

It descended—the whole canopy, with the fringe round it, came down—down—close down; so close that there was not room now to squeeze my finger between the bed-top and the bed. I felt at the sides, and discovered that what had appeared to me, from beneath, to be the ordinary light canopy of a four-post bed was in reality a thick, broad mattress, the substance of which was concealed by the valance and its fringe. I looked up and saw the four posts rising hideously bare. In the middle of the bed-top was a huge wooden screw that had evidently worked its way down through a hole in the ceiling, just as ordinary presses are worked down on the substance selected for compression. The frightful apparatus moved without making the faintest noise. There had been no creaking as it came down; there was now not the faintest sound from the room above. Amid a dead and awful silence I beheld before me—in the nineteenth century, and in the civilised capital of France—such a machine for secret murder by suffocation, as might have existed in the worst days of the Inquisition, in the lonely fens among the Hartz Mountains, in the mysterious tribunals of Westphalia! Still, as I looked on it, I could not move, I could hardly breathe; but I began to recover the power of thinking, and, in a moment I discovered the murderous conspiracy framed against me, in all its horror.

My cup of coffee had been drugged, and drugged so strongly. I had been saved from being smothered, by having taken an overdose of some narcotic. How I had chafed and fretted at the fever fit which had preserved my life by keeping me awake! How recklessly I had confided myself to the two wretches who had led me into this room, determined, for the sake of my winnings, to kill me in my sleep, by the surest and most horrible contrivances for secretly accomplishing my destruction! How many men, winners like me, had slept, as I had proposed to sleep, in that bed; and never been seen or heard of more! I shuddered as I thought of it.

But, ere long, all thought was again suspended by the sight of the murderous canopy moving once more. After it had remained on the bed—as nearly as I could guess—about ten minutes it began to move up again. The villains, who worked it from above, evidently believed that their purpose was now accomplished. Slowly and silently as it had descended, that horrible bed-top rose towards its former place. When it reached the upper extremities of the four posts, it reached the ceiling too. Neither hole nor screw could be seen—the bed became, in appearance, an ordinary bed again, the canopy, an ordinary canopy, even to the most suspicious eyes.

Now, for the first time, I was able to move, to rise from my chair, to consider of how I should escape. If I betrayed, by the smallest noise, that the attempt to suffocate me had failed, I was certain to be murdered. Had I made any noise already? I listened intently, looking towards the door. Not a footstep in the passage outside, no sound of a tread, light or heavy, in the room above—absolute silence everywhere. Besides locking and bolting my door, I had moved an old wooden chest against it, which I had found under the bed. To remove this chest (my blood ran cold, as I thought what its contents might be) without making some disturbance, was impossible; and moreover, to think of escaping through the house, now barred-up for the night, was sheer insanity. Only one chance was left me—the window. I stole to it on tiptoe.

My bedroom was on the first floor, above an *entresol*, and looked into the back street, which you have sketched in your view. I raised my hand to open the window, knowing that on that action hung, by the merest hair's-breadth, my chance of safety. They keep vigilant watch in a House of Murder—if any part of the frame cracked, if the hinge creaked, I was, perhaps, a lost man! It must have occupied me at least five minutes, reckoning by time—five hours, reckoning by suspense—to open that window. I suc-

ceeded in doing it silently, in doing it with all the dexterity of a house-breaker; and then looked down into the street. To leap the distance beneath me, would be almost certain destruction! Next, I looked round at the sides of the house. Down the left side, ran the thick water-pipe which you have drawn—it passed close to the outer edge of the window. The moment I saw the pipe, I knew I was saved: my breath came and went freely for the first time since I had seen the canopy of the bed moving down upon me!

To some men, the means of escape which I had discovered might have seemed difficult and dangerous enough—to me the prospect of slipping down the pipe into the street did not suggest even a thought of peril. I had always been accustomed, by the practice of gymnastics, to keep up my schoolboy powers as a daring and expert climber; and I knew that my head, hands, and feet would serve me faithfully in any hazards of ascent or descent. I had already got one leg over the window-sill, when I remembered the handkerchief, filled with money, under my pillow. I could well have afforded to leave it behind me; but I was revengfully determined that the miscreants of the gambling-house should miss their plunder as well as their victim. So I went back to the bed, and tied the heavy handkerchief at my back by my cravat. Just as I had made it tight, and fixed it in a comfortable place, I thought I heard a sound of breathing outside the door. The chill feeling of horror ran through me again as I listened. Not a dead silence still in the passage—I had only heard the night air blowing softly into the room. The next moment, I was on the window-sill—and the next I had a firm grip on the water-pipe with my hands and knees.

