

THE STRANGE CLUE.

By an Ex-Detective. CONCLUDED.

IT was a picture representing the finding of old Trapbols, the miser, in the Fortunes of Nigels. The heavy dull room was lighted only by the candle which the young nobleman held above his head; and it appeared to be excellently painted. But what drew my attention was, that as a part of the confusion in which the struggle between the old man and his murderers had placed the room, the washstand had been upset, had fallen into the fireplace, and the ewer had rolled into the grate, where it was shown as unbroken, although the water was flooding the boards—all exactly as I had seen the same things five years before—so exactly, that I was perfectly sure no chance coincidence had produced the resemblance, but that whoever had painted this picture had seen the room where Miss Parkway was murdered, and had had the features of the scene stamped on his memory. Who so likely to have the scene so stamped, I instantly thought, as the murderer himself? As this rushed on my mind, I could not repress an exclamation, although pretty well guarded as a rule. The only other person in the room heard me, and came to see what had excited me so strongly. Apparently, he was disappointed, for he looked from the picture to his catalogue, then to the picture again, then at me, back to his catalogue, and then went away with a discontented grunt. I did not move, however, but remained quite absorbed in the study of this mysterious painting; and the more I looked the more convinced I became that it was copied from the scene of Miss Parkway's murder. There were several little points which I had not at first noticed, and in fact had quite forgotten; such as the position of the fire-irons, the direction in which the water had run, &c., which were all faithfully shown in the picture. To be brief, I had made up my mind before I left the room that I had at last found the real clue to the Combested murder.

The artist's name was Wyndham; and I determined that I would very soon, as a natural beginning, make some inquiries about this Mr. Wyndham; and, indeed, I began before I left the exhibition. I engaged the hall-keeper to have a glass with me at the nearest tavern, and when I got fully into conversation with him, asked carelessly where Mr. Wyndham lived, as I thought I had known him many years ago, giving a description of some entirely imaginary person. The hall-keeper said no: "No, that was not the sort of man at all. Mr. Wyndham was" (here he described him); "and he doesn't live at the west end of London, as you said, Sir, but at a place in Essex, not very far from Colchester." He knew where he lived, because he had several times posted letters to him at "The Mount." This was all that I got from the hall-keeper, but it was as much as I wanted.

I am not greatly in the habit of taking other people into my confidence, but this was altogether an exceptional case; so, after a little reflection, I went straight to the address John Lytherly had given me, and told him what I had seen. He of course introduced me to his wife, a very pretty dark-eyed young woman; and when I had told all they exchanged looks less of surprise than triumph. "Oh, it is coming all right!" he exclaimed. "I knew the murder would cry out some day. And now you will have a little more respect for Indian fortune-tellers."

"I am not quite sure about that," I said. "But don't you go making so certain that we are going to find out anything, Mr. Lytherly; this may be only an accidental resemblance." Because, as you may suppose, I had not told them how confident I felt in my own mind.

"Accidental! Nonsense!" was all he said to that; and then he asked me what was the first step I proposed to take. I told him that I thought we ought to go down to this village and see if we could learn anything suspicious about Mr. Wyndham; and by my old detective habits, and the way in which the officers about would be sure to help me, I thought we might reckon on finding out what was wanted. He was delighted, and asked when we should start, and when I said that very night, he was more delighted still.

It is always my rule to strike the iron while it's hot, and nothing could possibly be got by waiting now; so I had made up my mind just to run home, get a few things in my bag, and go down by the ten o'clock train. My wife, you may be sure, was very much astonished; but, as I expected she would be, was just as confident in the murder being found out as young Lytherly himself. Of course the latter was ready. And we were put down at our destination about twelve o'clock; too late for

anything that night, but still we were on the spot to begin the first thing in the morning. And accordingly directly after breakfast we began. John Lytherly would have begun before breakfast, but as an old hand I knew better than that; because the party we were after, allowing he was the right party, after a five years' rest, wasn't going to bolt now; so it was no case for hurrying and driving. Well, soon after breakfast, I sauntered into the bar, and began talking with the landlord, who was an elderly sort of party about my age, and who bragged—as if it were a thing to be proud of—before we had talked three minutes, that he had lived, man and boy, in Chumply, which was the name of the lively place, for more than fifty years.

"Then you're just the fellow for me," I thought; and then began talking of an old master of mine who was now living somewhere down in this neighborhood, by the name of Wyndham.

"Wyndham? Let me see; Wyndham!" says the landlord, putting on his wisest look. "No; I can't remember any party of that name. There's Wilkinson and Wiggins; perhaps it's one of them."

I told him they would not do; and then added that the party I meant was something of an artist, painted pictures partly for pleasure and partly for profit. This was only a guess of mine, but it was a pretty safe one.

"Oh! there's lots of them about here!" exclaims the old boy, grinning very much as if it was a capital idea. "There's Mr. De Lancy Chorkle, Miss Belvedera Smith, Mrs. Galloon Whyte, Mr. Hardy Canute, and a lot more; but I don't think there's a Wyndham."

