

TRACKING A CRIMINAL,

OR

Paul Webber, The Detective.

CONCLUDED.

“WHO is that speaking?”

“Me, sir,” said a man, pushing forward.

“Was not this one of the witnesses for the prosecution?”

“Yes, my lord,” replied the speaker; “I’m the porter at Taggart’s Inn. I see it all now, my lord. On the night when Mr. Forbes was murdered, I had a few friends, and I daresay I did not keep my eye on the gate as well as usual. Whoever killed the gentleman, I never saw him, and I never saw this man, the prisoner. But about nine that night, Mr. Bressinair came running to me, and he says, ‘Russell, here’s Mr. Widginton in a fit, I think. At all events, he is at the foot of the staircase, insensible.’ We took him up stairs to his room between us, and a doctor was sent for, who said he had received a fearful blow on the right temple. But when he came to, he said that he had not been struck; that he had had a sort of fit, and that the mark upon his temple must have been done by an edge of the stairs as he fell.

“The doctor, however, still maintained that it was a blow. The next morning, the awful discovery of Mr. Forbes, dead, drove Mr. Widginton clean out of my mind. He was in bed for quite a week; and when he got up, he left Taggart’s Inn for the seaside. Since then he has had his furniture moved away. He himself has never returned. But to the last he maintained that he had not been struck, although he gave orders that no stranger should be allowed to approach him.”

“That’s the man,” said Langley. “He fell upon the stairs, and thank God I haven’t got murder on my conscience!”

The judge now conversed with the clerk sitting below him, the counsel whispered together, and the public began to buzz.

Meanwhile, Langley never once took his eyes off Sunflower, who was smiling and talking to the gentleman at her side.

But when the judge spoke, the silence in court was positively intense.

“The evidence just offered,” said the judge, “is of so remarkable a nature, that I find myself incapable at once of deciding upon what course to take. Gentlemen of the jury, the case is adjourned until to-morrow, when I think it very likely that you will be discharged without asking you to give any verdict whatever.”

On the following day, the counsel for the Crown withdrew the indictment; and therefore, Langley being returned to prison, had another chance of breaking jail, and of again seeking Sunflower’s presence.

The woman herself decided to escape to America. Nothing was more certain than that she would never again see him. She felt that she having tried to destroy him, he would show her scant mercy.

CHAPTER XVI.

On the day following the conclusion of that remarkable trial, Webber once more went to Margaret’s house. He went in the daytime, with the sun shining, and to the front door.

He was congratulated by the landlady of the house on his re-appearance, and an inquiry was made as to where he had been.

He made some feeble answer, and passed up-stairs.

He tapped with offensive loudness at the door; and when Ellen Fotheringay appeared, he said to the astonished girl: “Tell your cousin that I want to see her.”

“Come in, Mr. Webber; I’ll tell my cousin.”

And now Margaret entered the room. Webber was still standing.

Without asking him to sit down, she said, “Why have you come. I never expected to see you again. I come to tell you that Langley did not kill Graham Forbes!”

“Did not kill him?” Why, he confessed to the murder!”

“He confessed to what he supposed was a murder. He thought he had killed a man; he only stunned him. This man lived in Taggart’s Inn, and this affair took place the same evening as the assassination of Mr. Forbes. I need tell you no more. You can see how the mistake has arisen. It was only when the counsel began talking of the way in which the deceased had been stabbed, that Langley knew there was an error, for he had simply used his fist against his victim. Here is the paper—will you read it?”

She took the paper he held towards her, and very slowly she read the particulars of the strange turn the trial had taken.

Having completed the perusal of the report, she drifted into deep thought, and the paper rustled to the ground.

Webber picked it up, folded it carefully, and slowly put it into his pocket.

“So we must begin again!” he said, “I made a foolish mistake, I admit, and I have been wandering upon a false track. But in recognizing the false track, I came back to the old one, which is assuredly the right one.”

“The right one?” she replied, beginning to comprehend the man’s drift.

“Yes, miss, the right road; for inasmuch as Langley is not the guilty man, I am the more justified in again suspecting Austin Sivory.”

