

different opinion, and although they would prefer obtaining more conclusive evidence before proceeding to extreme measures, yet at the same time they deem it necessary to closely watch the actions of the gentleman I have mentioned, of course, unknown to himself. The officers expect that the clue already obtained will eventually lead to the discovery of the person whose hand committed the dastardly act. As I have stated, I am almost positive, nay, I feel absolutely certain that the police have mistaken their way, and will be compelled to look in another direction. I would almost as soon suspect my own son as the gentleman whom the detectives think it their duty to "shadow," as they term it; yet there are one or two awkward facts brought to light which may be misconstrued by prejudiced or malicious persons, and may lead to unpleasant complications. You will, I feel sure, pardon me, Mr. Dixon, if for the present I withhold the gentleman's name. I can assure you every effort is being made to solve the mystery, and I have instructed the police to offer £100 reward for the apprehension and conviction of the person or persons implicated. I may mention that the circumstances connected with the finding of the revolver are at present known only to the police authorities and myself, as the lake was dragged in the early morning, and so far the knowledge has not been disclosed to anyone else.

"Forgive me, Squire," returned Mr. Dixon, "I quite agree with the steps you are taking and thank you very much for your interest in the matter. You may double the sum offered, for while the untimely fate of my son has shocked and pained me almost beyond expression, yet for his sake, and for the sake of my family, I shall leave no stone unturned till the murderer has been run to earth. You recognize the necessity of this, do you not?"

"Certainly," replied the Squire, "and I, for one, trust that your efforts may prove successful."

CHAPTER XII.

ABOUT a week after the visit of Mr and Mrs Dixon to Squire Oakfield, a benevolent-looking, elderly gentleman in spectacles, dressed in a suit of broadcloth, and wearing an immaculate white collar, the tie to match, might have been observed slowly wending his way along the Camberwell Road, London, his eyes bent upon the ground, and his brows knit as if some problem had presented itself to his mind which he found considerable difficulty in solving. In his right hand he carried a neat black leather bag, and his appearance generally, seemed to indicate that he was a minister of the Gospel. There was nothing remarkably striking about the gentleman, and nineteen out of every twenty of the people who passed him on the road never turned to bestow on him a second glance. As he approached the more frequented streets, however, a close observer might have noticed a slight change in his demeanour. True, he walked along at nearly the same pace, and his right hand still kept its hold of the little black bag, but his eyes were no longer bent upon the ground before him; instead, they looked out from behind his spectacles with a very keen glance; in fact, nothing seemed to escape their penetrating gaze. Once, as the clergyman stepped aside to avoid collision with a spruce-looking gentleman, who was hurrying in the opposite direction, the bag I have mentioned was accidentally knocked against a lamp-post, and emitted a ringing sound, such as would be caused by two metallic substances, like iron and steel when brought into sharp contact with each other. At the sound the benevolent-looking old clergyman glanced from the bag to the man who had passed in such haste, and smiled as if the connection between the man and the contents of the bag had aroused some pleasurable reminiscence. "Have a care, my young friend," soliloquised the clergyman. "Be very careful now, or we shall renew our acquaintance before long, so I warn you, muttering which he hailed a passing hansom, and taking his seat in the vehicle, directed the cabman to drive to Paddington Railway Station. Upon arriving at the station the clergyman alighted, and after paying the cabby his fare proceeded to make his way to the booking office. He did not procure a ticket, however, but after a swift glance at the faces of those gathered round the ticket box, he continued on his way down the platform.

The elderly gentleman's movements seemed to have some attraction for Policeman X. 21, who was on duty in the vicinity, for no sooner did he catch sight of the clergyman than he immediately made it his duty to saunter in the same direction, and brushing past him near the book-stall, said, in a voice which indicated that his remarks were intended solely to catch the ear of the gentleman he was addressing, "11.15, South train. Alone." The clergyman half-turned, gave the constable a slight look of recognition, and bent his head to imply that he had heard the remark and understood its meaning, and at once became apparently absorbed in the contents of a book which he had lifted from the book-stall. The book must have been an interesting one, for the gentleman not only raised his eyes whilst perusing it, save when he turned a leaf. Presently, however, he closed the book, just at the moment when a tall, dark, gentlemanly-looking man came hurrying along the platform closely followed by a hotel porter, the latter carrying in his hands, a Gladstone bag and a gentleman's travelling rug. As the two passed the book-stall the clergyman noticed that the bag which the porter was carrying was marked with a monogram, "G.O." in gilt letters, and as the dark gentleman reached the door of an empty first-class smoking carriage, the clergyman saw him turn to the porter remarking as he did so, "you are quite sure the rest of the luggage is all right?"