"Ah, well, it don't matter," I said, very carelessly still; "I may be mistaken. I heard, however, he lived down here at a place called the Mount. Is there such a place?"

"Is there such a place?" says the landlord, with as much contempt in his voice as if I ought to be ashamed of myself for not knowing. "Yes, there is; and a first-rate gentleman artist lives there too; but his name ain't Wyndham; his name happens to be Parkway, Sir, Mr. Phillip Parkway, though I have heard that he is too proud to paint under his own name."

"I think, landlord," I said, "that I'll have just three-penn'orth of brandy cold;" which I took, and left him without another word, for when I heard this name I felt struck of a heap, because it made a guess into a certainty, though in a way I had never dreamt of. I couldn't even go back to Lytherly for a little while; it was all so wonderful; and I was so angry with myself for never having thought at the time that the man who, of all others in the world, had the most to gain by the poor woman's death, might have been the one who killed her. In the bitterness of my feeling I could not help saying that any one but a detective would have pounced upon this fellow at the first. However, I got over the vexation, and went back to Lytherly to tell him my news. We were each very confident that we had the right scent now; but yet it was not easy to see what we were to do. I could not very well apply for a warrant against a man because he had painted a picture; and so we walked and talked until we could think of nothing better than going down to Combested, and with our fresh information to help us, seeing if we could not rake up something there.

We came to the conclusion just as we reached a toll-gate, close by which stood a little house, which appeared to be the beer shop, baker's, post office, and grocer's for the neighborhood. Not much of a neighborhood, by the bye, for, excepting a few gentlemen's seats, there was hardly another house within sight. One small but comfortable-looking residence, we were informed by the chatty old lady who owned the "store," was the Mount, where Mr. Parkway lived. He was a very retired, silent sort of a gentleman, she said, and people thought his wife didn't have the happiest of lives with him. He had been married for a few years, the old lady went on; soon after a relation had died, and left him a good bit of money. Before that he only rented apartments in the village; but then he married Miss Dellar, who was an orphan, with a good bit of money too, but quite a girl to him, and they went to live at the Mount. At this point the old lady broke suddenly off, and said: "Here they are!" going to the door immediately, and dropping her very best courtesy. We followed her into the little porch; and there, sure enough, was a large carriage, drawn by one horse, and in it sat a gloomy, dark man, whom I had no difficulty in recognizing, and by his side a slight, very pretty, but careworn-looking young woman. Mr. Parkway looked coldly enough at us, and we carelessly returned his glance, for we were both so much changed since the Combested days, that there was little fear of his remembering us.

It seemed that they had called about a servant, which the post office keeper was to have recommended, and Mrs. Parkway alighted from the carriage to write some memorandum on the business. Parkway had never spoken, and I thought I could see in his harsh features traces of anxiety and remorse. Lytherly had followed Mrs. Parkway into the shop, and as I could see from where I stood, on the lady asking for a pen, he drew his gold pen-case from his pocket, and offered it, as probably containing a better implement than any the post office could afford. The lady stared, looked a little startled, but after a moment's hesitation accepted it with a very sweet smile. While Mrs. Parkway was engaged in writing her letter, Lytherly stood by her side, and sauntered out after her. I had been waiting in the porch, watching her husband, whose face was so familiar to me that I half expected to see a look of recognition come into his eyes; but nothing of the sort happened. Lytherly watched them drive off, then turning suddenly round, exclaimed: "It's as good as over, Robinson! We've got them!"

"Why, what is there afresh?" I asked. "Just sufficient to hang the scoundrel," said Lytherly. "You remember, of course, that among other things which were stolen on the night of the murder was a curious locket which poor Miss Parkway used to wear, and that some fragments of the chain were afterward found."

I remembered this very well, and told him so.

"Very good," he continued, "I gave that locket and chain to the poor old girl; it was the only valuable I possessed in the world; and Mrs. Parkway has the central carbuncle in her brooch now."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, not knowing exactly what I dare say at the moment.

"It is a fact," he said, "and I can swear to it. What is more to the point, perhaps, is that although the stone is in a strange setting, and no one but myself, probably, could recognize it, yet I can identify it. On the one side are my initials cut in almost microscopical characters. If they are there, that settles it; if they are not, put me down as an imposter, and fix the murder on me if you like."

There was a good deal more said after this, but the upshot of it was that we went over to Colchester, and laid the matter before the authorities; when after a little hesitation, a warrant was granted for the apprehension of Phillip Parkway; and two officers, accompanied by Lytherly and myself, went over to execute it.

