

a close, and I had arranged a provincial tour to follow. It was much better for me than earlier tours, as I went in support of a leading actor-manager, with the prestige of my newly-won London reputation.

Jimmy was still playing in town, so I left him in charge of our little flat. I remember Jimmy saw me off from King's Cross, chiefly because of his farewell phrases. The train was just moving out.

"Now, good-bye, Alan, boy. Have a good time. I shall watch over your progress. And remember, dear boy, I'm in charge of the flat; everything will go on all right, and if that blind beggar misses a minute, in tap, tap, tapping down our street, I shall let you know."

We moved on from town to town. The tour was most successful. My chief made things pleasant for me, as his leading man, and when social recognition was made of his undoubted qualities both as an actor and a gentleman, he always insisted in dragging me into the forefront to share the honours.

In due course, we arrived for our fortnight in Manchester. My chief put up at the Midland Hotel there, but I was content with something much more modest—a quiet hotel of the commercial type in Market Street.

Our stay in Manchester, socially, was a triumph in its way. We had many pleasant recognitions of our actor-manager's social prestige, and made many friends. One of the most charming men I have ever known was Sir Digby Stone, a great lover of the theatre, a great admirer of our work, who exerted himself in every way to make our stay in Manchester pleasant. He was a wealthy manufacturer, with interests in two counties, and his income made it possible for him to gratify all his tastes and fancies. We first met him in Leeds, and our sojourn in his own city, Manchester, cemented and ripened the friendship. We had many pleasant suppers together in the grim, manufacturing city, and many were the pleasant drives and excursions we arranged during our stay.

In the second week of our visit, Sir Digby left us on the Monday for town, and we saw him off in the midnight train. We missed his cheery association for the next two days, but on the Thursday evening he turned up again at the theatre, bubbling over with pleasure at the reunion.

That night, after the show, we had supper at the Midland. There was our old man—I should say, our distinguished actor-manager, Mr. Cyril Playfair—handsome, dignified, an astute and polished man of the world. Sir Digby Stone, in the prime of life, a young man of keen artistic sympathies, made the second in our party of three, which included myself. My chief was in a reminiscent mood. Sir Digby was in the best of spirits, and as my contributions to the general talk were by no means scanty, we made a jovial party.

As the wine passed, I remember we grew very intimate and confidential. One of the incidents bearing on this story arose out of our chief telling us the difficulties he had undergone in collecting the real properties used in one of our costume-plays.

"Which reminds me!" said Sir Digby. "For what do you think I have been to town these last two days?"

We did not know, and said so.

"Pearls," he said. "I have been to a sale at Christie's; I bought these."

He slipped his hand into his inside pocket and brought out a case. Opened, it showed a row of beautiful, regular, perfectly-matched black pearls—gems of even and rare quality, probably not to be duplicated three times in the world.

Our eyes were riveted on them.

"They are charming," said Playfair, the sensuous love of beauty shining in his artist's eyes.

"For the most charming woman in the world!" Sir Digby said, his eyes glowing.

"To your wife," said Cyril Playfair, raising his glass with a sure instinct and an old-world courtesy.

Sir Digby took the pearls into his hands and placed them carefully in his pocket.

"You are right," he answered Playfair. "For my wife."

He left us shortly after twelve with the pearls safe in his pocket. "Good-bye," he said, gaily, "for the night only. I carry the perfect pearls to the pearl amongst women," and he was gone.

"Perfect pearls they are," said my chief, with the wrapt concentration of the connoisseur; "they must be worth five thousand pounds."

"So much as that?" I ejaculated.

"Quite."

It was just a quarter to one when I reached my hotel, and I went straight to the bedroom on the third floor. There was a fire burning in it, sending sparks flying up the chimney. I drew up an easy-chair, rang the bell for a "nightcap," lit a cigar, and ruminated.

My thoughts turned naturally homewards. I thought of the old theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue, of the Greenroom Club, and the good fellows who would be there in the old place at Leicester Square; of the many pleasant places that make up an actor's life in London. I thought of London, with all the love of a lonely absentee. And step by step my thoughts went from the West End to the quiet, dark streets of Bloomsbury. I listened to the sounds outside. There were very few—the jingle of a hansom, the hoot of an occasional motor, the uneven steps of a reveller, the slow, measured steps of a policeman.

"After all," I said, "most places are much alike. Sitting here, with my eyes shut, I could fancy myself back in the old flat at Guildford Street, with the kettle steaming on the spirit-lamp and good old Jimmy Somerset curled up in the saddlebag chair over his hot grog."

I looked at the clock. It was just twenty-five minutes past one. "I wonder what Jimmy is doing. I'll bet he is having a good-night glass, and perhaps thinking of me. Or"—I looked at the clock—"I know what he will be doing. He will be looking at the clock and thinking of that old blind rascal. It is just his time."

The public clock outside struck half-past one. "Heavens! how like home it is," I thought. "I can just fancy Jimmy starting up, and listening for the tap, tap, tap; for the—"

The thought froze in my brain.

Tap, tap, tap! I passed my hand over my forehead. Was I awake; was I dreaming? My very thought was answered.

Tap, tap, tap; tap, tap, tap. I could hear the very sound, a long way off, coming nearer; the sound of the old ferrule on the stone floor.

"It's a hideous nightmare," I said; "it cannot be real." I threw open the window. There was Manchester, not my Bloomsbury Street; I was looking from my hotel bedroom, not from my room in Guildford Street. But there, sure, was the sound—tap, tap, tap, tap coming nearer every moment. "It's a ghostly coincidence," I murmured, every sense riveted on the sound. "They have blind men in Manchester."

