



THE CRIME OF THE BROKER'S OFFICE.

Meanwhile when Judith Kredge saw Stuart Harland a prisoner in the power of the officers of the law, her venomous eyes flashed with lightning triumph.

It was clearly apparent that she secretly hated the young man.

"You will take the oath and then we will listen to any statement you desire to make," said the coroner as Stuart did not reply to his last remark.

The young man was duly sworn and then the inquest proceeded and new and startling developments ensued.

CHAPTER VI.

"My explanation is most simple. I can only say that important business called me away suddenly, and I did not see fit to publish the fact of my intended departure. As for my having any connection with this case, those who know me will not for a moment entertain such a thought. For the assurance of strangers, I might further protest my innocence, but it is unnecessary to do so. It is no secret that a firm friendship existed between myself and John Oakburn," said Stuart Harland, at last.

His frank and fearless manner troubled the police sergeant who had caused his arrest, and he hitched about in his chair nervously, while he tried to devise some trap which might lead Harland to criminate himself.

"He thought of the old 'confrontation ruse,' as the detectives term it, and suddenly arising he said to Stuart: "Look here, sir!"

The young man promptly stepped to the side of the police sergeant, who then turned to the body of the murdered man and suddenly uncovered his face.

If the police sergeant anticipated that Stuart would recoil and manifest all the terror of guilt at the sight of the dead face of John Oakburn, he was greatly disappointed.

Such was not the result.

Stuart gazed sadly upon the ghastly features of the old cashier, and not the faintest evidence, such as the police sergeant hoped to elicit, was discernible in his manner.

"This is a foul crime. The murderer must be discovered. Poor John Oakburn must be avenged!" said Stuart, earnestly.

His voice and manner were so naturally sincere that those who heard him were impressed.

Even the coroner's voice sounded more kindly as he proceeded to question Stuart, when it was quite evident to all that the police sergeant's ancient test had utterly failed.

"What time did you leave the house last night, Mr. Harland?" was the first question propounded by the coroner.

"It was not quite one o'clock. I had set my alarm-clock to ring at one precisely, and without removing my clothing I fell asleep. I was awakened by some loud noise, though what it was I cannot tell. Springing up, I glanced at the clock, and I saw it was exactly twenty minutes of one o'clock. I left the house in a few minutes."

"Ah, but how long was he in the house at the time of the murder. He does not know about the clock that was overturned here, and that the time of the assassination has been positively determined," whispered the police sergeant, turning to Paxton.

"Wait until the examination is concluded—restrain your exultation until then," retorted the detective.

"Why did you leave suddenly last night, as you did?" the coroner then asked.

"I have told you that I was called away by important business; I was on my way to see a friend of mine."

"But you have not told us what the nature of your business was."

"It was a strictly private matter. It had no reference to this unfortunate affair."

"Perhaps so. But you can at least tell us your friend's name?"

Stuart hesitated for a moment, and then he said:

"His name is James Sanborn."

"At the mention of that name, Mr. Garrison gave a violent start and he thought: "There is no longer a shadow of a doubt. Stuart knows all, but he means to shield me. It is because I am Edna's father. For my daughter's sake, he will impart his secret, rather than reveal the truth. He is a noble fellow. How unworthy I am of such friendship as his!"

"Then you decline to give us his plain, straightforward explanation of your conduct. I warn you, Mr. Harland, that your own interest demands that you should conceal nothing," said the coroner.

"I can say no more; another than myself is concerned," replied Stuart.

"Very well, sir. Mr. Sanborn, the gentleman at the mention of whose name, shall be questioned."

Stuart bit his lips. Mr. Garrison turned white as death, and the coroner smiled at his victim's discomfiture as he said blandly:

"You had not thought of that, I see." Stuart's eyes blazed with wide-spread light, but he restrained the angry retort that arose to his lips and remained silent.

The coroner questioned Stuart further, but nothing was forthcoming, and he could not disabuse himself of the impression that Marion Oakburn was in some inexplicable way connected with it.

Stuart Harland was one of those noble spirits who ought to have lived in the days of chivalry and knight errantry. He had resolved not to make an explanation of his midnight departure, because to do so would be to betray the secret of another, which he had accidentally gained a knowledge of. He never thought of resorting to falsehood to exonerate himself.

He was not without a fear lest the course he had resolved upon would alienate the sympathies of his friends, but he felt in honor bound to adhere to it.

Paxton was somewhat of a physiognomist in his way, and he fixed his eyes on Stuart Harland's face and sought to read his character.

The detective's scrutiny was so intense that Harland felt his gaze and finally looked at him. Then the former dropped his eyes, but he was favorably impressed and he mentally reflected:

"He is an honest free, and if I am in error he is a man who would make almost any sacrifice for honor and friendship."

man who was imperiling himself for his sake, and as he reflected that if Stuart was sacrificed Edna would not survive the blow, his tortures were unexpressible.

