, and took the bearings of the flower-bed below. Possibly the dead man might have thrown the key from thence if he were self-slain. Mr. Usher had best

consult the flower-bed on that subject, for that seems to be his last chance of arriving at the discovery he aims at.

But the Sergeant, like many other people in earnest, searching for one truth discovers another; that it is a cold, raw, damp morning, and that between an open window, scant clothing, and an unsuccessful quest, besides the chill of disappointment, he has contracted physical shivers. He rings the bell and orders the chambermaid to light a fire and bring him a cup of tea. He a little staggered Eliza Salter by the request, fires in September being an unheard-of thing in bed-rooms in an old conservative house like the Hopbine, which rather held that there were seasons for fires and seasons for fanciful papers on the hearth, not to be interfered with by trifling variations in the weather. Still the eccentricities of travellers were wondrous, and of returned Anglo-Indians anything might be expected, and Bunbury had considerable

experience of these, the pretty little town being much affected by these whilom shakers of the pagoda tree.

Eliza soon returns with both tea and kindling, and having placed the former on the table, proceeds to clear out the grate previous to laying the fire. Mr. Usher idly watches her, and with his mind still absorbed on the mystery of the key, stares vacantly at the few scraps of paper the chambermaid has raked out and which still lie within the fender. Eliza quietly continues her work, puts a match to the kindling, and is about to thrust the above-mentioned paper scraps into the grate to assist the new-born fire when she is startled out of all equilibrium by the crotchety old Indian with the asthmatical cough (for such had Mr. Usher appeared to her) suddenly exclaiming: "Stop, for your life, girl! Let me see every scrap of that paper before you burn it."

He was but just in time, and as the Sergeant often said afterwards, when alluding to the

Bunbury murder case, "I can't tell to this minute what put the notion into my head."

The chamber-maid pauses, gathers the four or five scraps of paper together, and hands them over to that peremptory old Indian.

An impatient pshaw, and the Sergeant contemptuously throws back to Eliza Salter a couple of old washing-bills, records of guests long departed ; but as he flattens out the third piece of crumpled paper, he cannot restrain from a slight start, and ejaculating with bated breath, "By heavens ! it's the letter."

Yes, there it was, unmistakably enough, the note that had brought John Fossdyke to the Hopbine. A scrap of paper worth two hundred pounds, according to the finder's own appraisement, cast carelessly at the back of the grate, as a man might ordinarily be supposed to do when dressing for the feast to which such letter invited him, kept up to that time in order there should be no mistake about time or date.

Infallible key to the mystery had Mr. Usher pronounced this could it be come by, of which he had abandoned all hope; and now he has got it and reads it, the Sergeant is fain to confess that it is not quite so big a clue as he anticipated. A mere scrap of a note; any ordinary invitation to dinner conveyed as much, and it was with a puzzled expression that Mr. Usher—the chambermaid having departed—for the sixth or seventh time read over the following:—

"*Hopbine, Septr. 3rd.*

"Dear Fossdyke,

"Dine with me here to-morrow at 7.30. I have something rather serious to communicate to you concerning our last conversation. Circumstances have improved my business position regarding it considerably. I feel sure you will not fail me when you see that I am

"Ever sincerely yours,

"James Foxborough.

"*Bunbury, Monday night.*"

And once more did the Sergeant come to the conclusion that letter was "a rum 'un." Valuable, no doubt, and likely, probably, to lead up to something in the future, but it was rather hard to see "the how" of that just now. Meanwhile Mr. Usher determined to keep the finding of that letter entirely to himself. Nobody but Eliza Salter had been present when the discovery was made, and she had not in the least connected the strange gentleman with the murder further than he was mighty anxious concerning it. An opinion in which a comparison of notes with Jenkinson, the waiter, confirmed her.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SERGEANT PUZZLED.

IT was difficult to make much out of that letter no doubt. Sergeant Usher, great as had been his exultation at its recovery, was compelled to own himself disappointed at its contents. He twisted and tossed it over in his mind again and again while he dressed, but was fain to confess he as yet saw no key to the enigma in that careless, laconic epistle. Still no one knew better than the Sergeant how easy is the rendering of a cipher when you have once come at the initial letters; a mysterious epistle at present, but containing three or four points which yet might throw much light on the affair when he once learnt to

read between the lines. That he is possessor of this letter is a fact Sergeant Usher concludes to keep entirely to himself for a little, but in this that intelligent officer considerably over-reached himself.

Eliza Salter might not be an out-of-the-way clever girl, but a keen eye for surreptitious *billet-doux* is part and parcel of a soubrette's training, if ever she may hope to thrive in her vocation. Lady's-maid or chambermaid, if she don't understand deft passing of notes and taking of gold pieces, she is basely ignorant of her calling. Thunderstruck by the peremptory order of the old Indian to hand those scraps of paper to him, it was scarcely to be supposed that she did not observe, busy as she might affect to be over the fire, that the old gentleman was obviously interested by one that he retained. Your astute man is often upset by an inferior adversary, whom he has held too cheap. It is years ago since I saw one of the best billiard-markers in

London beaten by an adversary to whom he had given three-fourths of the game, and never troubled himself about, till his reckless opponent bet him a sovereign on the result. Then that marker laid down to it, but too late, luck, and the free style of the play produced on a neophyte by a bottle of old port proved too much for him, and the amateur won easy. How many millions that marker wanted to play it over again for I forget, but the winner knew better than that, and confined himself to chaffing his antagonist on what he perfectly comprehended was a most fluky victory.

From people coming to see the rooms in which the murder had been committed, the murder had become the epidemic one might say of the Hopbine. Salter confided to Jenkinson that the old gentleman had found an important paper; then she confidentially apprised Gibbons, the boots, of the same; then she demanded sympathy from her auditors on her having had courage to light

the fire, and so gradually paved the way to proclaim herself heroine of this important discovery, though of what this discovery consisted she was entirely ignorant. In due time the affair came to old Joe Marlinson's ears, and once more was the worthy landlord exercised past conception. It couldn't perhaps lead to another murder being perpetrated at the Hopbine, but that another inquest would be held, Joe Marlinson thought quite possible.

"I am going to have it, I tell you, Salter; it's your business to burn up odds and ends of that sort, and not let old Indian vultures come hopping about snaking things like badly brought up magpies. Look here, Jenkinson, I mean just snuffing this business out at once. I ain't going to have the Hopbine converted into a criminal court if I know it. When that old magpie rings for his breakfast, I'll just go up and let him have a bit of my mind. He's no more right to

steal waste paper out of the grate than he has tidies off the chairs, or napkins off the dinner-table. I'll not stand it; blame me if I do. Don't you forget, Jenkinson, I'll see to his rolls and coffee being hot enough. These retired Indians, as they are called, are very intrusive in my opinion."

Despite his own curiosity, Jenkinson was constrained to bow to his master's orders, and when the strange gentleman's breakfast was ready, duly acquainted his master with the fact. It was with much pomposity that Mr. Marlinson placed the quaint old Queen Anne silver coffee-pot on the table. The Hopbine was not a little proud of its old plate and its old wine, and had fair reason in both cases. The returned Oriental seemed very oblivious of Mr. Marlinson's presence; "Couldn't have paid less attention to an under-waiter," as that gentleman remarked afterwards when narrating the story.

"That will do, you can put things down,

and go," observed Sergeant Usher, still puzzling over that letter, and getting fidgetty at the way his attendant buzzed about the room.

"You'll excuse me, sir, but I've got just a trifle to say first. We don't like criminal inquiries and inquests, and such things, at the Hopbine. I happen to be its proprietor —that is to say, the landlord. I suppose you understand common sense, I don't mean common law, because that's expecting a good deal of any one, but what you find in the Hopbine belongs to the Hopbine, mind, whether its pillow-cases, spoons, or scraps of paper. I'm told you've taken possession of a bit of paper. I am not going to put up with that, as a matter of simple kindling I wouldn't make a fuss about it, but if that's going to bring more judges, juries, and inquests and riff-raff, I tell you I don't mean standing it. Now just give me the bit of paper, and we will see it burnt all comfortable."

The Sergeant had listened to this speech with no little amusement, and as a humourist could not resist the temptation of giving the autocratic landlord of the Hopbine a slight shock.

"Look here, Joe Marlinson," he said, rising, and utterly dropping his asthmatic cough and old-fashioned courtly manner, "I'm Sergeant Usher of the Criminal Investigation Department. You've seen me before, though you don't quite tumble to me now. I do pretty much as I like wherever my duty calls upon me to go. I've got all I want out of the Hopbine, and a deal more than I expected, and shall be off by the twelve train; but don't you talk any more nonsense about what may be taken out of the house, and what may not be done, to me. You've one thing to be grateful for"—and here the Sergeant paused for interrogation.

But old Joe was past that; with eyes starting out of his head, and a mouth eminently

adapted for fly-catching, he stood awaiting what further surprise was in store for him.

"I'm not fool enough," continued Mr. Usher, "to suppose I can muzzle a whole hotel. I'm going at twelve, and you may be thankful I don't take you and most of your people with me, just to ensure your not talking about what you don't understand."

"Me! You threaten to take me to prison!" gasped Marlinson.

Mr. Usher had reckoned up the landlord of the Hopbine on his previous visit thereto, and it was with an amused smile he replied—

"No! don't I tell you I shan't; but if you will have these sort of things done in your house, you know——"

"There it is—that's the way they go on," exclaimed Marlinson, excitedly. "One might suppose I'd asked the scoundrel to come down here throat-cutting—that my advertisements ran, 'To be done away with on the premises.'

I wish I was dead. I wish the old place was burnt down. Once I've seen Foxborough hung I'll never draw cork nor hand plate again. Now, sir, I'm ready. You come here as an old Indian judge, and turn out to be a thief-catcher. I mean a manslayer; no, I mean a man-catcher. No, I don't know what I mean, or who anybody is, or where anybody goes to. Where's Foxborough? Is it Jenkinson. Is Eliza Salter a disguised countess or female poisoner? Go it, put on the handcuffs! I know nothing about it, but no matter, I'm ready: take me, take anything else you fancy!"

"This comes of quenching excitement and irritation with noyeau, curaçoa, and kümmel," muttered the Sergeant. "Too much taking done already, as far as he's concerned."

"Nonsense, Mr. Marlinson. You've had the mischance to have a man killed in your house. A temporary annoyance, no doubt, but still you may safely say about over now.

You will be troubled no more, probably, except to give evidence on the trial, and you know very well not the faintest suspicion ever attached to any one of your people."

"I'm worried out of my life. People come here, and no matter where you put 'em, you can't convince 'em it isn't the room in which the murder took place, and if you do succeed in doing that then they want to see the room where the murder was committed at once. I tell you what it is, Sergeant, I've come to well-nigh telling them, at times, there was no murder on the bill of fare to-night, but no one can say what will be served up for supper. I knew poor Mr. Fossdyke well, and many a dinner he's ate in this house; but that, as far as my memory serves, was both the first and last bed ever he engaged. I'll never get right, Mr. Usher, till the trial's done. I can't sleep and I can't rest, and I can't do without more drink than is good for me."

And here Mr. Marlinson sat down, leant his

head upon his hand, and appeared the very picture of dejection.

"Now, look here, Mr. Marlinson," said the Sergeant, clapping him on the shoulder, a sign of encouragement to which the landlord of the Hopbine responded to by hastily holding forth his hands. "Nonsense! what a noddy you're making of yourself. I neither want to arrest nor place the bracelets on you," answered Mr. Usher, in response to this gesture. "I'm off to town, as I said before, by the mid-day train. I've found something of importance here, I don't mind admitting. I'm a candid, outspoken man myself, never seeing any good come of mysteries, and as all the hotel knows it, I don't object to acknowledging it's a letter of some consequence. If I don't tell you more, it's only to save you knowing. This will be all over Baumborough before evening; all over London by to-morrow morning. Everybody will come to you; they will say Mr. Marlinson knows all about it. And you can

reply, 'Right you are, I do. Sergeant Usher confided the whole thing to me, but, mark you, it was in strict confidence, and my lips are sealed.' Now, Marlinson, we understand each other. Good-bye, and God bless you. Send up the bill, please. I'll just put up my traps and then I'm off."

Joe Marlinson descended to his sanctum, the bar parlour, much mollified. Facts as personified by Sergeant Usher had proved too strong for him, but it had been a soothing of his ruffled plumes to think he was the sole confidant of that eminent officer concerning the latest discovery bearing on the great Bunbury murder, and it was not till many hours after the Sergeant's departure that old Joe thoroughly became cognizant of the fact that he had been told nothing.

