

# MY LAST DETECTIVE CASE.

## CHAPTER IV

I need scarcely say that the "regular" had character of the district had been duly looked after by our people; but there was nothing to connect any of them with the murder; which, take it altogether, was more deficient in clue than any crime I had ever had to deal with. So I was regularly at sea, as one may say; was expected to do something in the matter, to show that I was really at work, but with no more idea what it was I ought to do, or in which direction I ought to turn, than if I had been a baby in arms—a pretty position for a man who had been repeatedly described as an active and intelligent officer.

I shall never forget the aimless, drowsy sort of way in which I first started on my quest; I really felt half inclined to arrest some promising "rough" on pure spec. Calling up all the mysterious cases I could remember, I thought of one where the eye of the murdered man—a bank manager in Ireland—was examined by a "medium" to see if, in accordance with the popular belief, the last thing upon which his dying glance fell was permanently fixed on the retina. Had this been possible in the case of old Daryett, I think I should have tried it; but he had been buried a week ago. I recollected, also, that in the case I have quoted, it was proposed to consult a spiritualist and the idea immediately came into my mind that I would go and see old Mrs. Hatfield—Mather Fell, we used to call her—to get her to look in the cards. I laughed at myself for thinking of such a thing; not but what the old girl was very clever; but as I did so, the idea struck me with wonderful force, that "there might, after all, be something in a spiritualist. A spiritualist! one who can read people's thoughts, can see through brick walls, and can make tables walk about—why, there must be something in such a person; so why not try one? Suppose I tried two or three; if they failed, I could not be any worse off than I was before I applied to them; while if half I had heard about them was true, I might get some sort of a clue; even a guess would be better than nothing.

The paper had mentioned—which was a pity—putting the announcement into one of those little bits which come after the leading articles, and which no one ever heard of when I was a boy—that "the Upper Broughton Street mystery had been placed in the experienced hands of a well-known detective, Sergeant Nickham; and it is reported that the shrewd and intelligent officer had already obtained evidence of the most important character." Now, the reader is perfectly aware that I had not done anything of the kind; but it was clear that if I did not do something, I should get as much undeserved blame, as I was now getting undeserved praise; so I determined to consult a spiritualist.

It may easily be supposed that I was asked a great deal about my plans. The coolness with which persons who have nothing to do with the matter will ask an officer to give them an account of his plans in the most difficult cases, is astonishing. They seldom got much by doing so. Mr. Halpin, my lodger, took great interest in my movements, which was perhaps not so very wonderful; yet he had been so distant, that I did not like it so much as he evidently supposed I did, in spite of all his compliments. He was always prophesying my success, and seemed to have a most wonderful estimate of my power. He made me promise to stand a bottle of wine, the day I received the reward; and after I had done this, he was still more constant in his enquiries. After all, I did not much mind his knowing, as I have said, what a horrible interest some people take in such affairs; but I found he taken to cross-questioning my wife, so that he could get out of her; which was what I did not like it. Yet I must remember that while I, having been for more than twenty years, had had too experienced to fall into any such trap, I am proud to say of my wife, as I can say with perfect truth, that she was a great deal braver than I was. For she managed to guess I had some idea of consulting a spiritualist, and she should soon have been able to find out my plan.

At every time he did go, as if he knew about it.

I found there was a spiritualist who lived in a street turning out of the Marylebone Road; and so directly I had made up my mind, I set off at once to see him. He was out, the first time I called; so I made an appointment for the next day; and then I found he had been called into the provinces, and was not expected home for a week or a fortnight; therefore, he would not do. I looked up another, and went to him; he was at home, but busy. However, I made an appointment to see him on the next night, but alas! I was to pay a guinea—a perfect throwing away of the money, I was convinced, but I had made up my mind to risk it.

There was a young man at this second house, employed as footman or porter, but he was not in the room, and he was very civil to me. I always make it a rule to be civil to servants; consequently, I mentioned that I was going to the public-house at the corner, and if he could spare time, I should be glad of his company for five minutes. Now, in point of fact, I had not intended to go to this or any other public-house, as I really wanted to get home to my tea; but seeing him so civil, I made myself agreeable on principle; if I did not want any help from him then, I might on some other occasion, and you never can tell, you know. As it appeared he could spare the time, he went over with me, and said he would take a glass of stout and bitter; but I ordered a whiskey and soldier for him. He was quite struck by my liberality; I could see that. "My boy," I thought to myself, "if I should have to ask you any questions about spiritualism or mesmerism, I shall be glad to have you answer if you can; I will bet a new hat you'll do it."