"Yes, sir," responded the man. "I labelled them for Finchley, and put them on the luggage van myself."

"Thanks," replied the gentleman, and handing the man some silver for his trouble, the porter touched his hat and went off. The clergyman also left the platform for a brief space of time and made his way to the ticket office, and having procured a first class single ticket for Finchley, returned to this compartment occupied by the dark gentleman.

The latter, in the meanwhile, had divested himself of his silk hat, for which he had substituted a tweed one, and now sat in a corner of the car with a pile of papers and books on the cushions at his side. In a few moments the starting-bell rang, porters rushed along the platform calling out, "All aboard! Take your seats please!" the clergyman stepped into the compartment occupied by the dark passenger, the guard blew his whistle, and the engine with its living freight rushed on its journey. For the first miles the two gentlemen did nothing but read their papers, till at last the younger man, feeling an inclination for a cigar,

drew out his cigar case, which he politely handed across to his fellow-passenger, with the request that he "would oblige him by taking a cigar." The elderly gentleman, whilst thanking him for his courtesy, assured him that "being a martyr to dyspepsia, his medical adviser had ordered him to discontinue smoking." After this slight break they both lapsed into silence again, and became absorbed in the contents of their respective papers. Had the dark gentleman been aware of the true name and occupation of the elderly passenger, it is questionable whether he would have been so unconcerned about him, for the pseudo clergyman was a none other than that astute gentleman, Mr. Jeremiah Flint, ex-sergeant in Her Majesty's Police Force, and at the present time a member of the detective staff of Scotland Yard, London.

As the train stopped at a little roadside station for the purpose of putting off a few passengers, Mr. Flint, in a mild tone of voice, addressed his companion. "I beg your pardon, sir, but can you inform me what time this train should arrive at Finchley?"

"I believe 6.30 p.m. is the time, according to Bradshaw," responded the other.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," effusively from Mr. Flint. "I do hope I shall not be over carried. I mentioned to the guard to be sure to let me know when we arrived at Finchley. I trust he won't forget to do so."

"You may make your mind easy on that score," replied the dark gentleman, "as I get out at Finchley myself."

"Do you really? Then I'll not worry myself any more about the matter. By-the-by, I notice that the papers are still pretty full of the Oakfield murder which occurred there the other day. What a shocking affair that was to be sure, but, pardon me, perhaps you were acquainted with the unhappy man who met such a terrible fate?"

The gentleman thus appealed to removed his cigar from between his lips as he replied, "Yes, I had a slight acquaintance with the poor fellow, but as the subject is a rather painful one to me, you must excuse me if I prefer not to discuss it," with which remark he resumed his cigar, at the same time bestowing a searching look on his questioner.

The latter's face, however, wore such a benign aspect, and appeared to express so much regret lest he had, unintentionally, wounded the feelings of his companion, that the gentleman felt that he had been rather curt in his answer to the old clergyman, so to make some amends he addressed Mr. Flint again. "You seem interested in this case, sir?"

"Yes, yes," replied that gentleman, with some emotion. "It was a sudden call for the young fellow" (and to do the ex-sergeant justice, we must add that he was not incapable of appreciating the moral underlying the remark he had just uttered) "and," he continued, "I have heard it stated that a few hours before he met his death he had quarrelled with another gentleman, and had been forcibly expelled from the Grange, he being at that time in a state of intoxication; and it was also stated that the gentleman with whom the deceased had been quarrelling had been heard to threaten he would horsewhip him."

"I am happy to be in a position to contradict part, at any rate, of your statement, and since we have approached the subject, and it is evident, from your remarks, that mischievous reports are in circulation, I think it is time some steps were taken to refute these assertions; so allow me to inform you that this statement about threatening to horsewhip the gentleman, and the other about his being forcibly expelled from the Grange, are entirely without foundation, and must have originated in the brain of some evil-minded or thoughtless individual with a morbid tendency to exaggeration."

