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BY CELIA'S ARBOUR.

A NOVEL.

BY WALTER BESANT AND JAMES RICE, AUTHORS OF "READY-MONEY MORTIMORE,"
"THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY," &c.

CHAPTER XLIX.

A CORONER'S INQUEST.

It is a shame for a man to have to confess his own weakness; but the truth has to be told. I broke down at this point, and lay on the bed to which Leonard carried me for three weeks, in delirium. I suppose the great horror and shock of the evening following on the nervous agitation of the preceding three days was more than my brain could bear. At any rate, I had a bad time for the next fortnight or so, during which things went on without my being interested in them. Could one remember what delirium means a chapter might be written—but one would need to be Dr. Quiney to write it. First the chest seems to expand, and then the head to swell out and become of gigantic size. Then you lay your hands upon the forehead to make sure that it has not been carried somewhere else. Then you grow big all over, hands and feet and limbs. Then you lose all sense of weight, and seem to be flying in the air. And then just as you are beginning to feel uncomfortable, your mind runs away from your control: things grotesque, things splendid, things absurd, things of the past, things from books, wild imaginations crowd the brain, and move before the eyes like a real pageant of living creatures. Nothing astonishes, nothing seems strange; there is no sense of incongruity, and when you recover all is forgotten but the general impression of grotesque unreality. They told me afterwards what had happened.

They discovered, early in the morning, two things. First that a convict had escaped, and secondly that a dead man was lying in the meadow beneath the walls.

At first they connected the two things, but subsequent inquiry led them to believe that the convict had nothing to do with the homicide.

As soon as Leonard could leave me with the Captain he sought the old Pole, Wassielewski's single room was on the second floor in one of the crowded streets near Victory Row. The sailors' wives were all gathered about their doors though the rain was falling heavily, talking of the discovery of the dead body, and wondering whether it was a murder or only a suicide. Most of them knew Leonard as an old inhabitant of the *quartier*, and saluted him kindly as Gentleman Jack, a name which they learned from their husbands' friends, the soldiers.

Leonard asked if the old man had been seen that morning. He had not, it was too early in the morning. It was his custom to remain in his room until noon, unless he was engaged to play for a paid-off crew. At twelve he descended, and would seldom return till the evening. Leonard would find him in his room.

He mounted the stairs, and knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again. Again there was no answer. Could he have gone off already, on his way to Poland, acting on the burglar's advice?

Leonard went down the stairs again, and asked the mistress of the house. No, he had not gone out. He came home late, she said, perhaps as late as twelve, because she must have been in bed some time, and his footsteps woke her; but she had been up since six, and he certainly had not come downstairs.

She came up with Leonard this time, and they both knocked.

Then they called him by his name. All was still and silent.

Leonard leaned his shoulder against the door and pushed. The bolt came away from the rotten wood, and the door fell open.

Wassielewski was kneeling by the bedside. In his hands was the miniature of my mother, and his lips were pressed closely to it. But the lips were as hard and as cold as the hands that held the cross, for the poor old man was dead.

He was not undressed. He died in his devotions, perhaps immediately after he came home. Red-handed with the blood of the spy, he went unrepentant to the after world. The two souls, side by side, departed almost together.

This event, as Leonard said, simplified matters amazingly. It was no longer necessary for him to consider how the old man ought to give himself up to justice. It seemed pretty clear that the convict would hold his tongue even if he got caught, while if he got away he certainly would tell nothing. On the other hand, if he did tell it would be time enough to reveal the real truth. There was excuse, at any rate, in the plea that, the old Pole being dead, nothing could be gained by letting the whole world know that, like Lamech, he had slain a man.

The inquest on Wassielewski was very short. He had been found dead, he was an aged man, the Doctor certified that the cause of death was disease of the heart, the verdict was given in accordance with the evidence, and the poor old man was buried with the rites of his own Church.