I slid down into the street easily and quietly, as I thought I should, and immediately set off, at the top of my speed, to a branch "Prefecture" of Police, which I knew was situated in the immediate neighbourhood. A "Sub-Prefect" and several picked men among his subordinates, happened to be up, mulling, I believe, some scheme for discovering the perpetrator of a mysterious murder, which all Paris was talking of just then. When I began my story, in a breathless hurry and in very bad French. I could see that the Sub-Prefect suspected me of being a drunken Englishman, who had robbed somebody, but he soon altered his opinion, as I went on; and before I had anything like concluded, he shoved all the papers before him into a drawer, put on his hat, supplied me with another (for I was bare-headed), ordered a file of soldiers, desired his expert followers to get ready all sorts of tools for breaking open doors and ripping-up brick flooring, and took my arm, in the most friendly and familiar manner possible, to lead me with him out of the house. I will venture to say, that when the Sub-Prefect was a little boy, and was taken for the first time to the Play, he was not half as much pleased as he was now at the job in prospect for him at the "Gambling House."

Away we went through the streets, the Sub-Prefect cross-examining and congratulating me in the same breath, as we marched at the head of our formidable *posse comitatus*. Sentinels were placed at the back and front of the gambling-house the moment we got to it; a tremendous battery of knocks, was directed against the door; a light appeared at a window; I waited to conceal myself behind the police—then came more knocks and a cry of "Open in the name of the law!" At that terrible summons, bolts and locks gave way before an invisible hand, and the moment after, the Sub-Prefect was in the passage, confronting a walter, half-dressed and ghastly pale. This was the short dialogue which immediately took place.

"We want to see the Englishman who is sleeping in this house?"

"He went away hours ago."

"He did no such thing. His friend went away; he remained. Show us to his bedroom!"

"I swear to you, Monsieur le Sous-Prefet he is not here! he—"

"I swear to you, Monsieur le Garçon, he is. He slept here—he didn't find your bed comfortable—he came to us to complain of it—here he is among my men—and here am I, ready to look for a flea or two in his bedstead. Pican! (calling to one of his subordinates, and pointing to the waiter) collar that man, and tie his hands behind him. Now, then, gentlemen, let us walk up stairs!"

Every man and woman in the house was secured—the "Old Soldier," the first. Then I identified the bed in which I had slept; and then we went into the room above. No object that was at all extraordinary appeared in any part of it. The Sub-Prefect looked round the place, commanded everybody to be silent, stamped twice on the floor, called for a candle, looked attentively at the spot he had stamped on, and ordered the flooring there to be carefully taken up. This was done in no time. Lights were produced, and we saw a deep rastered cavity between the floor of this room and the ceiling of the room beneath. Through this cavity there ran perpendicularly a sort of case of iron, thickly greased; and inside the case appeared the screw, which communicated with the bed-top below. Extra lengths of screw, freshly oiled—levers covered with felt—all the complete upper works of a heavy press, constructed with internal ingenuity so as to join the fixtures below—and, when taken to pieces again, to go into the smallest possible compass, were next discovered, and pulled out on the floor. After some little difficulty, the Sub-Prefect succeeded in putting the machinery together, and leaving his men to work it, descended with me to the bedroom. The smothering canopy was then lowered; but not so noiselessly as I had seen it lowered. When I mentioned this to the Sub-Prefect, his answer, simple as it was had a terrible significance. "My men," said he, "are working down the bed-top for the first time—the men whose money you won, were in better practice."

We left the house in the sole possession of two police agents—every one of the inmates being removed to prison on the spot. The Sub-Prefect, after taking down my "process-verbal" in his office, returned with me to my hotel to get my passport. "Do you think," I asked, as I gave it to him, "that any men have really been smothered in that bed, as they tried to smother me?"

I have seen dozens of drowned men laid out at the Morgue, answered the Sub-Prefect, "in whose pocket books were found letters, stating that they had committed suicide in the Seine, because they had lost everything at the gaming-table. Do I know how many of those men entered the same gambling-house that you entered? I won as you won? I took that bed as you took it? I slept in it, were smothered in it? and were privately thrown into the river, with a letter of explanation written by the murderers and placed in their pocket-books? No man can say how many, or how few, have suffered the fate from which you have escaped. The people of the gambling-house kept their bedstead machinery a secret from us—even from the police! The dead kept the rest of the secret for them. Good night, or rather good morning, Monsieur Faulkner! Be at my office again at nine o'clock—in meantime, *au revoir!*"

The rest of my story is soon told. I was examined, and re-examined; the gambling-house was strictly searched all through from top to bottom; the prisoners were separately interrogated; and two of the less guilty made a confession. I discovered that the Old Soldier was the master of the gambling-house—justice discovered that he had been drummed out of the army, as a vagabond, some years ago; that he had been guilty of all sorts of villainies since; that he was in possession of stolen property, which the owners identified; and that he, the croupier, another accomplice, and the woman who had made my cup of coffee, were all in the secret of the bedstead. There appeared some reason to doubt whether the inferior persons attached to the house knew anything of the suffocating machinery; and they received the benefit of that doubt, by being treated simply as thieves and vagabonds. As for the Old Soldier and his two head-myrmidons, they went to the galleys; the woman who had drug-