

*The Mysterious Occurrence in Lambeth*  
by G.P.R. James

“Yesterday morning, about a quarter to six o’clock, as police constable B 45 was returning from his round, he perceived the door of a house in Transom Street, Lambeth, apparently not quite closed, and judging that it must have been left in this condition all night, he thought it advisable to enter in order to warn the inhabitants against such gross carelessness, which only gives encouragement to the pilfering habits long a reproach to that neighborhood. On pushing the door, however, he found that it was chained on the inside, and now feeling his suspicions still more excited, he knocked loudly for admission. No answer was returned from the house; but his repeated applications to the knocker called forth several of the neighbors, from whom he received information which induced him at once to force his way in. This was effected by means of a crowbar obtained from the shop of Mr. Tibbits, a blacksmith, five doors farther down the street, which, being introduced through the small aperture left between the door and the door post, when the former was pushed back as far as the chain would allow it, wrenched out the staple through which the iron catch was passed. Immediately this was accomplished the officer and four of the nearest neighbors, namely, Mr. Andrew Tibbits, the blacksmith above mentioned, Mis-tress Golding, a lady who keeps a chandler’s shop opposite, Mr. Stimpkins the tailor in the same street, and Mr. John Piggensdorff, the German sausage-maker who lives at the corner, entered the house and proceeded to examine the rooms on the first floor.

“Nothing of any importance met their eyes in the parlor, which is a small room fronting the street. Everything seemed in perfect order, and wore evidence of two people having taken tea there. The teapot was found quite cold, but half full, with two teacups on the table, which had clearly been used the night before. The sugar basin was in its place, and the silver teaspoons had not been disturbed. The window shutters also in all the under rooms were shut and barred; and in the further examination which took place after the discovery of the facts presented above stairs, it was found that every fastening was firmly fixed and undisturbed in the lower part of the house. The back parlor offered nothing worthy of remark, all the furniture being in order; and the parties who had entered would have been inclined to think that the inhabitants had clandestinely left the house, had such an idea been compatible with the fact of all the doors and windows being fastened on the inner side. After inspecting the ground floor, the constable and those who were with him ascended the stairs and entered the front room, where a spectacle presented itself which at once accounted for the solemn stillness which pervaded the dwelling. On the floor, near the foot of the bed, with her throat cut in a ghastly manner, lay an old lady whom the neighbors instantly recognized as the mistress of the house. She was quite dead, and indeed must have expired in a few minutes after receiving the injury which caused her death; for the wound severed both the trachea and esophagus, completely dividing the carotid artery and jugular vein on the right side, and coming within the breadth of a shilling of the former on the left. The idea that she had committed suicide naturally suggested itself from the circumstances, especially as the deceased was known to be a person of very singular habits; but no instrument with which the cut could have been performed was found in the room after the most diligent search; and moreover, a cut from

some sharp instrument in the palm of the right hand testified trumpet-tongued that she had resisted the sanguinary purpose of her murderer.

“No clew has yet been discovered as to his means of entrance or escape. The little yard behind the house is paved with stone, and the most minute examination has failed to discover the trace of a footstep there. But we have reason to believe that the skill and address of our justly celebrated detective force will not be found at fault upon this occasion, and that suspicions point at a certain person, whom for obvious reasons we shall not more distinctly designate.”

Such was a paragraph that met my eyes in one of the morning papers of the 6th of May, 182-. Stripping it of its verbiage, and setting aside the “trumpet tongues” and “sharp instruments,” etc., it appeared simply that an eccentric old lady had been murdered in Lambeth no one knew how. This was my conclusion over my first cup of coffee; but before I had sipped out the second, I began to doubt whether there were not something more in the matter. If the statements of the article manufacturer were true, it was indeed a very curious and mysterious affair.

If—there was the question. How often is it that we see correct statements of anything whatever that occurs being furnished by daily journals, especially on the first blush of the affair? Does it not rather seem that a false, a perverted, and exaggerated account is given one day for the purpose of correcting it the next, with a new apocrypha, to be recorrected on the day following?

The end of all these questions was, that I determined to go myself to the spot. I knew something of the locality, even of the very street; and I thought that, at all events, if the tale were substantially true, it would be worthwhile to trace it out; if it were principally false, I should get at the truth. I accordingly got into a cab and drove over to Lambeth; but I took care to alight two or three streets’ distance from the house I sought, and thence trudged forward on foot.

Most people in London—at least those who take any interest in the less busy, and in the less aristocratic parts of the metropolis where mediocrity and inactivity vegetate—know Transom Street. It is what is called a “respectable street”; that is, a street where there is only one public house and no pawnbrokers. It is narrow, however, and dull, with the red houses rising, grenadierlike, close opposite to each other, as if they were about to fight the next moment. The buildings bear evidence of having been well smoked; and, very flimsily built at first, they have not acquired any appearance of additional stability from the crooked finger of Time having scraped out the mortar of the pointings.

The first house I came to was that of Mr. Piggendorff, described in the newspaper as “the German sausage-maker who lives at the corner.” By the way, the journal had denied Mr. Piggendorff his fair proportion, inasmuch as Mr. Piggendorff dealt in dead pig in all its shapes; and looking in at his window at the number of dead hogs there ranged, I felt that a man so accustomed to murder must have let a great number of little incidents escape him. I therefore passed by his door, and soon saw a shop with a keg of Dutch

butter on the step, a box of raisins in the window, and the name Golding in large letters over all. This was on the opposite side of the street, and next but one I perceived a public house, with a clapboard painted in blue and white upon the doorpost, indicating that it was called the Checquers. Several people, principally men, were gossiping before that house; but a glance into Mrs. Golding's shop showed me metal more attractive than either her butter or her raisins. This was the coat of a police constable, with stiff collar and glazed hat, in the individual bearing which official signs I recognized an acquaintance. Constable Greenly, whom I now found to be no other than B 45 of the newspapers, had been employed by me more than once in some business matters, and had been well paid for his services.

