Mrs. Whitheron

by Thomas Waters

I HAD been absent from duty on sick leave for some three or four weeks prior to the still unavenged murder of Eliza Grimwood—a tragic incident in the domestic history of London, which I have no doubt dwells freshly as ever in the minds of thousands. When the news reached me, I was, though convalescent, unfit for active duty; yet so powerfully did the barbarous deed, its sickening details, and the mystery which shrouded its perpetration, interest and excite me, that I determined to make inquiries forthwith at the scene of the murder. As I should act without particular instructions, my interference would be officious rather than official, but none the less for that would be considered commendable by the authorities if rewarded by success.

The distance from my dwelling was not more than a mile; but I had not proceeded half way when I found that my strength was feebler than my will, and I was compelled to rest myself in a tavern for a considerable time before I could recover sufficient strength to return home.

During my absence, which could scarcely have exceeded an hour and a half, a pressing message had been received from a Mrs. Witherton, of Queen Square, requesting to see me immediately. I was in no condition to personally obey the summons; and as no especial circumstance necessitating extreme haste was stated, I dispatched an answer to the effect that I could not wait upon her till the next day but one at the earliest, and if the affair was urgent she had better, therefore, apply at Scotland Yard for the services of another officer.

I had a slight professional acquaintance with this lady, knew more of her personal history than she was aware of, and was desirous of acquiring a still more intimate knowledge thereof. It was, consequently, with regret that I felt myself compelled to refuse compliance with her message, and that regret was much increased upon being curtly told by the housekeeper, when I did call at Queen Square, that Mrs. Witherton had recovered from her nervous terrors, and required, for the present, neither the services of parsons or policemen.

“Mrs. Witherton has been ill then?” I remarked.

“Yes, ill of blue devils—Methodist megrims—which of late will only yield to *spirituous* remedies. You know what I mean,” replied the housekeeper tartly.

The petulant, unbecoming tone and manner of the housekeeper much surprised me. I had long known Mrs. Jameson, and that only about three months previously she had been rescued by the active kindness of Mrs. Witherton from a very painful position, in which, however, she had been placed by no fault of her own. I could not understand her, as, till now, she had always spoken of her mistress in the highest terms. It was plain that she was much excited and disturbed in mind. She had invited me into a front apartment, and no sooner had we entered it than she industriously set about dusting the dustless chairs with a feather brush, for no other purpose than to conceal from me, as much as possible, her pallid face, and red, tear swollen eyes.

"It is very odd," said I, "that a young widow in capital circumstances should be subject to such nervous terrors."

"Oh dear, no, not at all," rejoined Mrs. Jameson. "A young widow in capital circumstances is just the sort that the praying people get hold of first, and hold on to like that grim death which they are always worrying and tormenting about. *You* know very well that Mrs. Witherton turned dreadfully serious before I entered her service, and now she's getting worse and worse every day; pokes about to all the churches and chapels in the neighborhood, particularly when there's any uncommon horrors going on, such as funeral sermons and the like. Nothing," added Mrs. Jameson, "does her real good, when she's in one of her tragedy tantrums, but her child, and the spirituous stimulant I have spoken of, which she has lately taken to. The child makes her weep and sob herself to sleep; and brandy has the same effect in perhaps less time."

"Well, but your mistress could not have gone to hear a funeral sermon in the middle of the day before yesterday."

"Certainly not at a chapel," was the quick reply, "but at somewhere a great deal worse. You, of course, know," continued Mrs. Jameson, her sharp voice sinking and trembling with sympathetic awe; "you, of course, know all about the barbarous murder of that unfortunate barmaid. Well, what of all things must Mrs. Witherton take it into her head to do, after reading the paper till she looked like a ghost, than have a hack brought to the door, and order the coachman to drive her to where the body was to be seen. Yes, and she managed to see it too; and didn't she go on when she came back about death, murder, and everlasting fire. She's a kind, sensible lady," added Mrs. Jameson, "when she's not driven mad by religious terrors, and I would not have said what I have only that you know much more of her than I do, or, perhaps ever shall, and that it will go no further."