Candid very was Mr. Usher, but his candour a little resembled the razors of the old story that were made not to shave but to sell. Sergeant Usher on his way to London

turns the letter over and over again in his mind. He has as yet made nothing out of it, but is still firmly convinced the key to the enigma is in his breast pocket—a key in cipher, it is true, key of which cipher has yet to be come by; but that in the eyes of this experienced tracker of crime is a mere question of time and detail. A few weeks and he will show who committed this murder, and why. What perplexed him more than anything was the complete disappearance of Foxborough; that they should not be able to lay hands upon him was nothing, but after leaving Bunbury Station he seemed to have vanished from the face of the earth.

Evening papers must be sold, the public in these times likes its news highly spiced, or, to use a phrase of the day, is greedy of "intensified intelligence." Consequently the special editions found it necessary to continually furnish problematic reports about Foxborough; rumours of his arrest being imminent, wild

details of his life and so on flowed freely from Fleet Street, that great emporium of all our latest information, and in the race of competition it is small cause for wonder that Fleet Street at times get a little loose in its latest intelligence. Concerning the antecedents of Mr. Foxborough, it was undoubtedly at variance, as also with regard to what had become of him, and the public were served up nightly with what the public dearly love—fresh and well-spiced food for speculation; the Theatine club being by no means sole monopolist of romantic history concerning the fugitive.

That terrible endorser of a man's criminality, a reward of two hundred pounds for the apprehension of James Foxborough, now covers the walls, especially in the vicinity of police stations, and looms prominent in the papers. To have a price set upon one's head may be difficult to realize for most of us, but it cannot be calculated to induce faith in our fellow-creatures. It is reverting to those primitive

times when the discovery of any one or anything on his trail made man decidedly uncomfortable, to the days when he was as often hunted as hunting, when the selection of the fittest was still undetermined, and whether our supposed ancestors, the anthropoid apes, or the bigger cats, such as tigers, &c., became lords of the world doubtful; our superior intelligence to this hour being in great measure marked by our superior capabilities of destruction.

The more Sergeant Usher thought over that letter the more resolved he was to keep it to himself, as far as possible, for the present. That it would not only be all over Bunbury, but probably be in the papers, that important documentary evidence had been discovered at the Hopbine, was to be looked for, but the Sergeant felt pretty confident that except himself and Foxborough there was no living soul aware of the contents of that note. There was one fact about it desirable to establish as quickly as possible, and that was its being in

the fugitive's handwriting, and the Sergeant felt a little puzzled as to where to go to establish that identification. He was, however, a man accustomed to settle such problems rapidly, and a day or two after his return to town betook himself to the Syringa Music-Hall, and asked to see Mrs. Foxborough. Not only was the Sergeant, of course, perfectly aware that a wife could give no evidence against her husband, but he was also essentially a considerate man in his vocation; ruthless, it might be, to the professed criminal, but in cases like the present always anxious to spare the feelings of the unfortunate's relatives as much as might be. The espionage kept over Tapton Cottage by his subordinates had made him conversant with Mrs. Foxborough's present habits.

He knew that she went to the Syringa no more than was absolutely necessary for looking after the business details of that establishment, and that her visit invariably

took place in the morning, still he asked for Mrs. Foxborough to make quite certain she was not there. Informed of that fact, he demanded to see Mr. Slant, the stage-manager, and was forthwith informed out of hand that gentleman was engaged, and could see nobody.

"Just so, my flippant young friend," rejoined the Sergeant, drily; "but take that note round to him, and you'll find he'll see me, and mind if he don't get it pretty sharp, and happens to hear by post I called this evening, he'll see you, my chick, to-morrow, and you'll find the interview more lively than agreeable."

The quiet consciousness of power with which the Sergeant delivered his speech somewhat overawed the young gentleman in the ticket-office, and he condescended to despatch a myrmidon with the note. It contained nothing but the Sergeant's official card—

SERGEANT SILAS USHER,
Criminal Investigation Department,
Scotland Yard,

with pencilled at the bottom, "desires to see you as soon as possible." Mr. Slant knows that the law is not to be coquetted with, and is, moreover, smitten with that curiosity respecting the Bunbury murder which has already laid such violent hold upon the public. "Ask the gentleman to step this way at once," is his prompt response. He welcomes Mr. Usher cordially; to stand well with police officials is matter of policy with all places of public entertainment, but essentially when your licence depends on that incomprehensible body the Middlesex magistrates, the why or wherefore of whose decisions defy forecast or scrutiny.

"Take a chair, Mr. Usher. You've come no doubt about something connected with this terrible business down at Bunbury with which our 'boss' is unhappily mixed up. Kind-

hearted man, Mr. Usher, and I can't believe it of him, although we didn't see much of him here."

This was mere looseness of expression on Mr. Slant's part, and was not to be taken as laying down the argument that attendance at music-halls strengthens one against an infringement of the sixth commandment.

"It's cut up the Mistress terrible; a bright, cheerful woman she is naturally, with a merry word and good-natured smile for every one; kind-hearted, too, with any of them here as gets into trouble, and we've lazy limmers amongst us who impose on her not a little, and would more, business woman as she is, if I didn't interfere a bit. But what is it you want?"

"Do you know James Foxborough's signature when you see it?" inquired the Sergeant, curtly.

"Certainly, I have seen it many times, although the cheques are more often signed

by Mrs. Foxborough. They bank at the London and Westminster; whether they've separate accounts or not I can't say."

"Very good, now," said Mr. Usher, taking an envelope from his breast-pocket, and producing therefrom a paper peculiarly folded and laying it on the table; "is that James Foxborough's signature?"

Nothing of the epistle but the subscriber's name was visible.

Mr. Slant looked at it for an instant and then replied, "I should say undoubtedly not."

"Feel pretty positive, I suppose?" observed the Sergeant with a slight interrogatory elevation of his eyebrows.

"Yes," replied the stage-manager, "I don't believe that to be signed by James Foxborough. Take it to the London and Westminster Bank and see what they think of it. Is that a document of supposed importance?"

"Dear me, no," rejoined candid Mr. Usher, "no bearing upon the case. I should fancy

none whatever; might have had, though, undoubtedly if it had been proved genuine. It's a mere plant I dare say. Bless you, we always encounter bits of fun on these occasions, more from mere mischief than any attempt of the accused's friend to mislead us. Good night, Mr. Slant. I hope this unfortunate affair has not interfered with the fortunes of the Syringa."

"It seems a cruel thing to say, Sergeant, but it's a fact all the same. We've never done such business. The murder seems to have been the most tremendous advertisement we ever had. What the deuce they come for it's impossible to say. They can hardly expect Foxborough, with £200 offered for his apprehension, to appear, and it is not very likely his wife, poor thing, would do so either under the circumstances; but they come, Mr. Usher, as if," continued the stage-manager, dropping his voice, "we were doing the murder here nightly.

"I can quite understand it. Mark me," repeated the Sergeant, "in a big criminal case we could always let the whole court off in stalls at two guineas a-piece easy. Yes, we've put down cock-fighting and prize-fighting, but the taste exists, only it takes another form of gratifying itself. Good night."

The bull at the stake, the captive before the lion, the murderer at bay in the dock, there is much similarity in all these, and Imperial London, despite all our brag of civilization, seems to have much the tastes of Imperial Rome. Sergeant Usher, as he wended his way to Spring Gardens, was lost in deepest cogitation. He had treated Mr. Slant's non-recognition of James Foxborough's signature as a thing of no consequence, and for which he was quite prepared; but, in reality, he had never been much more astonished. That this identical note was what took Fossdyke to Bunbury he'd no doubt. If Foxborough did not write it, who on earth

did? Was there somebody else mixed up in the business? It evidently was going to be, as he had first suspected, a more complicated affair than it appeared. He would submit that signature to the London and Westminster Bank, but he had little doubt that Mr. Slant's opinion would be confirmed.

CHAPTER VII.

JOHN FOSSDYKE'S AFFAIRS.

"How are you, Doctor?" said Phil Soames, as he made his way into the familiar sanctum to which he had been a privileged intruder for many a year.

"Ah, Phil!" exclaimed Dr. Ingleby, looking up from a mass of papers with which he was apparently wrestling, "I am very glad to see you. I suppose there is no fresh news about this terrible business."

"None. Foxborough is either lying concealed in London, or has fled the country, I should imagine. At all events there is no news of him whatever. The police seem baffled at present. Turn me out if I am interrupting you."

"Not a bit; glad to see you, whatever brings you."

"Well, I called chiefly to ask after poor Mrs. Fossdyke and Miss Hyde. Of course I've left my card and inquired at Dyke; but I have seen nobody, and you, probably, have seen them."

"Yes," replied the Doctor, "and Mrs. Fossdyke, now that she has got over the first shock, bears it better than I anticipated. Miss Hyde, I think, seems the more thoroughly upset of the two. By the way, I used to fancy, Phil, you were a little sweet in that quarter," and here Doctor Ingleby eyed his companion somewhat keenly.

"I not only was but am," replied the young man, doggedly.

"Ah, then, perhaps, it is just as well you should hear what I have to tell you. Bessie Hyde is a sweet girl, and much too good to be made a fool of."

"You needn't tell me that," interrupted Phil, somewhat roughly.

"Ah, but you probably have mistaken ideas regarding her. Firstly, that she is the adopted daughter of the Fossdykes."

"I am under no mistaken impression of that nature," rejoined Phil, slowly. "I asked her to marry me some time back. She was very careful to disabuse my mind on that point then, and told me she was nothing but Mrs. Fossdyke's paid companion."

"And what, pray, was the result of that conversation?"

"She declined the honour," replied Phil, "saying there were unsurmountable obstacles, that unless she could tell me the story of her past life, it was impossible; that she had not the courage to do that; and finally, though she didn't exactly say so, gave me to understand poor Fossdyke was acquainted with her whole history."

"Curious," said Dr. Ingleby, as he called to

mind Sergeant Usher's dictum, that Miss Hyde could probably throw light upon this mysterious affair if she would tell what she knew about James Foxborough, little as she might think it. "Still, Phil, there is one thing more you had better know. You may fancy that Miss Hyde, although not nominally an adopted daughter, is likely to succeed eventually to the bulk of what John Fossdyke has left?"

"I have never thought about it," replied Philip, quietly.

"Well, it will come rather as a surprise to Baumborough, but as one of his executors I have of course been looking into his affairs now the funeral is over, and it looks to me very much as if he has left very little indeed behind him. I can't understand it, and we haven't quite got to the bottom of things yet, but it looks to me as if even the biggest half of Mrs. Fossdyke's fortune has disappeared. I am afraid she will be found to have been left

very poorly off. That she will have to give up Dyke, and either sell it or let it, is I think certain."

"You do amaze me," rejoined Soames. "Not that it makes the slightest difference to me. I mean to marry Bessie if I can, and don't expect her to bring me anything, but I am very sorry indeed for Mrs. Fossdyke; giving up Dyke will come very hard upon her. Do you think I might venture to call?"

"Yes, do, it will do them good; rouse them up a bit, especially Miss Hyde. You evidently don't deem her answer conclusive, and putting money considerations on one side, you will be a lucky fellow, Phil, if you win her. She's a special favourite of mine."

"I have got her mysterious past to get at first. I don't believe the bugbear she torments herself with to be of the slightest consequence in reality; but to discover it is

the difficulty. I shall say good-bye for the present, and walk out to Dyke."

Arrived there at the expiration of half-an-hour, Philip sent in his name, and hoped the ladies would see him. Poor Mrs. Fossdyke looked very sad in her sombre draperies, and evidently felt her loss acutely; the remembrance that she had not been quite as good a wife to him who was gone as she might have been of late was a subject of bitter regret, and she thought ruefully over that passage of arms on the subject of Bessie Hyde, which had been in truth the severest quarrel of her married life. She had done her best to make up for it, but felt her husband had never been quite the same man afterwards. He had always worn an absent, preoccupied look, as if worried with business cares or difficulties. Her penitence for that momentary abandoning of herself to her godfather's insidious counsel had made her marvellously tender to Bessie ever since. Fond of the girl she had always

been, and it was nothing but curiosity concerning her antecedents, fanned into a flame by the irrepressible Totterdell, that had led her to play the part she had. Since her husband's death she and Bessie sorrowed for him together, and the girl had become inexpressibly dear to her.

