

"They would have to be sharper than you or your sister then," the old lady rejoined, with a grim chuckle. "You two, who know every hole and corner and cranny and crevice in the house, and are always ferreting about. And what have you ever found?"

"Yes, but aunt," began the niece, protestingly, "you know——"

"Aye, that's just it," snapped Mrs. Krumiser. "I do know, and you don't, and never will. And if you ain't satisfied, you can pack up and be off as soon as you please?"

It will be understood how completely the two inquisitors had exhausted every means of accounting legitimately for what Mrs. Krumiser did with her money when it came at last to their falling back on the supernatural. It was actually whispered in the house and not so softly that it reached Christopher Chiffinch's dull ears that Mrs. Krumiser swallowed her money. They did not go so far by way of giving colour to this monstrous statement to affect to believe that she was gifted with a digestive system more powerful even than that of the ostrich, nor did they do the old lady the injustice to declare that her greed for gold was such that she had bargained with one who shall be nameless, and for a certain awful consideration for ability to enjoy her precious sovereigns not by spending them in the ordinary, but in partaking of them as dainty food, endowed with a delicious flavour.

This much, however, Helen Prawl and her sister Catherine as well were prepared to swear to on the Bible. They had seen their aunt with money in her mouth. Helen's testimony was even more startling than this. She averred that on one occasion when Mrs. Krumiser had received some rent, she watched her through the keyhole, and saw her amusing herself in a curious kind of a way. She had reached the punch-bowl out of the cupboard by embracing it with her trembling arms, and by the same means tilted the gold on to the table. Then she knelt on a stool, so as to bring her open mouth on a level with the table top, and pressed against the side. Then, with much pain and difficulty, with a circular movement of her partly-paralysed arms, she swept the money, a few coins at a time, into the receptacle ready to receive it. As Helen Prawl told her story, at the time she had an idea that the old lady might find a miserly enjoyment in sucking the gold as folks do sweetstuff, and watched for a long time to see her take them out of her mouth again. But she kept them there until she at length quitted the room by an inner door that led down into the garden. The strange story was told to Peggy, the kitchen woman, and shortly after she had a story to tell. Chiffinch had carried Mrs. Krumiser in her easy-chair into the garden and set her in the sun; and Peggy saw her, when she was left alone, get up and walk about among the flowers. Wishing to ask her some question, Peggy approached her from behind, and so noiselessly that when she spoke the old woman gave a sudden start, and as she did so a sovereign fell from her and rolled along the path. 'It fell out of my bosom,' said Mrs. Krumiser; 'put it back there again.' But Peggy declared that it was quite wet, for all the world as though it had fallen from her mouth. The kitchen woman had told Chiffinch, who gruffly replied that he believed it was a lie of the same pattern as that hatched up by Helen Prawl.

From such a rude and unceremonious manner of address it might be inferred that Chiffinch had but little respect for his fellow servant; but it was only his unpleasantly blunt way of speaking, the fact being that he and Peggy Drake were almost on sweetheating terms and occasionally walked out together on Sundays.

It was with evident reluctance that Miss Drake gave incriminating evidence against Chiffinch at the trial. She stated on oath that on one occasion when they were talking of old Mrs. Krumiser having been seen to place sovereigns in her mouth, and apparently to swallow them, that Chiffinch had remarked with a laugh that he would give the old woman a shake up the next time he was carrying her to the garden in her chair, and if he heard anything rattle inside her he would no more mind twisting her neck that the man did who killed his goose for the sake of the golden egg.

Drake further deposed that Chiffinch had expressed to her his opinion that Mrs. Krumiser had a lot of money hidden away somewhere, but that it would take them all their time to find it, for she was more artful than old Ambrose, who had stowed his savings in the stuffed mon-

key. And, at that time, Chiffinch had remarked; "If you or me, Peg, could discover the golden nest, by hook or crook, it would give us a fair start to marry on." And when she asked him what he meant when he said "by hook or by crook," he made answer that "one day he might have to put her courage to the test and that then he would explain further."

Other evidence was forthcoming, showing that within a few weeks of the murder the accused had been observed under such circumstances as left little room for doubt that he was stealthily watching the old woman. One time after he had carried her into the garden, he was seen by the cowboy to crawl under a heap of straw, at a point from which he could watch her movements, and on another occasion he was observed to climb up into an old pear tree and crouch among its branches probably for the same purpose. But one of the most serious items of testimony against Chiffinch at this period was that all of a sudden the old woman took a dislike to Chiffinch, and was seemingly afraid of him. She would not permit him to carry her into the garden, or if she knew it to enter the house even.

"He is crafty," she remarked to her nieces, "crafty and sly. He is a changed man, and I wish he was far away from here."

And when one of them asked her since she could no longer trust him, why she didn't discharge him, she made answer:

"No, no, that wouldn't do! I wouldn't have him think that I suspected him for the world. He might turn revengeful, and lurk about the neighborhood, and come one night and murder me in my bed."

Chiffinch was informed of this by Peggy Drake, but he affected to make light of it, and said that he had noticed a "queerness" in the old woman lately, and perhaps she was going a bit cranky. And there was some evidence of the latter. Although Mrs. Krumiser could still manage to walk about a bit in the garden, and seemed no weaker bodily speaking than usual, she began to have odd fancies, one of which was to have the old stuffed ape, which years ago had been put away in a lumber room, brought back again into her bedroom. She had, she declared, had it made known to her in a vision that the late husband's spirit had taken up its abode within it, and that it intended to remain in its present quarters until the money it had been robbed of had been replaced where originally deposited—when that happened, the ghost would return to where it came.