"Does a man of the name of Rookliffe sometimes visit Mrs.Witherton?"

"Yes, and generally stays about five minutes, which is all five minutes too long. For hours afterwards Mrs. Witherton's face is the color of a candle, and she trembles in every limb as if smitten with ague."

"I heard," said the housekeeper in a low voice, after a few moments' silence, as if she had at last taken courage to speak out her secret thought—"I heard my cousin say, when I visited her about ten days ago, that—that Mr. Witherton—*her* husband—died—suddenly. Charlotte had been told so," continued Mrs. Jameson; "I am sure of that; but I said at once I could take my Bible-oath there was nothing in it, for a better-hearted woman does not live than Mrs. Witherton. It's nothing, *can* be nothing but religion—I am certain of it," added the housekeeper, and burst into tears.

"You would take your Bible-oath that there is nothing in what?"

"Why, of course," stammered the woman, flushing flame; "why, of—of course, nothing in Mr. Witherton having died a sudden, or even a violent death."

“It is quite true that Mr. Witherton died a sudden and violent death. The mode of death was that by which Eliza Grimwood perished, with the difference that Witherton died by his *own* hand.”

“Blessed be God for that!” exclaimed the housekeeper with a burst. “I don’t mean that, you know,” she added quickly—”merely that I am overjoyed to hear—to be made quite sure that—that—but I never really felt a doubt upon the matter. Had I done so this house should not have held me another hour for all the gold in London.”

“The coroner and jury felt no doubt in the matter,” said I. “Their unanimous verdict was *felo de se*, or suicide.”

“Thank God! Thank God!” sobbed the woman. “Poor dear lady! It’s all plain to me. She has never recovered the shock; and I understand now about sudden death, murder, and fire eternal! She believes that her husband is gone to perdition, and refuses to be comforted! Oh, what an ungrateful wretch was I to speak as I did of the failings, the excusable failings, of the kindest mistress in the world! I am ashamed, thoroughly ashamed of myself. Yes, yes,” went on the housekeeper, continuing to sob and pace to and fro with excitement, “yes, it is all plain, too plain now—even her frantic weeping at sight of her child. He reminds her of the father—of the lost father, as she believes. Poor broken-hearted lady! And I,—conceited fool! could dare suspect, since what I heard from Charlotte, that those were tears of guilt!”

I rose to go away, but was sharply stopped by the housekeeper with

“One moment if you please. What of that Mr. Rookliffe?”

“What of that, Mr. Rookliffe?” I echoed, hardly determined what answer to make. “Well, of Rookliffe I have to say that if you can manage, the next time he visits here, to have him secretly dogged to his lair, I shall be obliged.”

“I will take care that shall be done,” said Mrs. Jameson; “but that which I meant to ask was why his brief visits should so distress Mrs. Witherton.”

“I almost wish you had not asked the question, but as not to answer it would fill your mind with doubt and suspicion, which the facts, as known to me, could not warrant, and as it is, for several reasons, desirable that Mrs. Witherton should stand as well as possible in your esteem, I will tell you all I know of Rookliffe’s connection with Witherton’s death. The unfortunate suicide had conceived a jealousy—a furious—but, as I firmly believe, a groundless jealousy of Rookliffe, which passionate distraction it was that armed the unhappy husband’s hand against his own life!”

“A groundless jealousy!” exclaimed Mrs. Jameson. “You are sure a groundless jealousy?”

“I firmly believe that Witherton had no real, absolute cause of jealousy·”
“No real, absolute cause for jealousy? Well, that is much; nay, it is every thing. Still the appearance of evil was not, perhaps, avoided with sufficient care; and, in that case, I was not altogether wrong when imagining I detected the fires of remorse in those hot, burning tears. God mend us all!”

Mrs. Witherton's bell rang, and shaking hands with the warm-hearted, impulsive housekeeper, I left the house less, much less satisfied than she, that I had fathomed the true sources of the morbid restlessness of mind which was driving Mrs. Witherton to the degradation of drink—to the bottomless abyss of fanatical despair.