I accordingly walked across the street, entered Mrs. Golding's shop, and accosted him. He was all deference and respect; for one of the principal members of great law firms is always revered in the eyes of gentlemen of the police force, who look upon themselves as a sort of link between two professions less dissimilar than they seem at first sight—a sort of half-breed between the bar and the army.

My first questions elicited from him and from Mrs. Golding (who was running over with murder) numerous details of what had occurred on their first entrance into the house, all of which tended to show that the newspaper account was substantially correct. My interest was now, however, a good deal excited, and I asked Greenly whether it would be possible for me to go and examine the premises with my own eyes.

“Certainly, Sir, certainly,” he said; “I have got the key. The adjourned inquest is to meet at the Checquers in half an hour; but I can show you all the places before that. There is not much to see but the poor old lady herself. We let her lie till the jury had viewed the body, but after that, by permission of the coroner, we took her up and put her on the bed quite comfortable.”

Hang the fellow! What a ghastly idea of comfort he had!

We went over the street, Greenly lingering behind for a moment to tell Mrs. Golding that I was a great lawyer, and a very curious gentleman, and he unlocked the street door to give me admission. A number of loiterers round the door of the Checquers were darting after us to get in too; but Greenly, without words, warned them off by a mere Bow Street look, and shut the door in their faces. The parlors, the kitchens, etc., were all exactly as he had found them, with the exception of a chink of the window shutter being left open in each room. But he explained to me, and showed me exactly how each had been fastened; and it was very apparent that no one could have got out of the house that way, having nobody but a dead woman in it. Upstairs we next went, and there certainly the sight was horrible. The poor old woman had been stretched upon the bed in the front room in her clothes, and a sheet drawn over her as far as the neck; but a part of the ghastly wound was uncovered, and the ashy white face above seemed to bear still an expression of pain and mortal terror. Then at the foot of the bed, partly dabbling a little piece of carpet which was stretched there, partly staining the uncovered floor, was a great blotch of blood unwiped up, and indeed not yet quite dry. I felt all the dreadful character of the scene; but

I am accustomed to sights which make men's blood run cold, and I stood and gazed at the harsh, wan countenance, with its petrified expression of terror. I even lifted a part of the cap, and, in doing so, brought part of the gray hair up with it. It had evidently been torn from the roots; and pointing out the fact to Greenly, I said, "There has been a terrible struggle before the deed was done."

"There has indeed, Sir. The poor old creature died hard, I'll warrant," said the policeman, with more feeling in his tone than I thought he would have displayed. "She would fight for her money, if not for her life."

"Robbery was the object, I suppose," replied I.

"Oh, that's certain, Sir," said Greenly. "They rummaged her pockets, and cleared out that cupboard, too. She had lots o' money, I don't doubt; for she was very stingy, the neighbors say, and we find she had a very good sum in long annuities—more to live on than she ever spent. They got a good haul up here, and that's the reason, I suppose, they never went downstairs after the plate."

"But how could they get in and out?" I asked, musing. "Were these windows shut too?"

"All down, Sir," answered Greenly. "It must have been people who knew the premises and the neighborhood well; and I'll tell you how it must have been done—there was no other way to do it. You see the two windows in this room were not only down, but the spring bolts atop were fastened; but though the window in the little back room looking into the yard was drawn down, the bolt was back. That was the only way anyone could get in or could get out."

"What's the height?" I asked.

"Oh, twelve feet, I daresay, Sir," said the policeman; "but that makes no difference. Nobody could have jumped it; for the window was pulled down after them, and there is not room upon the sill for a cat to turn round. They must have had a ladder, got in by that window, robbed and murdered the poor old soul; then out again, closing the window to hide how they did it."

"Then there must have been collusion on the part of some of the neighbors," I said; "for from the stairs I perceived that the yard is surrounded by houses."

"Likely," replied Greenly, laconically; "but none of them will peach at present. I daresay they have had snacks, for in that closet, if the gossip be true, she kept a number of valuables well worth sharing."

I turned toward the closet and opened the door, which was unlocked and had the key in it. Not an article was left within. If it had really ever contained anything, the sweep was clean and complete. I remarked, indeed, a splinter of wood lying on the floor, but where it came from I could not perceive, for there was no appearance of the door having been forcibly opened.

I then went into the back room, where was a little bed and some women's apparel lying about. I threw open and drew down the window, and found that it was very hard to move—more especially to pull down. The mystery, in my eyes, became greater than ever; for I could hardly conceive it possible for anyone standing on a ladder outside to close it completely. I then inquired if there was a trapdoor leading to the roof. Greenly replied that there was, but it had been found secured by two bolts.