“Sir, the gentleman you are pleased to suspect, is far, far above your suspicions.”

“My suspicions reached him before,” said the officer, cruelly, “and I flatter myself that they will reach him again. What change has taken place in the man that his position so utterly differs from that in which you placed him a few short weeks since?”

“I know him now to be an honest gentleman,” she replied, with energy. “I have come to know him; and in knowing Mr. Sivory, I esteem him. Do not cast upon him the shadow of your suspicion—of your evil thought!”

“Woman,” replied Webber, exasperated to see Margaret defend Austin with all the energy of her vigorous nature, “from the moment I have entered this room, you appear to have taken a pleasure in giving me to understand that I am nothing but a police-officer—that there is nothing of the man, much less gentleman, in my composition. So be it. But the detective only knows his duty. He has been told to find out a certain criminal, and without reference to any interest a woman may feel for him, or the love she may have bestowed upon him.”

“She leaped from her seat, and said, ‘Leave the house!’”

For some time Margaret was quite unable to recover her self-possession. However, suddenly she took a resolution. She had previously assured herself that Webber had quitted the house, and she had given orders that he should not be admitted again.

No one thought of the key of the garden gate, which he still possessed.

Her resolution took the shape of a letter, which was thus worded:

“Do not come to see me during the day, but be here at seven this evening. I think I have some good news that you will be very glad to hear.”

“MARGHERITA.”

This letter was written and addressed to Austin Sivory.

She then said to her cousin, “I wish you would carry this letter yourself to Mr. Sivory. Take a cab, and be as quick as you can.”

When Ellen returned, she said, “Will you help me pack up?”

“Why, Margaret? Where are we going?”

“Far away—to Italy.”

“And when?”

“To-morrow morning.”

“I am in complete amazement!”

“You will soon learn all. I am going out. If anybody calls while I am away, say that I shall not be able to see anybody to-day. As for to-morrow, let to-morrow take care of itself.”

She then left the house, called a cab, and drove to her lawyer’s. With him she had a long, and evidently important, interview.

About half-past six, night being now come, she returned home. The spy quitted his cab near Westminster Bridge. Five minutes after he had opened the garden gate, crawled up the staircase, was once more in the balcony, and watching her.

As the clock of the Houses of Parliament sounded seven, the drawing-room door opened, and Austin Sivory appeared, looking radiant with happiness.

“What is the news?” he asked, advancing. “I am glad to hear anything that you say; but what is the great news?”

“I am going to leave London—to leave England for Italy.”

“Let us go he said.

“Will you follow me?” she asked.

“Can you ask the question?” he replied, kissing her hands.

She looked fixedly at him, read the deep love he had for her in his beseeching eyes, and said, “Sit down; I have to talk with you very seriously.”

“I hear you,” he said, as he seated himself upon a stool at her feet.

“I have committed,” said she, “a great fault—a fault even greater than I thought it could be; and I have atoned for it with bitter tears. But I do not seek to make you responsible for this fault, and it will never be mentioned after this day between us. I trust myself to your wealth of love; and it will, I am certain, be happy work for you to make me forget a wretched past.”

“All my existence belongs to you,” he said.

“I do not doubt it. And what would become of me if you were gone? I have no longer even the right to think of the past.”

“Do not remember, but look forward, and hope.”

“I would I could as readily forget my past.”

And now a desire to open his heart to tell her the great and terrible secret of his life—took possession of him.

She had spoken of her past life, and he owed it to her to speak of his. There could be no secrets between them—they loved each other so much. Before she accepted his name, he told himself that she must know the circumstances which placed a black spot upon that name. Who would be merciful to him if not Margherita? Who so naturally as Margherita could wipe away his tears, console him, and calm him with sweet words?

“Margherita, I have a secret; may I tell it to you?” he said.

The man in the balcony crouched lower down, but, at the same time, more closely to the window-panes.

“MAY you tell it?” she replied, candidly. “You know you may.”

“Tis a secret of my remorse—remorse which tears my heart in twain.”

“Remorse?” cried Margherita, raising her head.