Why had Mrs. Witherton sent for *me* during the paroxysm of excitement which ensued upon her return from visiting the corpse of Eliza Grimwood,—the corpse of one who had perished by the same manner of death as her husband, though not by her own act? Was it, could it be possible, that Charles Witherton's death was identical with that of the unfortunate girl not only in mode, but that the agency which effected it—*murder*, namely—was the same? The suspicion was a very horrible one—so horrible that I would fain have shaken it off, but could not. It fastened itself on my mind with swiftly increasing tenacity as I mentally revolved anterior circumstances in the domestic life of the Withertons, and viewed them by the lurid light of the young widow's frenzied fanaticism, and apparently remorseful despair. A brief glance at those circumstances is here essential:

Laura Woodward was a third or fourth-rate actress and dancer at a respectable London theatre. Tastes differ, but I do not think many persons would have held her to be strictly handsome in face. Her figure was, however, perfect, her manners engaging, and her ballad-singing charming, by its expressive simplicity, rather than by quality of voice,

This dangerous young person attended a grand Licensed Victualler's Soirée and Ball, whether professionally or not, in the first part of the evening, I do not know; but when dancing commenced she was amongst the general company, and soon attracted and fixed the attention of Charles Witherton. This young man—he was about six-and-twenty years of age—had, about a twelve month before, succeeded, at his father's death, to a City tavern business, the rich profits of which were said to reach several thousands per annum. Being an only child, he had also inherited the whole of the personals, which amounted, in cash, to a large sum.

Charles Witherton was, therefore, in respect of wealth, a capital catch for almost any middle-class girl; and how infinitely more so to Laura Woodward, whose net emoluments, taking the year through, did not, perhaps, exceed two pounds per week. No one, then, can blame her for putting forth all her charms and graces for the effectual [enthrallment] of so desirable a captive, and the result was that the susceptible young tavern-keeper found himself waltzed and whirled out of his heart and senses almost before he knew they were in any real danger.

In such a case we may be sure "the wooing was not long a doing," and I believe the wedding took place within a fortnight of the ball.

To show how thoroughly the bridegroom had been charmed out of all prudence and self-control, it is but necessary to state that, not urged thereto by even a hint on the part of the bride-expectant (she would, we may be sure, glide very, very gently across the thin ice which bridged over the gulf between poverty and wealth,) he gave directions to prepare an ante-nuptial settlement which would secure to his wife, should she survive him, all he might die possessed of, with remainder

to their children, should there be any, in equal proportions. This settlement was duly executed the day before the marriage.

The match proved to be a most unhappy one. Mrs. Witherton was about as much fit to be mistress of a tavern as captain of a frigate. A deficiency in that respect would not, however, have been regretted or regarded by her uxorious husband, had she been contented to spend his money, dress splendidly, live in idleness and luxury, and care, or seem to care, for no one's admiration but his own. This last very reasonable condition Mrs. Witherton could not submit to. She was fond to excess of the admiration of men, and delighted to parade, as it were, the homage paid to her by simpering city coxcombs—to flaunt the flatteries of which she was the object, in her husband's eyes. This utterly reprehensible conduct enraged, at times maddened him; but I do not believe—in fact, I am quite sure, from strict investigation of all the circumstances of the case when the catastrophe occurred—that Mrs. Witherton had been positively unfaithful to her husband. Her married life seemed to have been a continuous flirtation, and nothing more, with every fop or fool that came in her way. In one instance only did it at all appear that she had felt the slightest regard for anyone of those whose lip-homage she listened to and encouraged.