It was now nearly time for the meeting of the coroner's jury; and having carefully closed the house again, we went over to the Checquers. All the first part of the evidence was to the effect stated in the first newspaper account. Very prolix narratives were given by the witnesses, and very absurd questions asked by the jury. Then came a world of gossip, to which I listened very attentively in the hope of finding a grain of corn in a bushel of chaff. Poor old Mrs. Reader, it seemed, was a widow of very penurious and eccentric habits. None of the neighbors had ever got into her house except accidentally; and one old maiden lady, living on the second floor three doors off, declared that she was not fond of any living thing—not even a cat. This evidence, however, was rebutted by others, who declared that she had a niece, of whom she was as fond as she could be of any thing—which, of course, implied some degree of fondness for something—and that this niece sometimes slept at her aunt's house—sometimes had been known to stay there for a week at a time. No one knew her name, or where she came from, or whither she went; but all agreed that she was a “very pretty, genteel young lady,” and quite gentle and civil-spoken when anyone addressed her. She had sometimes, too, been seen walking with a gentleman with black whiskers, “who seemed quite a gentleman.”

Upon this hint the coroner, who knew a little more than the jury, recalled Mrs. Golding, and inquired if she had remarked from her shop—which, it must be remembered, was very nearly opposite—anyone enter or go out of Mrs. Reader's house on the day of the murder.

Yes, she said, she had seen Miss Emily go in and come out twice that day. The first time she went in was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and then she came out in about half an hour. Mrs. Golding remembered it quite well, for she came across to change a five-pound note.

All the detectives put their heads forward, for this five-pound note was evidently something to be hunted down from its infancy in the cradles of the Bank of England to the day of the murder, and thenceforward forever.

But Mrs. Golding had more to tell, and she went on to state that about dusk Miss Emily came out of her aunt's house, and went down the street. Mrs. Golding watched her in a peculiar manner. She did not go out to the door to watch; but her shop had been constructed, as if for the purpose of watching, with a projecting front having a sort of elbow with a perpendicular row of panes in it, through which, when a head was advanced slanting from behind the counter, one could see all the way down the street. Through these panes, then, Mrs. Golding had seen Miss Emily walk down almost as far as the

shop of Mr. John Piggensdorff. There she was joined, or rather overtaken, by the gentleman with the black whiskers, who drew her arm through his, and they walked away together beyond the mortal ken of Mrs. Golding. Poor lady! She knew not what a storm of cross-examination she was about to bring upon her head, or she would have held her tongue, I am sure. She was asked if Miss Emily was agitated when she came to change the note. She replied, yes, she thought she was a good deal flustered. Then she was asked if she saw where the gentleman with the black whiskers came from before he joined Miss Emily. She declared that she did not, for she was looking after the young lady. Here she was solemnly reminded that she was upon her oath, and asked if she could swear that he had not come out of Mrs. Reader's house. To this she wisely replied that she could not swear any thing of the kind, for she did not see where he came from. Then followed some five hundred questions, tending to elicit all she knew of Miss Emily and the gentleman with the black whiskers: what were their names, professions, and relationships; where they lived, and what they had to do with each other. The coroner and the jury both were sometimes very sharp with her, and at others very cajoling; but Mrs. Golding was accustomed to deal both in vinegar and soap, and on these points she could not and did not give any information.

The last question was, "Pray, ma'am, did you ever see Mrs. Reader after Miss Emily, as you call her, quitted the house?"

"I never see her alive, Sir," replied Mrs. Golding, "but I see her dead the next morning."

At a late hour of the day the jury returned a verdict of willful murder against some person or persons unknown. They were wiser men than I thought them.

In the meantime, the detectives had gathered in a knot round the door taking counsel together, and I could see as I passed them, that they had already fixed upon the murderer in their own minds, and that the gentleman in the black whiskers was likely to be put to some inconvenience if he could be found in London or elsewhere. My conclusions in such cases are never so very rapid; for I have seen too many fatal errors committed to be very hasty. I believe that at least one man out of every three who grace Horsemonger Lane or the debtors' door at Newgate, are judicially murdered. I therefore left them to trace the history of the banknote, and dog the steps of their intended victim, and determined to make further inquiries for myself. I have said that I knew something of the very street, which occurred from my having a client who lived next door to the house of the murdered woman, and I thought that either from him, his wife, or family, I might obtain some information regarding Mrs. Reader more precise and definite than the mere gossip of the neighborhood. He was a tolerably well-informed man, somewhat soft and weak, who possessed a leasehold property, not very large but quite sufficient for a man in his station, which we used to manage for him. His wife was a shrew, who led him a terrible life I believe, and he had two buxom daughters, very fond of ribbons and young officers in the army. His chief weakness was a desire to associate with persons above himself, and as he had a good deal of cunning, he contrived often very dexterously to conceal both his want of birth and his want of means to fit him for the society he affected. He gave himself out as a gentleman who had seen better days, but who had still enough

left to give a friend a bottle of wine and take his daughters to the opera now and then. But I have remarked that he was very sullen when his sub-tenants did not pay up to the day, and had some reason to believe that, like many another “good-humored fellow” with his equals, he was a little inclined to be tyrannical with those he could venture to bully.

On knocking at the door, a somewhat sooty servant girl opened it and told me that Mr. Hartup was ill. He had not been able to get up for two days, she said.

Mrs. Hartup, however, was at home, and into her presence I was ushered.

“It was so unfortunate,” she said, “that Hartup was ill; he wanted to see me of all things about that horrid Mr. Lackfarthing, who had not paid his rent in March.” Hartup was determined to have the money, she assured me, and had that day talked of writing me a note to beg I would distrain.