She rose with a faint smile to welcome Philip.

"You were always such a favourite with dear John," she said as they shook hands. "It would have been hard to lose him at any time, but that he should come to such a violent death is too dreadful."

"I am sure the whole town and country sympathize with you in your terrible trial, Mrs. Fossdyke, and the most heartfelt regret and pity is everywhere expressed for your poor husband's sad fate," replied Phil; and then he turned and greeted Miss Hyde.

Bessie looked very pale, and her lip shook a little as she faltered forth her welcome.

Then Mrs. Fossdyke began to tell Philip of her plans for the future. "I mean to go away," she said, "in about a fortnight, to some quiet, seaside place — change will be good for both of us; everything here reminds us of all we have gone through lately, and him who has gone. I have never dared to look into the study since that evening when I came and found you with Bessie, and little dreamt what you had come over to break to us."

"Saddest errand ever I was sent upon, but I deemed it best you should not be left to learn such awful intelligence by accident; and news of that kind spreads like wild-fire."

"Both you and Dr. Ingleby were everything that was kind and considerate; indeed, everybody has been that."

"I hope we have all done what little we could, but then it is so little. I trust they may not trouble you much on the trial, but it is possible, Mrs. Fossdyke, remember, that your

evidence will be deemed necessary. I mention this now so that you may accustom yourself to the idea."

"They have apprehended Mr. Foxborough?" then asked Bessie anxiously.

"No," replied Soames, "so far, I believe, the police have no trace of him whatever."

"I could almost hope they might not find him," now observed Mrs. Fossdyke in a low voice, "nothing can give me my John back again, and I confess I dread the idea of appearing in a court of law."

"You may rest quite assured that you will be spared all possible pain, and be treated with the greatest consideration, and you also, Miss Hyde."

"They cannot possibly want to question me," exclaimed Bessie. "I can tell them nothing."

"It is quite open to question whether they will require either of you; at all events, the criminal is not caught as yet," said Soames,

rising. "Will you walk with me as far as the gate, Miss Hyde? A little fresh air would do you good, I'm sure."

For a few seconds Bessie hesitated, and poor Mrs. Fossdyke faltered out, "You've nothing dreadful to tell to-night surely, Mr. Soames? If so, let me hear it at once."

"Nothing, I assure you. I can say all I have to say here if Miss Hyde wishes."

"I will walk with you to the gate," interposed Bessie hastily. "I'll run and get my hat."

Phil Soames wished Mrs. Fossdyke good-bye, and in another minute he and Miss Hyde were strolling slowly down the drive. Bessie looked very handsome in her dark robes; mourning suits a brunette invariably, and the trouble of the last few days had thrown a languor around her brilliant beauty that was infinitely bewitching.

"I want to know if you are still resolute not to tell me what it is stands between us?

You pretty well know poor Fossdyke meant to have done so. Be generous, Bessie; I love you so dearly that I ought to be allowed to judge whether the obstacle you talk of is insurmountable."

"More so, Philip, than ever," replied the girl, turning away her head.

"Do you mean that poor Fossdyke's death has still further increased the impediment?"

"Yes. Philip, you must think of me no more. I have walked down here with you on purpose to say this in common justice to you, to again thank you for the honour you have done me, and to tell you that though I acknowledge you have won my heart, my giving myself to you is now more impossible than ever!"

"Will you let Mrs. Fossdyke be judge?"

"Great heavens, no! She of all women must never know my story now."

"Would you let Dr. Ingleby judge between us?"

"No! I tell you, Philip, we must part. Good-bye and God bless you," and with a quick little nod, Bessie turned abruptly and sped back to the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

"KISSES AND CONSOLATION."

Herbert Morant snatched something to eat after the inquest was concluded, and made his way to London by the same train as Sergeant Usher. He had noticed him at the Hopbine, and again on the platform, but had no idea of who he was. Phil Soames didn't know the detective by sight, neither did Ellen Maitland, and with the exception of Dr. Ingleby, to whom Phil had introduced him, those were the sole acquaintances that Herbert had in Baumborough; the Doctor in his worldly wisdom thought it best to make no parade of his acquaintance with Mr. Usher, and raised himself considerably

in the Sergeant's estimation by such laudable reticence.

Arrived in town, Morant took Ellen under his charge, put her into a cab, and, jumping in beside her, drove out to Tapton Cottage. Mrs. Foxborough herself opened the door to them, and though she carried herself bravely, there was a slight quiver about the mouth and fidgetty nervousness in her manner that betrayed her extreme anxiety. She was a proud, passionate woman, with all the immense self-controlled power that such women invariably possess up to a certain point, but who, when the barrier of their pride once breaks down, are reckless of all considerations but their own wild impulses.

"Go down, Ellen, at once, and get something to eat. I'm sure, poor girl, it's been a hard day for you as for us. No, don't protest, and don't cry. I know very well you wouldn't say one syllable against me or mine if you could help it. Go now."

"But, Missus," said the girl, half sobbing, "they made me say I'd seen the dagger before. I was obliged to do it; indeed I was."

Mrs. Foxborough gave a slight start, but mastering herself by a strong effort said, quietly, "You were obliged to tell the truth, Ellen, of course. I'll hear your story to-morrow. Go, now, get your supper and then be off to bed as soon as they will let you."

Mrs. Foxborough knew too well that the cook and her own maid had to have their curiosity satisfied before Ellen would be permitted to seek her chamber.

"Now, Mr. Morant," she continued, "come into the drawing-room and tell us all. I say us, for Nid insists upon knowing everything. She says suspense is the least endurable form of agony, and I think she is perhaps right; at all events it is useless to keep her in ignorance, poor child, any longer. She claims her right to share our great sorrow,

and as I cannot spare it her, I feel I have no longer the right to refuse. I tell you that, Mr. Morant, in order that you may feel no reticence in speaking before her."

As she finished they entered the drawing-room, and Nid springing from a low chair by the table, exclaimed eagerly, "Oh! Herbert, what have you to tell us? Mamma wouldn't let me come to the door with her, but I am to hear everything, everything."

"Mr. Morant has been told that, darling. Sit down and try to bear his tidings as bravely as you can," replied Mrs. Foxborough.

"I bring no good news for you, I am sorry to say, but rest satisfied, I am going to tell you the whole truth—it would be useless to do otherwise, for every paper will contain the whole story to-morrow morning, and the later evening ones have most of it to-night. It is a verdict against your husband to its fullest extent, but mind, though the evidence was perhaps enough to warrant that to a

coroner's jury, the facts against him are curiously slight."

Mrs. Foxborough leant against the mantelpiece as a slight shiver ran through her frame, but her head kept its habitual proud pose, and she looked Morant steadily in the face. As for Nid, she cowered in her chair, listening to the narrative with flushed cheeks and tearful lashes, looking like a crushed flower in her abandon.

"Your husband's extraordinary absence! The fact that he asked Mr. Fossdyke to dinner, and was recognized by him under the name of Foxborough, and—and——"

Here for the life of him Herbert could not master a choking sensation in his throat, as he looked upon the two sorely-tried women before him.

"Go on, quick," exclaimed Mrs. Foxborough, in a low tone.

"And," continued Herbert, "the singular coincidence that the weapon with which

Fossdyke was slain was either that dagger which I've often played with in this very room, or its exact counterpart, constitutes the whole evidence against him."

"That Eastern poignard, the one he used as a paper knife, why if it isn't here it must be in James's own room," cried Mrs. Foxborough, as she glanced nervously round the tables. "Quick, Nid, get a light, child, and let's find it.'

"Stop, please, for one moment," cried Morant. "Ellen was obliged to confess she did not remember seeing it the last week or so, though she could not say that she had missed it; but she, like me, recognized the dagger produced. Dear Mrs. Foxborough, this has been a cruel, trying day to you. Take my advice, and endeavour to get a good night's rest, and search for that dagger to-morrow."

"A good night's rest," she rejoined, almost contemptuously, "do you suppose I have

known that since this horrible charge against my husband was first bruited abroad."

"I fear not," he murmured, struck even as she spoke with the ravages the last few days had worked in her handsome face.

"No, nor do you suppose I can sleep to-night till I have sought the house through for that miserable toy. I should be false to my dear husband if I failed in anything that might aid him in his need. Good night, Mr. Morant, you have been a loyal friend to us this day;" and Mrs. Foxborough extended her hand. "Come and see us again soon."

"Good night," replied Herbert, clasping it warmly; and then turning to Nid, who had risen to bid him farewell, he folded her suddenly in his arms and imprinted a warm kiss upon her lips. "I claim her for weal and woe, Mrs. Foxborough," he said apologetically, "and shall never believe, let them prove what they will, that if Fossdyke unfortunately did meet his fate at your

husband's hands, it was anything other than the result of a sudden and quite unpremeditated quarrel."

"Bless you for that, Mr. Morant," exclaimed Mrs. Foxborough, as her face flushed with pleasure at the young man's loyal suggestion. "Nid is not likely to think worse of you for the way you stand by us in our troubles. Once more, good night," and with another pressure of the hand from his hostess, and a kiss blown to him by Nid, Herbert Morant was dismissed.

He mused a good deal as he made his way home over this incomprehensible murder. There were plenty of others fascinated by the attractions of a great crime, who, though having nothing but an abstract interest in it, were quite as much absorbed in speculation concerning it as Morant could be. His remark to Mrs. Foxborough was significant that his faith was in some measure shaken in Foxborough's innocence. It would have been

noted by a close observer that though Morant still staunchly refused to admit that the luckless lessee of the Syringa was a murderer, he conceded the fact that he might have been guilty of manslaughter. To his mind that dagger was conclusive evidence; he knew the toy so well, he had fiddled with it too often in the drawing-room at Tapton Cottage to feel any doubt about its identity, and how could it be in the hands of any one else but Foxborough, and was it not conclusively shown that Foxborough was the man who had asked John Fossdyke to dinner and with whom he had dined.

Morant, though he had been called to the Bar, had never studied law nor that preliminary the law of evidence. His conclusions were precisely those to which a considerable portion of the public had equally arrived, although a numerous section held to the theory of truculent, deliberate, cold-blooded assassination. In cases of this kind

the culprit is tried nightly at the clubs according to the evidence in the evening papers, and though "the sports of the Coliseum" would be deemed accursed of modern society, yet gambling on a man's life has always its votaries, and there is usually some wagering on the verdict when a great criminal is on his trial.

Then Morant's thoughts took another turn, and he thought how pretty Nid had looked in her blushes and confusion at his sudden embrace, and he vowed, happen what might, he'd be staunch to the girl, let what may be her father's fate; even if he had the misfortune to be shriven at the foot of the leafless tree. What a terrible business this murder was! Here was poor old Phil Soames all upset; not only were Herbert's fiancée and her mother suffering agonies reflecting to some extent upon him, but all his schemes for a start in the world were left in abeyance, and yet Herbert knew that starting late

in life, as he was, there was no time to be lost in beginning. His love for Nid had transformed this man. For the first time in his life he was anxious to be up and doing; he, who had always pitied the getting up and derided the doing of most people—and undoubtedly it was the lot of many of his associates who rose early to do so of compulsion and to very little purpose—was most anxious to buckle to hard work on his own account. But he was bound to wait; without Phil Soames' advice he could not see in what direction to make a start, and there was one consolation in the mean time, that Mrs. Foxborough and Nid really did at present require his advice and assistance in some measure. They had told him they should be always glad to see him in their troubles, and there was no doubt that he could bring them intelligence it would be difficult for them in their retirement to come by. That a man desperately in love, and also moved to the

sincerest pity for the family of the lady of his adoration in their sorrow, should feel it his duty to console and comfort may be easily understood, and so despite that inward prompting that it behoved him to bend his neck to the yoke without more delay, Herbert Morant reconciled himself to the decrees of fate, and resolved to take care as far as he could of Nid and her mother for the present.

During the next week the papers were rife with reports of the usual imbecilities that invariably follow upon the commission of a great crime. Provincial constables arrest harmless individuals moving about in pursuance of their usual avocations upon no grounds whatever but that they are strangers, and that in the eyes of the rural police their ways, like those of the heathen Chinee, are peculiar. The average number of good-for-nothing inebriates becoming dimly conscious that they have forfeited all right of existence, in moments of deep despondency give them-

selves up as the murderer of John Fossdyke, and having had sobriety shaken into them by enforced abstinence and ammonia, whiningly plead drunken ignorance of what they had been talking about. Scotland Yard is inundated with senseless letters, and newcomers in suburban neighbourhoods find the neighbourhood's eye emphatically upon them. Scotland Yard, as personified by Sergeant Usher, keeps its own counsel, and that illustrious individual in bursts of unwonted candour confides to himself that "it's a rum un."

