

TRACKING A CRIMINAL,

OR Paul Webber, The Detective.

CONTINUED.

"A POUND a-day," he said, when by himself, and looking about the room. "But no matter, my winnings at my lady's card-tables will carry me on for a couple of months; and if I can't manage the business in that time, I ought to be turned out of the force."

He passed a pleasant hour in distributing and arranging his purchases in the various drawers and wardrobe he found in his apartment; and then putting on his best purchases, he strode out of the hotel with as much confidence as he could assume; gave orders in the office that a haldresser must wait upon him in the morning, likewise a hatter and a bootmaker; and then, police-officer again, he set to work to find a convenient lodging for Margaret. Passing the Abbey, and the elaborate fountain at the corner of Great George Street, he entered Bird-cage Walk, the houses of which have two entrances—one from Bird-cage Walk, the other in Park street. By the placarded window of one of these houses, he found that there were rooms to let, and at once he made inquiries.

Now, it may occur to the reader to wonder why Webber did not simply matters by taking a second suit of apartments in Westminster Palace Hotel for Margaret; for she was passing as his sister, and nothing could be more natural than that a brother and sister should live under one roof. If he had gone to her, and said, "I have taken for you the next set of apartments to my own," probably she would only have nodded. It would never have entered her head that the act of living near him was wrong. She had but one thought—to avenge the murdered man.

She looked upon Webber as a mere machine, who was to direct her hatred in obtaining vengeance. But, on his part, he looked upon her as a living and breathing woman. Strange that he, who by preference had become a mere police-office detective,—strange that, in all which related to Margaret, he showed himself to be a perfect gentleman. He would not allow her to live under the same roof as that which covered him, because he feared she might be compromised. This was the aim of his life—to bring the assassin to confession by Margaret's influence, while she herself should suffer as little as possible, and run little or no risk of losing her reputation during the process.

Therefore, he was very difficult to please in finding the lodgings he wanted. The very first he looked at was admirably suited to his purposes, but he would not take it at once. But after hours spent in hunting for convenient apartments, he came back to the first he looked at.

The lodgings in question were exactly suited to Margaret. This was Webber's thought. They were on the first floor, and consisted of three rooms—a front drawing-room, at the side of which was a bedroom, and a back drawing-room, to the window of which was attached a conservatory and balcony, from both of which a charming view of the Park was obtained.

The rooms were capital in themselves, not expensive, and so well furnished that while they did not look comfortable in their grandeur, they were perfectly fitted to the use of a lady who had been accustomed to good society. But their greatest charm consisted in the fact that there were two entrances and two staircases to the house.

It has already been said that this strange man's delicate consideration for Margaret's character had induced him to prevent her from living in the same house where he had a lodging. From a similar feeling of delicacy, he saw, in the peculiar arrangements of this house, a great advantage in preserving her from suspicion. She could always enter and go out at the street entrance. He could meet her, when it was necessary that he should see her, at the Park entrance.

Then, again, if a visitor surprised her while he was present, he would not have to pass this person even on the stairs; while he could retire without being seen, even if the visitor were at the door, for he could pass by the conservatory and balcony to the landing window, which opened like a door from the staircase leading to the garden and the gate opening upon Bird-cage Walk.

And the landlady of the house so far fell in with his views, that she undertook to provide him with a garden gate key, so that he could let himself in and out, and avoid disturbing the servants.

"Again," he thought, "I may often have to watch him when he does not know I am near. Now from the conservatory, and keeping behind the sloes, I can see over the two drawing-rooms, and hear everything if the windows are open; and if they are not, they are

simply latched, and I can unfasten them in a moment."

For thirty-six hours the police agent had not slept. Now, and only now, when he had taken, all possible steps to prevent Sivory from discovering a fault in the description he had given of himself and Margaret,—now, when he had made all possible preparations for what was to happen, did he feel—not sleepy, but nearly dead for want of rest.

He almost reeled back to the hotel, refused dinner, went directly to bed, and falling asleep—awoke not an hour afterwards.

"What is the matter with me?" he asked. "I can't rest, though I am half dead for want of sleep. I can drop off easily enough upon my mattress in my own room off the Strand. Why not here? Perhaps because the bed is soft."

He got up, pulled a way the bed, and lay down upon the mattress. Another hour over, he was awake again. This time tears were on his face! At this he wondered greatly.

What allied the police detective, a common-place man? How came it to pass that he was so particular to guard the fair name and fair reputation of Margaret Mayer?

On the morning following that strange night of restlessness, Webber was up by times; had seen the tradesmen he had directed should attend upon him, and had breakfasted before Sivory made his appearance. As a rule, debts incurred over cards are paid within twenty-four hours of their being made, and, therefore, Webber was quite certain that Sivory would pay him a visit. His great fear took the shape of a dread that, by some means, Sivory had found money sufficient to meet the debt, and that paying it, he would naturally escape the watch the police-officer sought to maintain over him.

