

thirty inches high running across the end. On this stood a square tin, which on examination I found to be a picnic-case, divisible into two portions. Save for a few crumbs, it was empty. There was a slight gathering of rust in the corners of the bottom compartment, but with this exception the tin had the appearance of being in daily use.

I confess that each of my discoveries so far had only succeeded in more completely mystifying me. That the stable had been occupied recently—perhaps was still in occupation—was obvious; but had this any connection with the burglary of Dr. Gresham's consulting-room? My experience so far had not brought me in contact with criminals who were in the habit of carrying expensive picnic cases along with the other implements of their trade.

But the crux of the problem was yet to come. I had replaced the picnic-case on the bench, and was standing back contemplating it, when my eye was attracted to something white sticking in the skirting-board below. I found this object to be an envelope, and it had either been placed or, more probably, had fallen accidentally in such a manner that it was held by one corner against the front of the bench. It was sealed, stamped, and directed, in what seemed to me either a hurried or agitated manner, to—

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High Street.

A further search of the floor in this vicinity led to one more find, after which I was able to discover nothing. This was a worn leather pocket-case, empty, which, owing partly to the darkness of the stable, and partly to the similarity of colour between it and the earth between the cobbles, I had not at first noticed.

Leaving the picnic-case, I took possession of the other two articles, and fastening the stable door as I had found it, made my way back to the doctor's house.

As I entered the lane I caught sight of the trap, now containing two figures, disappearing over the hill at the other end. I had evidently missed the doctor, but I determined to go on, notwithstanding, and see if I could elicit any information from Miss Gresham.

The young lady seemed surprised to see me back so soon, and I now noticed what at first had escaped me, that she was dressed in mourning. Possibly, I thought, the pallor and unhappiness of her countenance might be due to the loss of some near relative. Apologising for my intrusion, I handed her the pocket-case, asking her if she could identify it as having belonged to her brother.

"Yes," she said at once, "that is Dr. Gresham's. I know it by these silk stitches at the back, which I put in myself."

"And this," I said, handing her the letter; "but it is hardly likely—"

My words were arrested by a sudden whiteness that swept across the girl's face; she swayed, and, but for my arm, would have fallen. I assisted her to a chair.

"Thank you," she said, unsteadily. "I had not been very well lately."

"Perhaps," I said, embarrassed, "it will be more convenient if I call when Dr. Gresham is back. Will you allow me to ring for assistance?"

"Oh, no," she said, rousing herself; "I assure you it is nothing. You were saying—about this letter?"

"I found it with the pocket-book in the old stone stable across the road. There is also a square picnic-case there, divided into two compartments—have you any knowledge of such a thing?"

"No," she replied, "we have nothing of the kind."

"There is something peculiar about the stable," I said. "Is it supposed to be in use?"

"It has not been used for the last eighteen months," she replied; "not since we first came to live here."

"To whom does it belong?" I asked.

Again the girl seemed to show agitation. "To Mr Barrow," she said, at last, in a curious, hesitating voice.

"Does he reside in the neighbourhood?"

"He did," she replied, "he boarded at the third house from this; but he is gone."

"You think, then, the stable has not been entered with his knowledge and consent?"

"I feel certain of that," she replied. "but why do you ask these questions?"

She looked at me with eagerness, and as it seemed to me a suspicion of dread.

"I hardly know," I answered. "I am puzzled by several things—the appearance of the place presents of having been occupied, the presence of the picnic-case, the pocket-book, and the letter. Are you acquainted with Robert Asher?"

"No," she said, "I do not know him."

I turned and took up my hat, possessed by a feeling of distrust. It was quite evident to me that something material lay behind the girl's agitation, something which she was desirous of concealing; that it was in any way connected with the robbery I could hardly believe, yet how otherwise was it to be accounted for? I resolved before returning to town to pursue the matter a little further by endeavouring to obtain the present address of Mr Barrow.

The third house from the doctor's proved to be a small villa standing close to the road. The door was opened to me by an elderly woman in a widow's cap, who, on hearing my business, invited me inside.

"Are you a friend of Mr. Barrow's?" she asked.

I explained that I was unacquainted with the gentleman, but desired to interview him on a matter of business.

"I wish I could tell you," she replied. "We thought very highly of Mr. Barrow, as indeed did everyone who knew him. The only fault I ever had to find with his was his manner of leaving my house."

"And how was that?" I asked.

"He gave me no notice," she replied. "nor did he drop the slightest hint of any desire to change his lodgings. He just walked out one evening and never came back; nor have I heard of him since. It will be a month to-morrow since he went. With other young men one might be able to come to a conclusion, but Mr. Barrow was different. He was a gentleman, if ever there was one, and his going away like that has puzzled me more than I can say."

The field of my investigations now showed signs of enlarging with a vengeance; I made no effort to bring it back into a narrower compass.