Oakburn had listened to Stuart Harland's examination with the deepest interest, and as he comprehended that the suspicion against him seemed destined to bring him into deadly peril, although they had heretofore been but passing acquaintances, he felt that the strands of their lives which led into the unexplored future had been woven together by a mystic fatality without the knowledge of either.

The cashier's daughter was not a fatalist; but she could not think that the singular conjunction of events which had recently transpired had come about by mere chance.

"In view of all the circumstances of this case, I order that Stuart Harland be searched."

"Officer Smith, you will attend to this matter," said the coroner, addressing the police sergeant.

A hot flush mantled Stuart Harland's face.

"What! Am I to be subjected to this indignity, as though I were a common thief?" he exclaimed.

"Justice is no respecter of persons. In quest of truth, she seeks for information everywhere. If need be, she enters the sacred precincts of the cloister. No man is exempt from her search," answered the coroner, impressively.

"So be it then." Let this farce continue to the end, and he bowed his head.

The officer named came forward and proceeded to search him.

He first examined Stuart's overcoat pockets, and Stuart assisted him, saying cordially:

"You will find nothing to reward you."

"We shall see," answered Police Sergeant Smith, gruffly.

Presently, the officer thrust his hand into the inside pocket of the young man's overcoat and drew out a number of wax impressions of locks and skeleton keys.

He held them up to the sight of all, exclaiming:

"I thought so. Here is the proof we were in search of!"

Stuart Harland staggered like one suddenly seized with an overwhelming vertigo.

"This is fatal! I had forgotten about the cast; I am lost!" he exclaimed, scarcely knowing what he said.

This last startling discovery produced a profound sensation and the greatest excitement.

Mr. Garrison was like one stunned by a heavy blow.

Marion Oakburn, with her hands clasped upon her heart, and an agonized look in her eyes, covered in her chair.

Paxton was absolutely amazed.

Had a thunderbolt descended at his feet the detective could not have been more disconnected.

Here it seemed was the positive evidence of the guilt of the man for whose innocence he had vouched in the strongest terms.

The detective's prophesied opinion seemed to be proven worthless before all the assemblage, and he felt abashed, humiliated and defeated.

The police sergeant was exultant.

"Who was right, friend Paxton?" he said jeeringly.

"What has become of all your theory of this man's innocence? I grant you it was stupid for him to run away as he did after committing the crime, but his conduct was not without precedent. The great Vidocq used to explain the stupidity of certain crimes committed by men of superior intelligence, by saying that they act under the influence of a kind of vertigo. That they become dazed after the crimes."

"Quite true, I recollect the theory, but mark my words your suspicion is all wrong despite its apparent confirmation. The mystery of John Oakburn's fate is still as far from being solved as ever," said Paxton in reply, but he could not avoid betraying some of the discomfiture which the last denouement had occasioned him.

Stuart Harland regained his composure to some extent in a moment or so, and he muttered:

"This is destiny. The immutable law of bad luck is not to be abrogated. It follows me throughout this entire unfortunate affair."

A loud he said:

"I believe that I can convince you that I was entirely ignorant that the articles just discovered were in my possession."

"One moment, sir, and we will hear you," answered the coroner, and taking the skeleton keys in the police sergeant he tried one of them in the safe. The key entered the lock, but it would not move the bolt. The other keys were made for the door locks, and turning to the office door he tried one of them, finding that it fitted the lock perfectly. He tried the other key in the lock of the street door and found that it also was a perfect fit. That the door could be locked and unlocked by means of it with ease.

The coroner then examined the wax impressions of the keys they had been taken from the locks of the street door, the office door and the safe.

"Ah," said the coroner, reflectively, "the intricate mechanism of the safe lock resisted the skeleton key, and so it was necessary that the police sergeant should have the key John Oakburn carried."

"But what need had Stuart Harland of a skeleton key to the front door?" ventured Paxton, suggestively.

The coroner shook his head doubtfully, and turning to Stuart again he noted that there was a marked decadence in his manner from the confident air he had worn when he entered the office.

"You may proceed with your statement now," the official said.

"Thank you, sir, I will tell you how it is that those incriminating keys and the impressions of the locks must have come into my possession without my knowledge," said Stuart. He paused for an instant as though to collect his thoughts.

At last the young man, who had comprehended the terrible nature of the accusation which had been brought against him and realized the deadly peril of his situation.

He began to speak again, when suddenly there was another commotion at the door and a loud voice was heard to call out:

"Here is new evidence to throw light on the mystery of the murder!"

A hope arose in Stuart's heart that something had been discovered to prove his innocence. At the same time there was in his mind a dread lest some new circumstance was to be brought against him.

There was a moment of suspense.

CHAPTER VII.

A man pushed his way into the office, and every eye was fixed upon this last arrival.