“Listen!” he continued, his voice betraying a strange, wild, terrible exaltation.

“Margherita, if some one told you that the man you loved—him to whom you have given life, whose name you consent to bear,—if you were told that he had committed a terrible deed—even a crime—what—?”

“What should I think? Austin,—would not believe that person.”

“Yet, if it were true—if in a moment of rage, fury, he had dared mortally to strike a human being—?”

She turned deadly pale, and shrank from him.

“And if,” he cried, “by a fearful fatality, that wound brought death with it—?”

“Be silent—be silent!” she cried instinctively.

“No,” he wailed, “I have begun, and I will make an end to it. This secret is killing me. You must condemn me, or absolve me.”

Again she called upon me to be silent but he could hear no longer; all his senses were wrapped in his pleading voice.

He was now on his feet, his hands before him, striding up and down the room, in agony.

“Listen,” he cried, “and know me. Calm as I usually am, I am sometimes so little master of myself that I have no self-control whatever. I had dined, on that particular night, at Verey’s, in Regent Street, and as I was much tormented and worried about money affairs, I am afraid I drank more than I was accustomed to take. Dinner ended, I called upon a gentleman, with whom I had already quarrelled over money matters. I owed him a large sum of money. I was unable to meet my engagements, and I wished to inform him of the fact. I found him at home, and alone. He received me very harshly. I explained to him the serious position in which I was placed, and told him that I was fearfully pushed for cash. I prayed him to be good enough not to issue a writ against me. I urged, ‘You will completely ruin me, and also the little credit which yet remains to me in the city and by which I live.’ He replied that it mattered little to him whether I lived or didn’t. I entreated him, and he remained quite insensible to my prayers. Thereupon, raised to a pitch of exasperation, I cried, ‘You’ll find that you will cause a serious disaster! Rather than be humiliated, pursued by legal processes, I will destroy myself!’”

“You!” he replied, in a mocking tone; “you kill yourself. If you think fit, here is a sharp poniard, quite at your service. I offer it to you as a present, quite certain that you will turn it to no bad use!”

“Quite mechanically, I took the knife, but my blood was by this time coursing through my head. The wine I had drunk mastered me. I no longer supplicated my creditor. I complained of his rigor, and reproached him for his harshness. ‘Harshness!’ he cried, ‘there!—here are your precious bills! Take them—I want to have nothing more to do with you! But I shall have the right to say over in the city that you are a rogue!’ ‘A rogue!’ I cried. I flung myself upon him, and he struck me in the face. Thereupon, mad with rage, I struck him in turn, but unfortunately, with the knife he had placed in my hands. He uttered one cry, and fell, while I cast the blade from me, and fled. So it all happened, and this I swear!”

Austin Sivory stopped for a moment, overcame the bursting sobs which were stifling him, and continued.

“I believed that I had only slightly wounded him, but I had killed him. Some days afterwards, I received a letter from Mr. Caellem, the magistrate, requesting me to call at his court, where I saw him. At first, I determined to confess all, convinced that no jury would have found me guilty of murder. I was unfortunate rather than criminal. I had caused death, but I had no intention of

doing so. Suddenly I remembered the bills of exchange that I had refused to take, and which he had forcibly thrust into a pocket of my overcoat. There they were, and they would condemn me, if I told all, for they gave a motive for murder. I felt that I should be looked upon as a common murderer, who killed for money. Now, Margherita, speak;” he continued, advancing towards her, but not daring to look at her, “Speak; you know my crime. Do you absolve me?”

Her face was hidden in her hands. She made no reply.

The silence affrighted him. He placed his hand upon her forehead, and tried to raise her head.

Then he drew back in affright, for her face was livid.

Two heavy tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“Am I, then, more guilty even than I thought myself? Will you never forgive me?”

She stood up with an immense effort, and after much useless attempt, she said, “The Margherita whom, in his last words, he ordered to avenge him, was myself. I was to have been the wife of Graham Forbes!”

For a few moments no word was said. Their agony was beyond description.

At last, in a deadly voice, he said, “You have avenged him!”