I quieted her evidently angry mood by telling her that the rent was paid, and handing her the money; and then, in the fullness of her heart, came out that Hartup would not give the girls the spring bonnets he had promised them, nor let them have a glass coach to go to the Haymarket theatre till the money was paid. “He has grown quite morose about it, I do declare,” said Mrs. Hartup. As soon as this affair was settled I learned from the good lady a world of small facts concerning the poor old woman next door. All her eccentricities were detailed with a good deal of spite. I was told how she used to cook her own dinner and sweep her own room, though she was prodigiously rich. How she had refused to lend Mrs. Hartup only half-a-dozen silver spoons when she had a party, and the next day had given a golden sovereign to a beggarly Irishwoman, who lived in those horrid low buildings at the back, just because her husband had been sued for eleven and ninepence in the Court of Requests—and Mrs. Hartup added that she dared to say the Irishwoman or her husband had something to do with I know what.

Sometimes we get at the end of a long thread in the midst of a confused ball of very insignificant shreds, and I asked more about this Irishwoman; but I need not dwell upon what Mrs. Hartup said concerning her, for nothing came of it. Mrs. Hartup had only seen her twice in the house next door, once when she was there doing some clearing, and once when old Mrs. Reader fell down in a fit, and she and Hartup ran in out of Christian charity to help.

I next went to the Irishwoman; but I could make nothing out of her except that Miss Emily was the most darling girl in the world, and would break her heart when she heard what had happened to her poor aunt, for they doted on one another. But what Miss Emily’s surname was she either could not or would not tell; and the rest of her story, though voluble enough, and abundant too, and all in English, had better have been in Greek, for then I might have had some chance of understanding it. As it was, the parts and portions were confused, the pronouns were put to so many questionable uses, the interjections were so numerous, and the fragments were so disjointed that the meaning could only have been discovered by intuition which I did not possess. I thought I might perhaps find out something farther from her husband if I could see him, as he was out at his work, I wrote my address down and bade her tell him to call on me. It could but cost

me half a crown. I did not see him then, however, nor for some time afterward; for on my return to my chambers I found a note waiting for me, which forced me to go immediately to Carlisle upon business of importance. It was speedily accomplished, and there being no railroads in those days, I took my place in the mail on my return. I hate traveling in a post-chaise alone. It is a sort of voluntary solitary confinement, for which the occasional conversations that we hold with the trees, and milestones, and hedgerows, as we whirl past them, afford no compensation. Dull and heavy is the man who cannot extract some fun, some amusement, some interest, or some information from a journey in a mail coach, if he have not unfortunately the choice of all the four corners.

On the present occasion I had, for a part of the way, two companions, a young gentleman and a young lady, both very good-looking people. She was as pretty a girl—quite young—as ever I saw in my life; and there was a look of tenderness—a sort of confiding, imploring look—especially when she called him Charles, which made me fancy they had not been long married.

Youth is generally openhearted; and there is something in jolting and jumbling over hard roads that shakes open the doors of sympathy, if not very tight locked. We were soon in full conversation. I could tell them a good deal about the country through which we were passing, and the remarkable places by which we passed, of which they were quite ignorant. Among other facts, I informed them that we were going, in a reverse sense, over the road which foolish young people sometimes took toward the too famous Gretna Green; and being somewhat given to moralizing, I added some sage remarks upon the imprudence and danger of such trips. My young lady colored a good deal, and, after a profound silence of a moment or two, the young gentleman answered, somewhat sternly, “General truths are rarely without exceptions. I can conceive circumstances, Sir, in which that which you stigmatize as imprudent and improper, and which is really so in most cases, would not only be prudent and right, but absolutely necessary. What would you say if a young lady had a father, a well-intentioned but very violent man, married to a second wife, who made his house intolerable to his daughter, and, having forced her to seek another home as a governess, compelled her to remain there, when she knew that she was daily subject, if not to temptation, to insult and importunity, while an old and devoted friend was seeking her hand, and unable to obtain her parent’s consent?”

I saw I had made a little mistake, and, answering quietly, “What you say is quite true; general truths are never without exceptions,” I turned the conversation to other subjects.

At night I lost my two companions, who remained behind at a town on the road; but I picked up two stout manufacturers, who, if they were not quite as interesting, served to fill up the space in the coach somewhat more largely.

Two days of very active business succeeded my arrival in town. I had no time for anything but to read and write dull papers. But on the evening of the second day, after I had dined, I put on my slippers, and, always liking to be aware of what is passing around me, I took up the public journals, which had accumulated during my absence, to make up for lost time. I had gone on about half an hour, when once more my eyes were attracted



by a paragraph, headed "Mysterious Occurrence in Lambeth. Apprehension of the supposed Murderers." I run my eye down the article, and soon found that, as I had anticipated, the suspicions of the police had fixed at once upon the murdered woman's niece, Miss Emily, and the gentleman with black whiskers; that they had been traced and apprehended with a considerable sum of money in their possession, and, what was still more important, some of the jewelry known to have belonged to the unfortunate Mrs. Reader.

I had not read the whole story, and only gathered that they had been subjected to an examination at which no one appeared to advise them, and had then been remanded for further examination, when my servant came to inform me that a man named Patrick Monaghan desired to see me immediately. I remembered the man's name at once as the husband of the Irishwoman to whom Mrs. Reader had given a sovereign in a moment of difficulty, and I ordered him to be admitted. He seemed to be a very respectable man, and much more clear-headed than his puzzle-brained little wife; but he was in a great state of agitation. His object, however, was to induce me to go at once to see Mr. Marchmont, the accused man, in the prison to which he had been remanded.

