

THE PERUVIAN ABORIGINES

By L. J. BEESTON

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"Your man's late, Francie," remarked Tredways.

"He may not turn up," I answered. "I hope he will. When did he leave Chalmers Prison?"

"Two weeks ago. Since then—" At that moment the bell trilled in the hall.

"Spells!" chuckled Tredways. "He has come."

And as William Spells had just climbed out of the ashtray of a prison existence you will admit that his visit had the interest of the unconventional.

Twenty seconds later he was blinking in the electric sheen of Tredways' sitting-room.

"Sit down, Spells," invited our host cheerily. "What was it you say to a drop of Scotch and a cigar?"

The visitor looked at him as much as to say: "Is that a joke?" I nodded encouragingly and pushed a chair toward Tredways.

That bet a post spark of interest glimmered in his visitor's gloomy eyes did not disturb Tredways' equanimity. He got off the table and poked the fire slowly.

"Fascinating!" said he with grim relish. "There's drama in it—'I like to think of those few souls coming out of that. The chat to which I alluded helps them. Is it possible to take up their case after the lapse of many years, perhaps, and clear them? A hard, hard matter. Above all, there is a conundrum never to be solved. Yet it has a pull, an appeal most powerful. I asked our friend, the chaplain here, if he had encountered any such case. His answer was in the affirmative. He said 'I would like to produce one case to me to try to clear them. I would like to try to produce one case to me to try to clear them.'"

The guest looked from one to the other of us with a dull, with an exhausted expression. He opened a little and spoke to him.

"You were convicted of murder," went on Tredways, clearly and grimly. "Of the murder of Howard Pendrell. You insisted upon your innocence in the face of the most damning evidence. Now, between us, Spells, man to man, your scolded gull, your frankly: did you kill Pendrell?"

"No, I didn't," answered the other sullenly.

"Then tell us just what happened." The man from Bessie's shook his head again, and his brows came together. "No, I won't. You wouldn't believe me. Who would? No one!"

"Well, then, tell us about it," soothed Tredways. "We more than half believe you, or you wouldn't be here. Come, make a start. You owned, I am told, a second-hand bookshop in Timber Street, near the East India Dock Road. It was in a cellar below this bookshop that one of your customers, Howard Pendrell, was found with a bullet in his brain. You were arrested, and some of his property was found upon you."

"That's simple enough, and the bare truth," answered our guest, his head again drooping dejectedly. "The gentleman came into the shop in the late afternoon and walked round among the cases and shelves, looking at the books. Everyone was asked to do that, so I didn't speak to him."

"I understand you had never seen him before?"

"Not that I could remember. After a while he asked me if that was all the books I had. I said there were plenty more upstairs, and showed him two rooms full, on the first floor, up at the front, the other at the back. He went into the back one first. I was wondering if I'd leave him alone there or not when he cried out: 'That's a most interesting work!' He was pointing to a row of ten volumes called 'The History of the Peruvian Aborigines.' It was an old work, in a tattered, leather binding. He was excited at it if he had found a treasure—or, rather, more agitated than excited, for his hand shook as he pointed, and I thought he had turned extremely pale."

"No doubt, sir. The card wasn't signed, nor did it bear any address. One of the girls had seen the book and had scrawled on the request some time after, meaning to purchase it. I mentioned this to Mr. Pendrell. He said, in a husky kind of tone: 'That's all right. But perhaps you won't mind my staying here for half an hour while I make some extracts from the books?' Of course, I had no objection, and I left him there. That was the last I saw of him alive."

The bookseller stopped. Beads of sweat gathered upon his pale forehead. He seemed unable to continue.

"Take courage," urged Tredways. "Do not wince at the question I must ask. I have made a careful study of this singular case in a file copy of the Times. When you returned to the room where you had left your customer, he was gone—leaving on the table his umbrella and overcoat. That was what you asked the jury to believe. Keep calm; I do not say that I disbelieve it. He could easily have quitted the premises without you seeing him. The mystery was his leaving his top coat with a matter of fifty pounds in notes and gold in the pockets."

"That's it," said the other in a hollow tone.