One Rookliffe—Robert Rookliffe—was the man upon whom Witherton's suspicions were finally fixed. Who or what this Rookliffe was nobody exactly knew, except that he dressed well, kept late hours, boasted of being intimately acquainted with sporting members of the aristocracy, and paid his bills with sufficient regularity at Witherton's Tavern, where he had, before the landlord's marriage, taken up his permanent abode. He was not bad looking, but one of the vulgarest, most blustering bullies I ever met with. Mrs. Witherton was not of that opinion, and there was no question that she had been to a certain extent debauched in mind by the pretence and swagger of the fellow. Inadvertently or purposely, she had used expressions which, to Witherton's jaundiced apprehension, suggested a growing hope or expectation on her part that her husband's failing health—the fever of jealousy was in him, literally drying up the springs of life—would one day, and that not a very distant one, enable her to contract a second marriage much more to her taste than the first. The irrevocable ante-nuptial settlement terribly exasperated Witherton's jealous fury; and he had again and again told a sympathizing confidant that the marriage revelries of his wife with Rookliffe, after his own death should have placed her in possession of abundant means of revelry, haunted his thoughts by day, and his dreams by night, at times unseating reason by the violence of impotent rage.

I need dwell no longer on this portion of the narrative. Over and over again Witherton had been heard to say he would destroy himself, and towards the tenth month of his wedded life the suicidal purpose was accomplished. It chanced that I was one of the first persons in the chamber of death when the terrible discovery was made.

This occurred at about eight o'clock on a dull wintry morning. Witherton was a very early riser, and his non-appearance having at last excited surprise, when it was found that no answer could be obtained by the loudest knocking and bawling at his chamber door, it was burst open. A frightful spectacle presented itself. The miserable man had deliberately undressed himself, got into bed, and then cut his throat in a horribly effective manner. The pillow and sheet were saturated with blood, and on the counterpane lay a razor, the suicide's own, by which the

dreadful deed had been accomplished. The body was cold and rigid, and there was no doubt had been dead several hours.

It struck me as something strange that the intended self-murderer should have taken the trouble to put off his clothes, fold them up, settle himself snugly in bed, and carefully extinguish the candle when about to immediately destroy himself. Further search afforded proof that he had intended to take poison, and must have changed his mind as to the mode of death at the last moment. On a chair close by the bed there stood a corked and sealed phial, filled with arsenious acid, labeled "POISON" in large letters. The name of Mr. Benson, the apothecary at whose shop it had been purchased, was also affixed. Upon application to Mr. Benson it was ascertained that the poison had been obtained late in the evening, two days previously, by Witherton himself, who had given the youth that served him his true name and address. The apothecary's apprentice correctly described Witherton's dress, and identified the corpse as that of the man he had served with arsenious acid, principally, he admitted, if not entirely, by the thick, and rather peculiar sandy whiskers. A singular circumstance was that an unfinished note, in the deceased's handwriting, was found upon a dressing-table, addressed to the "Vile Traitress," his wife, in which the writer exultingly intimated (they had not spoken to each other for many weeks) that he had at last hit upon a mode of defeating her and her paramour's infamous hopes by selling all off, and—

Here the note abruptly ended; but a sufficient interpretation was supplied by evidence that Witherton had, during the previous week, spoken openly of an intention to dispose of all he possessed, and emigrate to America, or a more distant country. It was, moreover, proved that the unfortunate man had only the day previous to his death called upon an agent in extensive practice for the sale of tavern properties, and given him instructions to advertise the sale of his (Witherton's) lease and general effects without delay.

Strange all that; but the general evidence seemed to leave no doubt that Witherton's mind had been for some time completely unhinged; that the purpose of one day was turned awry by the feverish caprice of the next; finally, that the wretched man had destroyed himself during an access of frenzied jealousy. So, at least, the jury unhesitatingly decided, their verdict, as I have said, being *felo de se*.

I silently dissented from that verdict, though I should have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to give a valid reason for that dissent. There was a second door to the murdered man's bedroom, which was locked, and no key could be found. Ingress *might* have been noiselessly obtained through that door, whilst the reputed suicide slept, by anyone that had possessed himself or *herself* of the key, which in such a case would, of course, be carefully concealed after relocking the door from the outside. Still this was but a slight peg to hang so horrible a doubt upon, especially in the face of the apothecary's evidence, proving Witherton's unaltered determination to destroy himself, whilst affecting to be busy with preparations for emigrating.

