

# Mr. Max of Scotland Yard

by Charles Oliver

## II. The Briddon Mystery



THE rain was coming down in those torrents which are a specialty of Devonshire, when I knocked at Mr. Max's door the following afternoon. Salewski, who was sitting on the step, regarding the deluge with a moroseness which would have done honour to the keenest of fly-fishermen, took no notice of me, one way or the other.

"Come in, Captain Grensley," cried Mr. Max

from inside. "Leave as much water in the hall as you can."

He rose from his chair as I entered his study. "Excuse my not coming out to you," he said. "I was looking up my notes of a case that I thought would interest you, and I had just got my finger on the place."

"Do not apologise," I answered. "It was easy enough for me to find my way in, as—you won't mind my saying so—it would be for anyone."

"Easier even than you fancy," he said, with a smile. "There isn't a lock in the house, and yet, as you may guess, I have a host of good friends who would give a great deal to have their fingers at my throat."

"And are you not afraid?" I asked.

Mr. Max looked at me with a twinkle in his eye.

"Fear is not a factor in our professions, Captain Grensley, yours and mine, the two finest in the world. No, I am not afraid. I live very quietly down here, as you know, for foolhardiness is not bravery, and I am not the sort of man to say: 'This is where I live, gentlemen. Come on, the whole lot of you.' I feel rather like that, though. I love a scrimmage—was a first-rate football-player. There's no sense in a man's saying he was a second-rate, when he knows he was up to All-England form in his day, is there, now? I never got my All-England cap, though. Jealousy seems to have dogged me through life—mean, sneaking, twopenny-halfpenny jealousy. Pah!"

"However, take that easy in the corner, and I'll tell you about the case I mentioned. I have indexed it 'The Briddon Mystery,' as it is still called. There's no mystery at all about it, and if I had only been decently backed up—! But never mind that. There are the cigars at your hand—matches just by them. Are you comfortable? Good, then!"

"It was at the end of March, 1886, that I was sent down to Briddon to investigate a murder case in which the local police had come to a deadlock. My chief did not think it necessary to give me any hints on this occasion. I had put in some first-rate work since my affair with the Salewski's and my value was fairly well known."

"I had to get away with somewhat of a rush, and it was not till I was in the train for Branton that I had time to study the details of the case as they had appeared in the local newspapers."

"Briddon is a smallish village, a suburb of Branton, one of the centres of the Leicestershire boot industry. It lies five miles north of Branton, and is connected with the town by rail and a tramway."

"South of Briddon, in the first house of the village, Box Villa, lived a retired linen-draper of Branton, Mr. Richard Denning, a man of sixty-five at this time, and very much broken in health. His wife had died in the previous year, and an unmarried niece of his, Miss Mary Denning, had come to keep house for him. She was an amiable, practical woman. Her uncle was devoted to her, and she was extremely popular with her neighbours."

"Old Richard Denning's financial position was generally known. He had made a very comfortable fortune out of his linen-drapery business, which he had passed

on to a favourite nephew, Mr. John Telford. He had made no secret of his intention to leave the bulk of his property to his nephew, and smaller bequests to Mary Denning and to a cousin, a Mr. Edward Telford, who lived in a distant county. All the family were on the most cordial terms."

"On the night of Friday, March 18th, old Richard Denning and his niece had been murdered. The crime had been committed between five minutes to and a quarter-past eleven. These limits were absolutely fixed by the testimony of a Mrs. Hunt. She was the nearest neighbour of the Dennings, and had gone in to see them that evening. She had left them at five minutes to eleven. When she got home she found her husband suffering from colic, and, after having tried in vain all the remedies she had in the house, she had returned to Box Villa, twenty minutes after she had left it, to ask if they could give her some brandy. The lights were still burning in the house, as she could see through the bars of the gate, but no one came when she rang. After waiting ten minutes, ringing almost incessantly, she became alarmed and ran to the police-station. The gate was forced and Mary Denning was found lying at the bottom of the staircase and the old man on the landing above. Each had been killed by a revolver shot discharged at close quarters."

"That nothing had been heard was not surprising. Box Villa stands well back from the road, there were few people about, and a north gale was blowing. Robbery had been, it was thought, the motive of the crime, for some drawers in the old man's room had been smashed with a poker and the contents turned over."

"There was not much else to be got out of the papers except conjectures, which were really amusing in their inanity, and I thought of quite other things till the train drew up at Branton. I went out at once to Briddon and called on the local police-superintendent. I always like to get into communication with the country police, their simplicity is so refreshing."

"The superintendent was a large, important person, who was greatly surprised and offended that I did not propose to avail myself of his assistance and company in my researches. I mollified him somewhat by letting him bestow on me a vast amount of varied information."

"From what you tell me, Superintendent," I said, finally, "it is plain that the assassin was someone who knew Box Villa and the ways of the inhabitants very intimately."

"Just so, sir," agreed the officer, pompously.

"And that robbery was not the motive of the crime."

"But, my dear sir," said the astonished superintendent, "we found the drawers smashed and all anyhow."

"And the old gentleman's valuable gold watch and chain hanging up over his bed head. A stranger might have missed seeing it, though it is unlikely, but an intimate acquaintance, whose object was robbery, would have been able to put his hand upon it in the dark."

"I left the great man to meditate on this upsetting of his theory, the too obvious one, you see, and went alone to Box Villa. It was not difficult to 'reconstitute the crime,' as the French say. The criminal had rung at the back door that gave on to a lane. Mary Denning had opened it and had gone with the man, evidently no stranger, up to the house. He had followed her through the kitchen into the hall, and there had shot her without warning. He had possibly not meant to kill Richard Denning, but the old man had got out on the landing, recognised him, called out his name, perhaps, and there was only one thing to do. The man had run upstairs and put a revolver bullet through old Denning's head. Then had followed the drawer-smashing farce, and after that the murderer had gone quietly out. All this between 10.55 and 11.15."

"I went upstairs, where things had been left exactly as they had been found. I could see at a glance that