"Faith, Sir, if you don't go," said the good man, "they'll murder him intirely, and purty Miss Emily too; that they will do, and you'll see it. The very magistrate his self told them they'd better have counsel; and I just got to speak a word to them—all fair before the constables, as they were taking them out—and told them how kind your honor had been, and advised them to send for you; and Mr. Marchmont, God bless him! said, 'Very well, Pat.' "

I looked at my watch. There was just time to get in before the regulated hours would have excluded me, and away I went in a hackney cabriolet. The preliminaries were speedily got through, and I was admitted to my new clients' cell.

I must not say that I was surprised to see my traveling companion on the Carlisle road; a sort of instinct had forewarned me; but oh! how changed he was. The situation in which he was placed seemed totally to have overpowered and confounded him. I was very glad of it; for, to one accustomed to watch emotions and their results, small signs are of great importance. No stage trick, no affectation, hardly any hypocrisy, unless long practiced and consummate, can have any effect on the opinion of a jailer, if he be a man of common penetration and observation. The best trial in the world would be to have for a jury a dozen of honest turnkeys—if it were possible to find them—and let them secretly watch a prisoner for a couple of hours in his cell, without any other evidence whatever. My life for it, their verdict would be a just one.

I was glad to see Mr. Marchmont so utterly confounded by his situation. Had he done the deed, he must have been in some degree prepared for all the consequences.

He knew me directly, and seemed quite rejoiced to see me; but it was some time before I could get him to talk calmly. He continually recurred to his Emily, and spoke of the agony she must feel, and the horror of her being separated from him, and confined in a

dreadful cell like that; and he railed a good deal against the law, which would not allow two people accused of the same crime to communicate with each other, so that their mutual explanations might make things clear to the mind of each which were otherwise obscure.

“It is to prevent them, my dear Sir,” I said, “from concocting together such a story as would frustrate the ends of justice.”

“Don’t you think, if they were guilty, they would do that beforehand?” he asked.

“Not always,” I answered, “and in the law a little wrong must sometimes be done to attain a great right.”

“In the law of man,” he answered, “not in the law of God.”

When once I got him to argue, I soon contrived to quiet him, at least into a reasonable state, and I then pointed out to him that if I were to defend him, he must tell me everything in perfect sincerity and truth.

“I have nothing to tell,” he exclaimed, almost petulantly. “I told everything I knew before the magistrates. It is just a week ago last Tuesday, that Emily and I set out. Her situation had become intolerable. Her father being completely under the rule of his termagant wife, the only place where she could see me was at her aunt’s, good old Mrs. Reader, who was ever our fast friend; and it was with her consent—indeed, by her advice—that we determined to go off and be married. She told us that she would not live long, she knew—that Emily should have all she possessed, and that in the meantime she would help me in my profession, so that I need not care whether I got anything with my wife or not. I told her that I did not care so long as I was able to maintain her even in perfect obscurity. Emily hesitated for some time from fear of her father; but it was Mrs. Reader herself who removed her scruples. She did everything for us; for she was the kindest-hearted, most liberal woman in the world in great things; and gave us two hundred pounds to set us off in life.”

“That will account for the money,” I said, “but how about these jewels which I find mentioned?”

“I can tell nothing about them,” he answered at once. “Emily said before the magistrates today, she could tell nothing either. We did not know they were in the trunk at all till it was searched; for we had not opened that one since we went away. But, sure enough, there was the case with the emerald necklace at the very bottom. But it is all nonsense to accuse the dear girl of murdering an aunt, whom she loved like a mother, on that account; for I can prove that I saw Mrs. Reader after Emily left her, and then she was quite well.”

“How can you prove it?” I asked.

“I can swear to it,” he answered. “I told the magistrate all about it this morning. It was arranged that we should go down to Berwick by sea, and then cross the country to avoid

all pursuit. Mrs. Reader was afraid of our being seen going from her house, and so, just before dusk, Emily was to walk down the street and I was then to join her. The trunks had been sent down to the wharf the day before. I could not refrain from stopping one moment to thank the good old lady and wish her good-by. But she hurried me off after the dear girl, and I heard her lock and bolt the door. I can swear all this, and that must exculpate Emily at least.”

I was obliged to confound all such hopes by telling him that the one could not be a witness for the other; and then his countenance fell indeed. He sat for several minutes in profound and gloomy silence, and did not even seem to hear the questions that I addressed to him. But this desponding mood had a salutary effect. They banished the sort of hasty irritation, which had mingled with other feelings, and taught him to look the difficulties and dangers that surrounded both himself and his young wife in the face with a firmer and more steady eye. He then entered into all the details of the past fortnight with far greater precision and regularity than I had expected from the commencement of our interview. The narrative was simple, clear, and probable; but at length the case presented itself thus: Mrs. Reader had been murdered sometime between half-past six at night and daylight the next morning. Nobody, as far as had been yet shown, had been in the house, or at the house, during the whole day but Emily and himself. The former had been there all day; he had been there at half-past six or a quarter to seven. Emily had quitted the house in a somewhat private manner before him, and he had followed, joined her, and eloped with her. When apprehended, a larger sum of money had been found upon them than they could show had been received from any other person than Mrs. Reader, and a case, containing an emerald necklace, known to have been the property of the murdered woman, had been found in one of their trunks, which neither could account for. The aspect of the affair was very formidable, and I doubted not that several other little links in the chain of evidence would be brought forward and render it more formidable still.