The tragical death of her husband seemed to have completely prostrated Mrs. Witherton alike in mind and body. She was not, consequently, examined before the inquest, nor was Rookliffe, though his name, in connection with hers and that of the deceased, was frequently mentioned in

the jury room. I myself minutely searched both his and her sleeping apartments, but nothing to give color to the dim and vague suspicion I entertained was found.

About three months after her husband's death Mrs. Witherton was confined with a son; and I was told that from that time a great moral change for the better was observed in her life and conversation. The tavern was disposed of and she removed with her child to a quiet house in Queen Square. Rookliffe she had sedulously shunned since the first day of her widowhood, though it was conjectured, from words he had been heard to let drop, that she would find it difficult to ultimately shake him off. My informant's knowledge of the young widow's course of life was, however, not an intimate one; and when I had occasion to call upon Mrs. Jameson, a few weeks after her engagement in Queen Square, she could speak in eulogistic terms of her benevolent mistress, and I forebore to press her, either then or subsequently, with unauthorized, and, indeed, unwarranted queries.

The reader is now as well-informed upon the Witherton-Rookliffe business as I myself was when I left Queen Square, after listening to the housekeeper's passionate, regretful outburst and revelation.

Nothing more in connection therewith transpired for some little time, during which I was engaged in secretly watching the goings to and fro of a man, whom a shadowy suspicion rested upon that he was the assassin of Eliza Grimwood. He was an Englishman, though from his tremendous beard, whiskers, and moustaches, he was usually taken for a foreigner. He had a reputation, amongst those who knew him, of being an eccentric but devout man, and was, I found, a regular attendant at the Rev. Robert Montgomery's Chapel, Tottenham Court Road.

Just at that time intelligence was brought to England of the death of the Rev. James Hart, a young and gifted missionary, who had been murdered at one of the Sandwich Islands, under circumstances of peculiar atrocity. This Mr. Hart had long "sat at the feet" of the Rev. R. Montgomery, and having been well known to the major part of the chapel congregation, it was natural that his death should cause much painful excitement amongst them. Equally natural, too, it was that the popular preacher should endeavor to give a religious tone to that excitement—to *improve* the young missionary's death, as the phrase goes.

It was accordingly given out that a funeral sermon would be preached on the next Sunday evening. I determined to be present, and in such a position as would enable me to closely scan the countenance of the man I was set to watch during the harrowing details of the murder, and terrific denunciations of the murderer, sure to be poured forth in an unpausing torrent by the reverend orator. If, I argued, if guilty creatures sitting at a play have, as it is said, been so wrought upon by the cunning of the scene as to straightway confess their misdeeds, surely the Rev. Montgomery's dramatic eloquence will call up same tell-tale sign, some outward manifestation of guilt, if guilty the man really be. At all events, I would try the experiment, if only for my own satisfaction.

The chapel was crowded, my man present, and I conveniently placed for observation. The sermon was unquestionably a telling one, and greatly affected the auditory. Keenly I watched the suspected man whilst the preacher detailed the circumstances attending the murder. The calm

slumber of the victim, who, having commended his soul to God, had lain down to rest in the smiling security of Faith and Innocence—the stealthy approach of the assassin, trembling at the sound of his own footfall, starting at his own shadow cast by the lamp clutched in his trembling hand—finally, the consummation of the bloody deed! All this, with much more, *told* amazingly; hundreds were in tears, ladies sobbed aloud, and *my* man wept as plentifully as any one—genuine tears, too, I was sure, of a generous sorrow, of compassion; and my suspicions touching him were at an end.

Next followed, with gathering vehemence, a picture or prophesy of the fearful retribution which would probably overtake the murderer in this world, and whose soul, if a miracle of mercy were not wrought to save him, the just and Omnipotent God would speed into eternal fire—

A scream so wild, so piercing, arose up at these words from the midst of the congregation, that the preacher's utterance was stilled as by a thunderbolt, and hundreds of the audience sprang to their feet in bewildered consternation. When one recovered sufficient presence of mind to look in the direction the scream or yell had seemed to come from, it was seen that a lady, habited in deep mourning, was upon her feet, gesticulating wildly. Another glance, and I recognized that white, spectral face, those flaming eyes! It was Mrs. Witherton! Struck to the heart by the preacher's anathema, she had barely sufficient power to enunciate in one appalling scream the terror which convulsed her soul and body, and was then vainly striving to speak—foam, presently tinged with blood, bubbling from her lips with the mightiness of the effort. I pushed forward, but before I could reach her she had fallen down in a fit.