Every day does Herbert make his way out to Tapton Cottage, and that there he is warmly welcomed by Mrs. Foxborough and Nid may be easily imagined. That he is looked upon as engaged to the latter now, is matter of course, even Mrs. Foxborough no longer affects to treat it as an arrangement of the future, whatever the marriage may be; but Herbert cannot help noticing how this terrible

suspense is telling on Mrs. Foxborough. The defiant handsome face begins to look sadly worn, and even a silver thread or two is visible in the rich chestnut tresses. Not much to be wondered at, when one remembers this woman loves her husband very dearly, and sees no way of rebutting the terrible crime laid to his charge. She has had no word of him for weeks; that is nothing, she is used to that. She has often before been as long without hearing from him, but then this is different. If alive and in England, it is impossible he can be ignorant of the terrible accusation against him, of that dreadful verdict—Wilful murder. Absurd in these days of papers perpetual, of telegrams, and of instantaneous diffusion of news, real, false, or mixed, what might be termed half-and-half or embellished facts; absurd to suppose a man could possibly be ignorant of such a charge hanging over him, and gradually Mrs. Foxborough, who scoffed at

any idea of her husband's guilt, had arrived at the conclusion that he also had come to an untimely end. She pretended to give no explanation of the Bunbury tragedy, but she remarked sadly to Herbert, "If my husband were alive he would come forward at once to confute this miserable accusation, I tell you. Well, if that is not so, how is it the police cannot find him? I feel certain that he is dead? I cannot tell you why—one can never account for a presentiment, but I feel that he is dead. How? where? why? I can no more attempt to explain than who it was that killed poor Mr. Fossdyke, but that all this will be unfolded in due course I entertain no doubt."

"I am getting dreadfully unhappy about mamma," said Nid, one afternoon, when Mrs. Foxborough had retired to her own room, and left the young people in undisputed possession of the drawing-room. "She suffers terribly. She keeps up and wears a plucky

face and undaunted front to the world generally, but oh! Herbert, she breaks down terribly at night! I hear her pacing up and down her room like a wild thing, and the other night I stole down upon her. She turned upon me quite fierce, asked what I was doing up at that hour, and ordered me peremptorily to bed. But I wasn't going to have that, you know; and so I just dashed at her, got my arms round her neck, and in two minutes we were both crying our eyes out."

"Of course, Herbert, as a mere man, you can't understand what that is, to us women. The relief, the luxury it is! Bad for both of us it is, of course. I love my poor father very dearly, but, Herbert, you have taught me to understand how a wife loves her husband, and I know now what my love for my father is as compared with mother's. I feel ashamed of it. Yes, sir, literally ashamed at this minute to think what you are to me when my father,

who I dearly love, is under such a terrible accusation. I never saw much of him, no doubt. I've been at school a good deal, you see; and then since my emancipation, father has been a good bit away; but, whenever he was here, no father could have been kinder. Nothing was ever too good for mother and me. If I hadn't a chariot and four and robes of gold brocade, it was because mother curbed his too lavish hand. I can never believe him guilty of what they allege, Herbert; but, as I said before, the whole thing is killing mother. Can't you see it in her face?"

"Only too well, Nid, dearest; it's sad to see the work the last two or three weeks have wrought in your mother's handsome face, but what are we to do. You know well, and I think Mrs. Foxborough does also, there is nothing within my power that I would not do to aid her in this her hour of trial, but, Nid, we are helpless, we can at present but wait the course of events."

"No, I suppose we can do no more, but I am sure, Herbert, that anything that can be done you will do," whispered Nid, with all that grand belief in her lover incidental to girls in the first stage of love's young dream. As married women, sad to say, they have not that magnificent belief in our omniscience and capabilities; they have discovered we are pretty much as foolish as our neighbours, get into quite our average of scrapes, and show no peculiar aptitude for getting out of the most part of them; extricating ourselves for the most part in most prosaic and commonplace fashion.

"Good-bye, Nid, dearest," said Morant, as he once more clasped his betrothed to his breast. "I shall, of course, come out every day, if it is only to tell you that there is no news, and that as far as the public are concerned is just what is the state of the case at present. Whether the police know more I can't say, but your mother's theory that

her husband, like John Fossdyke, has been foully dealt with, would I fancy rather startle them, and yet if your father is alive it seems unaccountable they cannot hear of him."

Nid's reply was brief, and of the kind interesting only to the recipient.

CHAPTER IX.

MR. STURTON IS CONSCIENCE STRICKEN.

We have already seen that Mr. Sturton was entangled in the mysterious fascination that is apt to surround a great crime. It had taken him down to Bunbury so that he might be present at the inquest, and from that time he had experienced a feverish anxiety to hear of James Foxborough's arrest, not that he had any violent animosity to the criminal, but that he was morbidly desirous of seeing the riddle of this murder unravelled. Although he had through Cudemore lent money to Foxborough, he had never seen him, and Mr. Sturton was at the present much disturbed in his mind about this very loan. It was not

that he was anxious about his money; he had very fair security for that, but he debated very much with himself, whether it was not his duty to acquaint the police with the fact of Foxborough being in possession of so large a sum of money.

The days slipped by, and still the papers contained no clue to what they had tacitly agreed to call the Bunbury mystery. The public had certainly got no further intelligence since the inquest, and the general belief was that Foxborough had effected his escape from the country, and fled either to America or Spain. The whole affair seemed at a dead lock, and with the exception, perhaps, of Sergeant Usher, nobody had much idea that the culprit would ever be brought to justice. The Sergeant was, as we know, in possession of a little bit of evidence about which the world knew nothing, and pondering over that note in his lodgings in Spring Gardens Mr. Usher muttered more than once, "Whenever

I can read this aright I shall know all about the Bunbury murder. It might be Arabic or Chinese for all I can make of it at present, but just as one learns foreign languages after a bit, so I shall understand this note. One thing is clear already, if Foxborough was the murderer he had a confederate."

Mr. Sturton at last made up his mind to communicate with the police, but previous to doing so thought it might be as well to talk the thing over with Mr. Cudemore. He had a suspicion that gentleman would be very much opposed to either the police or any one else being acquainted with his money-lending transactions; still Mr. Sturton, for all his languid and somewhat affected manner, was quite capable of taking his own line, and was little likely to be overruled by Cudemore, whom he always treated as a subordinate; finding him capital at times, throwing business into his way no doubt, but always assuming

the position of the big capitalist. Cudemore, indeed, like many ostensible money-lenders, was dependent in considerable measure upon bigger men than himself, and Mr. Sturton was his great patron. Very handy, indeed, also to Scotland Yard for the reporting of his little bit of intelligence was Mr. Cudemore's residence, reflected Mr. Sturton.

The thing had to be discussed with that gentleman as a matter of detail, but that he would communicate with the police, Mr. Sturton had quite made up his mind. That the famous Sergeant Usher was living within a few doors of Mr. Cudemore, and habitually had his meals at the Wellington Restaurant, would have startled Mr. Sturton not a little. Still more would it have surprised Mr. Cudemore that his junior clerk was aware of this fact, that he habitually lunched at the same restaurant, and spent his whole time staring at the eminent detective. Of course, Sergeant Usher knew all about him, the clerk ;

he did that from sheer habit. To what he called "reckon up" all those with whom he came in contact had become second nature to him, and therefore with no earthly motive he had learnt all about Mr. Cudemore's clerk. In similar fashion he, with no particular reason, had acquired a general knowledge of Mr. Cudemore and his pursuits; quite promiscuously, be it understood. It was information picked up in the way that a man trained to take note of everything that takes place around him would almost imperceptibly acquire of any one living in his vicinity. Of course he had put a question here and there. Men like Sergeant Usher cannot for the life of them resist doing that. They have, and they're very little account in their profession unless they do have, an insatiable thirst for information about every one. They should always regard it as possible they may want to know all about a man, and Sergeant Usher pursued an inquiry of this

description mechanically, and without any definite aim. Still it would have astonished Mr. Cudemore not a little to know that one of the crack detectives of "The Yard" was living within a few doors of him, and had more than a general idea of his (Cudemore's) business. There was nothing about Mr. Cudemore's business that might cause him to fear the interposition of the police, and yet at the same time they were just the sort of transactions that men desired secrecy about. Men driven to borrow money don't, as a rule, wish the fact advertised; there is a touch of the Spartan boy with the fox beneath his cloak about the process, they prefer to bleed inwardly, and that the hemorrhage is severe and exhausting, let those who have painfully gone through the ordeal testify.

Mr. Sturton, upon presenting himself in Spring Gardens, is speedily ushered up-stairs. The clerks know him, and are quite aware

that he is a visitor by no means to be kept waiting. They have, perhaps, rather hazy ideas of what his actual relations with their master may be, but they know Mr. Cudemore is always at home to Mr. Sturton.

The great sartorial artist salutes his confederate in his usual affected languid manner, correctly copied from one of his most *blasé* customers, who generally orders his coats, &c., by the half-score, and whose superb *nonchalance* is the subject of Mr. Sturton's unbounded admiration.

"Delighted to see you," exclaimed Mr. Cudemore, as he shook hands, and then proceeded to roll an easy-chair to the fire for the accommodation of his guest. "I suppose it is business of some sort to which I am indebted for the pleasure of seeing you."

"Well, yes, it is. I want to have a talk with you about that money we advanced to James Foxborough. You see, we're so to speak mixed up in this Bunbury murder."

"Good heavens! Don't talk in that way," rejoined Cudemore. "We can't be held responsible for the future career of every man we lend money to. Besides, as I always told you, the security is good enough, and if you don't like it I can manage to take up your share of the loan."

"Not at all, that's not it," interposed Mr. Sturton. "I know the Syringa Music Hall is to be found, although Foxborough isn't, and what is more, I don't think he ever will be now. I take it he's got clean out of the country. But I think we ought to let the police know that he is in possession of that big sum of money."

"I object to that altogether," exclaimed Cudemore, vehemently. "No money-lender makes a confidant of the police; besides, what is the use of it? According to your own view the man has fled the country. It won't further the ends of justice or in the least contribute to his apprehension to publish the fact

that his pockets are full of money. Besides, ours is a profession," he continued with a sneer, "that does good by stealth. The advances we make at heavy percentage we don't publish on the house-tops; in fact it is a calling we don't usually talk about. As for you, I should have imagined that you had every reason for not letting the world know that you traded on its necessities."

"You are right, Cudemore," rejoined the other. "I don't particularly want the public to know that I do a quiet and tolerably lucrative business here with you. Sending a man the money to pay yourself don't sound a profitable transaction to the uninitiated, but let him only have tolerable prospects, and it's a very tidy game. But, remember this, it doesn't at all follow my name is to appear. The information may be of use to the police, or it may not; at all events, there is no reason for making the thing public."

"And don't you think the police will want

to know why you didn't come forward with your information before?" retorted Cudemore, spitefully. "They well may, as it is past my comprehension. If you are bent upon advertising yourself as a money-lender, and in connection with the Bunbury murder, it seems singular that you should have put it off for so long."

"I tell you there's no necessity whatever for the appearance of our names," replied Mr. Sturton quietly. "Any way, I have made up my mind to give that much information to the police, and it is for them to make use of it if they can."

"I tell you, again, that I strongly object to your doing so," exclaimed Cudemore, vehemently. "Look here, if this is a matter of money, I'll, as I said before, find your share of the loan in a few days. It will be then altogether my affair, and you will be absolved from all conscientious scruples."

"I tell you that it is nothing of that sort,

once more. I am not in the least uneasy about my money, but I consider the police ought to be informed of Foxborough having this sum in his possession, and I intend they shall."

"And once more I protest against your doing anything of the sort. You've no right to compromise me," said Mr. Cudemore irritably.

"All right, I won't; I'll make it appear that I found the money in conjunction with others, and who the others are need not transpire. I can't for the life of me see what you are raising such a pother about."

"I tell you I don't want the police interfering with my private affairs," rejoined Mr. Cudemore, doggedly.

"I'll argue the thing no longer, but remember I shall do what I have made up my mind to do as soon as I leave these rooms."