Nevertheless, I did not in the least doubt the truth of Mr. Marchmont’s story; but, hitherto, everybody had been seeking for proofs against him, and no one for him. That was my business; but I fairly confess I did not know where to look for them. I questioned him as closely as possible in regard to every particular; but I could extract nothing on which to hang a reasonable hope of defense against the presumptive proofs against him and his poor young wife. The only fact which afforded a glimmering was, that his portmanteau and Emily’s two trunks had been left at Mrs. Reader’s for two days, and sent by her to the Berwick smack, or packet-boat, which conveyed them to Scotland. If I could find out the man who conveyed them, I might build up something like a probability in their favor. But I know juries too well to trust to slender proofs of innocence. Juries never remember that it is proof of guilt they are to obtain before they convict, not proofs of innocence before they condemn. A sort of Aristides feeling possesses them the moment they enter the jury box: they make a vanity of it—a self-conceit; and knowing themselves to be as weak as water, they try to harden themselves into ill. They read the newspapers, too; and into their soft clay the impress of the type stamps marks that are indelible.

I suppose he saw that I looked very grave; for after a somewhat long pause, he exclaimed, “Good God! You cannot think there is really any danger?”

It was necessary to tell him that there was; and I cannot attempt to describe the state into which this mere expression of opinion threw him. Hitherto, it was evident, what had principally oppressed him was the sense of disgrace attendant upon his situation, with a sort of indignation at being treated as a culprit, and separated from his poor young wife. But now other feelings succeeded, and dark and terrible phantasms of the future, I could see, rose thick and horrible before his eyes.

No time was to be lost. I could not stay to console or cheer him, even if I had possessed the means. From his cell I went to that of Emily. It is strange: she was infinitely more calm. She had a hope and a trust that nothing could shake. She was very glad to see me; but she repeated more than once, "God will defend us! But if it be his will that we suffer innocent, his will be done."

I made her give me her own story without suggestion or question. It was precisely that of Charles Marchmont; and the perfect coincidence determined at once one part of my course. I promised both that I would be with them before the magistrates on the following day, and then set out to search for the man who had carried their baggage to the vessel, never doubting that he was no other than my friend, Patrick Monaghan. The faithful fellow was not far to seek. I found him outside of the jail, waiting to see me come out. But I had deceived myself. He had not conveyed the baggage, and knew not who had. I went with him to Lambeth; I inquired all round the neighborhood. No one could give me any information; and I returned home tired to death, and in a very uncomfortable state of mind.

On my table I found a note, saying,

"Dear Sir—Papa would be very glad if you would call upon him directly. He is quite sick, and has got the blues. He fancies he is dying, and, I believe, wants to make his will. Mamma says it is all stuff; but as he has told me to write, I am forced to inflict the trouble of reading this from  
Yours sincerely,  
"Julia Bessy Hartup."

I am afraid I swore; but making a memorandum to send a clerk the following day, I went to bed.

The next morning before daybreak I was at work again. An advertisement, coupled with promise of reward, for the man who carried the baggage, was drawn up; every particular of the story, as told by Mr. and Mrs. Marchmont, was reduced to writing, the facts arranged and classified, and compared with the imperfect statements of the newspaper. The case looked very black. True, links were wanting in the chain of circumstantial evidence against the prisoners, but the minds both of magistrates and juries, like electric fire, have a habit of jumping from point to point, if they be not too far apart; and many a man has been hanged in the gap between doubt and certainty.

At the appointed hour I was in — Street office. The presiding magistrate and I were old

acquaintances, and I had a moment's chat with him before the case was called on. It was a rather slack day.

"So you have to appear for the two young Marchmonts," said his worship. (I nodded.) "What do you think of their affair?"

"As innocent as you are."

He wrinkled up his snout with a sort of cynical grin, and asked, "Sincere?"

"On my word of honor," I answered.

"Looks bad," said he, in a doubting tone.

"Very," I said; "but you'll find me right. I don't meddle with such things usually, but when I do I am sure."

The prisoners were here brought into court, and I took my place close to them. The examination was about to begin; but I begged to be heard, and requested that the case against each should be investigated separately. The magistrate asked for what reason; and I replied, "Because I think the cause of justice will be served thereby. These two interesting young persons have each a statement to make. They cannot be witnesses for each other; but the coincidence or discrepancy of their accounts afford a kind of evidence which must have its weight in any court. Believing them to be perfectly innocent of the crime charged against them, instead of advising them, as is very customary, to reserve their defense, I have desired them each to tell his own tale here, with the full knowledge that whatever they say may be used against them with whatever ingenuity legal acumen can supply. But truth is great and will prevail, and therefore I now counsel them to tell the whole truth."

The magistrate had nothing to object but that the proposed course would occupy a good deal of time; but I did not mind spoiling his ride in the park, and I prevailed. Emily and Charles told their tale simply and well, entered into all the minute details, which could not all have been concerted, and accounted for their whole time but one fatal hour, which was not very clearly made out. I understood well that the last hour of their stay in London had been one of agitation; and at all events the appearance of sincerity and the perfect similarity of the statements made, did them good with the court.

I should otherwise never have got another remand, for the evidence against them was very telling. The five-pound note which Emily had changed on the day of the elopement, had been traced to the possession of the murdered woman. And Mrs. Golding recollected that though she was accustomed to see Mrs. Reader once or twice every day from her shop window, either opening the door or looking out of her bedroom, she had remarked on the day in question she had never beheld her at all, and wondered what had become of the good woman. Thus the exact period at which the murder had been committed was extended to a very indefinite space. It might have been even before the five-pound note was changed.

The magistrate, rubbing his spectacles, asked what would be the good of remanding them. He might as well commit them for trial, he thought; for he believed it must come to that in the end.

