Serial Story.

THE MYSTERY OF THE CLASPED HANDS.

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CHAPTER VII.

It would be impossible to picture, with any hope of success, the horror which accompanied the ghastly discovery described at the end of the previous chapter. Save for the cries of the ladies, who shrank from the box and covered their faces with their hands, and a muttered ejaculation from Godfrey, some seconds elapsed before anyone spoke. Fensden was the first to recover his presence of mind. Picking up the sheet of paper which had fallen to the ground, he covered the box with it, thus shutting out all sight of the dreadful things it contained.

"Perhaps it would be as well, ladies, if you were to leave the room," he said. "Godfrey and I must talk this matter over, and consider how we are to act."

"Come, mother," said Kitty," and she led the old lady in a semi-fainting condition from the room, closely followed by Molly.

When the door had closed behind them, Godfrey spoke for the first time.

"Good Heavens, Victor!" he said. "What does this mean? Am I mad or dreaming?"

"I fear it is no dream," replied the other. "Who could have done it? Is it a case of murder, or what? Did you recognise the—the—hands!"

Godfrey crossed to the chimney-piece and covered his face. A suspicion, so terrible that he dared not put it into words, was fast taking possession of him.

"Come, come," said Victor, crossing to him, and placing his hands upon his shoulder, "we must look this matter squarely in the face. Be a man, and help me. The upshot may be even more serious than we suppose. Once more I ask you, did you recognise what you saw?"

"I fear so," said Godfrey, very slowly, as if he were trying to force himself to speak. "There was a little scar, the result of a burn, half-an-inch or so above the knuckle of the second finger of the right hand."

He had painted those beautiful hands too often not to remember that scar. Without a word he crossed to the table in the middle of the room upon which the box stood, surrounded by the cases containing the other wedding presents, and once more removing the lid and the paper, carefully examined what he saw there. No, God help him! there could be no sort of doubt about it; the hands were those of Teresina Cardi, his model and friend. When he had satisfied himself as to their identity, he closed the box and turned to Fensden once more.

"It is too horrible," he said; "but what does it mean? Why should the murderer have sent the hands to me in this dreadful way?"

"That is what I have been asking myself," Fensden replied. "The man, whoever he was, must have borne you a fiendish grudge to have done such a thing. Is there anything about the box that will afford a clue as to the identity of the sender? Let us look."

He examined the box carefully, but, beyond the printed name of the firm who had originally used it, there was nothing that could serve as a clue. It had come by train from Euston, and had been sent off on the previous evening. That for the present was all there was to know about it.

"Once more, what are we to do?" inquired Fensden.

"Communicate with the police," said Godfrey. "In the meantime, I think I will send a note to my future father-in-law, asking him to come over. I should like to have his help and support in the matter."

"A very proper course," said his companion. "I don't think you could do better. I should send a man away at once."

Accordingly Godfrey went to a writing-table in the corner of the room, and wrote the letter, then rang the bell, and bade the servant who answered it see that the note was despatched without delay. When the man had disappeared, he turned to Fensden once more. "And now," he said, "I think it would be better if we removed the box to the studio."

They did so, by way of the new conservatory, of which mention has been made elsewhere. Then, in something less than an hour, Godfrey's future father-in-law arrived. Godfrey received him in his studio, and introduced Fensden to him as an old friend.

"It is very good of you to come so quickly, Sir Vivian," he said, motioning him to a chair. "I took the liberty of sending for you because I want your advice in a very serious matter. How serious it is you will understand when you have heard what we have to tell you. We have had a terrible experience, and I am not quite sure that I am capable of looking at the matter in a temperate light at present."

"You alarm me, my dear boy," said the old gentleman. "What can have happened? Tell me everything, and let me see if I can help you."

"If I am to do that, I must tell you a story. It will simplify matters, and it won't take very long. As you are aware, before my uncle's death, I might have been described as a struggling artist. I was painting my biggest work at that time, and was most anxious to find a model for the central figure. I had hunted London over, but without success, when Mr Fensden here happened to discover an Italian model whom he thought might be of use to me. I saw her, and immediately secured her services. In company with her mother, she had been in England for some little time, and was glad to accept my offer of employment. When the picture was finished and hung, I still retained her services, because I liked the girl and found her useful to me in some other work I had on hand. Then my uncle died, and I came into the estate. Mr Fensden and I immediately agreed to travel, and we accordingly set off together for Egypt and the East, intending to be away about a year. At the same time, it must be borne in mind, the girl and her mother had returned to Italy. While we were at Luxor, I received a letter from her forwarding me her address in Naples, in case I might desire to communicate with her concerning future work. Some weeks later my mother was taken ill, and I was telegraphed for to come home at once. I left Port Said in a mail steamer, intending to take the overland express from Naples to England. Having some hours to spend in the latter city, I thought there could be no harm in my discovering the mother and daughter. I did so; we dined together at a small restaurant, and went on to the Opera afterwards."

"You did not tell me that," said Fensden, quickly.

"I did not deem it necessary," said Godfrey. "I should have done so when we came to discuss the matter at greater length. But to continue my story: After the Opera I escorted them back to their dwelling, but I did not enter. On my way to my hotel afterwards, I was nearly stabbed by a lover of my former model, a man, so she had informed me, who was extremely jealous of anyone who spoke to her. Fortunately for me, he did not succeed in his attempt. I knocked him down, and took his dagger from him."