"If you had taken the garment and money to the police all might have been well with you. Unfortunately, you were in considerable financial straits at the time and you very foolishly yielded to temptation by helping yourself to some of the money when three days had passed without the owner re-appearing. At the end of that time your wife made an appalling discovery. On a voyage to a cellar which was little used by the body of the missing man was found, in the centre of his

forehead was a large bruise where he had been struck a blow. A pistol was lying on the green, damp stones of the vault, and a bullet from it had been discharged into the brain. The case against you, Spells, was that you had first stunned Mr. Pendrell, then carried him into the vault and killed him outright. It was supported by the fact of your admitted purloining part of the money. On the other hand, the pistol could not be traced to your former possession, and the position of the fatal wound—just under the right temple—was not incompatible with a theory of suicide. This saved your life. Are my facts in order?"

Spells made a motion of assent. Tredways went on, choosing each word with care:

"The sensation created brought upon the scene a young lady, Miss Lucy Pendrell, the adopted daughter of the dead man, and who identified the body. I will not enter into the details of your trial, which was illuminated by nothing startling. No shred of evidence was forthcoming against any other person save yourself."

"And you are not going to find it now, after all these years," was the bitter comment.

"A sane observation," remarked Tredways blandly. "I want to know if your business has been shut down since your imprisonment?"

"No, sir. My wife has been keeping it together." Tredways' eyes twinkled.

"Excellent. Is she a methodical person?"

The bookseller looked bewildered.

"I trust she is, for in that case she may have retained the correspondence of the business, making it possible that you may find the card you mentioned, that postcard from an unknown customer asking you to reserve the 'History of the Peruvian Aborigines,' in ten volumes. I want that card, Spells. Do you think you can say hands upon it?"

"I might," replied the bookseller in a gloomy tone, utterly devoid of interest. "My wife's last words were that she would keep everything intact. She never doubted my innocence, gentlemen," he added in a burst of feeling.

"Of course not," echoed Tredways warmly as he showed our visitor to the door. "Tell her that you have been to me, and tell her what I want."

"Indeed?" queried Tredways. "A mere coincidence."

He closed the door, returned to his seat by the fire and lapsed into a long silence which he was the first to break.

"If Spells did not kill Pendrell, someone else did. Now that someone had to enter the shop, make his way to the upper back room, attack the victim, convey the body to the disused cellar. That would mean doing. I should say it was impossible—ridiculous on the face of it."

"The theory of suicide was never entirely shattered," I ventured.

"That does not explain the blow on the forehead which stunned Pendrell into unconsciousness before he was murdered."

"Then you think that Spells did it all?"

"How can I think that? Would he have come here to have his conscience cleared if he was indeed guilty? He has been through prison. He has nothing to gain by weaving a tangle of lies. Besides, I respect the opinion you formed of him in chains. I am inclined to believe that we have here a case of justice deferred. Now what can we do? The harvest of evidence has been reaped and garnered. What is left for me to glean? It is a situation which we must face in every instance of a similar kind. You know what that means, Francie?"

"It means, as I told you, that you will struggle with the impossible," I answered. "You will come far, far too late on the scene."

"Which I shall have to myself," he added with a laugh. "That is something, at any rate. However, the likelihood of failure in investigating such cases is intense. I shall succeed here and there. And I will tell you how I shall succeed. It will be by my spotting some apparently utterly insignificant detail which is in reality a most vital value."

"Is that likely to happen?" I doubted. "It may happen sometimes, Francie," said Tredways earnestly. "It is the

And what did Mr. Pendrell say to that?"

"He laughed and remarked that the information was vague. His fit of illness had passed away, much to my relief. He was even amusing himself by copying some of the morning's letters. He showed me the copies, asking, jealously, if he had made excellent notes of the different handwritings."

"And he had?" snapped in Tredways.

"Indeed, no; they were quite bad."

"Ah! Now I wonder if you have long since destroyed that innocent letter which Mr. Pendrell chance to be reading at the time of his attack?"

"It was soon forthcoming. The sheet of paper bore no address, no signature, but simply the words: 'Pardon delay. Your note of the 10th inst. has been received. We will try the office at Southampton?'"

"We left the house together, I confess that was unwarned by even a flood of enthusiasm, and was for bidding him goodbye."

"But suppose it is over soon?"

"I started incredulously. 'Good heavens! Why not try the office at Southampton?'"

"I'll answer that question as soon as we are in my rooms."

"A taxi sped us to Half Moon Street, where my companion called on a table was a letter, which he ripped open eagerly. It contained an enclosure—the postcard by Spells. On this paper was written: 'I reserve the volumes of the Peruvian Aborigines.'"

"Ha!" chuckled my friend. "I can not guess the question of 'how soon?'"

"It answered that question as soon as we are in my rooms."