I replied that I trusted it would not; that to two young persons in their position a trial for murder was in itself a punishment which, if they were innocent, they might well be spared; that only having heard of the case on the preceding night, I had not had time to seek evidence to rebut the testimony offered against my clients; but that I doubted not, if two days were allowed me, I should be able to make the defense so clear that a discharge must follow. Upon the understanding that I sincerely did entertain such an expectation, I obtained a remand, and left the court just half an hour before my time of dinner. My clerk was waiting for me in the passage of the Police Office with one of those business faces which I hate to see him wear when I am tired and hungry.

“If you please, Sir” — he began, but I cut him short, saying, “Come to me after dinner, Mr. Tyson. I shall have a great deal to do tonight; but if the world were bursting, I must have a few minutes to eat and a few minutes to think.”

“Only, Sir” — persisted Mr. Tyson; but I broke away, and got home.

Before I had half peeled a pear after dinner, pertinacious Mr. Tyson was in the room; and, to stop his mouth, I made him sit down and take a glass of wine. It was down in a moment, and then he told me that, according to my orders, he had been to see Mr. Hartup, but that Mr. Hartup desired to see me, and would consult with no one else. “He is very bad, Sir — can’t last long.”

“Pooh! he is a hypochondriacal fool,” I answered, peevishly.

“But the doctor has told him he is dying, Sir,” said Mr. Tyson; “and told me so too.”

“Well, you can draw a will as well as I can, Mr. Tyson,” I said; “his property does not extend to the Hebrides, nor require as accurate a description as a Geographical Survey.”

“I suspect, Sir, his affairs are a little complicated,” said Mr. Tyson, dryly. “He has been taking up money, I know, and I fancy has got into bad hands. His daughters are very expensive; and he won’t let his wife come near him.”

The argument was somewhat disjointed, but it was conclusive. “Well, I will go,” I said; “but, in the meantime, you must attend to some other matters,” and I made some notes of various things to be done, one of which was to send for the constable, Greenly — now, by the way, promoted to the rank of sergeant.

I then traveled over to Lambeth, in a perplexed and truly desponding mood. The sights of London streets at night never raise my spirits; the great goggle eyes of the lamps looking in at the windows of the cab as I rolled down the Haymarket, and through Charing Cross and Parliament Street, offended me by their impertinent stare; the groups of bad women and worse men grieved me; and even the fools with cigars in their mouths, and children

training up to vice, and wretched members of Parliament, annoyed me.

But I was soon there, and soon disentangled from noisy Mrs. Hartup and the two young women in tears, and upstairs to Mr. Hartup's room on the first floor. It was not the room he had formerly occupied, and in which I had once seen him. This seemed a retreat set apart for himself from the eternal vibration of Mrs. Hartup's tongue. It was the front room, and the largest; but the bed was evidently constructed for one. I found myself at once in the presence of the doctor, the nurse, and the sick man; for Mrs. Hartup had told me previously that her husband was very "morose"—it was a favorite word of hers—and would hardly let any of his family come near him. The doctor was a very sage-looking man of about fifty; the nurse was a still sager-looking woman, five or six years older. The sick man was a very unpleasant-looking specimen of a living corpse. I saw at once that his peril had not been overstated. He had been a stout man—though not corpulent—with a face on which a good number of red spots had been partially concealed by the general rubicundity of visage. Now the predominant hue was a livid white, on which the once red spots lay in blotches of bluish purple. The lips were pale and bloodless, the nose pinched, the eyes hollow, and the cheeks fallen in. There was clearly no great time to be lost.

He felt that it was so, though he was strong enough to turn sharply in his bed, and say he was glad I had come, and add a few words about my not coming sooner. His tone was rude and unpleasant; but one cannot resent the incivilities of a dying man, and I simply replied, "My good Sir, it was impossible for me to come before; but do not let us waste words. Only inform me what it is you want."

"Ask him if I am dying," said Mr. Hartup, pointing to the doctor.

I put the question, and the doctor—never having spoke straightforwardly in his life—was entering into various pros and cons, when the voice of Mr. Hartup sounded again through the room, like a groan in a cave. "Am I dying, or am I not?" he said.

"Why, to speak the truth, I think you are," answered the doctor, advancing to the bedside; "at all events, my dear Sir, it is a safe precaution to make your will. No man ever died a day sooner for making his will."

"D—n the will!" said Mr. Hartup vehemently; "how long do you think I can last?"

"Perhaps an hour," said the doctor, with his fingers on the pulse.

"An hour!" said the dying man, with a tone full of horror. "An hour!"

But then he paused, and seemed to wander a little. "Let me see," he said: "Union Street—that's seventeen minutes: and back—that's seventeen minutes more—I'll wait ten minutes. Put those people out of the room, will you."

The last words were addressed to me; and I accordingly insinuated to the doctor and the

nurse that they had better leave me alone with my client, at the same time begging both to remain below, in case of need.

“When the room was clear, and I had drawn a table, with pen and ink and paper, to the bedside, a profound silence succeeded. I waited for full five minutes, until the silence grew oppressive, and then I said, “My good Sir, you had better go on. The instrument may take some time to write. Your affairs are somewhat complicated, I believe.”

He was still silent, and I looked at his face, thinking he might have died or become speechless. He was lying motionless, it is true, but the whole face showed life—painful, anxious life. Even the glassy eyes, turned up toward the ceiling, were full of intense and bitter thought.