"Indeed!" replied Mr. Flint. "I am extremely glad to hear it. I was afraid that the reports were to be relied upon, the consequences, so far as the young gentleman who quarrelled with the deceased was concerned, might have been of a serious nature, as I believe he was the first person to discover the body of the murdered man; and as it appears that no one else saw the deceased, so far as is at present known, after he left the ball-room till he was found dead, why, you know, the police, and the public too for that matter, might have put an ugly construction on the circumstantial evidence at their disposal. But if, as you say, the report about the quarrel, etc., is untrue, then, of course, no suspicion could attach to the other gentleman, whose name, if I mistake not, is Olphert."

Mr. Flint noticed that his companion started, and his features grew a trifle paler than before. Then he turned angrily towards the detective, and selecting a card from his card-case, he handed it across to him, remarking as he did so, "Perhaps you will be good enough to refer your friends who may be desirous of obtaining reliable information to the gentleman named on that card, with my compliments."

Mr. Flint took the card, and on inspecting it read that the name and address printed on it were

GERALD OLPHERT,
Temple Chambers, Brightstone,
and
Haverstock Villa, Finchley.

Extending his hand, he said with some show of feeling, "Pardon an old man's garrulity, Mr. Olphert. I am afraid my remarks have given you pain."

"Oh, it's all right," said Gerald, "but if I may be allowed to offer advice to one older than myself, I would say, don't be too ready to credit all you may hear till you have heard the other side of the question. But here we are at another station, and as the train slowed up Gerald stepped out on to the platform, the guard intimating that the passengers were allowed half an hour for refreshments."

When the starting bell rang Gerald found that he would have other company for the remainder of the journey, as several fresh passengers had joined the train, and by the time he had taken his seat again the compartment which he occupied was fairly well filled, so that he and Mr. Flint were unable to continue their conversation, much to Gerald's relief. When the train eventually stopped at Finchley, Gerald jumped into a cab, and was driven to his aunt's residence, Haverstock Villa, while the reverend-looking gentleman took a circuit, and at last brought himself up at the local police quarters.

CHAPTER XIII.

"We seek to mount the still ascending stair
To greatness, glory, and the crowns they bear;
We mount to fall heart-sicken'd in despair."

LAWREN.

THE day following the arrival of Detective Flint, at Finchley a rumour was in circulation that the rising and popular

young lawyer, Gerald Olphert, had been arrested on a warrant signed by the local magistrate, charged on suspicion with the murder of Mr. Frances Dixon. The news came to many like a thunderclap. The most intimate friends of the suspected man were horrified and indignant, and euphuistically vowed that "the thing was impossible; absurd."

"What?" said Gerald's friend, Stanley Grahame, "Gerald Olphert a murderer? It's a base falsehood! He wouldn't hurt a worm that crossed his path, much less take the life of a fellow creature. Besides, I have been in his company several times since the body of Mr. Dixon was found, and whenever he has reverted to the unfortunate occurrence it has always been accompanied with expressions of regret at the untimely end of the murdered gentleman, and Stanley hurried off to the police station to request an interview with his friend, and learn the true state of affairs."

Gerald was, as we have previously stated, what is termed 'popular,' and amongst his legal acquaintances and his friends at the Grange he was always spoken of as a 'capital fellow,' but like many others who enjoyed that title, he was not without a circle of envious acquaintances, who were always ready to traverse his actions and assign some ulterior motives to every generous deed, and who, when they heard the news of his arrest shook their heads knowingly as much as to say, 'Ah! I knew he wasn't such a model as his bosom friends insinuated: but I didn't think he was quite so bad as this; although it certainly is a curious coincidence that he should have been the only one near the spot when the shot was fired by which poor Dixon met his fate,' and such like remarks of a similar nature indicative of their own astuteness, and very possibly—though they might not allow this—of their own evil-nimdedness, if I may be allowed to coin a word.