Hastily explaining that I knew the lady and her place of residence, I was assisted to carry her out of the chapel to the nearest chemist's shop for immediate restoratives. These having been administered with success, she was placed in a hack carriage and conveyed to Queen Square, and as speedily as possible attended by a physician of eminence. He pronounced the patient to be in great danger—a lung blood-vessel had burst, and that absolute quiet was indispensable.

Before leaving that night I arranged with Mrs. Jameson to send for me without delay, should Mrs. Witherton, as I thought it likely might be the case, intimate a wish to see me; and to moreover send whether such a wish were expressed or not, before she died, if, as the physician seemed to fear, her death was near at hand. As I was going out the housekeeper, who was half distracted with fright and dismay, placed a paper in my hand: it was Rookliffe's address, which she had already managed to obtain. It was well to have it, though I could not for the present, act against him.

On the fifth day after the scene in the chapel a note came, briefly stating that Mrs. Witherton, though against the physician's advice, insisted upon seeing me and a reverend gentleman whom she named, immediately.

When I reached Queen Square, the clergyman was already with Mrs. Witherton. She was calmer, more composed, and much less feeble than I had feared would be the case. A strong determination to relieve herself, at all hazards, of the hideous secret which was fast sinking her into the grave, no doubt, helped to support her. The clergyman was also a magistrate, and Mrs. Witherton's confession, or statement—she having first solemnly declared that she believed

herself to be dying—was taken in form. At a sign from her mistress, Mrs. Jameson remained in the room the while—an unfortunate circumstance, as it proved. The material parts only of Mrs. Witherton's statement need be given in these pages, and this may be briefly done:

"Mrs. Witherton admitted that she had thoughtlessly, and, as she had since felt, wickedly flirted with Rookliffe from an inordinate love of admiration and flattery, and received attentions from him which no modest wife should have permitted herself to receive. She, however, solemnly declared that her fault, or, more properly, crime, went no further than that. The death of her husband by his own hand—that hand guided and impelled by her own abominable conduct to one to whom she owed so much flashed upon her as with the glare of hell-fire—I here quote her exact words—the grievous enormity of her offence, and burnt into her soul a consuming sense of blood-guiltiness. During the first months of her widowhood, Rookliffe, whom she had peremptorily refused to see, persecuted her with letters, most of which were successful demands for money. Wherefore successful she hardly knew, except that she must have, in some sort unconsciously, felt a vague dread of the violent temper of the man, and of evil consequences that might have ensued therefrom had he been provoked, coupled with a humbling consciousness that she had, to a certain extent, compromised herself with him. The birth of a son opened a new vista of
life before her, and increased the growing aversion she felt for Rookliffe to intensity. As soon as might be she sold the tavern business, and came to reside in Queen Square, with the resolution of being a faithful steward of the father's wealth for his child, and for that child's sake no longer submit to Rookliffe's insolent extortion. Enraged by the stoppage of the supplies, Rookliffe began throwing out hints in his letters respecting "the adamantine chain" which linked for good and evil her fate with his. A subsequent letter sneered at the miserable folly of her pretended belief that "a bond of blood could be dissolved by a capricious woman's silly tears." Terrified by the shadowy, formless spectre presented to her morbid imagination, Mrs. Witherton at length consented to see Rookliffe, he refusing to be more explicit in writing "for both their sakes."