As he said this, he took the small poniard, with which the Italian had attempted his life, from a drawer, and handed it to the old gentleman.

"Next morning I left Naples, to find on reaching England, that my mother was decidedly better, and I need not have abandoned my tour. Then I met your daughter, fell in love with her, and in due course our engagement was announced. From the moment I said good-bye to her in Naples, until last Thursday night, I had neither seen nor heard anything of or from my former model."

"You saw her on Thursday night?" repeated the old gentleman. "In that case she must have returned to England?"

"Yes," Godfrey replied. "It was after the theatre, and when I had seen Lady Devereux and Molly to their carriage. I was walking down the Strand in search of a cab to take me back to my hotel, when I met her. She recognised me at once, and informed me that her mother was dead, that she had married, she did not say whom, and that her husband was also dead. Though she seemed in great distress, for reasons of her own she would not let me help her. Feeling that she ought not to be in the streets at such an hour, I took a cab and drove her to her home, which was a house in a narrow street leading out of the Tottenham Court road. I bade her good-bye on the pavement, and having once more vainly endeavoured to induce her to let me help her, walked back to my hotel."

As he said this, he crossed to the table on which the box had been placed, and once more removed the lid and paper.

"A number of wedding presents have arrived to-day," he continued, and this box came with them. We opened it, and you may see for yourself what it contained."

Sir Vivian approached the table and looked into the box, only to start back with an exclamation of horror. His usually rubicund face turned ashen grey.

"My dear boy, this is more terrible than I supposed!" he gasped. "What does it mean?"

"I am afraid that it means murder," said Godfrey, very quietly. "My poor little Italian friend has been brutally murdered, by whom we have yet to discover. But why those hands of hers should have been sent to me, I cannot for the life of me understand."

"Are you quite sure they are her hands?"

"Quite sure. There can be no doubt about it. Both Fensden and I recognised them at once."

"One thing is certain: the man who committed this dreadful deed must have been jealous of you, and have heard of your kindness to the girl. Is there anyone you suspect?"

"I have it," said Fensden, suddenly, before Godfrey could answer. "The man in Naples, the lover who tried to assassinate you. He is the man, or I am much mistaken. We have the best of reasons for knowing that he was in love with her and that he would not be likely to stop at murder. If he would have killed you, why should he not have killed her? You told me upstairs, when we were speaking of her distress, that the street was occupied by foreigners; what is more likely, therefore, than that he should have lived there too. Possibly, and very probably, he was her husband."

"But she told me her husband was dead," Godfrey asserted.

"She may have had some reason for saying so," Fensden replied. "There are a hundred theories to account for her words. It is as likely as not that she did not want you to see him. He is a Neapolitan. For all we know to the contrary he may be an Anarchist, and in hiding. She might have been afraid that if you saw him it would lead to his arrest."

"There certainly seems a good deal of probability in Mr. Fensden's theory," said Sir Vivian; "but the best course for you to adopt appears clear to me. You must at once communicate with the police and cause inquiries to be made. I have seen no mention in the papers of a woman's body having been found under such circumstances. The discovery of a body so mutilated would have been certain to have attracted a considerable amount of public attention."

"I think you are right," said Godfrey, after a moment's hesitation. "In the meantime, what are we to do with these poor relics?"

"They must be handed over to the police, said Sir Vivian. "It is only through them that we can hope to unravel the mystery. If I were you I should send for the Head Constable at once and give them into his charge." Then he added, kindly: "I cannot tell you how sorry I am, Godfrey, for your trouble. It must be a terrible blow to you."

"No one can tell what a blow it is, Sir Vivian," said Godfrey, in a husky voice. "A more cruel murder has never stained the annals of crime. The girl was an honest, kindly creature, and that she should have met her death in this manner shocks me inexpressibly. If any reward can secure the arrest of the murderer I will gladly pay it. No effort on my part shall be wanting to bring him to justice."

"You may be sure that he is a cunning fellow," said Fensden, "and that his plans were deeply laid. For my own part, if I were you I should place it in the hands of Scotland Yard and patiently wait the result. You may be quite sure that they will do all in their power, and if they cannot bring about his arrest nobody else will be able to do so."

"Even if they do not succeed in capturing him, I should not abandon the search," said Godfrey. "Poor little Teresina shall not go unavenged. There must be several private detectives in London who know their business almost as well as the officials of Scotland Yard. I will find the cleverest of them, and put him on the trail without delay. If a promise of a thousand pounds can stimulate him to greater exertions it shall be paid."

"You will be only throwing your money away," said Fensden. "He will be paid by the hour, with expenses, and he will fool you with bogus clues from first to last."

"I must risk that," Godfrey replied.

A message was thereupon despatched to the head of the local constabulary, who very soon put in an appearance at the Hall. He was a little man, with a pompous manner and a great idea of his own importance. It appeared to be his opinion that Detwich was the centre of civilisation, and he the custodian of its peace and safety. On his arrival he was shown into the studio, where he found the three gentlemen waiting for him. He saluted Sir Vivian with the deepest servility, Godfrey respectfully, and Victor Fensden good-naturedly, as if the latter, not being a landowner in the district, was not entitled to anything more than a nod.

"We have sent for you, Griffin," said Sir Vivian, "in order to inform you that a serious crime has been committed, not in this neighbourhood, but in London."

"A good many serious crimes happen there every day, Sir Vivian," remarked the official. "May I ask the nature of this particular one?"