

turned Mr. Furnival, impatiently. "Our two middle-headed constables here won't be any good; but, if Hawkesbury's marked money doesn't trap the thief in a couple of days, we must send to Wellington for a first-class detective."

The next day was Sunday, and, on Monday morning, Ashtonville was thrown into a state of excitement by the news that there had been a most mysterious robbery at "The Crown Hotel."

Mr. Furnival and Harry Dunquerque had kept the knowledge of the bank robbery strictly to themselves. Messrs. Sloan and Hawkesbury had been discriminating in their choice of the ears to which they confided the tale of their losses. But poor Mrs. Pettifoy, the landlady of "The Crown," invoked the sympathy of all Ashtonville with a loud cry of indignant consternation. She had seven hundred pounds in notes and loose cash locked up in her strong box at eleven o'clock on Saturday night; and when she opened it on Monday morning she found that fifty pounds had disappeared. The key of the strong box had never left her person in the interval; the lock, which was of a very unusual make, had clearly not been tampered with; and the strong box itself had been locked up in her own wardrobe.

Ashtonville pounced upon this fine mystery with avidity. It would furnish food for talk to the township for many days. The stream of custom that at once set in towards "The Crown" bar might be held to suggest a laudable attempt on the part of the townfolk to make good to the landlady the loss she had just sustained.

Mr. Furnival and Harry Dunquerque heard the details of "The Crown" robbery with a feeling almost like panic.

"The invisible thief, again!" cried Harry. "Good gracious! if this sort of thing is going to go on, Ashtonville will be cleaned out of cash pretty soon. Shall we ever find the solution of those mysterious robberies?"

The solution was nearer than he could have imagined.

Early in the afternoon, while "The Crown" robbery sensation was still smoking hot to the good folks of Ashtonville, they were treated to another—bigger this one, but with the sobering touch of tragedy in it. News came that there had been a terrible accident at Sloan's mill, and that the victim was Mr. Hudson Savernake, the pleasant-spoken stranger, who had been staying for the last ten days at "The Crown" on a fishing holiday.

The particulars of the accident were somewhat meagre and confused, but it was understood that Mr. Savernake had taken a ride out to the mill, and was being "shown round" by young Jack Sloan when some careless gesture of his brought his clothing in contact with the teeth of the great circular saw then in motion. The next instant the saw was whirling him round with it. As swiftly as possible the poor torn and battered body had been released from its frightful position, but, even before the doctor golloped out from Ashtonville and gave his verdict it had been realised at the mill that Mr. Savernake's injuries must prove fatal.

Curiosity almost got the better of sympathy in Ashtonville when, early in the evening, a messenger rode in from Sloan's Mill, in hot haste. And presently Mrs. Pettifoy, of "The Crown," in company with Mr. Furnival, of the bank, and Mr. Hawkesbury, and a valise, which was said to belong to the dying man, were seen to drive away very rapidly in the direction of Sloan's Mill. The interested public of Ashtonville decided, on the spot, that Mrs. Pettifoy, kindly old soul, who had been rather "mothering" Mr. Savernake during his stay at "The Crown," was now on her way to nurse him. Not being thoroughly conversant with the range of a bank manager's duties, they concluded, after a little hesitation, that Mr. Furnival must have been summoned by the dying man on business. But, when it came to accounting for Mr. Hawkesbury's being sent for to the death-bed, Ashtonvillers declared themselves completely non-plussed. What could Mr. Savernake want at that time with the flourishing tradesman with whom, as likely as not, he had never exchanged a single word?

But Ashtonville could not be more puzzled in the case of Mr. Hawkesbury than were all the trio, who occupied Mrs. Pettifoy's big dog-cart, in regard to the reason which had made Mr. Savernake

summon them, each and all, with such surprising urgency to his death-bed.

But they lost sight of their bewilderment in a great access of sympathy and awe when they entered the room in which the frightfully injured man had been placed to die.