Rookliffe came punctually at the appointed time, and, to the unutterable amazement and horror of the young widow, charged her with complicity with himself in the taking away of her husband's life. Nay, that she had first imagined the crime, and urged its commission; not, certainly, by direct words; nor did he himself admit in direct words that it was by his, Rookliffe's, hand that Witherton perished. The truth, however, was not for that the less a truth in both cases. "Did you not, Madam," the callous scoundrel went on to say, "did you not confide to me the consternation you felt at hearing that Witherton was about to sell his property and emigrate to the New World? Did you not say, 'I shall be beggared, ruined, if he be permitted to do that?' Did not your tone and look suggest that *we* should be foiled, ruined, if his purpose could not be frustrated? and did you not lament that, except as a consequence of his death, there was no chance of its frustration?''

"I was stricken dumb," sobbed Mrs. Witherton at this stage of her confession: "the hair of my head stood up, and it seemed that my flesh was turning to stone! Yet I could not, but recognize a kind of distorted truth in much that he said."

"Did you not," continued Rookliffe, "did you not soon after that conversation, ask me for the key of my bedroom, which you remarked *fitted the inner door of your husband's chamber*, which

was locked, and the proper key mislaid or lost? The excuse framed by your tongue was that you wished to obtain possession of a particular letter that your husband had intercepted. Yes, but what did your eye, what the mocking smile that played about your lips suggest? Nay, desperate as you knew my circumstances to be, command?"

The villain was silent—quite satisfied, no doubt, with the impression he had made. In some degree recovering her self-possession, and remembering the phial of arsenious acid found in the bedroom, Mrs. Witherton faintly asserted her belief "that Rookliffe was not, could not be the diabolical assassin he pretended that he was, much less that she herself had—"

"Look here, woman!" interrupted Rookliffe, taking from his pocket a pair of bushy whiskers, and holding them on to his face. "Do you think that with these appliances, aided by your husband's wardrobe, which the key gave me free access to, it was difficult to personate Witherton by the dim lamp-light of an obscure chemist's shop? The poison was not made use of—there were difficulties in the way: a razor, his own razor, settled the affair, making you mistress of the wealth, for the assurance of an equal share in which there is, I repeat, a bond of blood between us."

"I do not think," said Mrs. Witherton, "that I have ever been in my right mind since that terrible interview. I believed myself impelled to minister to his prodigal needs, and a profound despair fell like a black curtain between me and all hope of peace in this world—of salvation in that to come. You know the rest—the morbid fascination which murders, executions had over me; but you cannot know, no words could describe, the agony of an ever-present terror, which I vainly strove to combat by equally morbid fanatical exorcisms, and lately—so rapid has been my fall from self-respect—by the coarse stimulant of drink."

The document having been signed, Mrs. Witherton, whose factitious strength was ebbing rapidly, murmured, "Now, then, let justice be done on both of us," and fainted.

Criminal justice could have nothing to say to her, as the confession, exonerating herself from the alleged complicity in her husband's murder, could only be received as a whole. There was, however, enough in it to warrant the arrest of Rookliffe: and it was with extreme concern I heard that he had called whilst we were engaged upstairs, made inquiry as to what was going on, particularly as to who were with Mrs. Witherton, had received such answer as the garrulous housemaid could give, and hurried away.

He had been gone full half an hour, and when I reached his lodging the bird was flown. Vainly was indefatigable search made for him, and a large government reward offered for his apprehension. He was not to be found.

His doom was but postponed. Three years after his escape from England a communication was received from a judicial functionary at Brussels inclosing a paper drawn up in the handwriting of an Englishman, who in Belgium had gone by the name of Thomason. He had, with another, been convicted of burglary and murder in Brussels, sentenced to the guillotine, and executed. The evening before he suffered, "having previously given proofs of an edifying contrition," he drew up the said paper, which shortly stated that he had murdered Witherton, without the instigation or

complicity of any one else, and that the widow, Mrs. Witherton, was wholly guiltless of the crime, not only in act, but intention.

Mrs. Witherton died several months before this, so far exculpatory document reached England. The fiery arrows of Remorse had done their work, and, spite of abundant spiritual and material balm for hurt minds, she expired raving mad. The death of her little boy occurred about a fortnight before her own. This was the fatal poison-draught commended to her lips from the chalice of Retribution.

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *The Diary of a Detective Police Officer*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864