

A MYSTERIOUS MURDER.

"On taking a hasty survey of the scene of the tragedy, I noted with great surprise that the chamber had not apparently been despoiled of its riches. A massive plate-chest close by her bed was secure—at least to superficial observation; a purse and some rings—costly ones, so far as I could judge—lay untouched upon the antique toilet-table. I noticed that a key from which a bunch of others depended was in the lock of an exquisite Italian casket which stood on the table beside the mirror. However, it was possible—nay, probable—that the dead woman had left the keys there the night before. I was greatly disinclined to examine anything, or, truth to say, even to remain with the silent blood-stained form longer than necessary; so, closing the door, I descended the stairs and rejoined Linceforth, with whom I returned to Ashcombe. There our first duty was with the police-superintendent, to whom we delivered up the key of the murder chamber and with whom we were forced to spend nearly an hour in giving the necessary information.

"After engaging to appear at the forthcoming examination and to assist in his investigations, we were at last free to depart—I wild with impatience to see Gladys, and horribly afraid meanwhile of the stories that had got afloat already, and had no doubt been carried to her. The event proved that my fears were not ill-founded, for a messenger from Aston-on-the-Hill was awaiting me at the surgery with directions to proceed at once to Mr. De Winton's, as Brown, Miss Pierrepont's gardener, had gone thither straightway on leaving Doctor Linceforth, and, precipitately entering the garden, met Gladys, who—poor child!—was at that moment expecting me. Of course he blurted out his news and spared none of the horrors, with the usual desire of the lower class to produce a sensational effect and create a scene on which they can afterwards expatiate with gusto.

"In this case the result was that Gladys fell down 'in a dead faint fit, sir, stone dead,' said my messenger, and had remained insensible for nearly an hour, according to the account of the old housekeeper who had sent him for me.

"I hurried to the house with vague terror filling all my soul, but not unprepared for what I was to find. Recovering from her long swoon, Gladys had only relapsed into that almost cataleptic condition of which I had previously observed some symptoms, and which had caused me the uneasiness to which I have before referred. She scarcely noticed my presence, except to shudder when I touched her, and almost, as I fancied, to shrink from me. I noted her feeble, irregular pulse, and watched carefully for indications of fever, or of cerebral excitement; the abnormal mental condition I had observed before seemed by this shock to be revived and exaggerated. I remained with her some hours, to the neglect, he it said, of my other duties; but it was impossible to leave her then, and her sad state made me more passionately tender and anxious than I had ever felt before.

"I had the satisfaction of seeing some degree at least of ordinary sensibility restored before I returned, heavy-hearted, to my daily work. The first expression of this return of consciousness, if I may so phrase it, was her eager desire that we should not in any way refer to what had happened at the Moat.

"Don't say a word in my hearing—not even the name of the house, Harold. Let me pretend to forget—at least, I can't hear what has been done. Save me, oh, save me from that if you love me, Harold!"

"Need I say how I promised or how earnestly I strove to soothe and comfort her?"

"I must now ask you to return with me to the chamber of horror and the subject of this most mysterious murder.

"Mr. De Winton, accompanied by our local magistrate, went over to the Moat with the police inspector and a celebrated detective from Scotland Yard. The whole house and premises, even to the shrubbery and orchard, were carefully explored, and the least point of suspicion or interest noted and stored up for future use. The task of examining the servants, from the two stolid innocent rustic maidens who formed the household staff of the murdered woman to

the utterly wooden gardener and his assistant, was at last accomplished—a long and tedious process, during which our detective never lost patience or sight of his object, following steadily through many devious ways with intense skill and care. The house had been overhauled with almost microscopic minuteness—indeed I once found the detective on his knees examining the carpet by Miss Pierrepont's bed with a large magnifying-glass! Nothing that could be brought forth into the light of day was left in darkness, and the exploration of the house had been perfectly systematic throughout, beginning with Miss Pierrepont's chamber and extending from there to every room in the house; and the result was general bewilderment to the uninitiated and serious anxiety to our experienced detective. The utter absence of all motive, combined with the fact that the murderer had not left a trace behind him, made the case more than usually difficult.

"The one motive for the murder, if it could be called a 'motive,' lay in the fact that the Pierrepont diamonds—Gladys's inheritance—had been extracted from the toilet-table; but at the same time many valuable gems had been left untouched—Some opals of great size and fineness were noticeable among these. Then the cases containing the diamonds had not been roughly despoiled of their contents; but opened carefully and replaced empty in their separate compartments; so far there had evidently been no hurry. The iron safe, too, the key of which was on the bunch attached to the casket, containing considerable treasure in the form of gold plate, much of which was valuable—nay, priceless almost—from the artistic workmanship thereof; but all this was quite intact.

