

THE STRANGE CLUE.

By an Ex-Detective.

I HAD left the detective work several years, and indeed had left London, for when I grew a little tired of the business I was recommended to the authorities of Combestead, a thriving market-town in one of the home counties; and I had a very comfortable situation there, having little to do, very good pay, and being head of the borough Police. Of course there is a great deal of difference between life in the country and life in town, and from a policeman's view it perhaps appears greater than it does to anybody else; and whereas I had often wondered how anybody could be detected in London, I was equally surprised to think how anybody could hope to escape in the country; for, excepting when strangers came down on some carefully planned burglary, we could nearly always tell where to look for our men if anything went wrong; in short, I knew everybody. As a matter of course, everybody knew me.

There was a middle-aged party lived in a quiet row of houses in Orchard-street—which ran parallel with our High-street—a Miss Parkway, who was reputed to be pretty well off, although not extremely rich, and reputed also to be rather eccentric. She lived by herself, in the sense of having none of her relatives with her; but there were other persons, although not many, in the large house where she lodged. I had my attention drawn to her by seeing her walking repeatedly in company with a young man of no very good character, who was fully twenty years her junior, and at last I heard she was going to be married to him.

After all, although I have said John Lytherly—that was his name—was of no very good character, yet there was nothing serious against him. He was a good-tempered, good-looking, easy sort of a fellow, with a lot of cleverness about him, too, that always showed itself when it wasn't wanted, and never showed itself when it might be of service.

Matters progressed so far that it was known the lady had given orders to Bunyan & Co., our chief bankers, to call in a thousand pounds of her money which was out on mortgage; and it was said she intended to buy one of the houses in the High-street and fit it up as a photographer's.

It was known for certain, however, that she had not only given notice, but had actually withdrawn the money; and among other things it was said that she had admitted to her landlady, Mrs. Amblass, that the match with Lytherly would break off all intimacy with her friends. She only had one relative who came to see her, and that was a gentleman living some forty miles away, but he had not been to Combestead lately. Whether he was offended or not, neither the landlady nor lodger could say; but the latter feared he was, as she had written and told him exactly how matters stood and what steps she had taken, but had received no reply to her letter. Lytherly seemed, very naturally, to be brightening up and took our jocular congratulations—for I had my say as well as the others—in a good-tempered although rather a concealed style. One annoyance he felt, which was that everybody to whom he owed money—which was every one who would trust him—was anxious to be the first paid; and, thinking that a little gentle pressure might help them, two or three of the tradesmen took out County Court summonses against him; and this, as he said, was very hard on him and very selfish. However, there seemed a little chance that they would defeat themselves, for, harassed and worried by these doing, he was forced to ask Miss Parkway for an advance of money, being the first time he had ever done so. He had received money from her, but she had always offered it, and pressed it upon him when he made a show, if he was not actually in earnest, of wishing to refuse it. Whether she was in a bad temper at the time, or whether she was hurt at his making such a request, Lytherly could not say, but she refused to make the advance, and they parted worse friends than they had been for some time.

All this the young fellow let out at the Bell on the Saturday, as the refusal happened on the Friday. A great part of it in my hearing, for I generally took my pipe and glass at the Bell, and I saw that he was well on for tipsy. He had indeed been drinking there some hours, and would perhaps have stopped longer, but that the landlord persuaded him to go home. He was hardly able to walk, and as I did not wish him to get into trouble, which might mean also trouble to me, I followed him to the door, determined I would see him to his lodgings if necessary; but just then his landlady's son happened to come by. The poor chap, as I well remember, had been to the dentist's to have a tooth drawn, but his face was so swollen that Mr. Claws would not attempt to draw

it till daylight, and the poor fellow was half-distracted with pain. He offered to see Lytherly home, and as he lived in the same house and slept in the same room, of course he was the fittest party to do so; and so off they went together, and in due course of time I went home too.

Next day was Sunday, and a quiet day enough it always was in Combestead. Younger men might have thought it dull, but it suited me. I had lived fifty years in London, and did not object to the steady-going ways of the little town; in fact I took to going to church, and all sorts of things. Well, the day passed by without anything particular, and I was really thinking of going to bed, although it was only 9:30, for I felt sleepy and tired, when I heard somebody run hurriedly up our front garden, and then followed a very loud double knock at the door. I lived, I should mention, at a nice house in Church-street, which was a turning that led from the High-street into Orchard-street, where, as I have said, Miss Parkway lived. I was just about to drink a glass of eggshot, which is a thing I am very partial to when I have a cold, and this was winter-time; but I put the tumbler down to listen, for when such a hurried step and knock came, it was nearly always for me; and sure enough, in another half minute the door was opened, and I heard a voice asking if the Superintendent was in; then, without any tapping or waiting, my door was thrown open, and I saw a young woman whom I knew as servant to Mrs. Amblass. The moment I saw her I knew something serious was the matter; long experience enabled me to decide when something really serious was coming.

"Now, Jane," I said, "what is it?"

"Oh, Mr. Robinson!" she exclaimed, (I forget whether I have mentioned before that my name is Robinson, but such is the fact); "come round at once to missus, for we have found poor Miss Parkway stone dead and murdered in her room!"

