

# THE CHILDERBRIDGE MYSTERY

By GUY BOOTHBY.

SYNOPSIS OF INSTALMENTS I. to IV. William Standerton, a successful colonist, with his two grown up children, have decided to leave Australia and settle down in the Old Country. Just before their start, the son, Jim, is accosted by a "swagman" who tells him to inform his father that Richard Murbridge will meet him in the morning. When Jim delivers the message, his father seems greatly agitated, and although no harm comes of the meeting with Murbridge, whom Standerton acknowledges having known in previous years, both Jim and his sister are rendered very uneasy. Childerbridge Manor becomes the English home of the Standertons—an historic mansion with an army of ghosts. Jim, out driving, runs over a dog, and becomes acquainted with its mistress, Miss Devle, and her guardian, Abraham Bursfield. The two young people in time fall in love with one another, but Mr Bursfield refuses his consent. Jim encounters Richard Murbridge in the park. He forbids him to see his father, but the latter, on hearing of it, sends for the man and they have a stormy interview. That evening a fainting servant declares she has seen a ghost, and the next morning William Standerton is found dead in bed, strangled. Suspicion fastens at once upon Murbridge, who, it is found, has left for London. "The Black Dwarf" again appears, frightening the inmates of the Hall.

## CHAPTER V.

The inquest on the body of William Standerton was held next morning at the George and Dragon Inn in the village, and was attended by half the neighbourhood. The affair had naturally caused an immense sensation in all ranks of Society, and, as the Coroner observed in his opening remarks, universal sympathy was felt for the bereaved family. Wilkins, who had not altogether recovered from the fright he had received on the night before, was the first witness. He stated that he had been the first to discover the murder, and then informed the Coroner of the steps he had immediately taken. Questioned as to the visit paid to the Squire by Murbridge, he said that the latter was in a great rage when he turned away from the house, and on being asked to do so, repeated the words the latter had made use of. In conclusion, he said that he was quite certain that no door or window in the house had been left unfastened on the night in question, and that he was equally sure that none were found either open or showing signs of having been tampered with in the morning. Jim followed next and corroborated what the butler had said. A sensation was ensued when he informed the Coroner that Murbridge had threatened his father in his bearing in Australia. He described his meeting with the man in the park before dinner, and added that he had forbidden him to approach the house.

Examined by the Coroner, he was unable to say anything concerning the nature of the quarrel between the two men. The doctor was next called, and stated that he was summoned to the Manor House. He described the body, and gave it as his opinion that death was due to strangulation. Then followed the Police Officer. The landlord was the next witness, and he gave evidence to the effect that the man Murbridge had stayed at the inn, had been absent on the evening in question from eight o'clock until half-past twelve, and that he had departed for London by the first train on the following morning. The driver of the mail cart, who had seen him standing beside the stile, was next called. He was quite sure that he had made no mistake as to the man's identity, for the reason that he had had a conversation with him at the George and Dragon inn earlier in the evening. This completing the evidence, the jury, without leaving the room, brought in a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown," and for the time being the case was at an end.

"You must not be disappointed, sir," said Robins afterwards. "It is all you possibly can expect. They could do no more on such evidence. But we've got our warrant for the arrest of Murbridge, and as soon as we can lay our hands upon him we may be able to advance another and most important step. I am going up to London this afternoon, and I give you my assurance I shall not waste a moment in getting upon his track."

"And you will let me know without fail how you succeed?"

"I shall be sure to do so," Robins replied.

"In the meantime there can be no harm in my putting an advertisement in the papers offering a reward of five hundred pounds to anyone who will give such information as may lead to the discovery of the murderer."

"It is a large sum to offer, sir, and will be sure to bring you a lot of useless correspondence. Still, it may be of some use, and I would suggest that you send it to the daily papers without delay."

"It shall be done at once."

Jim thereupon bade the detective good-bye, and returned to the house to inform his sister of what had taken place at the inquest. She quite agreed with him on the matter of the reward, and an advertisement was accordingly despatched to the London newspapers together with a cheque to cover the cost of a number of insertions.

Next day the mortal remains of

William Standerton were conveyed to their last resting place in the graveyard of the little village church. After the funeral Jim drove back to the Manor House, accompanied by his father's solicitor, who had travelled down from London for the ceremony. He was already aware that, by his father's death, he had become a rich man, but he had no idea how wealthy he would really be, until the will was read. When this had been done and he discovered that he was worth upwards of half a million sterling, he shook his head sadly:

"I'd give it all up willingly, every penny of it," he answered, "to have the poor old Governor alive again. I wonder what the police are doing. It seems an extraordinary thing to me that so far they have not been able to obtain any clue as to the whereabouts of Murbridge. Look at this heap of letters," he continued, pointing to a heap of correspondence lying upon the writing table, "Each one hails from somebody who has either seen Murbridge or professes to know where he is to be found. One knows just such a man working in a baker's shop in Shoreditch, another has lately returned with him on board a liner from America, and on receipt of the reward will give me his present address. A third says that he is a waiter in a popular restaurant in Oxford street; a fourth avers that he is hiding near the docks, and intends leaving England this week. So the tale goes on, and will increase, I suppose, every day."

"The effect of offering so large a reward," replied the lawyer. "My only hope is that it will not have the effect of driving the man we want out of England, in which case the difficulty of laying hands upon him will be more than doubled."

"He need not think that flight will save him. Let him go where he pleases; I will run him to earth."

Helen had spent the day at the Manor House, trying to comfort Alice in her distress. At nine o'clock

she decided to return to the Dower House and Jim determined to accompany her. They accordingly set off together. So occupied were they by their own thoughts that for some time neither of them spoke. Jim was the first to break the silence.

"Helen," he said, "I cannot thank you sufficiently for your goodness to poor Alice during this awful time. But for you I do not know how she would have come through it."

"Poor girl," Helen answered, "my heart aches for her."

"She was so fond of our father," James answered.

"Not more than you were, dear," Helen replied. "But you have borne your trouble so bravely—never once thinking of yourself."

The night was dark, and there was no one about, so why should he not have slipped his arm round her waist.

"Helen," he said, "the time has come for me to ask what our future is to be. Will you wait for Mr Bursfield's death before you become my wife, or will you court his displeasure and trust yourself to me? You know how I love you!"

"I know it," she answered. "But I do not know what answer to give you. Do you not see how I am situated? I owe everything to my Guardian. But for his care of me I suppose I should now be a governess, a music-mistress, or something of that sort. He has fed me, clothed me, and loved me, after his own fashion, all these years. Would it not, therefore, seem like an act of the basest ingratitude to leave him desolate, merely to promote my own happiness?"

"And does my happiness count for nothing?" asked Jim. "Let us talk the matter over dispassionately, and see what can be done. Don't think me heartless in what I say, but you must realise yourself that Mr Bursfield is a very old man. It is just possible, therefore, that the event we referred to a few moments ago may take place in the near future. Then, owing to our terrible loss, it will be impossible for me, I suppose, to be married within the next six months. Now the

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