By common consent of the few Poles who remained in the town, Leonard took possession for me of the few effects which the old man left. These were two or three weapons, relics of the last struggle, and his violin. We looked through

the drawers and cupboard, but there were only a few papers containing lists of names and plans of campaigns. These were burnt to prevent accidents. Also there was a bagful of sovereigns—seventy or eighty—which he had put together in readiness for a start at a moment's notice. With the Captain's consent and by his advice I subsequently distributed the legacy among his fellow-countrymen, who all came to the funeral of the most determined patriot that ever Poland produced.

A more important inquest was that held on the same day upon the body of Herr Rämmer.

Ferdinand Brambler was, of course, present taking notes with the air of one who has got hold of a good thing and means to make the most of it. Also he was himself conscious of an accession of importance, for was not the deceased a lodger in his brother Augustus's house?

They first called the policeman who found the body.

He deposed that early in the morning, at half-past four, he took the walk under the walls in the course of his beat, that he saw lying on the grass just within the meadow the body of a man. The man was dressed, but without a hat. Money was in his pocket—somehow the statement of Stepmey Bob and that of the policeman did not exactly tally, and either the burglar helped himself to more than he confessed, or the policeman took advantage of the situation and took two notes, at least, on his own account—that the deceased had upon him also a watch and chain and a diamond ring, those, namely, that lay on the table.

A suspicious juror—there is always, I believe, a suspicious juror—here requested to see the watch and chain, which he inspected minutely. The deceased lay, the policeman went on, as if he had fallen backwards after the blow was inflicted, and never moved again. The knife, which was that lying on the table, was of foreign make, such as a German gentleman might have carried. Being asked if he thought it was a murder, he said that there were no marks of violence or trampling in the grass, that, as he had not been robbed, he did not see why it should have been a murder. That from the knife being held tight in the right hand he thought it was suicide.

Then the doctor was called, the same doctor who gave evidence in the case of Wassielewski. He stated that death had been caused by a deep wound which penetrated right through the heart, that the death must have been instantaneous; that, although such a wound would require the greatest determination, it was quite possible for a man to inflict it upon himself; that the right hand tightly held a knife covered with blood, and that the wound, in his opinion, was undoubtedly inflicted by that knife, the one before the jury.

The next witness was Mr. George Tyrrell, the Mayor of the Borough. He deposed that Herr Carl Rämmer and himself were on friendly and intimate terms; that he had the management of his affairs; that he knew nothing whatever of his family connections in Germany; that a short time previously the Herr had instructed him to realize certain investments, which had been done as he requested; that he had last seen the deceased on the morning of his death, when nothing whatever passed which could warrant a belief that he was about to commit suicide; that, on the contrary, he stated that he was about to go away to the Continent, there to take up his permanent residence. But, on the other hand, he had received a note in the evening which struck him as singular. This note he would read. It was short, and was as follows:

"DEAR TYRRELL,—I find that my departure will take place earlier than I intended. I wished to see you again. I shall, however, go this night and for ever. My affairs are all settled. I wish, as you will never see me again, that you will take care of Ladislas Pulaski. Do not let the boy be persuaded ever to go to Poland. That is my solemn advice to him. Yours, "C. R."

He said that on receipt of the letter he thought at first of going round, but as the hour was late he refrained, to his present great regret. The letter was brought by a child, daughter of his clerk, Augustus Brambler, in whose house Herr Rämmer lodged.

The Coroner asked if any of the jury wished to put any questions to His Worship the Mayor. The suspicious juror wished to ask the Mayor if he was quite certain about the handwriting. The Mayor had no doubt whatever of the letter being in his old friend's writing.

Then Charlotte Brambler was called. The report in the paper of the following Saturday, with which, of course, Ferdinand Brambler had nothing to do, spoke of her as a most intelligent, straightforward witness, who gave her evidence clearly and to the point. "Her face," the report went on, "is singularly attractive, and her appearance and demeanour elicited universal respect and admiration. She is, we understand, the eldest, not the second daughter, as reported, of Mr. Augustus Brambler, long and honorably connected with the legal interests of the Borough."

Little Forty-four did give her evidence very well. She had to say that she attended to Herr Rämmer, and that at nine o'clock in the evening he called her up, and sent her with a letter to Mr. Tyrrell. There was no answer, and she returned immediately after delivering the note. Then he rang the bell again and told her that he was going away that night—going on a long journey.