"And where is that?" niece Catherine asked her. "Was you told in the vision, aunt, where the spirit came from?"

Old Mrs. Krumiser made no verbal response, but with a jerk of her head indicated a downward direction."

"Good Lord!" the niece exclaimed, "what—in that dreadful place?"

"Who mentioned a dreadful place, you fool. If you had waited a moment, I was going to tell you that in the vision it was explained to me that, as a punishment for drinking hot rum and water after dinner on Sundays, your poor uncle is doomed to abide in a cold spring in the bowels of the earth for one hundred years."

She told the doctor the same story.

"There could be no harm," he said, "in bringing back the stuffed ape to the bedroom again, since she so much desired it, but it seemed not improbable that her intellect was failing her, and that she had best be well looked after."

Soon after this, Chiffinch became flush of cash. His wages being but eleven shillings a week, he had at all times to practise the strictest economy, and seldom allowed himself more than a half-pint of ale at the alehouse of evenings. But, quite suddenly, he seemed to have plenty of money. He took to wearing his Sunday clothes on week days, he bought a silver watch; and, one night, being at the Barleymow, he stood drinks round to everybody there, at a cost of four and tenpence.

Such mad extravagance, of course, soon got talked about. It appeared to have been an understood thing between him and Peggy Drake, that they were each to put by what they could out of their earnings, and when they had accumulated enough to furnish a small cottage they were to be married. Peggy naturally concluded that Chiffinch had proved false to her. That he had altered his mind about getting married, and was fooling away his savings in sheer wantonness of spirit.

Of this she accused him, and he laughed at her. It was all

right, he declared. He had come into a bit of money "from an unexpected quarter," and there might be a good deal to come yet. He declined to give her any particulars as to the "quarter" mentioned, and was shy of discussing the matter with Peggy at all.

"As long as the money was his," he remarked, "where was the odds where it came from?"

In giving her evidence at the trial, Peggy said, that putting "this and that together, she could think no other than that he had discovered the mistress's hoard, and had been helping himself. It was but a suspicion, of course, and it was not for her to accuse him, but when he offered her twenty pounds to mind for him, all in gold, she made an excuse and declined."

At the end of that week Mrs. Krumiser was one afternoon missing.

She seemed better than she had been of late, and after dinner had walked out of the house and into the garden, and when one of the nieces went to bring her in to tea, she was nowhere to be found. Chiffinch, who was at work in the stables, helped to look for her. It was a very large old garden, and in a part of it that was never cultivated, there was a well, and continuing the search to this part, it was evident that there had been a struggle at that spot. No one could stumble into the well as it was fenced in with brickwork to the height of nearly a yard. There was old Mrs. Krumiser's cap trod in the muddy soil—it had been raining all the previous night—and there were plentiful footmarks all round about, some such as a woman would make, and the others of heavy boots, and with deep circular indentations such as might be made by Chiffinch's iron-shod boot.

A man was lowered down into the well, with a rope and a grapple, and the body of poor old Mrs. Krumiser was brought to the surface at the first cast.

Chiffinch was arrested. Everything pointed to him as being the murderer. There was the half-joking conversation that had taken place between him and Peggy Drake, weeks previously, respecting the "goose with the gilded eggs," and the finding and appropriating the old lady's hoard by hook or by crook. There was Mrs. Krumiser's sudden dislike and mistrust of the man, and her expressed fear of discharging him, lest he should come one night and kill her in her bed. There was the large sum of money he had so mysteriously become possessed of, and of which he could give no more satisfactory account than that it had "come from an unexpected quarter," Chiffinch at the same time remarked to Peggy Drake that there might be "a great deal more to come yet." And finally, and of course more convincing than anything else besides, there, at the brink of the well into which the victim had been cast, mingling with her shoe-marks was the imprint of the iron ring on his lame foot.

What more reasonable conclusion could be arrived at than that Chiffinch—who was seen to be on the watch—had found out whereabouts in the garden the old woman hid her money; that he had helped himself to a portion of it; that his mistress had discovered the theft and taxed him with it, and that infuriated by her threats he had thrown her into the well.

Chiffinch, while acknowledging that he had been guilty of concealing the fact that he knew deceased was in the well, stoutly maintained his innocence of murder. At the same time it was the opinion of everyone who heard it, that his explanation was a lame and exceedingly unlikely one.

He accounted for the moneys he had in his possession, and part of which he had requested Peggy Drake to mind for him. He had found it. It had apparently been purposely stowed away and hidden, but not by Mrs. Krumiser, neither was it her property. The sum he, Chiffinch, had discovered was £40, all in gold, and it was in an old leather bag, such as old Ambrose Krumiser used to carry on market days, and it had been placed in the hole in the wall in the hay-loft; the probable period of the deposit being indicated by a toll-gate ticket within the bag, and dated within a few weeks of the farmer's death. When, as he averred, he remarked to Peggy Drake that there might be more where that came from, he meant that the old man, whose miserly habits were pretty much like those of his wife, might have more gold hidden away in out-of-the-way places, and he might find it.

As regarded the untimely end of his mistress, Chiffinch declared that it was a case of suicide. He had seen her