Mr. Cudemore shot a most malignant glance

at his companion, a glance that augured ill for Mr. Sturton's well-being, should it ever depend on the money-lender's good wishes, but he made no further reply. He knew from experience that Sturton was placidly immoveable when he had once determined on anything. He would discuss it in his usual languid fashion as long as you liked, but invariably remained of precisely the same opinion. He was a man of much quiet tenacity of purpose, and, a thing Cudemore had yet to learn, opposition only strengthened him in his determination whatever it might be.

"So young Morant paid up. I never expected that of him. I thought he was certain to renew."

"No, the young gentleman has fallen in love and turned over a fresh leaf; he's paid off his tradesmen and done with all transactions involving stamped paper. The fool thinks that having spent the best part of what money

he had, the remainder will go further if there are two people to keep instead of one."

"Why, who does he want to marry?" asked Sturton.

"Miss Foxborough."

"But that is a marriage I think will probably not come off, as I understand," said Mr. Sturton, carelessly, "you are interested in preventing it. Well," he continued rising, "I wish you every success, and, in the mean time, good-bye."

"And are you going across to Scotland Yard?"

"Undoubtedly, but don't disturb yourself, your name will not appear," and so saying Mr. Sturton took his departure.

True to his word, the Bond-street maestro made his way across to the police head-quarters, and briefly explained his errand. He was requested to sit down and wait a few minutes while they sent for the officer in charge of the case. Sergeant Usher was

speedily on the spot, and no little pleased at the idea of receiving any fresh information bearing upon the Bunbury mystery. He was perhaps the one officer who was still confident of unravelling the tangle. Utterly nonplussed just at present he would admit, but he stuck to it he had a clue whenever he had learnt how to use it. He felt he had got the signal book, but had yet to learn how to read the flags.

He listened attentively to Mr. Sturton's statement, merely remarking that it was singular that Mr. Foxborough should borrow so large a sum without having some definite object in view. Did Mr. Sturton know at all for what purpose it was required. No. Curious, six thousand pounds is a good deal of money to raise to carry about as pocket-money. He was very much obliged to Mr. Sturton for the information, which might very possibly turn out of great value. Mr. Sturton's name in the papers? Certainly not. This fact would rest between them; indeed, far

from wishing to publish it, he, Sergeant Usher, would have asked Mr. Sturton as a particular favour not to mention it to any one, and so the Sergeant politely bowed his visitor out, and went home to ruminate on this last bit of information.

CHAPTER X.

Sergeant Usher at Fault.

Sergeant Usher did not commit himself much before Mr. Sturton, but when he got back to his own fireside he sat down and smoked a perfect succession of meditative pipes over this new feature in the case. What on earth had Foxborough wanted so large a sum of money as that for? Was it that having raised all the money he could command he then went in to wreak his vengeance on the man with whom he had an implacable feud, and, his victim done to death, made his way precipitately to the nearest seaport, and from thence to foreign parts? No, Mr. Usher was not inclined to

accept that solution of the case, and another thing that puzzled the Sergeant not a little was the curious fact that, except at the Syringa, Mr. Foxborough seemed unknown in theatrical circles, and the Sergeant had been very diligent in his inquiries on that point. Mr. Usher was puzzled as to what direction he should now make research in. At last it flashed across him that some further evidence as to Foxborough's personality was to be come by in Baumborough; there must be somebody else besides Mr. Totterdell who had noticed the stranger at the theatre. In country places, where every one is well known by sight, a stranger would invariably attract attention. He had been unlucky before in not getting hold of the right people. Moreover, the Sergeant reflected that he had not as yet, to use his own expression, "turned Mr. Totterdell inside out," and he had a hazy idea that there was something to be got out of that garrulous old gentleman, if one could

but get at it. That Mr. Totterdell would maunder away a whole afternoon before blurting out the one fact worth knowing which he had to tell, the Sergeant thought was likely, but he had experienced that sort of witness before, and knew that there was nothing for it but patience and—yes, he had one other receipt which he had found efficacious in similar cases,—namely, to affect incredulity. It was apt to make a weariful witness protest so much, that you did at last get at the one grain of evidence he had to give worth noting.

There was another important fact in the case now, according to Sergeant Usher's judgment; he had come to the conclusion that Foxborough had a confederate, and it was possible that it was the confederate and not Foxborough, who had sat next Mr. Totterdell at the theatre. At all events, Foxborough had got somebody to write that note, and it was singular that the reward offered for the

murderer's apprehension had not induced this person to come forward. The handwriting was unmistakably a man's, and yet, people conversant with James Foxborough's handwriting were quite positive it was not his. The Sergeant with those ideas once more ran down to Baumborough and commenced his inquiries. He talked as before with everybody he came across in easy and affable fashion, invariably turning the conversation before long on the great Bunbury mystery, but indefatigably as he gossiped for two days he failed to pick up one particle of information that might be turned to account. He had, it is true, got hold of one or two people who had positively noticed the stranger, not vaguely thinking that they saw him, but describing him definitely as a dark gentleman, of medium height, attired in evening costume. Still, this amounted to nothing. Foxborough was a dark-complexioned man by all accounts, and therefore there was no reason to dispute

the original theory that he was the man who had been present at the theatre.

On the third day the Sergeant proceeded to call upon Mr. Totterdell, and prepared himself for a tolerably long conversation. That gentleman, upon receiving his card, was only too delighted to admit him. Mr. Totterdell, in good truth, had been very much depressed about the turn things had taken lately. He had pressed for an inquiry into the financial affairs of the town, and this had turned out perfectly groundless. The Town Clerk was rumoured to have left but little behind him, still his books were all in regular order, and there was no warrant for supposing that, whatever he might have done with his own, he had ever made ducks and drakes of the public money. It is customary to speak tenderly of the dead, and when a man makes so tragic an end of it as John Fossdyke, pity makes folks recall his good qualities only. Baumborough forgot the Town Clerk's aggressive

and domineering manner, and remembered only the many improvements that he had promoted in their midst. Baumborough further called to mind that it was Mr. Totterdell, who in spiteful fashion had moved for an inquiry into its financial condition, and that his object in so doing had been principally to annoy John Fossdyke, who had very properly turned him out of his house as a meddlesome mischief-maker. Mr. Totterdell had succeeded in making himself, by dint of his insatiable curiosity and strong propensity to babble, exceedingly unpopular, and this last move had placed him in very bad odour with his fellow-citizens. It was true he would gladly have withdrawn his motion, but some of John Fossdyke's enemies—and he was much too self-assertive a man not to have made several—took good care the matter should not be allowed to drop. His untimely death it had been of course impossible to foresee, and the motion made in Mr. Totterdell's name

bore, if loosely looked at, the aspect of a malignant attempt to blacken a dead man's fame. People declined to hear Mr. Totterdell's explanation, and that he had moved for the inquiry out of mere malice and consequent on his quarrel with the luckless Town Clerk he was unable to deny. Mr. Totterdell had an idea that if he could appear as a prominent witness against Foxborough, and contribute not a little to his conviction, that Baumborough would condone his offending and take him once more into favour. That his present unpopularity was due to his inquisitive and meddlesome disposition, and not to the unfortunate circumstance of his having moved for that inquiry, never occurred to him. We are seldom conscious of our besetting sins, and, as a rule, men never plead guilty to tattling and curiosity; rather despising those vices, we are little likely to acknowledge to a weakness concerning them.

"Ah! Mr. Usher," exclaimed Mr. Totterdell,

as the Sergeant quietly entered his drawing-room, "delighted to see you; knew you'd have to come to me again. That old fool of a Coroner, you, of course, saw, deliberately suppressed my evidence. I hope it was only ignorance; but how are the perpetrators of crimes like this to be arrived at if the chief evidence about them is to be deliberately sat upon? You were there, Mr. Usher, and saw the Coroner, abetted by Mr. Trail, deliberately squash my evidence. I had no opportunity of stating one half of what I know."

"That's just where it is, sir. I said if they'd only let Mr. Totterdell tell his story in his own way we should get at the rights of things, but it's just like these muddle-headed country officials, they are so anxious to display their little bit of authority that they can't help interfering just to show they have the right to."

"Quite so, Mr. Usher, and if I had told my story things might bear a different aspect

now. Foxborough might be in custody perhaps."

"Well, I don't mind telling you in confidence. I'm always straight and above-board with the people in the case, but it is to go no further, mind: that it's getting just a question whether he ever will be in custody. He is either about the deepest card ever I came across, or rather can't come across, or else what they're saying about Baumborough is true."

"Saying about Baumborough," interposed Mr. Totterdell, greedily. "What are they saying in the town; nothing about me, eh?"

"Well, that's just where it is, sir; they're a gossiping, good-for-nothing set, and they seem to be mighty spiteful against you."

"Too true, Sergeant, too true, they are; and all because I endeavour to do my duty; but what is it they say?"

"They declare you never saw Mr. Fox-

borough at all, that you either dreamt it or saw some traveller passing through, who happened to drop a Syringa bill, and you imagined the rest."

"Ah, they say that," cried Totterdell, his face flushed with anger. "Wait till the trial comes off, and see what they have to say then."

"Getting open to question, as I said before, whether there will be a trial. It don't require much gumption," continued the Sergeant, "to understand that you can't have a trial without somebody to try."

"Nonsense," stammered Mr. Totterdell; "you don't mean to say there is no chance of the scoundrel's apprehension."

"Well, I am coming to the opinion of Baumborough that you didn't see Foxborough. Your opinion that you did is only based on that music-hall bill, you know, and that amounts to nothing."

"But," exclaimed Mr. Totterdell vehemently,

"I am not the only person who recognized him, or rather who spoke to him."

The Sergeant pricked up his ears, but all he said was, "Well, I can't find any one else that had any talk with him in all Baumborough."

"Perhaps not," retorted Mr. Totterdell triumphantly, "but all the world doesn't reside in Baumborough. Foxborough went behind the scenes; I saw him there myself, and they all seemed to know him."

"Oh," said the Sergeant, convinced now that he had about turned Mr. Totterdell out, "he went behind the scenes, did he? Would you, sir, as a particular favour, try to recollect who 'all' may mean. Who individually did he speak to?" Now here Mr. Totterdell broke down in ignominious fashion. He at first said every one—then, well, not exactly every one; and finally, dexterously manipulated by Sergeant Usher, he was brought to confess that he had only seen the presumed Foxborough speak to the lady who had played

Mary Netley in "Ours," he had forgotten her name.

But this was a fact tangible and important in the Sergeant's eyes. It would be simple enough to find out who the lady was, and also where she was now engaged. A professional lady is generally easy to discover. But the Sergeant was once more a little staggered; this fact was all in favour of its being Foxborough himself, and if so the accomplice had confined himself to writing the note, and had nothing more to do with the matter. Foxborough would of course be likely to know theatrical people, although the Sergeant had not been able to make out so far that he was known amongst them.

"Well, Mr. Totterdell," observed the Sergeant, who was by this most thoroughly conversant with the old gentleman's anxiety to appear as a witness, "this may turn out rather important for you; if we can only manage to find this young lady, you see, she will cor-

roborate your evidence, and then the chain will be getting complete."

"Didn't I say so before? If the Coroner had only allowed me to tell my story at Bunbury you'd have found this young lady before now."

"If you had only produced the most important fact in your wallet at the inquest, Mr. Totterdell, we might probably have arrested the murderer before this," replied the Sergeant curtly.

"You don't mean you can't find this young lady? The manager of the theatre, I dare say, can give you her name."

"Oh I'll have her name, and find her in four-and-twenty hours, but it is not likely to lead to finding Foxborough now."

"You surely don't mean that he has fled the country?" asked Mr. Totterdell anxiously.

"All I mean, sir, is that if people would afford the police all the information in their

power instead of half of it, it would be more conducive to the ends of justice."

And leaving Mr. Totterdell to digest this observation the Sergeant bowed himself out.

To ascertain that the leading lady at the opening of the Baumborough Theatre had been a Miss Lightcomb required, of course, only two minutes' conversation with the manager of that establishment, and a reference to the *Era* quickly revealed the fact that she was at present fulfilling an engagement at the Margate Theatre, and thither Sergeant Usher betook himself without loss of time.