"The weapon used for the murder had been taken from the butler's pantry, which opened into the hall, and the door of which, the housemaid deposed, stood wide open when she came down-stairs on the morning of the fatal fourth. There was not a trace, not a foot-mark either in the room, on the stairs, or in the hall below; every door was fast as it had been on the night before. To this both servants bore unshaken testimony when examined—in fact, they saw nothing to arouse their suspicions until they went, as usual, at nine o'clock to carry up Miss Pierrepont's breakfast. No windows had been left unfastened, with one exception. The windows in the drawing-room were extremely ancient and curious in their construction, and each of them was divided into three lance-shaped compartments, the central one being wider than those on either side. All these we found secure, save one, a narrow side window, the fastening of which, we learnt, had been broken for years, and that window was open nearly half-way.

"The detective laid a stealthy hand upon my shoulder, and said, with quiet meaning—

"That was the way he went; now I have a clue!"

"The window was so narrow that only a boy or a very slimly built man could have effected an entrance through it. We scrutinized the lawn just beneath the window; but the short velvet turf had not retained the impression of any foot, whether light or heavy; and there was no trace—absolutely none.

"Day after day our detective pondered the matter, watched the house and all connected with it, drew a secret cordon round the village, and had the surrounding country scoured by able men under his own direction, meanwhile sending the most precise instructions to London for extra scrutiny of thieves' quarters and suspected neighborhoods.

"Nothing that care or skill could do had been left undone, and the result was absolute and entire ignorance; the wisest of us knew no more than we had known on the first morning. The mystery of Miss Pierrepont's murder remained unsolved; every clue the eager detective imagined he had obtained led nowhither and ended in disappointment. Poor Brown the gardener remained under suspicion for some time; but nothing tended in the slightest degree to incriminate him, and the surveillance of the detective gradually ceased.

"I pass over the sickening details of the

inquest. A verdict of 'Murdered by some person or persons unknown' was returned; and the funeral took place shortly afterwards. I was glad indeed when the repulsive business was ended, as it left me comparatively free to devote still greater attention to Gladys, whose health now began to cause me real alarm. In a few weeks she had wasted to a shadow of her former self, while her eyes grew still more bright and beautiful. The death of Miss Pierrepont had been a hideous shock to the too-sensitive soul of the visionary girl, and I was completely absorbed in my fear for her. I went through my professional work faithfully, and the patients saw no outward change in me; but my work, which had previously been also my hobby, now became merely a hateful necessity which kept me from Gladys's side for the greater part of the day.

"I begged Mr. De Winton, who was much less easily alarmed than myself, to let her go away for a total change, to take her into the society he had adjured for so long—anything, in short, to keep her from dwelling upon the horrors of which she never spoke. He listened to my representations, and at length unwillingly agreed to break through the chains of long use and wont—which, at his age, was a very great concession—and to take Gladys to London for some months, when an unexpected obstacle met us, and this was Gladys's invincible determination to remain at Ashcombe.

"I found it impossible to withstand her piteous little entreaties not to send her away, to let her stay with me a little while, only a little longer! She assured me that I did not know what I was trying to do, and that to take her away from Ashcombe would kill her. The end of it all was that she had her way, more powerful with me now in weakness and distress than she had ever been in the old wilful imperious days that seemed to have receded into some dim past.

"The next month appeared to prove that Gladys had been right in her estimate, and she really grew somewhat better and stronger. Something too of her ancient gaiety returned; but her moods were even more variable and fitful than of yore; wherefore my anxiety never abated for a moment, and the necessity for taking her under my more special and immediate care seemed every day to grow more urgent. I told her uncle, and used a thousand arguments and all my eloquence to convince him that an early marriage would be beneficial for Gladys; but my allegations were most unexpectedly strengthened by the opinion of dear old Linceforth, who, on being consulted privately by Mr. De Winton, entirely concurred in my views of her case, and trusted to fresh influences and a new interest in life to do much toward effacing the morbid element from her nature and giving her an interest in things purely human and mundane.

"No pressing monetary anxieties here intervened to spoil my plans, for the one solitary ray of good fortune that had come to me in these evil months since Miss Pierrepont's murder had been the addition of about two hundred a year to my income, which accrued to me from the death of an uncle in India whose namesake I was. Ah, Bentley, if this had happened but three years earlier, how totally changed my whole career would have been by so simple a thing as a little money! Yet what failures and miseries we experience in life just for want of that same 'dross'!"