At one o'clock, however, the debtor had not made his appearance. Webber began to experience a certain nervous hesitation—a fear that his plot would fail.

It was not before three that his nervous trepidation suddenly ceased, when one of the hotel servants came to say a gentleman wished to speak to him.

As Austin Sivory appeared upon the threshold, Webber ran forward to meet him.

"Ha, 'tis you!" he said, with a slight accent in his voice, to aid the declaration that he and his sister had lived in Italy for some time! "I am delighted to see you! I suppose, after such a night as the one before last, you were not out of bed yesterday until the afternoon. Just like me."

"I have not slept well," said Austin.

"Why, I suppose you were over-tired."

"Yes; but, beyond that, I was anxious."

"Anxious! What about? Sleep ought to master all anxiety. Ha, I understand! I suppose you are in love with one of the charming ladies we met at Lady Pauline's. What beauty, what wit, what elegance distinguished them. Ha, there is nothing like your real English lady for beauty! The Italians may be beautiful, but they do not equal English beauties, and there is an end of the matter. And even my sister admits the same thing."

"You should not have taken your sister to Lady Pauline's."

"Why not?" asked Webber, in the most simple and candid tone possible.

"Then you did not quite comprehend the society in which you passed the evening?"

"In what society—amongst people who played at cards? Cards, I am told, are coming into fashion again; and is not Lady Pauline one of the leaders of fashion?"

"Yes, but she carries her peculiarities a little too far. In a word, Lady Pauline is a perfectly nice woman, but the best people will not visit her; and, therefore, any strangers to London coming to town, and visiting her in the first place will not be very likely to get into the very best society."

"Then you mean to say that I ought not to have taken my sister to that house?"

"Since you ask me the question so directly, I reply you ought not to have taken your sister to Lady Pauline's."

"This comes," replied Webber, "of being over truthful, and of not making inquiries. The best of friends said to me, when I was leaving Rome, 'Call upon Lady Pauline Darmer, Corzon Street, May Fair, and say all sorts of pleasant things to her concerning me. She is visited by a great many nice people, and her house is therefore one of the most charming in London.'"

"It is a most charming house," replied Sivory; "but too many parties are given there to justify a man of your position in introducing his sister into it."

"And I was quite eager to make Lady Pauline's acquaintance, and to present my sister to her ladyship. Fortunately she spoke so scarcely any one, for everybody seemed absorbed about the card-tables, and took no notice of her. I

tremble at the very thought of committing another social absurdity. Poor dear sister, she recently lost a friend, and the loss has preyed deeply on her mind; for already, I dare say, you have remarked the settled melancholy upon her face. I think, however, the journey to London has already done her much good, and I hope the change will do her more. I thought that I would at once launch her into a little gaiety and pleasure; but it now appears to me that my first attempt was very unfortunate. I ought to have asked my friend more particulars concerning Lady Pauline. But he had no idea that my sister was with me."

"My dear sir," cried Austin eagerly, "pray do not make so much of this little accident. No great harm is done."

"True, true; very true," replied Webber, rapidly. "Margherita must not hear a word about all this, for I am very particular about her—so particular, indeed, that I will not even have her remain in an hotel, so while I am here, she is at a house in Park Street, and facing your St. James' Park. I assure you, it would pain me fearfully if she came to know what a fault I have committed."

"No doubt," replied Austin. "But I have done myself the honor of this visit in order to—"

Webber cut in with these words: "To settle a little money affair there is between us. Pray do not speak of the trifle."

"But—"

"Rather let me trust that you have done me the honor that we may strengthen our acquaintanceship, so pleasantly begun. As for the little sum I was so fortunate as to win, put it pray, on some side-table or the mantle-piece, and let us continue talking."

"The fact is—"

Here Sivory stopped; for embarrassed and ill at ease as he was in the presence of his creditor, he became the more so as he remarked the want of importance with which he referred to the debt of honor.

"The fact is—what?" asked Webber, in a light, careless voice.

"I find that I must remain your debtor for some days longer. In consequence of several turf and other losses, I am, just at this moment, very hard pressed for money."

"Really!" asked the detective, in a tone of voice which would be used by a person who would be astonished to hear that one could be in want of so small a sum as that owing by Austin to the supposed Mr. Varli.

"In fact, Mr. Varli," continued Austin, in a fallen voice "I am come to beg you to remain silent concerning this debt, which is but a question of a few days, and to give me a week's or even a fortnight's credit."

"With all the pleasure possible," cried Webber. "Take what time you like. A week—two—three—a month. No doubt your affairs are such that you cannot realize when you wish; all that is very natural. Indeed, if I hesitated for a moment, hesitation would come with a very bad grace from me, who am myself about to ask a favor, and of you."

"Of me?"

"Yes; but pray permit me to explain myself."

"I am quite at your disposal, Mr. Varli."