Swathed in ghastly suggestive bandages, he lay flat on his back in the bed, and as the door opened to admit the three for whom he had sent he turned his eyes towards it.

"Furnival, Hawkesbury, Mrs. Pettifoy and Sloan—yes, that's all of them," he murmured as if speaking to himself. Except that the peculiarly piercing quality of the gaze of his black eyes remained unaltered, he was no longer recognisable as the fine, handsome young fellow of whom Ashtonville had had approving knowledge for the last ten days. The circular saw had, indeed, been very cruel to him.

Mr. Furnival, who had found Mr. Hudson Savernake, on more than one occasion, a very pleasant and interesting companion, approached the bedside, and tried to find words to express his painful feelings of sympathy.

The piercing eyes fixed themselves on the bank manager's face.

"Don't waste your sympathy on me," said the faint voice. "I am a scoundrel."

Before those in the room could quite realise that the words were not the outcome of delirium, he went on, speaking slowly and with painful stoppages.

"Perhaps it was the Power Who sees that scoundrels get their deserts that sent me on here to-day on a little hike—to this end! . . . Anyhow, I have been given time to repent . . . and to undo the petty villainies which I have practised in Ashtonville—never elsewhere before in my life. Believe me, . . . I haven't always been a scoundrel."

He broke off to take a stimulant from the doctor, and then proceeded with his confession to the group of utterly amazed people around the bed.

"In yonder valise, which I asked Mrs. Pettifoy to bring here with her tonight—she will find the fifty pounds she missed from her strong-box this morning. The money that disappeared from the bank is there too, Mr. Furnival, . . . and the money Jack Sloan couldn't think how he lost on his way home on Friday morning. The greatest part of the cash I've been supplied with from your till is there also, Mr. Hawkesbury. . . . But I'm afraid I've spent some of it. . . . I was frightfully hard up. I came to Ashtonville, . . . clutching aimlessly at the skirts of chance, . . . hoping that something good might turn up for me somehow. But nothing did. And to keep my head above water . . . the thought came to me to turn to account the power that I've . . . always known I've had. My villainy was the meanest of its kind . . . utterly despicable. . . . But it answered well, and when I found I could get money . . . so easily and safely out of Hawkesbury's till, I . . . tried for bigger sums. And yesterday I took fifty pounds from you, Mrs. Pettifoy, . . . and you have been very kind to me."

Mrs. Pettifoy's over-strained feelings had found vent in subdued sobs, that were oddly punctuating the dying man's utterances.

"But I seemed to have lost my conscience. I only thought of scooping as much as I could out of Ashtonville, and then going . . . elsewhere to try the game afresh. I thought—"

"But what was the game? However did you manage to get money out of my till with all of us watching so close?" burst out Mr. Hawkesbury, so curious to learn this secret as to be oblivious of everything else for the moment.

"I made your son, Jim, give it me," replied Savernake. "No, don't swear! the lad is all right . . . a good lad. He . . . doesn't know. . . . I hypnotised him."

Then, in accents growing ever feebler, he went on to speak of the remarkable mesmeric powers which he had known to be his ever since he was a boy—power so great that in the course of an ordinary interview he was able to send his subjects into a hypnotic trance, even without their knowledge or volition; and, while in this trance, to lay upon them his commands and to forget all about it after it was done, and even up to the moment of doing it. It was a terrible power for a man to possess,

but the dying Savernake swore to his listeners that he had never used it to any bad purpose except in the cases they knew of. He was not able to exercise this power over everybody, or to its complete extent over a great many. But still the number was not few of those whom he could make absolute and unconscious slaves of his will. And he had found some of that number in Ashtonville.

He had easily established, unknown to the lads themselves, a complete ascendancy over young Jim Hawkesbury and Jack Sloan, the one of whom he had come to know at the billiard table in the "Crown," and the other when fishing in the river near Sloan's mill. And when tempted by the devil and his own necessities he compelled Jim, by hypnotic suggestion, to keep him freely supplied with the cash of Hawkesbury's pere, while the poor lad retained no knowledge of his nefarious actions beyond the moment of their performance. Then, emboldened by his easy success with Jim, Savernake brought off his bigger coups.