"Mr. De Winton at length yielded to my arguments, only stipulating that after our wedding, which would necessarily be of the quietest and most private nature, we were to share his home, as he could not, for the years remaining to him, spare Gladys altogether. In this bad arrangement, little as I liked it—less for Gladys's sake than for my own—I found myself obliged to acquiesce.

"The beginning of October was fixed for our marriage, Gladys consenting almost wearily to the arrangements I made, though at times her old love for me asserted itself with a passion and intensity almost startling to any one less accustomed to her panther-like moods; at others she was cold and listless, indifferent almost.

"The summer wore away through a period of intense heat, which happily seemed to agree with my fragile white rose; and autumn drew on slowly, far too slowly for my twofold anxiety and impatience.

"Towards the middle of September I had all my old fears reawakened and increased

tenfold by a great and terrible change in Gladys. The cloud that at times had seemed to darken her wondrous pathetic eyes now made them heavy and lustreless for many days together, and the trance-like phase returned again, with new symptoms of an abnormal mental condition which were most distressing to witness. To this was to be added her own account, all unwillingly given, of restless nights in which familiar things became strange and mixed with broken dreams of haunting troubles and hideous forms seen dimly. But worse than these were nights made horrible, she said, by a profound unresting dream-sleep, from which she invariably awoke utterly exhausted in mind and body, worn out and weakened beyond expression. I found on close enquiry that she had experienced nights of this kind at long irregular intervals for years past, and that such nights were invariably followed by one of the 'bad' days that had formerly so perplexed and puzzled me.

"All that I saw and heard so alarmed me that I sought and obtained permission from Mr. De Winton to spend a few nights in the house unknown to Gladys, lest she in return became alarmed about herself; and it was arranged I should sleep in a room adjoining his dressing-room and not far from the dainty chamber that held my treasure.

"I was always a light sleeper, and, once under the same roof with Gladys, I became so exceedingly restless that I should almost have been tempted to try the effect of an opiate if my anxiety to be ready at all times to serve her had not overmastered every other consideration. The third night, I remember, that I watched instead of sleeping was an intolerably hot one for the time of year, sultry as August, with lurid clouds and threatenings of a storm at sunset. My windows were wide open for coolness, and I was lying half-dressed upon a sofa and smoking a last pipe before 'turning in,' with a vain determination to sleep that night at any rate.

"It was something past midnight, and a brilliant September moon, partly obscured by the flying storm-clouds, shone in at my window. I smoked on, and dreamed of the new life that I was so soon now to begin with Gladys. Sad and different though it would be from all I had ever planned, yet I was full of hope and faith in the future. 'A life with Gladys!' I repeated softly, when a sound—the very lightest footfall—outside my door fell on my quick ears—the veritable ghost of a sound, so light that I half-persuaded myself it was fancy or some wakeful mouse; but the vague fear and unrest which now always possessed me made me almost instantly rise and open the door, when, to my surprise and momentary terror, I beheld a slender shape in a dull dark-colored robe swiftly descending the oaken staircase. A ray of moonlight fell on her through the colored panes of the staircase window, and I saw—Gladys! In the same moment I was well assured she was walking in her sleep, and I followed, swift and silent as herself. I feared to awaken her, and I yearned to be able to save her from any evil result of somnambulism.

"Straight on into the darkness of the hall she walked, and entering the library, crossed at once to the large French window, which she opened easily, and so passed out into the garden. I pressed closer and closer, full of horror and distress, but dreading to startle or awaken her. She went on steadily through the garden, and out by a little door at which—oh, Heaven!—she used once to await my coming. On and on, fully two miles through the meadows wet with heavy dew, I followed her straight to the Moat—on and on, with beating pulses and bated breath, seeing, being conscious of nothing save Gladys. For her sake how I rejoiced the darkened moon—there was less chance of her being seen by some skulking poacher, the only soul likely to be abroad in Ashcombe at that time of night.

"I began now dimly to see how the shock of the murder had affected the delicately sensitive nervous organism and all too excitable brain, so that a sleep-walking tendency, hitherto only suspected by me, had developed into real somnambulism under the influence of the shock, and she had been driven during sleep by the morbid fascination of terror to visit the scene which during her waking hours she could not even endure to hear mentioned.

"But new lights were to dawn on this mysterious aspect of somnambulism. It is impossible even to shadow forth faintly the