"You yourself have been in a position to see how utterly unfitted for the every day world I am," began Webber, in that candid, frank voice, the value of which was known to no one better than himself. "I have really no experience of London life, and I am exposed to trip at every step I take in it if I have no one to guide me. Therefore, I need not say that I look upon having met such a man as yourself as a very great advantage. I therefore venture to ask you to help me with advice, and give me your experience."

"Pray command me," said Austin, and in a tone the eagerness of which delighted the watchful detective.

Now the offer made to Austin was too good not to be accepted. He already dimly saw the possibility of having no longer to trouble himself about a debt the knowledge of which during the last twenty-four hours had very much distressed him.

"I thank you beforehand for your kindness," said Webber. "However, I warn you not to offer to do too much for us. Remember, I am not alone, and that I am accompanied by my sister. As for you and me we shall get on together swimmingly, and I hope to make myself not altogether a burden upon you; for some of your tastes are mine, and I will force myself into liking the rest. But do not forget that in undertaking to look after me, you undertake also to pay some attention to my sister. It is to her most of your kindness must be shown, while you will find her far more difficult to please than I am myself."

"How is that?" asked Sivory. "During the short conversation I had with

your sister, she appeared to me a very amiable lady."

"No doubt she is very amiable amongst those she knows; and, indeed, before she experienced the loss to which I have already referred, she was remarkable for her liveliness; but now she is changed, and, indeed, you may find her at times almost morose, and looking at you, and addressing you, as though your very presence was an abomination. I simply put you on your guard, my dear Mr. Austin. Don't, therefore, think for a moment that you will owe me any thanks if I can make things agreeable to you; for in undertaking to look after my sister and myself during our stay in London, you place us both under a deep debt of gratitude."

"As you will," replied Sivory.

"Capital; and be sure I shall put your offer into operation without thinking long about it, I can assure you."

"So much the better."

"In the first place, I have quite a crowd of small inquiries to make. We shall certainly remain in London all the winter, and we want to pass it as agreeably as possible. What must we see? Where shall we go? And when may I present you to my sister in her own drawing-room, not Lady Pauline's; and in a manner more suited to your station and hers, than that in which you came to know her the night before last?"

"I cannot be presented to Miss Varli at too early a date."

"Then let us say to-morrow."

"So be it—to-morrow."

The newly made friends separated at the end of a quarter of an hour. Webber was delighted with his morning's work; while, as to Sivory, he was not at all displeased with his day's industry. In fact, he could scarcely account even to himself for the extremely pleasurable anticipation of the morrow which he experienced.

CHAPTER IX.

Three weeks have passed since that meeting at the "Westminster," and in that time Sivory and Webber have become inseparable companions. As to Austin, his life appears to have merged into this daily process. He gets up, carefully dresses, and makes his way to the Westminster Palace Hotel, where generally he breakfasts with the detective, who has now been so long playing the part of a rich Anglo-Roman, that he is perfect in the part.

"When I have finished and completed this mystery of Taggart's Inn, and made it as clear as day," he wrote to the Earl of Arlington, "then I shall occupy myself with my own family; for I believe that I must be descended from a good stock, I have so readily taken to the life of a gentleman. For my part, I begin to fancy that I am come down from a duke."

"And what if you are descended from a duke, you imbecile?" wrote the Earl, in answer; "you are still only a detective."

This aristocratic answer was accompanied by a handsome check, which, with the detective's winnings at Lady Pauline's, enabled Webber to calculate that he could carry on his present style of living through two or three months, if that length of time should be necessary to complete his inquiries.

Webber spared no expense when Sivory was present. There was scarcely a meal set upon the table at which champagne did not appear, while the dishes consisted of whatever was rarest and richest in the kitchens of the hotel.

It is, however, only just to the detective to declare that, apart from his guest, he was very economical, and even sordid.

In fact, Webber appeared to revel in this dual life—in being one moment Mr. Varli, from Rome with an unlimited amount at his banker's; the next being Webber the detective, looking after that case in Taggart's Inn.

As a rule, it was after a late breakfast, followed by an early cigar, that these two friends discussed as to how the day was to be passed.

"Well, 'mio caro,'" said Webber, one morning, and puffing forth a mouthful of blue tobacco smoke with all the aristocratic ease possible, "what of the famous plan we made for visiting all the wonders of London together? We seem to have forgotten it. Now just let us go over what we have seen, shall we? In the first place, you have taken us down to the Crystal Palace to dinner or rather you took me, for Margherita would not go—you remember that?"

"Unquestionably I remember it; and what then?" asked Sivory, laughing lightly.

"Why I did my best to make you drink more than enough champagne; and you only drank enough, and you kept as cool as a cucumber, and as quiet as a summer wind. I could get none of your secrets out of you."

"And how, my dear Varli, can you tell that I have any secrets? Really I do not think I possess any such treasures."—Continued next week.

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