"Perhaps you can give me the information I require," I said. "There is an old stone stable along the road which I am told belongs to Mr. Barrow; have you any knowledge whether he had given permission to anyone to use it for any purpose?"

"No," she replied, looking puzzled. "it was kept locked. He used to keep a horse there at one time, but that is months ago, and it has never been used since. Were you wanting to rent it?"

"I was making inquiries," I said, vaguely, as I rose. "By the way, what became of Mr. Barrow's luggage?"

"It is still here," she replied, "just as he left it. Nothing has been disturbed."

"And you have made no inquiries whatever during the interval?"

"None," she said, becoming agitated. "Oh, sir, do you think I have done wrong? Is there more in this than we think? Miss Gresham—" She stopped suddenly and bit her lip.

"You were mentioning Miss Gresham," I said. "As it happens, she was the lady who directed me here."

"Here!" she exclaimed, "to this house! But Miss Gresham is here every day, sometimes twice a day—surely you must be mistaken. If anyone should know where Mr. Barrow is now it is Miss Gresham."

I pricked up my ears. "How is that?" I asked.

"Because," she said, "they were engaged to be married. Poor, poor girl! This has been a terrible blow to her."

I repeated my self. "Mrs. Cowan," I said. "I may as well be frank with you. I am a police detective sent to inquire into a robbery which has been committed at Dr. Gresham's house. No doubt you have heard of it?"

She assented nervously.

"Tell me," I continued, "all you know about this matter, and if I can help you to ascertain the present whereabouts of Mr. Barrow I will do so. When Miss Gresham called here for the first time after your lodger's departure, did she appear surprised?"

"Yes," she was struck speechless.

"And she called frequently afterwards to inquire if you had any news of him—every day, you tell me, and some times more than once—did she ever suggest any explanation?"

"No," she believed in him, and nothing could shake her. But she told me that her brother, Dr. Gresham, took a different view—that he thought Mr. Barrow had run away to avoid the marriage, and he was very angry in consequence. The doctor is very proud of his sister. I have often thought that it was a good thing for him that the elder sister died instead of Agnes, for I believe it would have broken his heart to lose her."

"They are in mourning for an elder sister?"

"Yes; she died in November—four or five months ago. She had never been strong, but she went off very suddenly at the end. Poor Annie, it was a great shock to them."

I rose, feeling nothing further was to be gained from Mrs. Cowan. It was natural, I thought, that a woman shon natural, I thought, that a woman should be inclined to make a mystery of a man's sudden disappearance, but my knowledge of human nature, led me rather to side with the conclusion arrived at by Dr. Gresham, who had doubtless had opportunities of judging the character of his sister's lover which were denied to both the women. Yet, as I made my way back to the office, I could not avoid speculating on the agitation Miss Gresham had shown on seeing the letter now in my pocket.

The inspector heard my report with a mind evidently distracted by other business. "A fancy," he said, when I had concluded, "that the trail has been crossed; there are probably two sets of circumstances here. No complaint has been made of this man's disappearance, and in the absence of that it is not a fact of which the police can take cognisance. I will put Moulton on to make inquiries about the two large banknotes—we shall probably have to arrest someone; but he will see to that. Go to this Robert Asher and give him the letter and ask for an explanation. There is certainly something that requires accounting for there. Report to me again in twenty-four hours, or sooner if you hear anything important."

I turned into High Street, and a few steps brought me to the doorway on which the name I sought was inscribed. Asher's office, I found, was up a flight of narrow stairs at the back of the building. I knocked, and was hidden to enter. The room was small and dingy, uncarpeted, with a few ordinary articles of furniture. A table stood in the centre, and at this a man was seated, his face towards me.

"Sit down," he said, pointing with a quill to a chair opposite him; "I will attend to you in a moment."

I obeyed, and took stock of the person before me, as he continued busily transcribing some document that lay beside him. He was probably not more than thirty-five years of age, but was already partially bald. There was a wisp of black hair in the centre of his narrow forehead. His features were sharp and his complexion darkly sallow. His eyes, I noticed presently, when he raised them to ask my business, were singularly light in colour, and offered an odd contrast to the general tone of his hair and complexion.

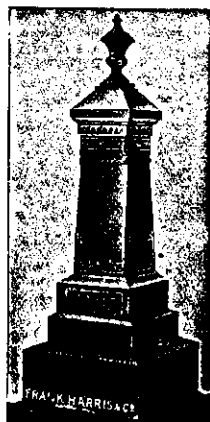
"I happened to be in Cave's Road this morning," I began; "probably you know the place?"

He laid down the pen he had been holding, with exaggerated care, and swung slightly round towards me. "Yes," he said.

"My business," I continued, feeling in my pocket, "took me into the old stable opposite Dr. Gresham's; while there I came across a letter which appears to be addressed to you, but has never been posted." I laid it down on the blotting-pad before him as I spoke.

He did not immediately touch it, but sat looking down at it in silence. "In the stable," he said at last, "that is strange."

"It struck me as being strange," I remarked.



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