We parted very good friends; but careful as he was, I felt as sure and positive that he knew I was in the police, as though he had told me so. Very likely he knew my name. I had no thought of this at first; and if I was to try and tell the reader how I came to know it, I dare say I should fall to make myself clear. You can't always put these things on paper; but that my new acquaintance spotted me for a policeman, was a fact, and I could not quite make up my mind, as I rode home, whether it was a lucky or unlucky thing for me that he did so. On the whole, I decided that it was a good job.

The reader will have guessed that I said nothing of what I was about to any one except my wife. I always told her; and many a good hint have I gained by doing so. As to the old proverb about women never keeping secrets, it is the greatest libel I ever came across. If it was worth while, I could tell you now of fifty cases where women did keep secrets in the teeth of temptations which would have made men in their places sell up their own grandfather and grandmother. Mrs. Nickham highly approved of the mesmerist's scheme from the first; and I was glad she did so, although I had certainly expected as much, for I never knew a woman who did not believe in some kind of fortune telling; and very few men for that part of it. For the last day or two, I had not seen much of my lodger, as he was laid up with rheumatism, only getting out for an hour or two, when he treated himself to a ride in a cab, by way of exercise, which he could afford to do, as he was very well off. Anyhow, there was no cross-questioning now from him, and I was glad of it.

Well, on the evening arranged, I, of course, went to the spiritualist's, and also, of course, was led in by my friend Charley. I ought to have mentioned his name before. I nodded. He smiled, and said: "So you are punctual, eh?" and showed me into the parlour. There I found Mr. Strevewright, the Professor; but I was surprised to find he did not do the prophesying and violent business kind; he had a young lady-servant who went into a sort of trance. I suppose I need not explain all the process. Since that time, it has become so common, that almost every reader must know all about it; what is more to my story is the fact that I could not make anything out of the broken, wandering kind of speech which this young person uttered. I thought then, and think now, that she was really incredible; and it was plain her mind was

running on a murder from the first; which was curious, for the interview was half over before I had them know what sort of transaction I was asking about. But what she said was of no more use to me than if she had been talking about a game of cribbage, or of making a plum pudding. It was a dead failure. But I had not expected much from it.

Mr. Strevewright was very civil and candid in his style. He said he was afraid the revelation was no better. He would not make any charge, if I liked to come again. I was of course equally civil, and said how very clever I thought the young lady was, and how much obliged I was for the trouble they had both taken, and that I would let them know if I thought of hearing any more. I made up my mind on the spot that I would not come again; but, as I have said, you never can tell when you may want people, and it is not a great deal of trouble to say a few civil words. I bade them "good night," and was let out by Charley, to whom I bade "good night," also. I was passing out the street door as I spoke to him, when, to my astonishment, he slipped out too, and holding the door in his hand, so as to prevent it slamming, whispered: "you will excuse me, sir; but I have often seen your face before, although I don't know your name. Ain't you in the police?"

"I am," I said at once; for there was no use in beating about, as I could see he was in earnest.

"And you are here on business?" he went on.

I nodded, for he was speaking quick and low.

"Wait for me, sir, across the way, at the corner," he continued in the same hurried manner. "I should like to have a word with you, if you don't mind waiting five minutes."

I promised to wait, and he slipped in again; while I, wondering what was coming now, went over to the corner where stood the public-house to which I had taken him, and smoked a cigar till he came.

I was always of a reflecting, meditative turn; and as I grow older, I become fonder of a quiet interval of thought, which, I believe, is a rule with people who are getting on in life; but I don't know that I ever applied myself to think out anything more thoroughly than I did to guess what on earth this young man could have to say to me; and I was never wider of the mark in any speculation in which I may have indulged. I dismissed at once all expectation that he knew anything about the Upper Broughton Street business, although that had first of all rushed into my mind. I decided that he was going to turn evidence against his employer, and tell me that I had been done out of my sovereign. I made sure I should not like him any the better for doing this; I might use his information—very likely I should do so; but I like to see people stick to the shop.

He was rather longer absent than the time he had mentioned; but if I had had to wait till twelve o'clock, I should have done it, for it is a rule of mine never to throw a chance away. At last he came: "Sorry to keep you waiting so long, sir," he began; "but I could not get away any sooner."