There was one, however, who heard the news as if she had been listening to her own death warrant. Constance Oakfield was sitting in her favourite nook in a retired part of the Grange gardens, little dreaming of the evil spells which were being woven in her destiny. It was a lovely afternoon in June. The bright sun shone in a cloudless sky, the birds sang gaily as they flew from tree to tree, and the soft, drowsy fragrance of the roses, the fragrant perfume of the flowers, and the quiet beauty of the scene around her made her feel that life was, indeed, worth living. From where she sat she was enabled to obtain a magnificent view of the surrounding country. Stretching away in the distance the river ran winding in and out like a ribbon of silver, passing, in its passage to the mighty ocean, through fertile valleys and well-timbered parks, by country village and county town, gathering volume as it ran from all its tiny tributaries; while here and there, half-sheltered by the surrounding trees, some little church modestly reared its spire to heaven. Under the influence of such a scene as this it was little wonder that the thoughts of Constance "lightly turned to love," and as she drew from her pocket a letter, and perused its contents for the twentieth time that day, a happy smile came into her eyes and wreathed itself around her almost-perfect mouth, and with all the ardour of an affectionate, sensitive nature she exclaimed, "What have I done to deserve such happiness? (God grant I may prove myself worthy of your love, Gerald, dear.) The contents of her letter ran somewhat as follows:—

"MY DARLING CONSTANCE, I hope to have the pleasure of seeing your dear face again on Thursday next. All being well, I intend leaving Paddington on Wednesday, but as it will be late before the train arrives at Finchley, I shall not be able to call at the Grange till the following evening, so must possess my soul in patience till that date. I need scarcely tell you, my darling, how I long to see you again. You have not repented the promise you gave me, Constance? It seems almost too good to be true, and is worth all the Lord Chancellorships in the world."

Constance refolded the letter, and put it carefully back into her pocket again, and then, softly humming to herself the refrain of an old ballad,

"A thing divine, for nothing natural I ever saw so noble,"

she rose from her seat and wended her way back through the garden. Very pretty she looked as she stooped to pluck a bud from a rose bush growing near, and had Gerald Olphert been by her side he would have proclaimed her "the fairest flower that ever grew." She was dressed in a white summer costume, relieved by light blue bows, and the rich coils of her bonnie brown hair were half-hidden by a roquish-looking gypsy hat, which was coquettishly tilted to the back of her shapely head. As she came to a bend in the gravel walk she saw her sister Laura coming towards her, frantically waving something above her head. As Constance approached, her sister provokingly doubled the object up in her hands, and placing them behind her back, said laughingly, "'Open your mouth, and shut your eyes, and guess what he has sent you." Now, Constance, a forfeit, mind, if you fail to guess right the first time."

"A letter," said Constance.

"Wrong!" returned her sister. "Forfeit that sweet little rosebud you wear in your breast, and try again."

"Now, Laura," pleaded the other, "please do not provoke me to anything desperate, for you know what a dreadful virago I am when roused."

"Well, since you give it up," said Laura, "look!" and she brought her hands to the front again and handed Constance an envelope containing a telegram. "This has just arrived," continued Laura, "and I thought it might contain welcome news of — Now don't blush, Constance, for you know how well it becomes you," and she, considerably embarrassed, and became, apparently, deeply absorbed in the flowers at her feet. She had scarcely time to gather more than three or four, when an exclamation of pain and astonishment caused her to turn quickly round, just in time to observe her sister, with one hand pressed to her brow, and the other nervously clutching the telegram, while her face was paler than the lilies in the garden, and a wild, hunted look was in her bonnie blue eyes. Laura saw all this at a glance, and sprang forward to catch her, but before she could reach her side Constance fell in a swoon to the ground. Laura was considerably alarmed, but her presence of mind did not forsake her. Hurriedly unfastening the neck of her sister's dress, she hastened to one of the ornamental fountains that was fortunately near at hand, and quickly filling one of the drinking cups sprinkled the water over the neck and face of Constance, who was moaning piteously all the time. In spite of her efforts, however, Constance's eyes remained closed, and her moans became so painful to listen to that Laura decided to run to the Grange for other assistance, first of all taking the precaution to lock the telegram from the hand of Constance and put it in her own pocket; then gently, but quickly, lifting the form of her sister out of the rays of the burning sun, she ran with all possible speed to