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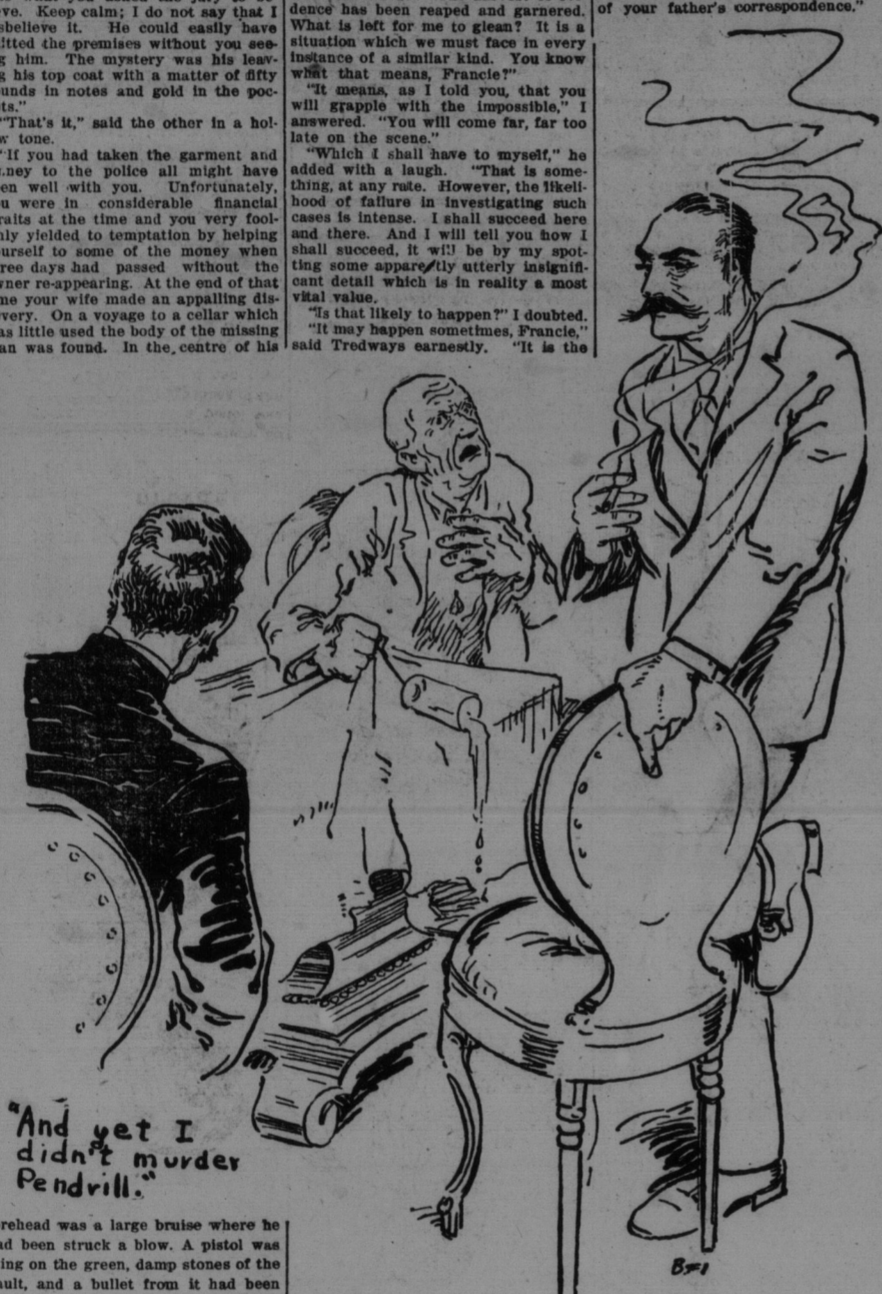
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ing to study the work. Once alone, he found the place of ingress. But he had grown complacent; he could not get through burdened with his heavy topcoat. So he left it behind him. When he was through, fearing that the bookseller might return, he replaced the volumes, which he had left within reach, in their places. On his way down those slippery steps he fell, as he mentioned, hurt his forehead badly, and may have been unconscious for a few minutes. Finally, he entered this cellar.

"And then? He was alone with the former scenes of his bad life. The dread and horror of it rushed upon him. He was aware from the duplicate notes he had received the note which first stirred the chords of memory—that an enemy had found him. The past was frightful; there was terror in the future. He had not ventured to this sinister place without arms; and I have no doubt at all that he suddenly drew the pistol from his pocket and—went out sternly into the dark."



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