



THE KRUMISER MYSTERY.

BY JAMES GREENWOOD.

Christopher Chiffinch was indicted at Oxbridge Assizes for the wilful murder of his mistress, Priscilla Krumiser. The circumstances of the case, as revealed at the trial, were peculiar. The deceased woman had been for many years a widow, and was an aged lady of eccentric habits. Up to the time of her death she resided in her own freehold house, which was situated in a somewhat lonely spot, about a mile and a half from the market town.

The estate included a small farm, and Mrs. Krumiser's two nieces, Catherine and Helen Prawl—women of middle-age and unmarried—lived with her in the capacity of servants. Chiffinch was a labourer, a sort of handy man about the house and premises, and had been in the same service since he was a lad up to the time when he was accused of the horrible crime in question, when his age, as it appeared on the deposition, was forty-six. Though hard working, and seemingly trustworthy, Cliffinch was of a morose disposition, and seldom had any other than a surly answer for anybody, excepting his old mistress. To her he was always respectful, and cheerfully willing to do everything she bade him. He was a clumsily-built, ungainly sort of fellow, which made it necessary for him to wear an iron ring attached to the sole of one boot, to eke out the short leg and make it of a length similar to the other.

Old Mrs. Krumiser was crippled too, and much more seriously. It was the result of an accident, that happened

a few weeks after the demise of her husband. It was not to be wondered at that Widow Krumiser was eccentric if only half of the stories told of the farmer were true. He was one of the close-fisted sort. Although he could very well afford to hire all the house and out door work he required, he toiled in the fields and on the farm harder than any common labourer, and shocked all his decent neighbours by working Sundays as well as week days. He was grasping and greedy for wealth, and compelled his wife to do housework and assist with the washing as well.

Anything to save a shilling. He never went to church, and, as far as anyone was aware, professed no religion. He had a stuffed monkey in his bedroom—a monstrous creature of the baboon species, with a Satanic expression of countenance, and gleaming white tusks, and great goggling glass eyes. This stuffed animal stood in a square glass-case near the bed, and when old Ambrose Krumiser was taken with his last illness, and the parson heard of it, he deemed it his duty, although the farmer had never treated him with common civility even, to call with a view of affording him spiritual consolation. But the wicked old fellow would have nothing to do with him.

"D'ye you want to know what my religion is and has been all my life?" he enquired of the minister.

"I should like very much to know," was the answer.

"Then *that* is it," and with a grin he pointed to the hideous ape in the glass-case. "That's the chap I believe in. He has been the best friend in the world to me."

The parson was much pained, of course, and left the venerable reprobate. But his meaning was not quite as it appeared. After Krumiser's death and burial, it was discovered that he had made a money-box of the ape—had taken out all the stuffing from its inside, and replaced it with hoarded money. Thinking it probable that there was more hidden somewhere, his widow mounted on a pair of high steps, poking among the rafters, fell and was afflicted with paralysis. He arms were so nearly useless that she could neither dress herself or eat her food without assistance. In addition to this, a few months before her death, she was so decrepit—her age was seventy-four—that she could walk but slowly and with difficulty, and having a great liking for sitting in the garden when the weather was fine. Chiffinch, who was very strong, was accustomed on such occasions to carry the old lady out, seated in her easy chair, and convey her back again to the house in the same way when she desired it.

Old Mrs. Krumiser's eccentricity manifested itself in various ways, but none so markedly as in the disposal of her money. In this respect she was amazingly like her late husband, but even more cunning. There could be no doubt as to her being rich. She was possessed of excellent house-property in the neighborhood, and her rents amounted to at least two hundred a year, and besides this she derived from another source an annual income of a hundred and fifty, and in addition there were the profits of the farm, which were at least enough for defraying household expenses.

But the singular part of it was Mrs. Krumiser never had any money. It was not frittered away in unnecessary extravagance in the way of living, and twenty pounds a year were made to meet the wage account of Mrs. Krumiser's two nieces and the kitchen maid as well. What the old lady did with the money was a mystery inexplicable, and the more so because she had a strange fancy for gold. If her rents or any part of them came to her in shape of bank notes, she was restless until she had exchanged the latter for sovereigns, and it was the same with her annuity. She put nothing in the bank. If she had done so, either Catherine or Helen Prawl must have known of it, for having scarce any use in her arms she never ventured abroad without one of them went with her. Where then could she hoard it? Say it was quarter day and she received forty or fifty pounds in gold. She would have it brought into her little sitting-room, and placed, for the present, in an old china punch-bowl, that stood in the corner cupboard by the fire-place. If this happened in the afternoon, never tired of puzzling on the singular circumstance, the two nieces went to look for it as soon as Mrs. Krumiser was gone to bed, but the punch-bowl was empty.

Had she been a person blessed with the free use of her limbs, the natural inference of course, would have been that she carried the gold upstairs with her. But it was a tested and proved fact, that she could not lift a coin from the table. Her fingers were powerless for such a feat. She might, with a spasmodic jerk of the wrist, sweep a piece of money from the table to the ground, but she could not, if her life depended on it, pick it up. How then could she take the money out of the bowl and convey it off and hide it? It was physically impossible. Yet, there was no getting over the hard fact, that, somehow or other, she did convey it off and hide it as well.

But where? The two sisters, though they were honest and faithful, were irate against the old woman for her parsimony, and, as need not be said, opportunity serving, they had many and many time made the strictest search for the concealed wealth. They had minutely examined beds and mattresses, probed the clinks between the floor-boards, raised the hearth, investigated the chimney even, but not so much as a single half-sovereign could they ever discover. They dare not question Mrs. Krumiser on the subject.

Niece Helen, being the bolder of the two, ventured to put out a feeler in this direction, and got sharply snubbed for her pains. A house in the neighborhood had been visited by burglars, and their booty included a considerable sum in ready cash.

"It should be a caution, aunt, to folk who hoard money on their premises," said Helen. "Much better bank it I should say. Suppose they were to break in here?"

"Well, what then," demanded Mrs. Krumiser, sharply.

"Why, see what they might perhaps find," replied her niece.