And with that, as is a matter of course with such people, off she went into strong hysterics. I couldn't stop with her; so I opened my door, and equally, as a matter of course, there I found the landlady and her servant listening.

"Go in and take care of that girl," I said; "and one of you bring her round to Orchard-street as soon as she can walk."

I didn't stop to blow them up, and they were too glad to escape to say a word; so off I went, and found a little cluster of people already gathered round the gate of the house I wanted. "Here is the Superintendent!" I heard them say as they made way for me. I hurried through, but had no occasion to knock at the door, for they were on the watch for me. Mr. and Mrs. Amblass were in the passage, and a neighbor from next door; all looked as pale and flurried as people do under the circumstances.

"This is a most terrible affair, sir," says poor old Amblass, who was a feeble, superannuated bank clerk. "We have sent for you, sir, and the doctor, as being the best we could do. But perhaps you would like to go to her room at once?"

I said I should, as a matter of course, and they led me to her room. There was a light there, and they brought more up, so that everything was plainly visible. The people had not liked, or had been afraid to disturb anything, so the room was in the same state as when they had entered it. It appeared they had not been surprised at Miss Parkway not coming down in the morning, for this was not uncommon with her; but when the afternoon and evening passed away and she did not appear, and no answer was returned to their rapping at her door, they grew alarmed, and at last forced an entrance, when they found the furniture in confusion, as though a struggle had taken place, and poor Miss Parkway in her night-dress lying on her face quite dead. They had lifted her on to the bed, and from the marks on her throat had judged she died from strangulation. As I could do no good to her I noticed as closely as I was able the appearance of the room, and especially looked for any fragments of cloth torn from an assailant's clothes, which often remain after a struggle; or a dropped weapon, or any unusual marks. But I could see nothing. There was no difficulty in deciding how the assassin had entered the apartment and how he had left it, for the room was on the ground floor, and the lower sash of one of the windows was thrown up, although the blind was drawn fully down. The furniture was knocked over and upset; the wash-stand, which was a large and somewhat peculiar one, of a clumsy and old-fashioned description, had been overthrown, and had fallen into the fire-place, where it lay resting on the bars in a very curious manner; while the jug had fallen into the grate, deluging the fire-place with water, but, extraordinary to relate, without being

broken; not broken to pieces, at any rate, although badly cracked.

I ought to have mentioned that the drawers in which Miss Parkway kept her money and jewelry were forced open and every valuable abstracted, the only trace of them being a few links of a slight chain of a very unusual pattern, which, with a curious stone, the lady generally wore round her neck. This chain had evidently been broken by the violence used and parts of it scattered about; the stone was gone.

Information was of course sent to Miss Parkway's relative who came sometimes to visit her. And the result of all the inquiries made was to make things look so very suspicious against young Lytherly, and so much stress was laid upon his quarrel with Miss Parkway upon her refusal to lend him money—which seemed known to everybody—that I was obliged to apprehend him. I didn't want to hurt his feelings; so I went myself with a fly, although his lodgings were not half a mile from the town hall, so as to spare him from walking in custody through the streets. I found him at home, looking very miserable, and when he saw me he said: "I have been expecting you all the morning, Mr. Robinson; I am very glad you have come."

"Well, I'm sorry," I answered. "But you may as well remember that the least said is soonest mended, Mr. Lytherly."

"Thanks for your caution, old friend," he says with a sickly smile; "but I shan't hurt myself, and I feel sure no one else can do so. Why I said I was glad you had come, was because from Sunday night, when the murder was found out, until now, middle day on Tuesday, everybody has shunned me and avoided me as if I had the plague. I know why, and now it will be over."

I didn't put handcuffs on him or anything of that; and when we got into the street he saw the fly, round which there had already gathered at least a score of boys and girls, who had, I suppose, seen me go in. He looked around and said:

"This was very thoughtful of you, Mr. Robinson; I shall not forget it."

We drove off, and spoke no more until we arrived at the town-hall. Here the magistrates were sitting; and here I found a tall, dark, grave-looking gentleman talking very earnestly to Mr. Wingrave, our chief solicitor. I soon found this was Mr. Parkway, the cousin of the murdered lady. He was giving instructions to the lawyer to spare no expense; to offer a reward if he thought it necessary; to have detectives down from London, and goodness knows what. Mr. Wingrave introduced me, and was kind enough to say that there was no necessity for detectives to be brought, as they had so eminent a functionary as myself in the town.

It was supposed that this would be merely a preliminary examination, but it turned out differently. A few of Lytherly's companions—although, as it transpired afterward, they fully believed him guilty—were yet determined he should have a chance, and so subscribed a guinea for old Jemmy Croton, the most disreputable old fellow in the town, but a very clever lawyer for all that; and Jemmy soon came bustling in. He had a few minutes' conversation with Lytherly, and then asked that the hearing might be put off for an hour. This was of course granted, and by the end of that time he had overwhelming evidence to prove an alibi, for the landlady's son hadn't slept a wink for his toothache, and he was with Lytherly until dinner-time on Sunday; and then the accused went for a walk with a couple of friends, and did not return until after dark, having spent two or three hours at a public house some miles off, as the landlord, who happened to be in the town, it being market-day, helped to prove; the rest of the time he was in the Bell, as was usual, poor fellow.