A casual remark, dropped by Jack Sloan, indicating that that week he would have to ride in to Ashtonville early on Friday forenoon to fetch the mill employees wage-money from the bank, sent Savernake, on the morning in question, to a lonely spot on the road beyond Bassett's Farm, to intercept the youth on his way home. Jim, reining up his horse in answer to the scoundrel's friendly greeting, was, in a few instants, completely brought under the spell of the other's extraordinary mesmeric powers. When requested to do so, he cheerfully emptied the contents of his cash bag into Savernake's pockets. The latter then sent the lad on his way again with the whole episode of their meeting completely wiped out of his mind.

The scoundrel made an unobtrusive return to Ashtonville through the scrub along the river bank in good time to keep an appointment which he had made with Mr. Furnival on the previous night, when he and that gentleman had been quietly smoking their pipes alone together in the vicarage garden. Trying his marvellous powers on the mild, unassertive bank manager, he found him a highly amenable subject, and, without scruple, he at once proceeded to turn the fact to his own criminal advantage. He told Mr. Furnival to bring him tomorrow, in the dinner hour, whatever gold and notes he could conveniently lay his hands on in the bank. The order was certainly not registered in Mr. Furnival's normal consciousness; but, nevertheless, at the appointed time the poor man met his villainous hypnotiser, and, in the privacy of the River Reserve, put into his hands the identical notes and gold, for the disappearance of which he was afterwards so utterly unable to account.

The task of getting money out of simple Mrs. Pettifoy had perhaps been the easiest of all to Savernake. Living

in the same house with her, he could hypnotise her a dozen times a day if he wished. A whi-pered suggestion, on the Sunday afternoon, had sent the mesmerised woman at once to her strong box, and fifty pounds passed from that into his well-locked valise.

It was with the greatest difficulty that Hudson Savernake delivered himself of his shameful confession, and he lay almost as one dead when he had struggled through to the end. Five persons, including the doctor, had listened to his faltering utterances in astounded silence. Four of these five had been filled, in addition, with burning wrath and indignation to learn with what humiliating ease they themselves, or their sons, had been made to serve as the unconscious tools of a villain in his acts of audacious dishonesty.

But an awful Nemesis had overtaken the villain, and the span of life now remaining to him was too short to be measured by hours. This knowledge kept words of anger or reproach from the lips of those he had wronged so shamelessly.

The dying man opened his eyes after a pause and looked feebly from one to the other.

"I had to speak the truth before I died," he muttered, faintly. "I don't ask you to forgive me. . . . But I've given you your money back again, and . . . Nobody need know the part I've made you play. The doctor here knows this deathbed confession isn't for the public ear. . . . Furnival and Mrs. Pettifoy won't give themselves away by speaking out. And Sloan and Hawkesbury will hold their tongues, not to make laughing-stocks of their boys." He seemed to be speaking rather to himself than to those about him, and his voice now trailed off almost into inaudibility. "I'm glad all the world won't know what a scoundrel I've been. . . . For I haven't always been a scoundrel. . . . And there's mother and the girls in the Old Country, and . . . and . . ."

The voice passed into a silence that it never broke again, and two hours later Hudson Savernake was dead.

The strange story of his villainy was buried in the grave with him. The few to whom it was known kept the secret—for obvious reasons, since they were mainly those whom he had made his victims and innocent accomplices by virtue of his abnormal mesmeric powers.

So it comes about that the robberies at Ashtonville last summer are still generally regarded as insoluble mysteries in that rising New Zealand township. (The End.)

References throughout Great Britain and Co. etc. ASTHMA Nothing rouses you so much as a cold. It produces an attack. You can get it, and stand it, and you without a sign of symptoms. Used to stay cured, by elimination and re-education. . . .

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