And then, as an answer, I heard the sounds of the accompanying footsteps. Plumb and sure went the first, the other dragged with a sinister, creeping sound—a palpable limp. The very sound, the very man! I plunged my head out of the window, and saw him. I could not see accurately from that height, but the hat looked the same, the coat looked the same, the moonbeams caught a tuft of the grey-white beard and laid bare the white hand.

"Oh! nerves, nerves," I said, with a chill foreboding. "Why should he not be in Manchester; why should it matter; why should such a simple thing give me even a suggestion of horror?"

There was a knock at my door.

"You are wanted, sir," the night-porter said. "Someone on the 'phone."

I went down, and seized the receiver. "Hello!" I shouted.

"Hello! Who's that?"

"Alan Wargrave."

"The actor?"

"Yes. Who is that?"

"Inspector Despard, of the City Police. I want you to come round to the Central Police Station at once."

"Why?"

"You supped with Sir Digby Stone. You and Mr. Cyril Playfair were the last to see him alive. He has just been found dead, in Narrow Lane, off Piccadilly. I wish you would come at once. You might help us. Mr. Cyril Playfair is here."

I went as fast as I could get there. I found Playfair there, his handsome, mobile face blanched, tears swimming in his eyes.

They took me to see what was Sir Digby. He lay with a peaceful expression that was half a smile, but fixed, as if it were frozen there. On his forehead there was a dull red mark, as of a blow. At the edges there was a slight abrasion. On his throat there were long blue bruises—the imprint of fingers that had strangled the life out of his body. His coat was open, and the inside pocket had been plucked out.

I could not think, I could not help, I could not cry. I could only hate, with a wild, blazing fury, the finger of fate which had pointed such a man to this.

I do not remember much of that night, or the succeeding day. I know, pallid, unstrung, dejected, I read my letters at dinner, after a night and a day that had known no rest.

I picked out Jimmy Somerset's writing. I thought it would comfort me. It rattled along, as Jimmy's letters always do. And then I saw one paragraph:

"Everything is right, Alan, my dear chap. But

that blind thief has played us false. I had three fellows in last night for a nightcap. I set up as prophet, and betted on that blind thief's appearance. It cost me five pounds. One-thirty struck, but the street was silent. I think the dear old blind beggar must have had a special murder on, Alan, my boy."

The words swam before my eyes, but Jimmy's letter brought me comfort. I began to understand.

III.

JIMMY'S letter made up my mind. The coincidence was so striking, so pointed, so remarkable, that I jumped at the conclusion. The man I saw was the man of Red Lion Street and Guildford Street; the night I saw him, he was not in London.

Hurriedly finishing dinner, I drove straight to the Central Police Station. I found Inspector Despard in the Parade Room. He had been up all night and day. He looked worn and tired.

"Have you found anything new?" I asked.

He shook his head. "There does not seem a single clue worth following. Here we have a man, well liked and respected. Everything he did was right. He was as straight as a die. The men he knew were above suspicion. All his associations were as clean as daylight. He went to Christie's and bought the black pearls. He bought them on the Wednesday afternoon, paying four thousand five hundred pounds. Someone knew he had them, followed him, and never lost sight of Sir Digby until last night. We have to find that man."

"How can you do that?" I asked, pointblank.

The inspector shrugged his shoulders. "It is difficult; it is one chance in a hundred. There are the railways."

"What do the railways tell you?"

"Nothing. We know how many tickets were issued just after one o'clock. There were many to a dozen places. But I do not despair; something may come of it."

"Look here, inspector," I said, earnestly; "suppose I give you a wild idea—a really unlikely clue, and yet one with just a tinge of logic in its insanity—would you follow it?"

"I would follow any possible clue, however absurd it sounded, that gave even a possibility of finding the murderer of Sir Digby."

"I want you to go to town with me, on the next train."

The inspector looked aghast for a moment.

"Don't think I am mad. You are up against a dead wall. All you can pursue, in the way of inquiries, your men can do. You will simply be whipping an empty covert until a lucky shot turns up game worth hunting. Now, listen to me. Don't think me absurd; I am an intelligent, capable man, but I am just as likely to be fooled as you. But I know a man in London, or, I can find a man in London, who was out of London last night."

Inspector Despard looked interested. "It does not seem to help much," he said.

"Wait," I answered. I told him of Guildford Street and the footsteps, and of our curiosity; how we went to see the solitary, regular man who strode through our streets; how the sound got on our nerves, so that we could distinguish the footsteps with absolute certainty; how we found the man a blind beggar.

"And," I said, "he did not beg; and the night we saw him he was starting out, not coming home."

Inspector Despard looked interested. "How does this help?" he asked.

"Now, that is the point. Foolish as it may sound, that man walked past my hotel last night at half-past one, just before I got your summons."

"What!" the inspector ejaculated. "The hour of the murder to fifteen minutes! Are you sure, man?"

"I hardly believed my senses, my ears. I thought it was a trick of the nerves. It sounded like him. I looked, and it seemed like him."

"Yes, yes," prompted the inspector.

"And it was he." I thrust Jimmy's letter in his hand. "See, I got that by the six o'clock delivery; I've come straight on from dinner."

The inspector's eyes gleamed. "It sounds a wild idea; it may be only mere coincidence, but it is a definite clue. I might just as well follow it. There is the logic of fact in it, wild as it looks."

"There is a train at 7.15," I said. "It is now 6.30. It just gives you time to change, and it just gives me time to arrange with my chief. Shall we make it 7.10 on the London Road Station?"

"Yes, I will be there."

I arranged for my non-appearance that night, and Inspector Despard was on the station prompt at 7.10 waiting for me. We were soon bowling along for Marylebone, and as we sat in the com-