Pretty Miss Lightcomb was not a little surprised at an abrupt visit from a stranger, and a little perturbed when her visitor announced his professional position. Dexterously questioned by Sergeant Usher she said that of course she had read all about the Bunbury murder, but what could she know about it. She had never even been in Bunbury, nor had

she to her knowledge ever seen Mr. Fossdyke. Of course she was aware that he had been present at the opening of the theatre, but she did not know him by sight, nor could one always distinguish people in front even if you did. Had she spoken to James Foxborough behind the scenes that night? Most certainly not. She had never even seen Mr. Foxborough in her life. Could hardly say she ever knew him by name before this terrible murder brought his name so prominently before the public. Could scarcely say who she had seen that night, there were a good many gentlemen came round, pretty well all strangers to her; many of them said something complimentary about her acting of Mary Netley; there was champagne and other refreshments going on in the manager's room, and most of the gentlemen were on their way there. No! she had been on the stage the last seven years, and she had never heard of Mr. Foxborough in connection with the country business. All her engage-

ments had been in the country; she had never succeeded in getting on the London boards.

"Then, Miss Lightcomb," said the Sergeant, at last, "it is fair to presume that you have a pretty considerable acquaintance with country managers?"

"Certainly I know personally a great many of them. I have fulfilled engagements all over England, besides taking a turn in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but I never heard of any company conducted by Mr. Foxborough. It is possible he had a stage name, you know, it is a common enough custom in our profession."

"Quite so, but I don't fancy he ever appeared himself; he merely managed a touring company. Ah, well, I need trouble you no further, Miss Lightcomb, at present; it is curious you shouldn't have heard of Mr. Foxborough. Good morning!"

"And it is curious," continued the Sergeant to himself when he got outside the modest lodgings in which the actress resided, "I

can't find anybody who ever has met Foxborough in his vocation, while, if ever there was a profession in which a man was well before the public, it is the theatrical. That he is lessee of the Syringa is certain, but about his other stage speculations nobody seems to know anything. It is a very interesting case, and Foxborough is about the most shadowy customer ever I was in quest of. He doesn't write his own letters, and doesn't apparently practise his own profession, but he commits one of the coolest, most audacious murders ever known, and disappears. I wonder whether that talkative old fool Totterdell is addicted to drink or opium. He must have seen some one though who did drop that music-hall bill and whom he fancied he saw behind the scenes afterwards. If he had only let one know that he had seen the man in the stalls speaking to Miss Lightcomb at the time, it is probable that the girl might have called to mind who did speak to her; still, as she

said most of them were strangers to her, perhaps the very man I want might have been one of those."

Once more Sergeant Usher found himself driven back to his old conclusion, that it was "a rum un." However, there was nothing more to be done in Margate, and Miss Lightcomb had apparently nothing to tell, and yet the Sergeant was impressed with the idea that, just like Mr. Totterdell, she would give a valuable bit of information could he but get it out of her. He did not think for one moment she was wilfully keeping back anything, but simply that for the want of the key-note he had been unable to arrive at what he wanted. All the questions he could think of that bore upon the matter he had put, and the actress had answered them frankly and freely; but Mr. Usher was aware that in the detection of crime you may walk round and round a thing and not see it; examine people who could and are quite willing to

tell you what you want to know, and yet not arrive at that fact. Some trifling matter that appears to have nothing to do with the case is just the one missing link in a chain of circumstantial evidence that the police are in search of, and the possessor of that knowledge has no conception of its importance.

Sergeant Usher determined to go back to Baumborough. Nothing had come of his last discovery there, but it was possible diligent investigation might lead to something yet, and no chess player was ever more absorbed in an intricate problem than Sergeant Usher in the elucidation of the Bunbury mystery. Should anything suggest that crucial question to which he believed Miss Lightcomb possessed the answer, she was always to be found without difficulty.

Nothing in these high-pressure days attains the dignity of more than a nine days' wonder, and it could not be supposed that Baumborough could sustain its interest about John

Fossdyke's untimely end any longer. His assassin had apparently beat the police, and the tragedy seemed destined to be one of those semi-revealed crimes of which we have only too many. But there were some few people in the town who still had strong interest in the solution of the riddle. Mr. Totterdell, for reasons already stated, deemed that it would put him straight with divers of his fellow-citizens, who now unmistakably gave him the cold shoulder, could the criminal but be apprehended. Philip Soames had a strong idea that if ever the story of the Bunbury mystery should be unfolded he should arrive at Bessie's secret, and Dr. Ingleby held a similar view. Soames had called often at Dyke of late and always been received with the greatest cordiality by Mrs. Fossdyke. The widow had returned from her excursion to the seaside, and Dr. Ingleby had made known to her the alteration in her circumstances. Curiously enough she was by

no means distressed at the idea of leaving Dyke. On the contrary she said she should never like the place again, and remarked that she should have left it under any circumstances. She talked matters over freely with the young man, and told him she should take a small house in Baumborough. Even had her means permitted it, what did she want with a place like Dyke. She should live a good deal in retirement henceforth; glad to see her old friends, of course, but after such a blow as had befallen her it was not likely a woman would ever mix much with the world again. As for Miss Hyde, she always welcomed Philip with a sweet smile and frank clasp of the hand, but she never suffered herself to be alone with him. She had decidedly refused to accompany him either for a turn round the garden or as far as the gate upon the one or two occasions that he had begged that favour of her, giving him to understand distinctly that all was over

between them, and Philip began to get despondent about ever carrying his point. There is no winning a girl's confidence if you can never secure a *tête-à-tête* with her. Folk don't, as a rule, unbosom themselves in public albeit that insufferable bore who always will inflict his domestic economy, from the price of his wife's last dress to what he pays for his washing, is ever manifest in the land. Still these are hardly to be called confidences; distasteful revelations is I fancy what many of the victims would describe them. Philip Soames determined at last to have a quiet talk over his love affair with Dr. Ingleby. He cannot help thinking the Doctor can force Bessie's hand if he will but try, and Philip is fain to confess he can make nothing of it himself, hard as he has striven. Were Foxborough only arrested he thinks the trial might throw some side-light that would reveal to him the cause of Bessie's scruples; for that they were mere scruples Philip was

convinced. Full of this design he took his road to the Doctor's one morning and made his way into the study.

"Well, Philip, what brings you here so early? Glad to see you at any time, as you know, but you don't often honour me so soon as this."

"Well, I have come to ask your help as an old friend. I told you how I stand with Miss Hyde, and I'm in real earnest about marrying that girl; but I'm at a dead lock. If she simply said me nay, well, I should be bound to take my answer with the best grace I could muster; but she owns she loves me, yet declares there are insurmountable obstacles to our marrying. Now if I could arrive at the obstacles I should probably not think much of them, but I can't. I want you to try if you cannot extort a confession."

"This is rather an awkward task you seek to impose upon me, Phil. Miss Hyde has always been a special favourite of mine, and

I flatter myself I stand pretty high in her good graces, but I don't know how she would take such interference on my part. She's a girl that, mark me, can hold her own, and knows how to check what she may deem an unjustifiable liberty."

"I acknowledge all you say, my dear Doctor, and I wouldn't urge you to do this save for two things. Bessie has owned she loved me, and I am sure she is acting, though most conscientiously, 'for my sake,' to use her own words, yet under a misconception. I know, my dear old friend, I am to some extent exposing you to a rebuff; but you know Bessie, and must feel assured that if she will not make confession to you her refusal will be courteously couched."

"I know all that, Phil, still I have a strong dislike to seeking a confidence. If people bring you their troubles, well, one must do the best one can for them, but when they prefer to suffer in silence it seems

gratuitous impertinence to endeavour to discover what they so obviously wish to conceal."

"I admit all that, but I am asking you to run some mischance of that nature for my sake," cried Phil. "My life's happiness is at stake, and though it may appear presumption to say so, I think perhaps Bessie's also. I am bound to leave no stone unturned, nor any friend who I think may aid me unsolicited for help under such circumstances. I think you can aid me, and I know you will when you have thought it over."

"I fancy I shall be so rash," replied the Doctor. "Give me a minute to think about it."

"You shall have ten, if you like," replied Phil, smiling, "because I know you mean saying yes at the end of them."

The Doctor thought it over and then said—

"I'll do my best for you. I'll see Miss Hyde, and if I can induce her to tell me her story——"

"Gentleman to see you, sir," exclaimed the voice of the Doctor's servant, and as the man spoke Dr. Ingleby became aware of the presence of Sergeant Usher.

"Beg pardon, sir, but your young man gave me to understand you were disengaged, or else I wouldn't have intruded. Can't say I regret it, as I just arrived in time to hear you say you would try to make Miss Hyde tell you her story. That's just where it is, if we could only induce people to speak out at once what a lot of things would be put straight, and what an amount of miscarriage of justice would be prevented. I don't say it's wilful perversity, because it ain't; it's human infirmity, that's what it is; it's people's utter incapacity to tell all they know about anything. Here's Mr. Totterdell, for instance, tells me the day before yesterday a little circumstance that if I'd known two months ago would have been worth any money in the case. Well, off I go to see the party alluded

to, and of course they've forgot the very thing they were wanted to remember. It's aggravating, very; it's as if we were engaged in a regular game of hunt the slipper with the British public, only the British public are not hiding the slipper intentionally."

Philip Soames had stared with amazement and no slight indignation at this little grey, voluble man, as he delivered the above tirade, and Dr. Ingleby saw that explanation was imperative.

"My dear Phil," he exclaimed, "allow me to make you known to Sergeant Usher of the Criminal Investigation Department, Scotland Yard. As for making you known to him, that I fancy is superfluous. I have little doubt there are few of the leading townspeople here with whom the Sergeant is unacquainted by this."

The Sergeant made a respectful bow and admitted he had the pleasure of knowing Mr. Soames by sight.

But the young man was by no means mollified.

"I don't understand the unnecessary dragging of Miss Hyde's name into the case," he exclaimed haughtily. "You must be aware she can know nothing about it. You catch a fragment of the conversation between Dr. Ingleby and myself, and immediately jump to the conclusion that the story I allude to has something to do with the death of John Fossdyke."

"Excuse me, sir," replied the Sergeant quietly; "the little I overheard was the result of the purest accident, but Dr. Ingleby will tell you I have been of opinion almost from the first that Miss Hyde has some previous knowledge of James Foxborough, and that if she could be persuaded to tell that to, say, Dr. Ingleby, it might prove of considerable value in getting at the rights of the Bunbury murder."

"It is true, Phil," observed the Doctor,

"the Sergeant is so far right that Miss Hyde has admitted to some knowledge of Foxborough, although she declares she never saw him, and that the little she knows about him could throw no light whatever on this affair."

"Now, look here, Mr. Soames, you cannot think that I want to annoy or occasion pain to any young lady," interposed the Sergeant, "but I know from experience it is just the merest trifle that constantly affords us the clue we seek. I don't say Miss Hyde is in possession of it; she no doubt honestly believes the little she knows is of no consequence, but I do wish she would let me be judge of that. If she could be induced to confide it to Dr. Ingleby, and the Doctor then submitted it to me, Miss Hyde would be saved pretty well all unpleasantness; and forgive me, sir, but in the interests of justice I am compelled to gather every scrap of information I can about one of the most

mysterious murders it was ever my lot to investigate."

Philip Soames was still indignant at the idea of the lady of his love being mixed up in the affair in any way, but then he reflected she must be slightly so under any circumstances, and then it occurred to him that what the Sergeant had first said was very probably true, and that Miss Hyde's story would quite likely include the account of the slight knowledge of Foxborough. He had just been urging his old friend to obtain this confession in his own behalf, and there would be glaring inconsistency in opposing his doing so now just because a detective officer thought a clue to the Bunbury mystery might turn up in the narration; moreover, his own love chase depended on the result, and he did not think that Bessie need fear to confide in so trusty a friend as Doctor Ingleby. Love is essentially a selfish passion, say the philosophers, more especially a young

man's love, and finally Philip gave his assent once more to his own scheme.

"You rely on me, Mr. Soames. Don't you be afraid of my not considering Miss Hyde's feelings. The chances are there won't be the slightest necessity for ever making public the young lady's information, but it will quite likely just throw a glimmer of light upon what I don't mind telling you, gentlemen, is about as dark a business so far as ever I went into. By the way, Doctor, I suppose you never made anything out about that letter?"

"No; I should think there is little doubt it was destroyed. By the way, I saw in the papers some letters had been discovered at the Hopbine."

"Bless you, sir, the papers will say anything in cases of this kind," replied the candid Sergeant. "Good night, gentlemen!"

CHAPTER XI.

BESSIE'S CONFESSION.

