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The Cranberry Chase Mystery.

Story of a Typewritten Letter.



"YES," said Inspector Ford, lighting up, "it was the queerest job I ever handled. It was a licker. How? Well, every way—but you shall judge when you've heard the tale. All I will say at present is that it's too strange to be true."

"The case briefly stated was this. Cranberry Chase, a mansion in North Staffordshire, had been entered while the family were away, some articles of silver stolen, and the housekeeper murdered. The unfortunate woman had evidently been disturbed in her sleep. Rising hastily, she had slipped on a dressing-gown and thrust her feet into slippers. Probably she was in the act of leaving the room when she was attacked."

"Her assailant had tied her hands behind her, a towel being used for the purpose, while another had been stuffed into her mouth as a gag. It had been forced into the throat, and she had died from suffocation."

"That the murderer was someone who knew his way about the house was pretty certain, while the fact that the silver—a teapot, some forks, and half-a-dozen spoons—which was stolen was the property of the murdered woman, helped to fasten suspicion upon the man who was subsequently arrested. The plate belonging to the Chase had been sent to the bank at Northwood during the absence of the family. The servants were on board wages at the time, only a maid, a young woman of twenty being left."

"The girl, however, had gone to Birmingham in the morning to visit a sister, and had received permission from the housekeeper, Mrs. Harding, to stay overnight."

"On her way through the station the maid, it seems, met the wife of the suspect, stopped for a gossip, and mentioned the fact. Of course, when it came out that the wife knew of the girl's absence, it made the case so much the blacker against the husband."

"No arrest had been made, however, when I came on the scene—I was only Sergeant Ford then, of Scotland Yard. But such information as was in the hands of the local men was placed in my possession, and after following up the clues I had no hesitation in applying for a warrant for the arrest of Joe Thurgood—the man whom everybody had fixed on as guilty of the crime."

"The evidence seemed without a flaw, yet after I had him in custody I began to doubt. In the course of my ten years' experience I had had a good many criminals through my hands, and, having kept the prisoner under close observation, I had formed an opinion. The facts I admit all pointed one way, and that way led straight to the gallows. My own opinion, however, was that the prisoner had been caught in some infernal network of circumstances, which he was powerless himself to break through."

"The man was the keeper of an alehouse in the village, and had an evil reputation as a poacher, though he had never been convicted, and his wife, a niece of the murdered woman, had been in service at the Chase."

"The match had been strongly objected to by Mrs. Harding, who had done all she could to break it off. She had not succeeded, but the two women had been at daggers drawn for twelve months."

"My bit of silver won't come her way, so she needn't look for it," Mrs. Harding was reported to have said quite recently. While Mrs. Thurgood, according to the same authority, had advised Mrs. Harding not to be too sure about it, as stranger things had happened than that. It was no secret that they were on very bad terms."

Meantime evidence looked very black against Thurgood.

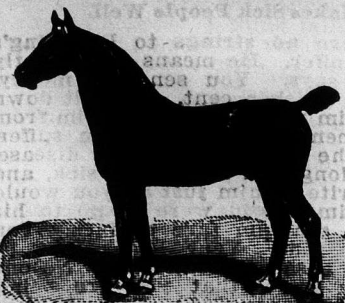
On the eventful evening people had

seen him on the river as late as 10 p.m. The river was the Trent, which formed the boundary of the Chase on the east.

"It was dark, and Thurgood was rowing upstream. That would be the direction of the Chase, which was

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