There was no getting over this. There was not a shadow of pretense for remanding him, and so—much to Mr. Parkway's evident annoyance—Lytherly was discharged.

Mr. Parkway left that evening, having placed his business in the hands of Mr. Wingrave; for as there was no will, he was the heir-at-law. Now this was a very curious affair about the will, because Miss Parkway had told her landlady not many days before, that she had made her will, and in fact had shown her the document as it lay, neatly tied up in her desk. However, it was gone now; and she had either destroyed it, or the person who had killed her, had taken that as well as the money; and even if the latter was the case, it was hardly likely to turn up again. So, as I have said, Mr. Parkway went home. The solicitor realized the poor lady's property; and all our efforts were in vain to discover the slightest clue to the guilty party. As for Lytherly, he soon found it was of no use to think of remaining in Combestead, for guilty or not, no one of any respectability cared to associate with him; and,

as he owed to me, the worst part of it all was that old Croton, the lawyer, whenever they met at any tavern, would laugh and wink and clap him on the shoulder, and call upon every one present to remember how poor old Jemmy Croton got his young friend off so cleverly; how they "flummoxed," the magistrates and jockeyed the peelers, when it was any odds against his young friend.

So he went; and a good many declared he had gone off to enjoy his ill-gotten gains; but I never thought so; and one of our men going to Chatham to identify a prisoner, saw Lytherly in the uniform of the Royal Engineers, and, in fact, had a glass of ale with him. The young fellow said it was his only resource—diligence he could not, and to beg where he was known would be in vain. He sent his respects to me, and that was the last we heard for a long time of the Combestead murder.

I had left the Police altogether, and was living very comfortably, my good lady and I, up at Islington, in the same street with my married daughter, who was doing very comfortably too, her husband having a good berth in the city. I had always been of a saving turn, and had bought two or three houses; so with a tidy pension, which I had earned by thirty years' service, I could afford to go about a bit and enjoy myself. Of course in all that time I had made the acquaintance of a good many professional people; and there were very few theatres or exhibitions that I couldn't get admission to.

It was at the Canterbury I first had the Combestead murder more particularly recalled to my mind.

There was a young woman who sang a comic version of "There's a Good Time Coming," splendidly; and as I always was of a chatty turn, I couldn't help remarking to the person that was sitting next to me how first-class she did it, when he exclaimed: "Hallo! why, never! Superintendent Robinson!" And then held out his hand.

It was young Lytherly, but so stout, and brown, and whiskery—if I may say so—that I didn't know him.

"Mr. Lytherly!" I exclaimed, "I didn't expect to see you; and you're right as to my being Robinson, although Police officer no longer. Why, I thought you were in the army."

"So I was," he returned; "but I'm out of it now, and I'll tell you how it was."

It seems he had been to India, and got some promotion after three years' service; and had the good fortune to save his Colonel from drowning, or what was more likely in those parts, being taken down by a crocodile, under circumstances of extraordinary bravery. He did not tell me this last bit, but I heard so afterward. Lytherly was always a wonderful swimmer, and I remembered his taking a prize at London. The exertion or wetting brought on a fever, and he was recommended for his discharge. The Colonel behaved most liberally. But what was the best of all, the old fellow who kept the canteen at the station died about this time, and Lytherly had been courting his daughter for a good bit, more to the girl's satisfaction than that of her father; so then they got married, and came to England, and he was tolerably well off. He naturally talked about the Combestead murder, and said frankly enough, that—except the people with whom he lodged, and they were suspected, he said, of perjury—he thought I was the only person in town who did not believe him guilty of the murder.

"But murder will out, Mr. Robinson," he said, "and you will see this will be found out some day. I dream of it almost every night; and my wife consulted some of the best fortune-tellers in India, and they all told her it would be discovered."

"Hum!" I said; "we don't think much of fortune-tellers here, you know."

"I am perfectly aware of that," he says; "and I shouldn't give them in as evidence; but if you had lived three years in India with people who knew the native ways, you might alter your mind about fortune-tellers. Anyway, you will remember when it's found out, that I told you how it would be."

I laughed, and said I should; and after we had another glass together, and he had given me his address and made me promise to call on him, we parted.

It was the very next day that Mrs. and myself had agreed to go and see a new exhibition of paintings which some one was starting in London, and tickets were pretty freely given away for it; but the same reason which stopped my wife from going to the Canterbury, stopped her from going to the exhibition. I went, of course, because I couldn't be of any use, under the circumstances, to my married daughter; and a very good exhibition it was too. There were plenty of paintings, and I

had gone all through all the rooms and entered the last one. There were very few persons, I was sorry to see, in the place, so that you could have an uninterrupted view of any picture you pleased. After glancing carelessly round the room, for one gets kind of surfeited with pictures after a bit, I was struck by a gloomy-looking painting to the left of the doorway, which I had not noticed on my first entry. When I came to look closer into it, I was more than struck—I was astounded.—Concluded next week.

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