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CHAPTER XXXII.

Mr. Boskett got up, and in the softest and blindest of voices asked: "Now, will you tell us—don't be afraid—you heard voices at various times that evening. Did you hear Miss Deane's voice after—mind, after—the deceased had entered the room?"

"No," said Jane. "There were only two voices after that of the deceased's and Lord Gaunt's."

"And you did not see Miss Deane leave the Mansions? She might have left a few minutes after the deceased had entered?"

"Yes, sir; I think she must, because I didn't see her go afterward, and, of course, I was waiting to be rung for to let the visitors out as usual."

"And Miss Deane asked for her brother and not for Lord Gaunt?"

"Oh, yes, sir; I'm sure the young lady doesn't know anything about it. He is the sweetest—"

The coroner stopped her again, and Mr. Boskett, with an encouraging smile and a glance at the jury, murmured audibly: "No one suspects her!" Then, aloud, he said: "Now, tell me, you found the inner door of the drawing-room locked?—On the bedroom side?"

"Yes, sir."

"And no one entered the drawing-room, so far as you know, after the deceased? You must have heard them—"

Sir James rose.

"Really, that is scarcely a fair question," he said.

"We want all the information we can get," remarked Mr. Boskett, blandly.

The coroner nodded, and Jane said: "She did not."

"No; no one had come in afterward."

"And now, did you notice anything peculiar in Lord Gaunt's manner when he passed you in the corridor on his way out?"

Jane hesitated.

"His lordship looked upset and—"

"Anything peculiar about his dress? Think?"

"He knows something," whispered Mr. Boskett to Sir James. Sir James did not move a muscle. Jane hesitated, and looked distressed.

"Come, speak out," said Mr. Boskett, gently and persuasively, and Jane, with a kind of sob, said: "There—there was blood on his wrist-band."

A thrill ran through the crowd. Mr. Boskett glanced at the jury in a casual kind of way.

"The porter was with you as Lord Gaunt passed?"

"Yes," said Jane. And she was allowed to stand down.

The porter was next called, and gave his evidence clearly. So far as he knew, no one had entered Lord Gaunt's flat after the deceased.

Yes, Lord Gaunt had looked haggard and upset; and he, the porter, had noticed the blood-stain on the wrist-band.

So also had Wilkins, the butler from Morlet's. He carried the grim

story a point further by telling how he had sent the luggage to Southampton, but had heard Lord Gaunt, when leaving in the morning, direct the camban to drive to Charing Cross. Had remarked that Lord Gaunt did not wear his fur coat when he returned the preceding night, and had been informed by Lord Gaunt that he had left it at his club.

The crowd exchanged glances, and murmured significantly.

Then Mr. Morgan Thorpe was called. He was a piteous spectacle. The usually pleasant and youthful face was haggard and drawn; his eyelids were swollen, and his lips tremulous and pale. He had been drinking, but not enough to steady his shaking hands and voice. As he raised his eyes and glanced round the court with a shrinking look, Bobby could scarcely believe that it was the same man who only a few days ago had swaggered and ruffed it with such self-assurance. Every answer had to be dragged out of him. Yes, the deceased was his sister. She was married, secretly, to Lord Gaunt, who married her under the name of Barnard. Had not known Barnard's real name and title. His sister and her husband had separated soon after the marriage, and she had lived with him, the brother, since then. Her husband had disappeared, quite disappeared. She had not seen him, to his, Morgan Thorpe's knowledge, between the hour of their parting and the night of the murder—

Sir James looked up.

"Do not use the word 'murder,' Mr. Thorpe," he said, sharply. "The jury have not yet given their verdict."

Morgan Thorpe glared at him resentfully.

"It was murder, foul and cowardly murder—"

"Silence!" said the coroner, sternly. "Confine yourself to a statement of what you actually know."

Sir James rose.

"You say, Mr. Thorpe, that, so far as you are aware, your sister did not know the whereabouts of Lord Gaunt?"

"She did not; I swear it."

"You knew she was going to Prince's Mansions the night of the 6th?"

Thorpe hesitated. Could he venture to deny it? As he paused, Sir James carelessly picked up a blue paper from the table, and Morgan Thorpe's eyes dropped.

"I knew it."

Sir James handed him the bill.

"This was found in the pocket of the deceased. It is a bill, unsigned, for two hundred pounds. Can you explain it?"

Thorpe glanced at Bobby, and his face went white.

"My—my poor sister was in want of money. She—she thought Mr. Deane would lend it to her—"

His voice grew inaudible. Bobby hung his head as every eye in court was directed to him.