An intelligent juror here interposed. He said that a long journey might mean anything, and he asked the witness why she did not ask him how long it was?

Forty-four replied that she never asked Herr Rämmer anything, but answered his questions, and as he did not say where he was going, it was not for her to inquire. She went on to depose that he added that he should not return any more; that instead of a month's notice he paid down a month's rent; that as she had attended him for some years he gave her a five-pound note, which he advised her to keep for herself, and not waste it in buying things for her brothers and sisters—this was a touch entirely Rämmeresque. Then he looked about the room, and said that the furniture could go to Mrs. Brambler, and she might have his old piano if she liked. Then she asked him what they were to do with the books which are in French, with yellow paper covers, in fact, French novels. He laughed, and said that if she pleased she might keep them till her brothers grew up, and then give them the books, which would certainly teach them a good deal about life previously unsuspected by them; but that, if she preferred, she might sell them for what they would fetch as waste paper. At all events, he would never want any of the books or any of the things any more.

The Coroner here interposed, and asked her if she was quite sure that those were the very words the lodger used.

The witness was perfectly certain that those were his exact words.

"He would never want the books or any of the things any more."

The jury whispered together.

Then the Coroner asked the girl about the knife.

She knew nothing about the knife; she had never seen such a knife in his room; but could not swear that he had no such knife, because he kept everything locked up. Perhaps the knife had been lying among Herr Rämmer's things in one of the drawers. Had never tried to look into the drawers; would not be so mean as to pry into things.

Here the suspicious juror remarked plaintively that he should like to see the five-pound note which the deceased had given her. She produced the note, which was handed round among the jury, who examined it as carefully as if it had been an important *pièce de conviction*. Then they all shook their heads at one another, and gave it back to the Coroner, who restored it to Forty-four.

There being no other evidence to call, the Coroner proceeded to sum up.

The jury must consider, he said, all the circumstances. The deceased informed an old friend in the morning that he intended to go away shortly; in the evening he sent a very extraordinary epistle, stating that he was going away "for ever"—the jury would make a note of that expression. At the same time he tells the little girl who was accustomed to attend upon him—and he was constrained to express his admiration of the very straightforward way in which that little girl's evidence was given—that he was going away, and was not coming back again. Let the jury mark, at this point, the suddenness of resolution. He took nothing with him; he abandoned the piano, his books, everything; and even made the very important remark that he should not want them any more. Why not? If a man goes on the Continent he does not give up reading; if a man changes his residence he does not throw away, so to speak, all his furniture, but carries it with him, or sells it; but Herr Rämmer was not, as he told the girl, Charlotte Brambler, going on the Continent, that he was going—let the jury mark this very earnestly, he was going on a long journey. Very good; but consider another point. The doctor was of opinion that the blow, if that of a suicide, must have required great determination. Possibly, perhaps, Herr Rämmer had not the requisite amount of resolution, but the jury will remember him—a stout, stern, and determined-looking person. As to courage, no man could tell when any other man's courage came to an end. And there were the facts that the knife was found in his hand, covered with blood; that there was no sign of any struggle on the ground, and that the knife was of foreign manufacture. If it was not suicide, what was it? Could the jury believe that a man of singularly quiet, regular, and reserved habits, should go out in the dead of the night, after making those remarkable statements and writing that remarkable letter, for a stroll, without his hat, on the walls? That he should then, still with the intention of taking a purposeless stroll, have climbed over the wooden railings into the field, and then presented his breast, offering no resistance, to the murderer? Then it was whispered that a convict escaped that morning from the prison close by might have done the deed. First of all, he must say that it appeared to him disgraceful that any convict should escape, but it was absurd to connect the convict with the death of a man he could not have known, and whom he did not rob. Also, how did that convict get hold of a foreign knife? Let the police catch and produce the fugitive, and it would

then be time to consider the absurd suggestion. There, in fact, was the evidence, all before the jury. They were a body of educated and intelligent men; they had sat at coroners' inquests before, and he, the coroner, was glad to say that a more trustworthy body of men to weigh evidence impartially he did not hope or desire to find. He therefore dismissed them in the confident hope that they would shortly return with a verdict.