Dr. Ingleby, the next morning, half repented him of this promise he had made. He was exceedingly fond of Bessie Hyde, and he recollected the girl's distress the last time he had spoken to her about her knowledge of Foxborough. True, this was somewhat different, he was only going to ask her this time to trust in him and let him be judge whether there was reason the happiness of two lives should be wrecked. If she really loved Philip, and he was not the man to say she had made that admission without due and sufficient grounds for so saying, surely she would be anxious to clutch at a

chance of clearing away the obstacles to her marriage. At all events, thought the Doctor, if I am somewhat overstepping the privileges of an old friend, it is on behalf of two young people whom I sincerely desire to benefit. It may not be quite a pleasant business, I am afraid it won't, it seemed so painful to Bessie before to touch upon, that it would be absurd to suppose it will prove otherwise now; still it's got to be done. I'm not going to have Bessie Hyde and Phil Soames drift apart if I can help it. She's just the wife for him; he's plenty of money, and lots more to come. Oh no! I'm not at all above doing a bit of match-making when I think it desirable, and I'll have the bells ringing at Baumborough about those two, or know the reason why.

No matter this to be put off, and the Doctor determined to go over to Dyke, and have the thing out at once. Unlike Philip, he knew he should have no difficulty about

a *tête-à-tête* with Miss Hyde. Bessie undoubtedly regarded the Doctor as a trusted friend, and he was of that age she might look upon him as not likely to misinterpret her confidences. He called next day upon the two ladies, as was his custom, about tea-time, and after much desultory conversation as was usual, and having quietly informed Mrs. Fossdyke that nothing fresh had transpired concerning her husband's melancholy end, said, as he made his adieux, "Miss Hyde, walk to the gate with me, please. I have something to say to you."

"You wouldn't deceive me, Doctor?" cried the widow. "Surely there can be no more terrible news coming to me?"

"Not in the least, my dear madam. What I have to say to Miss Hyde concerns herself alone, and is a thing she need feel little misgiving about listening to. Will you come, Miss Bessie?"

"Yes, of course; my hat is in the hall. I

feel half frightened, Doctor," she continued as they passed the hall door. "I don't know what you have to tell me, but I can never forget the night when Phil—Mr. Soames sent for me into the study and told his terrible tale."

"I have nothing terrible to tell you, nor you me, but, Bessie, I want you to comprehend that I consider I stand to you in the light of him who has gone. You know how intimate I have been at Dyke, and it has always appeared to me that poor Fossdyke looked upon you more in the light of a ward than his wife's companion. I was, as you know, one of his most intimate friends, and am now his executor. I want you, Bessie, to regard me in the same light, and give me your confidence."

The girl's face looked a little troubled for a minute or so, and then she replied, gravely, "It is only too good of you to take an interest in me. As for confidences—" and here she indulged in a little nervous laugh,—"what

should I have to confide further than it was I upset the cream and not the cat."

"To begin upon," said Dr. Ingleby, "Philip Soames has acquainted me with all that has passed between you."

"Then I think Mr. Soames has been guilty of much indiscretion," retorted the girl, as she reared her head proudly. "He might have relied upon my lips being sealed, and though I have nothing to reproach myself with, still I did not anticipate our affairs becoming common discourse."

"Bessie, Bessie," replied Dr. Ingleby, gently, "please don't meet me in that spirit. It was in no braggadocio vein, believe me, that Phil told me the story of his wooing. It was the wail of a rejected lover—rejected forsooth, as he honestly avers and believes, for some shadowy reason that could he but come by it might be swept away in an instant."

"Mr. Soames did me an honour which for

reasons good and sufficient I felt compelled to decline. He has told you that he asked me to be his wife and, further, that for his own sake I was obliged to refuse his request. I think Mr. Soames is not treating me generously. I told him frankly that I could marry no man to whom I had not first told my story, and that I had not courage to do that; if I had loved him less it would have been easier, but I could not bear the dismay on his face when he learnt who I really was, or to have him stand by his offer from a pure sense of honour. I could not bear," she continued, passionately, "to embroil him with his own family, or that people should whisper and point to Philip Soames's wife as a woman with a shameful story attached to her. No! Dr. Ingleby, you are very good, but I love Philip too dearly to be a millstone round his neck, or to have him at war with society for my sake. If poor Mr. Fossdyke had lived the decision would have rested with him. He knew all

about me, and I told him what had passed between me and Philip, but his advice is lost to me, and I believe I am acting for the best, doing what is right, in adhering to my original decision."

Bessie ceased speaking, but it was evident she was deeply moved, the long dark lashes of her eyes were wet and the girl's whole frame trembled slightly with emotion. Dr. Ingleby was not a little nonplussed. There could be no doubt that Bessie honestly loved Soames, and that it was entirely for his own sake she refused him. She certainly was a better judge than either he or Philip could pretend to be of the circumstances; was it fair to wring this girl's story from her only to endorse her own view and acknowledge that the obstacles she deemed unsurmountable really were so? Then again, was it not better for Philip that things should remain as they were, and he be free from what might probably turn out an unfortunate marriage,

so far as connection went? Society in country places is even more intolerant than in big cities; in London, for instance, who you are, is not so much consequence now-a-days, as what you've got per annum, and can you keep clear of the law your iniquities are not counted against you, provided your cook and your wines are unimpeachable; but none knew better than Dr. Ingleby that if the ladies of Baumborough once decided the antecedents of a new-comer, made her admission within society's pale inadmissible, it would be a gigantic task to break through the taboo.

"Give me a few minutes to think, Bessie," he said at length. "I want to give the best advice I can, to think what is best for both you and Philip."

And as they strolled slowly on it occurred to the Doctor that Philip was in very genuine earnest about winning the girl for his wife, and was not likely to rest passive with

things as they were; that whether he interfered or not the chances were that the young man sooner or later would come at the truth and take his own way then without much reference to the opinion of friends or relations. It would be better, he thought, if he could induce Bessie to yield him her confidence; he should be judge of the case now while he had yet opportunity to tender advice to both the young people.

"Bessie, you admit the decision of this affair would have rested with poor Fossdyke had he lived. Do you not think it would be best to look upon me as standing in his place. True, in one case, unfortunately, you have a painful story to tell which would have been spared you in the other; but you know I am sincerely attached to Philip. I have known him from a child, and know his character thoroughly—a man very resolute, and difficult to turn from a thing when his mind is once made up, and he is terribly

in earnest about marrying you. It will be no light thing that will stop him, and, Bessie, remember by your own confession he has friends in the garrison should he press the place hard."

The girl smiled, as she said softly,

"Too true; I've never denied it, but I'll be staunch to Philip's real welfare, never fear."

"Can you not trust an old friend of his, a man like myself, who knows the world well, and who would be a much clearer and more dispassionate judge than himself, and who would not abet him in doing a foolish thing, to be judge of the case? It may be I shall pronounce your scruples groundless, it may be I shall say, 'Bessie Hyde, if you have any real love for Philip, run away from the place, and don't bring social ruin on the man for whom you profess affection.'"

The colour came and went in the girl's face, as she listened to the Doctor's speech.

He had struck the right key; he ignored her and affected to be only anxious about Philip's welfare. That was what she wanted. Would any one decide between them, thinking only of him. If her marriage was pronounced possible she should only be too happy and thankful, but if for Philip's sake it were best she should go, she would depart without a murmur.

"Dr. Ingleby," she said at length, "if you will promise to do that, to think only of Philip and never of me, I can perhaps muster up courage to tell you my story; but, mind, I am never to be cause of reproach to him. Tell me honestly if I am right in my view, and, friends in the garrison notwithstanding, I'll take good care he never has chance to carry the place."

"My dear Bessie, I want to do what I deem best for two young people, of whom I am very fond, but my first consideration here I think ought to be Phil."

"Yes," she faltered, "you must not mind me. Remember, please, to be the woman whose sad story was hung round his neck, and socially drowned him, would be infinitely more painful than giving him up altogether. You must not forget, will you?"

"No," replied the Doctor, mechanically, "I will not forget," and as the words passed his lips, he thought to himself, "I have no right either to forget your negation of self or honest love for the man who loves you."

"Doctor," Bessie continued, after a slight pause, "you must know that I am nameless; that I have no father; that I am nobody's child. You understand," said the girl, in a low tone, as the blood rose to the roots of her hair, and her voice dropped almost to a whisper.

"You have no father you ever knew, I presume?" observed Dr. Ingleby, inquiringly.

"I have no father at all, I tell you," rejoined the girl, sharply. "I am a love

child. I have been brought up by my aunt, and impressed all my life with the disgrace of my birth. I have only seen my mother now and again. She has always been upon those occasions kind, tender, and anxious to provide me with everything I might want, but my stern aunt used to interfere with her austere ways and language, and remind her sister that when she took charge of me it was upon the express stipulation that she had control of me for good, and that I was not to have my head turned with the frivolities and fripperies of my mother's position. It was long enough before I understood what my mother's position was, she had run away from a serious family at Clapham with a theatrical gentleman, and had naturally taken to the same profession. I was the unfortunate result of this union, if union it can be called, as I am afraid, Dr. Ingleby," continued the girl, blushing rosy red, "my mother never was married."

"There is no very serious obstacle in all this, Bessie; unless you have something much worse to tell I shall give you away yet, my dear."

The girl shot him a grateful glance before continuing her narrative, and then resumed—

"When my cousins grew up they were no longer to be repressed, they wanted more life and gaiety, and speedily overruled their mother, which, of course, included their father, and got it. Dances, parties, and even an occasional theatre became the order of the day. My uncle undoubtedly disapproved of it, but as for my aunt, she thought the new *régime* possessed great opportunities of settling her daughters, and so acquiesced in it. Then came my offending. I unluckily proved more attractive than my cousins, and no sooner did this become transparent than my home was made unbearable to me. I was for ever twitted with my birth, or rather want of it; and at last confided my troubles to Mr.

Fossdyke, who was an old friend of my mother and who often came to see me. He not only offered me this place of companion to his wife, but counselled my taking it, saying, "Remember, Bessie, you are not dependent upon these people; you have to earn your own living, no doubt, but while she lives there is always an allowance from your mother to look to; this, of course, goes to your aunt at present, but will be paid down to yourself if you come to us. I shall allow you fifty pounds a year, which in addition to your mother's hundred ought to make you a well-to-do young woman, considering you will live at Dyke for nothing. And so it all proved."

"Still, Bessie, you surely must know there is nothing very dreadful in all this. Illegitimacy is no such terrible stigma in these times; if there are people who would carp at it, there are plenty of others who would laugh at the idea of its being any ban to

marriage or social advancement of any sort in these days."

"But my mother is an actress," said Bessie, in low tones.

"That may sound very terrible to your fantastical aunt and uncle, but to people who live in the world that is nothing now-a-days. Indeed, from the time of the Stuarts down to that of Her present Gracious Majesty, royalty and nobility have always had a great admiration for the ladies of the theatrical profession. Who is she? I mean what is her stage name?'

"Miss Nydia Willoughby," rejoined Bessie, with eyes rivetted on the ground.

"Miss Nydia Willoughby; let me see, dear me, I know the name. Where did I hear it? I don't think I ever saw her."

"That is her stage name, and I believe she sings at the Syringa Music-Hall."

"Good heavens, the Syringa! why that is the place of which this James Foxborough is the proprietor."

"Yes, and my mother is Mrs. James Foxborough," faltered Bessie, in a low tone.

To say that Dr. Ingleby was astounded at this last revelation really did not describe that gentleman's state. He was completely stupefied by the announcement, and for a minute or two remained silent. At last he said, "Foxborough is not your father, though?"

"No, I tell you I never knew my father. I never saw my mother until the year before I came here, except quite as a child, and saw as I told you but little then of her. Mr. Fossdyke, who was her man of business, and an old friend, called upon me about twice a year as a child, and perhaps a little oftener as I grew up; and now, Dr. Ingleby, you know my history. With the stain I bear upon my name, how could I marry Philip, and the last awful tragedy has made matters still worse; I am the step-daughter of the murderer of one of his most intimate

friends, though I never even saw the miserable man."

"My dear Bessie," said the Doctor, after a slight pause, "I tell you fairly, I am so bewildered by what you have told me that I don't think at present I am quite a clear judge of the circumstances. In all your story it is not quite evident to me there is any impediment to your marrying Philip. You acted like an honest girl when you said you could not consent to do so until he knew your history; that you should shrink from telling it was only natural. Still Philip alone can decide upon this matter. There is nothing in reality against yourself, and if you follow my advice you will keep your own counsel. It is not necessary that, with the exception of Philip, any one in Baumborough should know more about you than they do at present. If you give permission, I shall make him acquainted with your story; but otherwise, of course, my lips are sealed."