It was after nightfall when we arrived at the Mount and on knocking at the door, we found that Mr. Parkway was in; but his wife was out, having gone out, (so the elderly woman that was called by the foot boy informed us,) to play the harmonium at the weekly rehearsal of the village choir. "About the only amusement she has, poor thing," the woman muttered, and she seemed in a very bad temper about something. We said we wanted to see her master, and that she need not announce us. And, as I live, I believe that woman guessed directly who we were, and what we had come for. At any rate quite a glow of triumph came into her face, and she pointed to a door nearly opposite to where we stood. We opened it, and found ourselves in a sort of large study, where, seated at a table, reading was the man we wanted. He looked up in surprise as we entered, and the light falling strongly on his face, while all the rest of the room was in darkness, I thought I saw a paleness come and go on his gloomy features; but that might have been fancy.

"What is your business?" he began; but Mr. Banes, the chief constable cut him short.

"I am sorry to inform you, Mr. Parkway," he said, "that I hold a warrant for your arrest, and you must consider yourself in custody."

Parkway stared at him, mechanically closed the book he was reading, and said:

"On what charge, Sir?" "For murder," says Banes; and then I was sure Parkway turned very white. "For the murder of Miss Parkway, at Combested, in 186—"

Parkway looked from one to the other of us for a few seconds without speaking; at last his eyes settled for an instant on Lytherly; then turning to Banes, he said, pointing straight at Lytherly, "It was that man, I have no doubt, who set you on."

"You had better not say anything, Sir," said the chief constable, "but just give your servants what orders you wish, and come with us as we cannot stop."

"I dare say it was he," continued Parkway, not answering Mr. Banes, but seeming to go with his own thoughts. "I fancied he was dead, for what I took to be his ghost had been seen in my

room every night for this month.—Where is my wife?"

We told him she was not at home, and that we were anxious to spare her as far as possible; but he gave such a bitter smile and said: "She will certainly be vexed to have had a husband that was hanged; but she will be glad to be a widow on any terms."

We didn't want to hear any more of this, so got him away; not without some little trouble though; and if there had not been so many of us, we would have had a scene; as it was we were obliged to handcuff him.

The servants, four of them, were naturally alarmed, and were in the hall when we went out. Mr. Parkway gave a few directions, and the elderly woman grinned quite spitefully at him.

"Don't insult the man, now he's down," I said in a whisper, while Parkway and the two officers got into the fly. Lytherly and I were to ride outside and drive.

"Insult him! the wretch!" she said; "You don't mean to suppose he has any feelings to hurt. He has been trying to drive my poor young mistress, that I nursed when a baby, into her grave, and he would have done it if I had not been here. The only excuse is, he is, and always has been, a dangerous lunatic."

We drove off, and I saw no more of her, and never heard how Mrs. Parkway took the intelligence.

The lady was present at the preliminary examination; and to her great surprise her carbuncle brooch was taken from her and used against her husband. This examination was on the next morning, and we obtained more evidence than we had at first expected. Not only was the carbuncle marked as Lytherly had said it would be, but I had been up to the station, being unable to shake off old habits, and had made some inquiries there. Strangely enough, the man who was head-porter now had been head-porter five years ago (it is a very sensible way railroads have of keeping a good man in the same position always; promotion generally upsets and confuses things,) and he was able, by secondary facts, to fix the dates and to show that not only did Mr. Parkway go to Combested for the funeral, but that he went to London and back just before; from London, of course, he could easily get to Combested, and his absence left him about time to do so. We proposed then to have a remand and get evidence from Combested, but it was not needed.

Parkway had been expecting this blow for years, and always kept some deadly poison in the hollow of his watch-seal. This he took on the night after his examination, and was found dead in his cell by the officer who went the rounds. He first wrote a very long and minute confession, or rather justification, showing that his motive had been to prevent his cousin's marriage with Lytherly, whom he seemed to hate very much, although the young man had never harmed him. He said he went expressly to Combested to get possession of the money his misguided relative had drawn, and to kill her. He felt that if he left her alive she would carry out her scandalous plan, and therefore it was his duty to kill her; so in doing this he felt he had committed no crime, but had only been an instrument of justice. So I suppose he was, as the housekeeper declared, a dangerous lunatic.

However, the reward of £100 had never been withdrawn, and I got it; it was paid out of Parker's estate, too, which was about the strangest go I ever heard of. Lytherly and his wife are great friends with Mrs. Robinson and myself; indeed, we have usually one of their young ones staying with us, when we haven't one or two from my married daughter. Mrs. Parkway, I heard, sold off at the Mount, and went away; and some time after I saw by the papers that she was married to some one else. I hope she made a better match the second time.

On the whole, on looking back I am inclined to think that of all the clues by which I ever found anybody out, this was really the strangest.

History and Strawberry Packing.

It is a curious fact that the packing of strawberries, raspberries and similar fruits on the system of putting all the choicest fruit on the top and the spott fruit underneath is one of honorable antiquity; for it was alluded to in the form of a political apologue by Queen Elizabeth about three centuries ago. Speaking of her Ministers, this good queen said: "When first chosen by me all goes well, for they do put forth their best virtues like the large strawberries in market-baskets, but by and by small vices and faults appear in them like the little fruits hidden beneath the big."

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