In five minutes the jury came back. Their finding was unanimous. It was that the deceased committed suicide while suffering from temporary insanity.

This verdict, never disputed, was the end of the whole business. The deceased was buried at the expense of the Mayor, who acted as chief mourner. Our Polish friends made not the slightest sign of any knowledge of the deed; no one in the town knew anything, and our only accomplice was Stepmey Bob. I never heard that he was re-captured, and I have every reason to believe that he managed to escape altogether and get to America—or some other part of the world, where his possible good private qualities had not been obscured by his public reputation as a cracker of ribs. Nor did it appear that any inquiry was made into the matter by the Russians. They did not acknowledge the *mouchard* who died fighting for his life with one of the people whom he was paid to watch. If he had friends or relations, none of them ever turned up. No doubt his was an assumed name, under which no one of his people would be likely to recognize him.

When I recovered, and was able to be told everything, I confessed to a feeling that fortune for once had found a fitting death for this man.

We never told the Captain, Leonard and I. But once, when Mr. Tyrrell had been lamenting in public over his great private loss, while he was perfectly oblivious of the little facts which preceded the death of his friend, I ventured to tell him privately the whole history. After that we never mentioned him again. The behaviour of Leonard in suppressing the real facts was, like his conduct, when first he introduced himself to the Captain—what Mr. John Pontifex called a Wrong Thing.

CHAPTER L.

I got well again and strong, but I was forbidden to do any teaching work for two or three months, and had to give up all engagements for that space.

A holiday of three months, with Celina to come every day, till I was strong enough to go out, and read to me; the Captain to suggest about what was best for me to eat and drink; Leonard to tell stories, and sometimes the Rev. John Pontifex to come and sit with me, making profound remarks on the wickedness of men in general, his own fearful backslidings in his youth, and the incredible amount of repentance which they involved, the ignorance of the Papists, and the strength of will possessed by his remarkable wife. Or Mr. Broughton, who would come round, and, by way of giving me a flip, read a little Greek with me and then send round a few bottles of choice old Port. Mrs. Pontifex sent strawberries and truffles; she also told me that my fever was no doubt intended to bring me more directly under the influence of her husband's ministrations. Augustus Brambler would come bursting in between the intervals of writ serving and message running, to tell me joyfully of the great business done by the House. And little Forty-four would come as often as she could, if no one else was with me she sat down, beaming with smiles, the tenderest of little nurses, and told me how they were all getting on. Forty-six developing into a real genius over his books—he was the son who subsequently became a Reporter and Journalist; Forty-eight, who had been named at school for insubordination, and so on. I learned, too, from her, that the famous five-pound note had been, contrary to the donor's intention, distributed in new clothes, as far as it would go, among the whole family. A new lodger had been found who was at least more considerate than the former, did not dine at home, and talked to the children.

But, of course, Celina was the most regular visitor, and with her, Leonard. They came together, and went away together; and in my presence he made shameless love till sometimes the light of answering love flashed for a moment in her eyes, and then she drew herself from him, blushing, and fell to busying about my pillows. Miss Rutherford drove over from Farnham, too. She turned out to be exactly what she looked at first sight—for that matter, people always do: a gentle, quiet, and careful old lady, who ought to belong to some planet where there are no such things as temptations, follies, or worldliness. She was always profitably and daintily dressed, and as became an elderly lady, behind the fashion.

She had a sweet and pleasant face, with an expression on it which reminded one of Leonard, and when she spoke it was in a clear and precise way, like the ripple of a stream over stones. And when she looked at her nephew it was with an ever-growing wonder that there should be in the world such a boy as that to call her Aunt.

Imagine all the sentimental and tender things that these two women, Miss Rutherford and Celina, would say to each other and me as they sat beside my armchair while I was recovering. Think, if you can, how they were bound together by their common love for one man, and how they would read, as women always try to do, in each other's soul, dissatisfaction until they succeed in