At length he turned partly on his side, and said, “Now write— ‘I, Samuel Hartup, do hereby declare and certify—’”

“That is not the usual form,” I said.

“Put it down—put it down!” he cried. “I, Samuel Hartup, do hereby declare and certify that I alone, and no other, did kill the old woman, Reader, at eleven o’clock of the night of—”

“Good God!” I exclaimed; “how could that be?”

“Put your hand between the sacking and the palliasse,” said the dying man; “higher up—here—take out the key.”

I put my hand in, and could clearly feel several things, I knew not at the time what, but among the first I found a key, which I drew forth and looked at.

“There—there,” said the unhappy man, “take it, and open that cupboard.”

He pointed to a door on his right hand as the bed stood, which a moment’s thought showed me must exactly correspond on that side with the cupboard I had examined in Mrs. Reader’s house; and waiting for no further direction, I opened the door. In the bottom was a pile of rubbish, with a plasterer’s hammer and hatchet. The shelves which had once been in the cupboard had all been removed; the plaster and the single row of bricks which separated the two houses had been worked through from the mass of the chimney to the other side of the closet next the partition. Plain boards appeared beyond, forming the back of the closet in Mrs. Reader’s house; and now, comprehending all, I doubted not that those boards would be removable by a touch. But it was of the utmost importance to obtain a full confession; and suppressing every indication of surprise, curiosity, or horror, I returned to the bedside, saying, “I see now; what am I to write next?”

He did not answer the question directly, but he said, “I did not intend to kill her; on my life and soul, I did not. She used to go into the kitchen late at night to wash up the cups and spoons, and I had no notion she was in the room. So I just pulled back the two middle



boards, and was helping myself to the things as I had done the night before, when she made a dart at me, knocked down the middle shelf, and got me by the neck. She gave one scream, and I knew it was all over if I let her give many more; so I stopped her screaming.”

“What with?” I asked.

“A knife she had in her own hand,” he answered; “put it all down, and don’t ask me questions. You’ll find the knife with the rest of the things. It was all done in a minute. but I thought, as it was done, I might as well have the benefit, and I brought in the light, and cleared that room pretty well, putting up the boards again and fastening them with the new nails. But what good was it? I staved off Dixon, the tax-gatherer, by sending him down twenty sovereigns. That’s all it has done! What good has it done?”

“What good, indeed,” I said, mournfully; “and what could drive you to such an act?” “My wife,” he answered, bitterly; “my two daughters. But mind, mind, mind. They know nothing of it. It was by their constant craving for money. They nearly drove me mad. Mrs. Hartup must have this, Julia must have that, Octavia must have the other thing. I told them I could not do it—that they were ruining me. But it was like pouring water on sand. They never seemed to comprehend that a hundred pounds was not a thousand. If I spoke of economy, Mrs. Hartup sulked and declared she was the most economical wife ever known; asked if she did not work her fingers to the bone to make the girls look decent with nothing at all, and talked of Mrs. Jones’s fine cloak or Mrs. Smith’s beautiful veil. If I refused them anything, they all looked injured for three or four days; and so they made me—mark—they made me first, an insolvent debtor, and then a robber, and then a murderer; and now I am here, and they must go to the workhouse when the breath is out of my body. Have you got it all down? Tell them that’s all the will I have to make. Where are you going? I won’t be given up; I won’t be taken to jail!”

“No fear, no fear, unfortunate man,” I said. “But it is necessary that this confession should be witnessed, and, if possible, certified by a magistrate. There are two young innocent creatures now in prison on the charge of having committed the crime you perpetrated.”

“That’s hard,” he said; but without waiting for discussion, I went out and called the doctor and the nurse. The former came up three steps at a time; but before I had whispered three words to him and we had re-entered the sickroom, a great change had taken place. Whether the fear of being apprehended and committed to prison had shaken the hourglass, or whether the exertion of speaking had been too great, I know not; but the wretched man’s eyes were rolling convulsively in his head.

“Stay,” said the doctor, “stay”; and pouring something into a glass—I know not what—he applied it to the dying man’s lips. It revived him for a moment, and pointing to the paper I had written, I asked, “Is all this true? Did you kill Mrs. Reader in the way you have told me?”

He gazed at me intently for a moment, and then answered, "I did; and her death has killed me. I lay in bed at first from fear, but I am dying now, no mistake—Colonel Jenkins that's my friend Colonel Jenkins of the —. "What's trumps? That's good Champagne—imported it myself. Try the hock, Colonel—"

All was still.

There was a tremendous outcry in the house when the nurse, running down, told that the husband and the father was gone. All those who had received him flew up to mourn, or to affect mourning. I gave a little way to the semblance of grief, but then I put them all out of the room, and sent—not for an undertaker—but for a police officer. Him I put in possession of the room, and made him search the bed.

Between the sacking and the palliase, where I had found the key, we discovered all that was needed to confirm the confession, and Emily and her husband were liberated. It was not, however, till more than a year after that anyone discovered how the emeralds had been placed in the trunk where they were found. As has been said, the baubles were shut up in an old-fashioned case. Beneath them was some cotton, and beneath the cotton was a bank bill for a hundred pounds, together with a scrap of paper in Mrs. Reader's handwriting, telling her niece that the jewels had belonged to her grandmother, and that she, Mrs. Reader, having always intended them for her dear girl, had put them into the trunk while it was left at her house. Emily remembered having left the keys for a whole day with her aunt, and doubtless the good lady had expected to give her niece an agreeable surprise. It had well-nigh proved a fatal one.

*Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, August, 1855.