Another pause, and he said, “Good-bye forever!”

He staggered from the room.

He looked back as he went over the threshold.

She was on her knees, praying.

A minute, afterwards, there was a great shrieking and calling in Park Street, outside the house within which Margherita was still praying.

“I say,” cried the coachman of a private carriage, which had stopped, “that the man threw himself under the horses.”

“Nonsense!” said a man who had been looking on; “the gentleman had just left that house,” pointing. “You were driving too fast, and you knocked him down.”

“Is he dead?”

“No; but both his arms are broken.”

“Poor dear gentleman!” here said a voice from within the carriage. “I assure you my man is very steady; he has been with me thirty years. I am Lord Arlington. Pray be good enough to place the gentleman in my carriage, and I will drive with him to the hospital.”

“No,” said a voice, “he belongs to that house. Some one knock at the door.”

The next minute the occupier of the dwelling came out, and recognized the sufferer.

“Good gracious! it’s Mr. Austin Sivory—pray bring him into the house, gentlemen.”

About this time Lord Arlington had busied himself very much concerning a police-detective of the name of Webber. The newspapers could not make out the mystery. The writers told their readers how Mr. Austin Sivory, leaving a certain house in Park Street, Westminster, had imprudently attempted to cross the road, and must have slipped upon a piece of orange peel, or other dangerous substance. At all events, the horses and wheels of a carriage went over the unfortunate gentleman. The owner of the carriage happened to be in it, for he was being driven to the Opera; and this gentleman—the Earl of Arlington—showed great anxiety about the sufferer—the more especially when he had heard from the landlady of the house in Park Street who the gentleman was.

Mr. Sivory was taken up-stairs, where Miss Mayer was found in a condition apparently of torpor. The presence, however, of the injured gentleman, who was much blood-stained, recalled her to herself, and she at once busied herself about the still senseless patient.

It was at this point that a strange gibbering was heard at the window, and the attention of those present being drawn to the point, they saw a terrified, white face looking in.

Fear for some time prevented anything being done. The window was at last opened, when it was found that the individual in question was quite insane.

“It is Miss Varii’s brother,” here said the woman of the house.

When suddenly, Lord Arlington uttered a sound of anguish and cried, “Paul, my poor lad—Paul, do you not know me?”

He looked, smiled, and then said, in a low voice, “Hush! we shall hunt him down.”

He was quite mad.

Last November there died, in a private asylum for the insane, a patient who was distinguished as the richest in the establishment. He died of sheer bodily exhaustion.

He was quite harmless and pleasant, and was possessed of but one mania—that of listening, day after day, at key-holes, or hiding in a corner, or with his eyes at a chance crack in any wood-

work. Thus he would pass entire days.

At the inquest held on the body—as an inquest is held upon all people who die in public establishments—the doctor said: “His name was Paul Webber, and I supposed he fell a victim to over-zeal in his profession. He was found mad in the balcony of a house partly occupied by a lady who had employed him to search for the murderer of a gentleman, a gentleman to whom she was to have been married. How he found his way to the balcony, or why he was there, has never been ascertained. He was a favorite protege of the late Lord Arlington, who left him about a thousand a year. To the last, the nobleman believed he would recover, and left this sum of money that his protege might be in easy circumstances, when he was re-possessed of his reason.”

Three months after that fatal night when Austin Sivory’s arms were broken under the wheels of Lord Arlington’s carriage, a beautiful woman sat watching by the bedside of a still young man, whose arms were bound, and whose face showed great marks of care and sorrow.

“You have passed through the purification of suffering, Austin; and I have learned to love you once more while nursing you. I repeat, I will be your wife. The future must conceal all the past.”

“I wonder whether I did throw myself under the carriage wheels or not. Whichever way it may have been, I bless the chance, for it brought you back to me.”

“Never to go again, Austin; and we will leave this place and find a lovely, quiet spot, where no one knows us, where we know no one. We will do all we can for these about us, and live a sweet, peaceful, happy life. I recall that it has been said, ‘To him that has much loved, much shall be forgiven.’”

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