"All right, my boy," I said. "My time is no longer, as there is no harm done. But since you are here, suppose we try another soldier and whisky?"

"Thank you, sir," said the young fellow; "presently I shall feel much obliged for it; but if it is all the same to you, I should like to have a few words with you out here, on the quiet. It would not do for me to be overheard."

"Ah! it is the spiritualistic business, then," I thought; but when I was at his service; so we passed into a quiet crescent which was close by, and he crossed over to the side where the iron railings enclosed a lonely deserted plot of grass, away from the houses; and here, as we walked in the shade of some trees, he began.

"No one is likely to overhear us now," he said; and I mentally agreed with him; in fact, I thought he was taking a most unnecessary amount of trouble over such a trifling matter. "You told me, sir, that you were in the police?"

I nodded.

"I have heard a few words passing between Mr. Strevewright and Miss Jukes, our clairvoyant as to your business," he went on, and being in the next room this evening, I heard her while she was in her trance.

"Well, if you did, you could not make

much out of it, unless you are a good deal sharper than I am," I thought; but I did not say this aloud. I merely said "Indeed!" and he went on again.

"You are here about a murder, are you not—a murder to which you want a clue?"

"Hello!" thought I; "this is what I did not reckon on. What is coming now?" Then I said aloud: "Suppose I am or not, what then?"

"But you are," returned the young fellow; "and I am not the only one who knows it. You were watched coming here."

"What! to-night?" I exclaimed, quite staggered at this.

"Not that I know of," he replied; "but I should say it was more than likely, as you were certainly watched to this place the other day, and I saw the man who was spying; but I didn't know what he was after, then."

"How do you know it now?" I naturally asked.

"Because when I let you in on the first day you called, I saw a man go past on the other side of the way. Soon afterwards I had to let another visitor out, and I saw the man again. I noticed him this time. There was something about him like a man on the look, so I looked for him when I let you out."

"But you were with me then," I interrupted.

"Quite right, sir," said Charley; "but still I looked for him, and I saw him a little way off; so I say to myself: 'This don't look like a matter of chance; but if it is, you won't be here when we come out of the Crown.' If you are slinking about then, I shall know you are on the watch." He was there when we came out; and so, as I am sure it can't be me he's watching, it must be you. But I saw him again yesterday, in a different part of town."

"Then I should think it's you he's watching, after all," I struck in with a laugh, not because I thought it such a laughable matter, but to see how he took it.

"No, sir," said he seriously enough, and shaking his head; "there's no one else like me worth watching; but with you it may be different. However, to come to the point, sir, I am here only three days a week, on the recreation-days. I fill up my place in another establishment of the same kind only not so stylish a place; in Clerkenwell. There I am of a little more importance than I am here; in fact, I am the assistant, and help in the experiments, instead of only a porter. Well, sir, last night that very man—the man I had seen waiting for you—called there."

"Called there?" I exclaimed. It is a very bad plan to interrupt a story, but I was fairly surprised into it.

"Yes, he did indeed," continued Charley; "and as I was with the proprietor at the time—dressed up, of course—I heard all he said. I did not like his look when close to him, any more than I had done at first; and he hummed and hawed so much, and fenced about so long before coming to his business, that I was sure he was after no good. We, of course, thought he wanted to consult the clairvoyant—that's me there, you know; and I am a very good one. But after a deal of preface, he said he only wanted to ask a few questions about the way other people consulted the spiritualist, and what the clairvoyant's powers are. He asked how the clairvoyant answered, and whether he could refer to events which had happened several weeks before; so that if he or any friends of his wanted to enquire about the commission of a crime, was it possible for us to throw a ray of light upon it. I can tell you, sir, that he himself threw as much light upon it as any clairvoyant could; for I saw at once that he must himself have committed some crime, and was afraid you was consulting us to help to trace him. Of course, I could not have made such a guess as this, if I had not seen him slinking about after you, or if I had not known you was in the police. No, nor if I hadn't got a pretty good guess as to what you was a-coming to our place here for. You may be sure we did not quite satisfy him; and the end of it was that he had made an appointment for to-morrow night—I was engaged here to-night as you know—to see the clairvoyant. Now, sir, you may depend upon it that if it is worth his while to spy on you, it's worth your while to look after him; and if it's worth his while to ask about your business with the spiritualists, it's worth your while to find out why he is so anxious."

"I am very glad," I exclaimed, when the young fellow had finished, "you ought to be