"May I take it that you sent her on this errand?" said Sir James.

Morgan Thorpe raised his head and stared at him insolently.

"You may take it as you please," he said, defiantly.

"That is sufficient," said Sir James, gravely.

Mr. Boskett rose.

"One moment, Mr. Thorpe. Were you aware of the real name and rank of the deceased's husband? Oh, don't hesitate, please!" he added, with the first note of sharpness in his voice; and Thorpe nodded.

"Yes? And you kept your knowledge from your sister?"

Thorpe looked round like a hunted animal seeking for some means of escape.

"I—I did. I thought it best."

Mr. Boskett turned his glittering eyes upon him.

"Did not Lord Gaunt undertake to pay you a sum of money to keep his identity secret? Answer, please."

The reply was scarcely audible.

"Good. Now, Mr. Thorpe, you remember a certain scandal in Paris in the summer of 18—? A scandal in which a lady was concerned. Was not that lady your sister?"

"Yes," said Morgan Thorpe, and Mr. Boskett turned to the jury.

"I regret to have to allude to this matter, but I desire to show the cause of Lord Gaunt's desertion of his wife."

"Not desertion!" said Sir James, quickly.

"Separation, if you like!" said Mr. Boskett. "In a word, Mr. Thorpe, did not Lord Gaunt separate from his wife because he discovered certain facts in connection with her life before her marriage?"

Morgan Thorpe moistened his lips.

"If any one has been saying—" he began; but the coroner interrupted him.

"Painful as this question must be to you, Mr. Thorpe, you must answer it."

"Well, yes—so he said," replied Thorpe.

"And these facts you concealed from him? Did you conceal from him this other fact, that you had suffered three months' imprisonment for fraud committed two years before you made his acquaintance?"

"Where did he get all this?" asked Sir James, testily, of Mr. Belford, while the court was waiting on Thorpe's reply.

"If I am to submit to having all my past life raked up for the amusement of a crowd—"

"Answer, sir!" said the coroner, sternly; and Thorpe's livid lips formed the "Yes."

"Did you conceal the identity of her husband, and his whereabouts, from the deceased because you feared his violence if they should meet?" asked Mr. Boskett in gentle tones.

It was scarcely a permissible question, and Sir James was on his feet in a moment; but Thorpe had got his answer out before he could be stopped.

"Yes, I did!" he said, with a suppressed eagerness. "Gaunt was a violent man, one of the hottest-tempered men I have ever met. I wanted to protect my poor sister—"

The coroner stopped him; but it was too late. The jury had got the impression Mr. Boskett had desired to give them.

"I have finished with you," he said, with that air of satisfaction which a clever counsel can make so telling. One or two other witnesses were called, and the two doctors who had been summoned after the discovery of the body were recalled by Mr. Boskett.

"I wish to ask these gentlemen a question, sir," he said to the coroner. "The young lady, Miss Deane, who is now, I regret to say, lying unconscious and seriously ill, is unfortunately connected with this case by one of those accidents to which we are all liable. I do not think that the slightest suspicion had been directed toward her; but, nevertheless—perhaps I feel it my duty to protect her from any further suspicion—I desire to ask a question on her behalf. I ask you, sir—if in your opinion it would be possible for a young girl to have lifted and placed the body on the couch, as it was discovered?"

"No; certainly not," was the reply; and the second doctor repeated the answer.

Then the coroner wound up; and, as with the skill of experience he linked the evidence together, Bright and Bobby felt as if a chain were being wound round Gaunt.

The crowd listened with breathless attention to every word, and when he had finished, turned their eyes upon the jury with hungry impatience.

The jury did not leave the box, but gathered together and whispered for a few minutes, then pronounced the verdict.

They found Edward Barnard Gaunt, Earl of Gaunt, guilty of the wilful murder of his wife Laura.

Mr. Bright rose white and trembling. Bobby let his head fall in his hands. Some one touched him on the arm, and looking up, he saw Mershon beside him.

He was pale, save for a red spot on each cheek, and his small eyes shone vindictively.

"A clear case," he said, with a note of satisfaction in his thin voice. "He did it, right enough. And they'll have him presently. They've cabled to stop the ship at the Canaries."

Bobby shrank from him with a look of terror.

"I—I don't believe it," he said, his voice breaking. "Gaunt is as innocent as—I am!"

Mershon shrugged his shoulders.

"All right! Let him come home and prove it!" he said, sullenly.

He went over to Mr. Gilsby, who was talking to Mr. Boskett—Mr. Boskett cheerfully triumphant—and clutched him nervously by the arm.

(to be continued.)

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