Previous to placing before the reader the evidence which this personage gave,

or recording Stuart Harland's explanation as to how the skeleton keys and wax impressions came in his possession, we will relate certain adventures which befell Harland after he left his room on the night of the murder.

Stuart reached the depot and boarded the train which he desired to catch just as it was moving out of the station.

He saw several persons on the platform whom he knew, and he exchanged greetings with them.

In the coach which he entered he recognized no familiar face, but the train had not gone far when he had struck up acquaintance, as people sometimes will on a railway train, though inclined to be exclusive elsewhere.

A young gentleman who seemed inclined to make himself agreeable found an opportunity to open a conversation with Stuart, and the two young men were eventually favorably impressed.

They were soon chatting familiarly.

Finally, at the request of the stranger, Stuart accompanied him to the smoking-car, where, as it chanced as the coach was overhauled, they both removed their overcoats.

Excellent cigars were produced by Stuart's new acquaintance, who, by the way, represented himself to be a Bostonian and a son of a wealthy family whose name was familiar to commercial men.

For some time the new acquaintances smoked and chatted pleasantly, but as the night drew on their conversation gradually flagged, and both seemed inclined to nap.

It was not long before silence fell between them, and soon Stuart's heavy regular habit of snoring assured him that he was sleeping soundly.

The young man did not awake until the loud voice of the brakeman smote upon his ears as he shouted:

"Albany!"

This was Harland's destination, and he sprang to his feet just as the train began to move.

As he hurried on his overcoat he glanced about for his recent companion, but he was gone, and then Stuart discovered that it was not his own but his late companion's coat which he was donning.

But his own coat was gone, and surmising that his new acquaintance must have taken it through a very ordinary mistake, which there was no opportunity to rectify in time, Stuart buttoned up the coat which was left to him by the exchange of garments, and concerning himself no more with the matter he leaped from the train just in time.

Meanwhile, Stuart Harland's recently made acquaintance had not slept at all, though for a time, until he was sure of the former's solomenly, he had feigned to do so.

When he was confident that the oblivion of sleep held Stuart's senses enthralled the young stranger coolly arose and appropriated his coat.

There were but few other persons in the coach, and they were all sound asleep.

Deliberately the young man who had secured it donned Stuart's overcoat, and then removing his hat he threw it out of the window. From his pocket he produced a skull-cap, which he drew down over his eyes, and he turned the collar of Stuart's overcoat up about his ears.

The garment was a long ulster, such as was then the prevailing style, and it reached to the stranger's knees, completely concealing his under suit.

The moment the train slowed up at Albany, the stranger leaped upon the platform, and turned to hurry away.

Two police officers were standing on the walk at the moment of landing, and they advanced toward the young man as he alighted from the train.

One of the officers flashed the light of his lantern in the face of Stuart Harland's late companion, and as the young man saw the uniform of the policeman, which the light disclosed, he trembled as with a fearful chill, and turned pale, as though with fright.

"He ain't our man, Tom," said one policeman, as he scanned the young stranger's face by the light of his lantern.

"No, he don't tally with the descrip," assented the other police officer.

The stranger seemed about to sink upon the platform as the police officer seized him, but now, as the two minions of the law turned away, he recovered himself, and strode rapidly from the depot.

The moment he was out of the policeman's sight he broke into a run.

"I thought I was lost. I could have sworn they meant to arrest me," he muttered.

"Well, I have secured a partial disguise, at all events, and if the human wolves I fear mean to play a double game and betray me I yet have a chance to baffle them," he added.

On through the streets of Albany he fled, choosing thoroughfares that he hoped, imperfectly illuminated, until he paused at a street corner where the tents of Judah are pitched.

Proving a card on which certain directions were written, he consulted it by the light of a street lamp and muttered:

"This is the street, and yonder is the number. We shall see what our worthy sort of Abraham will do for us."

With this monologue he turned down a side street where old clothes merchants and pawnbrokers abounded, where "Isaacs," and "Levis," and "Solomons," and "Goldsmiths," and "Jacobs," and "Rosenthals," and other historic names ornamented the signs.

It was here that during business hours barter and trade were carried on very much as in the marts of ancient Jerusalem, by sharp-eyed men whose nature had given them the genius of trading.

Late as was the hour, and although all the stores were closed, the man we are following gained admission to a certain shop where the familiar sign of the pawnbroker, the three balls hanging from the door as a warning to the wayfarer who ventured that way in quest of some good Samaritan to heal his financial wounds, that the chances were as two to one if he entered therein he would come forth victorious.

But the stranger accomplished the purpose for which he had visited the establishment, for in half an hour he emerged from it clad in a manner which created a complete metamorphosis in his appearance.

He had procured an artistically fitting wig and beard, and it was evident that he relied implicitly on the impenetrability of his disguise, for he no longer slunk along the gloomy retired streets, but walked boldly where the light was brilliant.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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