



BY HAWLEY SMART.

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CHAPTER IX.—CONSTABLE TARRANT IS PUZZLED.

Police Constable Richard Tarrant is somewhat disconcerted at having as yet failed to verify his conclusions. He had drawn a more poetic deduction than Miss Smerdon, concerning the mysterious employment practised by Dr. Lynden in his den. When on duty, his beat really brought him within the vicinity of the Doctor's house; but he spent many a sleepless night, which his obligations to the force did not impose upon him, in watching that side-door of the Doctor's. We know what he supposed that the rather retiring portal would open to admit; but, with all his vigilance, he was fain to acknowledge that, watch as he might, he had seen bodies neither living nor dead pass its threshold. Had he confided his suspicions to Pollie Phibbs, that young lady, after she had got over the first shock of such an accusation against the Doctor, would have ridiculed the bare idea of such a thing. What the Doctor might do in the laboratory she did not know, but she would have been quite certain that it could be nothing of the kind that Dick Tarrant suspected; and still more certain that if there had been the faintest grounds for thinking such a thing, nothing would ever have induced her to enter the room again. She had obeyed her cousin's command to keep her eye upon the Doctor; she had always done as Dick told her, and yet even about that she had her compunctions, and only for that foolish belief she had in Dick's understanding would have pronounced that all nonsense. That so far it had led to nothing, she was well-satisfied. The Doctor was a kind master, to whom she wished no harm; if, as Dick said, he was engaged in something "agen the law," well, then, she supposed he deserved to be punished, but she did not wish hers should be the hand to bring it about. Her young mistress too she held in the highest esteem and then had she not just written that letter to Mr. Fleming in the Crimea, and Polly Phibbs looked upon the ægis of Hugh Fleming's protection as going far to ensure the safety of her boyish brother. Still she never had refused to do Dick's bidding, and she would do it now, but it was much satisfaction to her to find that nothing came of it. What had induced the Doctor to make that mysterious addition to his house? It would have hardly attracted the curiosity of anyone but such an addle-headed man as Dick Tarrant. His main idea was that advancement in the police was easiest procured by some startling discovery of crime. More than one had taken place since he had been in the force, but Dick argued that he never had any luck; let him only get a chance and they would see what was in him. His superiors believed very little, and were not at all likely to entrust Constable Tarrant with any delicate investigation. A slow

thinker, one to whom ideas came but seldom, Dick clung strongly to this main belief of his, and also to that subsidiary notion that the conviction of the Doctor was the case by which he was destined to achieve greatness. Now, without the slightest disparagement of the police, because it is an infirmity of human nature, there is always a disposition to make evidence chime in with conviction. Once having settled in our mind who is the author of a murder, we are more disposed to devote our powers to proving ourselves right in that conjecture than to the unbiassed investigation of who really committed it. The faculty of cool, judicial analysis is rare, and it is seldom even the best detective can resist jumping to a conclusion at which he should only have arrived step by step.

That Richard Tarrant is also obstinate, it is almost needless to state: men of this type always are. Let them once get a maggot into their head, and they cling to it with a pertinacity that would be beyond all praise if it were not wrongheadedness—mainly owing, I fancy, for want of another idea to take its place. Dick Tarrant is in this plight. He began by suspecting Doctor Lynden of vague offences, and must continue to do so because he has no one else to suspect.

It is Sunday afternoon, and in the worst possible humour Mr. Tarrant is lounging about the road awaiting the advent of Miss Phibbs. He is angry that his vigilance has resulted in nothing so far. Mr. Tarrant is an indolent man, and chafes mightily at nights out of bed, which produce no compensating result. That he should have been kept waiting is an additional grievance; and moreover he has discovered that Polly is reluctant to carry out his orders—in fact, to use his own expression, that she isn't half "keeping an eye on him."

"Now," mutters Mr. Tarrant to himself, "I ain't going to stand that! not likely, you know. Never give women their heads; that's my motto. And if Polly thinks she's not to keep her nose to the grindstone she's very much mistaken. There's my future career all depending upon the successful working out of this riddle, and she thinks she ain't called on to assist. If she thinks after we are married she'll have nothing to do but sit with her hands in her lap and play at being a fine lady, she won't do for me. A man can't do everything himself, and my wife will have to keep the pot boiling."

God help poor Polly Phibbs if she should come to wed this man under that delusion. He is of that sort for whom women of Polly's class work their fingers to the bone, quite content to keep their lords in indolence as long as they neither ill-use nor are false to them.

Suddenly the side-door of the Doctor's house opened, that door which, watch it as he might, he had seldom succeeded in seeing used by anyone.

And out of it, to the utter bewilderment of Constable Tarrant, stepped a well but quietly-dressed lady-like woman. Although closely veiled, he felt sure that it was not Miss Lynden; he knew the latter perfectly by sight. The Doctor's visitor was both taller and stouter, in short, much more of a woman, and her unexpected appearance so upset his previous suspicions concerning the Doctor that he neglected to do what an ordinary intelligent officer would have done under the circumstances, to wit, follow her.

She apparently did not notice him, but walked quickly towards the busy part of the town, while Dick first stared vacantly at her and then looked in a mazed way at the portal from which she had emerged. He was still gazing at this last, when he was startled by a voice at his elbow, saying—

"You seem rather interested in that door, my man; pray, what is it you see to admire in it?"

He turned, and to his surprise found the Doctor standing by his side.

"How on earth did he come here?" was Dick's first thought, utterly oblivious of the fact that it was easy for the Doctor to come out of one door while his (Tarrant's) eyes were fixed on the other.

"Nothing, sir, nothing!" he replied, confusedly. "I was only just thinking—"

"Of what?" said the Doctor, suavely.

"Thinking, sir, thinking—just thinking—about nothing at all," concluded Dick, desperately disconcerted by the keen glance with which the Doctor regarded him.

"An occupation in which mankind spend a good deal of their time," said the Doctor, with a slightly sarcastic smile. "I wish you a good afternoon!" and he walked leisurely away in the same direction as that taken by the lady.

"Well, I'm blown!" remarked Mr. Tarrant after a minute or two. "Here's a discovery! This is what comes of keeping your eye on them." And here his reflections were interrupted by the appearance of Miss Phibbs.

"Now Polly," he exclaimed, after they had shaken hands, "You're a nice one, you are, to help an intelligent officer in the discharge of his duties. Who's that lady who visits the Doctor, and he lets her out of the side door? You've never said anything about her, you know."

"Lady! What lady? The only ladies that come to our house come to visit Miss Lynden, and of course come and go at the proper door."

"Oh, oh!" said Mr. Tarrant, sarcastically; "this is what you call keeping an eye on him, is it? If you ain't got no powers of observation, you can't help it. If you can't see beyond the end of your nose I'm sorry for you; but if you ain't altogether a beetle, it's downright wicked idleness, that's what it is."