"Yes, Dr. Ingleby, I should wish Philip to know all I have told you. It will convince him, at all events, that I am no heartless coquette. Give him, give him my love, and say I wish it could have been otherwise; but he will now see the impossibility of my saying other than I have done."

"Good-bye, Bessie," rejoined Dr. Ingleby, as they reached the gate. "You have a staunch friend in me, whatever may be your future lot; and remember, my dear, I shall feel proud to give you away yet, and claim the privilege should it come to pass."

Bessie Hyde made no reply in words, but her eyes thanked the Doctor with mute eloquence as they shook hands.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PHOTOGRAPH.

As Dr. Ingleby walked back to Baumborough and turned Bessie's story over in his mind he could not but reflect that his own situation was now just a little awkward. Prepossessed as he was in the girl's favour, and believing thoroughly that there was nothing which could be alleged against Miss Hyde herself, still it was impossible to shut one's eyes to the fact that she would hardly be deemed a desirable connection by any respectable family. There was not only that matter of her birth, but the very unfortunate accusation under which her stepfather at present lay. Old Mr. Soames and his wife might

fairly resent the encouraging of their son in such a marriage, and the Doctor felt very loth to give cause of offence to such old friends. He was bound to tell Philip this story, and had a strong idea that the chivalry of the young man's character would only lead him to cling more closely to his sweetheart in her trouble. Well, it could not be helped; Philip was a man of thirty, and if he could not decide for himself now, would he ever be fit to do so? He would get a good wife in Bessie, even if her antecedents should be deemed a little against her, and, moreover, as these had been kept a secret for two years, why should they not continue such. He could trust himself not to speak. Philip would naturally for Bessie's sake keep silence, whilst as for Sergeant Usher the Doctor had early taken stock of that officer's open candid disposition, and rightly deemed that he could be close and dumb as an oyster upon anything of importance; the confidences he made were

for the most part of the most innocent and milk and watery description, and might have pretty well been arrived at by diligent perusal of the journals.

That Philip Soames would call that evening Dr. Ingleby felt assured, and that Sergeant Usher would do likewise he thought was more than probable. He was not deceived, he had not long finished his solitary dinner, and was sitting over his wine and walnuts when Phil made his appearance.

"Well, Doctor, have you any news for me?" he asked, anxiously, as he took a chair and responded to the mute invitation contained by the pushed-across decanter, and filled his glass.

"Yes," replied Dr. Ingleby, "I have. Whether good or bad is for your own self to determine. I am prepared to tell you the whole of Miss Hyde's history. I may promise at once there is nothing against herself, but many men might hesitate about marrying

her. You, Phil, are old enough to judge for yourself. I intend to tell you her story simply, and to counsel you neither one way nor the other," and then without further preamble Dr. Ingleby narrated Bessie's account of herself.

Phil Soames listened attentively, but interposed never a word, though he could not suppress a start when he heard that Bessie was the illegitimate daughter of James Foxborough's wife. He waited patiently till the Doctor had finished, and then said,

"Thanks no end, my dear old friend, for what you have done for me. We have agreed not to discuss this subject, but that is no reason I should not tell you what I shall do. All this makes no difference in my feelings with regard to Miss Hyde. I only honour her more for the delicacy and regard she has displayed towards myself. I shall marry her, for I don't think when I ask he again, with full knowledge of her story, she

will say me nay any longer. I don't mean just at once, you know; she couldn't well do that so soon after John Fossdyke's death, but as soon as the conventionalities allow, and, Doctor, I don't think it is necessary my future wife's history should go any further."

"Certainly not; and you may trust me in that respect, but remember we are half pledged to let Sergeant Usher know the result. Still, I consider that a question for your decision, and would only remark that I think you may rely upon his making very discreet use of the information."

"I had rather it went no further than ourselves," rejoined Phil, slowly.

"As you will," replied the Doctor; "only remember so far, the Sergeant has shown much feeling and thoughtfulness in dealing with the ladies at Dyke. If we refuse to take him into our confidence he may discover, and very likely will, the whole thing for himself, and is then of course in no way bound

to show any particular discretion in dealing with the information. If we let him into the secret of Miss Hyde's history, of which remember he is already on the trail, I think he will make no public use of it, except in the last extremity."

At this moment the door opened, and the servant inquired if the Doctor would see Mr. Usher, and after that official's wont he followed so close upon the heels of his own announcement as to pretty well preclude the possibility of denial.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I have just called in to tell you I can gather no particle of information that is to be called reliable about Foxborough in this town. No one, you see, really knew him by sight. Now, Doctor, have you got anything for me?"

"Sit down, Sergeant, and help yourself to a glass of port," and as Mr. Usher complied Dr. Ingleby cast an inquiring glance.

"Quite so, sir; I understand," exclaimed

that worthy, whose quick eye little escaped that came beneath it. "Now, gentlemen, I'm not such a fool as to be obtrusive, but I see you've got the information I seek, though you can't quite make up your minds to let me share it. You cannot suppose I would make things unpleasant for Miss Hyde. Although what she has told you may be great use to me, it strikes me as most improbable that her name will ever appear. Of course I can't say for certain till I know what it is, but I can promise this, Mr. Soames, that nothing but the most extreme necessity will permit me to bring Miss Hyde's name into the case." Phil looked Mr. Usher straight in the face for a moment, but the Sergeant's keen grey eyes never faltered, and then turning to the Doctor he said, curtly, "tell him everything."

Doctor Ingleby without further delay narrated Bessie's history, to which the Sergeant listened without comment.

"I don't think, gentlemen," he said, as the Doctor concluded, "that this is likely to be of any use to me, though it unexpectedly may be. It is very unlikely, indeed, that Miss Hyde will ever be called upon with regard to this case further than possibly to testify that the dagger was not Mr. Fossdyke's property. As to what the Doctor has just done me the honour to confide to me, my lips, gentlemen, are sealed. But, Mr. Soames, has one singular coincidence in this affair struck you?"

"No; what do you mean?" cried Phil.

"That you and your friend, Mr. Morant, should be each courting a daughter of Mrs. Foxborough."

"It never occurred to me before, but it is extraordinary," exclaimed Soames, "but how on earth did you know it?"

"Well, if you'll excuse my making so bold, it's no secret that you are sweet on Miss Hyde in Baumborough. Watching Foxborough's

house, as of course we've done very close, showed us that Mr. Morant was Miss Foxborough's lover, and of course at the inquest I saw you knew each other perfectly well, and the rest is very simple, that you were old University chums, and a slight knowledge of your previous lives was not difficult to come by."

"And do you always study people after this fashion?" asked Philip, half angry, half amused.

"Only when they have the distinction of being concerned in what I consider a great case," rejoined the Sergeant, gravely rising, "and now, gentlemen, with many thanks for your kindness, I have the honour to wish you good night."

Soames was not long before he followed the Sergeant's example and also betook himself homewards. Phil lived with his father and mother, but in a low wing or rather leg of the house that had been run out expressly

for his accommodation. He had a separate entrance, a sort of half ante-room, half business-room, and a library, study, smoking-room, or what you please to call it, on the ground floor. Above were two excellent bed-rooms and a bath-room. Having turned up his lamp Phil lit another cigar and began to reflect on the events of the evening. It was curious —deuced curious—that coincidence, as the Sergeant described it. To think that he and Herbert Morant were going to marry sisters, at all events half-sisters ; and then it occurred to Phil, why on earth should he not have Herbert down at once, and put in motion those schemes for that young gentleman's redemption which had crossed his brain before the miserable tragedy of John Fossdyke's took place. How little did he think when Morant said at the inquest it was odd that the murdered man should be a friend of Phil Soames, while the daughter of the presumed murderer was the girl himself aspired to marry,

that they were in love with half-sisters. Phil was a man of decision. Half a dozen more turns in the room, and some slight more consumption of tobacco, and seating himself at his writing-table, he wrote to Herbert Morant, saying he should now be delighted to see him at once. It would be rather pleasant, he thought, as he directed and stamped his letter, to have a chum with whom to talk matters over a bit, and then he wondered whether it would be unwise to tell Bessie's story to Morant, who, no doubt, was in perfect ignorance concerning it. No matter, he wanted to do his old friend a turn, and had not two old friends in love, constant food for discourse; they would smoke, talk of their sweethearts and poor Herbert's future till the grey of the morning, more especially as Phil really did see his way into opening a career for that careless spendthrift, always providing he was willing to put his shoulder to the wheel in earnest.

When Herbert got that message he read it with mingled feelings of exultation and despondency. He was jubilant at the idea of really making a start in the world, but he was low at the idea of having to leave Nid and her mother in their troubles. Still it was impossible to doubt what it behoved him to do, he could be but of negative use to Mrs. Foxborough; except that his daily visit brightened her now somewhat sombre life, and was of course of much consequence to Nid, he could really do nothing for them. The Bunbury mystery was for the present in abeyance, and Mrs. Foxborough's theory that her husband was dead had gradually obtained considerable hold of Herbert's mind. He had a sorrowful good-bye to say at Tapton Cottage; Nid clung to him, and declared it was cowardly of him to leave her in her misery, but Mrs. Foxborough had more strength of character. She rated her daughter pretty sharply for her selfishness, thanked Herbert for all he had

been to them in their affliction, and bade him "God speed" in search of fortune with a face half smiles, half tears; reminding him that Baumborough was within very easy distance of London, and that she should have no scruples about sending for him if she had need of him. Under which assurance, and with a tearful embrace from Nid, Herbert bade good-bye, and set forth to see what sort of career that might be that dear old Phil had to suggest for him—hazy, very, concerning what this career should be, but firmly convinced that an alarum clock and early rising were most important factors in all starts of a commercial description.

Very glad indeed was Phil Soames to welcome his old University chum; he had always been very fond of Herbert when they were at college together, having for him that strong liking so often conceived by the man of strong character for his weaker brother, and Herbert Morant was essentially one of that

class—a continuous doer of foolish things, but no chronicle of anything mean or blackguardly against him. And so Herbert had continued till the present, with nothing against him but want of vertebra in his character.

The greeting between the pair was genuinely cordial, and Herbert having been duly presented to the old people, and dinner being concluded, they adjourned to Phil's peculiar domain for a cigar and gossip.

"I want to have a real good talk with you, old man," said Herbert, as he took possession of an easy-chair; "have wanted it indeed for some time. I have been a lazy purposeless beggar all my life, but I've got something to work for now, and I mean to begin just as soon as ever I can see my way. If Foxborough did kill Fossdyke I believe it was done in hot blood, and any way I am going to stand by his daughter. I told her I loved her before her father had this charge laid at

his door, and no one can suppose I'm going to be such a pitiful cur as to abandon her in her trouble."

"No, Herbert, I know you too well to think that of you, and you might know that I was not speaking at random when I asked you to come down here. We have an opening for you in our business, and I consider it worth your consideration. It will take you a good six months to master the routine, and by that time we shall know if you will suit us, and you will know whether the work will suit you."

While Philip was speaking, Morant had taken up from the table a small photograph book, and was idly fiddling with the clasps, undoing them and snapping them to again.

"It is awfully good of you to give me such a chance," he exclaimed, as the other paused.

"Yes, it is a chance; might quite possibly lead to a junior partnership in the firm, but

mind, Herbert, it must depend a good deal upon yourself. If we can't make you a business man in that time there is no more to be said. We cannot afford to make you a sleeping partner. You must put your neck to the collar, and pull your fair share of the wagon. If you are ever to participate in the profits you must be a *bonâ fide* working partner."

"I'm going to make no protestations, Phil. I can only say try me, and as for sleep, sir, I've brought down an alarum clock that will effectually attend to all that. With Nid to work for I should be a brute to neglect such a chance."

While he spoke he had opened the photograph book, and was carelessly turning over the pages. Suddenly he exclaimed, "Great heavens, Phil! how did you come by this?"

"What is it? That?" he replied gravely, as Herbert showed him the photograph that had arrested his attention,—"that is a likeness of poor Fossdyke."

"Extraordinary!" exclaimed Herbert. "I could have sworn it was meant for James Foxborough, and was a very excellent photo. The two men must have been the very image of each other."

And Morant and Soames stared at each other in blank amazement.

END OF VOL. II.