

the two masters adjourned to Dr. Porchester's study.

"What do you think of it, Fields?" asked the Doctor.

"There seem to be two alternatives," was the reply. "Either Thomas was in league with some one outside, and did all the indoor evidence by way of a blind, or else a burglar actually entered the house by the window upstairs, sawed out the lock, packed the basket, placed it within easy reach from the window, and escaped the way he came. I cannot help inclining towards the first alternative. I went to Thomas' room soon after, and his snores were rather too good to be genuine."

"I don't pay much regard to Legg's thinking," he recognized Thomas, said the Doctor; "he may be right, but he may be wrong. However, no burglar could possibly have entered that window by the ladder in its present position, that is absolutely certain. Yet if the ladder were brought round the angle of the wall, an active man could easily get up to the ledge by help of the rain-water pipe. He may have intended to remove the ladder altogether, to avert suspicion, but his wounded hand prevented it."

"I do not believe the tools were left about by accident," said Mr. Fields. "Like the snores, it's rather too good to be true. Would any burglar be such an idiot?"

"I cannot say," replied the Doctor. "We read of such things. I do not wish to condemn Thomas without the strongest proof."

In the course of the morning Mr. Fields interviewed Thomas.

"Bad business last night," said the master.

"Yes, sir, all that plate gone. 'Tis a rascally job!"

"Do you always snore when you're asleep, Thomas?"

"Me, sir? I don't know. I never stay awake to listen. Why do you ask, sir?"

"Last night, soon after the plate vanished, you were snoring wide-awake, weren't you?"

Thomas stared, and looked surprised, and the master thought he detected a perceptible falter in the voice that said, "Was I, sir?"

"Well, I happened to be outside your room. I think it must have been just after you went back to it, curious coincidence, but odd things do happen."

Thomas' face was a study. It may have been merely the natural shrinking from unjust suspicion which blanched his cheeks, or it may have been a consciousness of guilt detected. Mr. Fields could not decide which. Presently Thomas said,

"I can't make out what you be driving at, sir. Do you think I stole the plate?"

"No, I do not think that, and I need not say what I think. I should be sorry to accuse you falsely of being an accomplice. We have sent for the policeman, and I shall tell him all I know. I hope he will be able to settle the matter."

That was the last shell in Mr. Fields' battery, and he fixed his eyes on Thomas' face to watch the effect. Thomas met him with a stony stare, and that was the end of the interview. Mr. Fields walked off to his classroom.

The policeman came in the course of the morning. He was taken into confidence about the plate basket, and then made his observations with deliberate minuteness, under the escort of Mr. Fields. He asked questions, and entered notes in a leather-covered pocket-book, holding the pencil between thumb and two fingers stretched to their full length, while the other two fingers played out like the crippled wing of a gull, as Mr. Fields remarked afterwards, when showing Browser how not to hold his pencil.

The policeman could not stomach in throwing much light upon the subject. He said that three men of suspicious character had been in the village sometime, and had left early that morning. A conveyance drawn by a grey horse had. They had lost no time in packing their property, and had driven off. The policeman said it looked suspicious, and he would communicate with the inspector.

"The would-be robber must have a bruise on his hand," said Mr. Fields; and the policeman made an extra note of the fact.

In the half-hour before dinner Mr. Fields brought down the basket of plate. Thomas was amazed when he saw it; but he made no remark.

As before stated, the mystery was not cleared up. A week later those three men were taken open-handed in committing a burglary at Dorchester. The Deepwell's policeman had instructed the inspector, and the hands of all three prisoners were examined; but as no trace of a bruise was discoverable on any of the six hands, proof positive was supplied that none of the three men was the midnight marauder at Highfield House.

In the course of the magistrate's trial, the visit to Deepwells was brought up, and the landlord of the "Bird in Hand" was subpoenaed to give evidence. The disturbance was mentioned, and so the matter of Punchey Brown's bet was incidentally divulged.

Mr. Fields had a suspicion that Punchey might have been in league with his son, and had hoped to settle his debt by passing on the plate to the man to whom he owed money. But, if so, Punchey must have employed an agent, for he came up to the house a few days after the excitement, and there was no bridge to be seen on either of his hands.

So things soon settled down, and curiosity gradually subsided. Mother Scrubhard had a bad attack of rheumatism, which confined her to her cottage for seven weeks. Miss Porchester used to take her broth and jellies. A charwoman from the village took her place for week-end clearings at Highfield House, and she continued to hold office even after Mother Scrubhard recovered. The latter told Miss Porchester that her hands were