

The Print of a Finger

by David Ker.

CHAPTER I, — AN UNLUCKY MEETING

“EDWARD! *you* here!” The tone was as joyous as might be expected of a young lady at the unexpected appearance of the man who was always foremost in her thoughts. But there was a quiver of unmistakable fear along with it, and not without reason.

Here, in the very house which her father had ordered him to quit once for all, three months before, stood Edward Ashley, holding her hands in his own—the saucy fellow!—and papa was at home, and might at any moment make a third at the interview. Oh, goodness, what *should* she do?

What Mr. Ashley should do he seemed to know without telling. To kiss the blooming face beside him half a dozen times at least, to place a chair for the young lady, and to seat himself at her side, was, as the penny novelists say, “the work of a moment”; and considering the chances of detection, and the fact that the “stern parent” who held him in such aversion was at that moment in the room below, this exemplary young gentleman looked provokingly at his ease as he observed:

“Don’t look so frightened, my pet; old Symonds, the butler, is an old friend of mine, and I can trust him to smuggle me out as cleverly as he smuggled me in. Come, clear away all the ruffles from that bonnie little face, and tell me all that’s happened since I’ve been away.”

The girl did so, not failing to lay ample stress upon the utter desolation of her life after he was gone, the dreadful scoldings that “papa” used to give her for thinking so much about him, and the odious attempt recently made to induce her to marry “a horrid man whom she couldn’t abide”—at which last communication Ashley started and muttered a very shocking word, which, luckily, was not clearly audible.

Then his turn come, and he told her how he had turned his back upon England in despair after her father banished him, and had sought forgetfulness on the Continent; and how he hadn’t found it by any means, but, on the contrary, had discovered that his only chance of avoiding suicide or hopeless insanity lay in coming back for a sight of her “darling little face” once again—with much more to the same purpose.

In short, their talk was so interesting that for a time they quite forgot the grim old man in the library below, who would have been upon them like a tiger had he had the least suspicion of what was going on over his head.

A local wit had called Squire Alstone and his daughter “Beauty and the Beast,” with singular appropriateness in both cases. It would have been hard to imagine a more striking contrast than

Evelyn's fresh, rosy face, all sunshine and beauty, and the old squire's harsh, deep-lined, granite-hewn visage, which, like the summit of Vesuvius, seemed always to have a cloud upon it.

Even those of his neighbors who did their best to admire the master of Alstone Grange as an "Englishman of the old school" were forced to admit that the old school, as represented by him, was anything but a pleasant school to go to; while the servants' opinion of him had once been pretty accurately summed up by the much enduring coachman:

"You see, sir, I'm only a servant, and daren't speak my mind freely; but I wish he was dead—I do."

It was doubtless for the same unknown reason which makes rain always set in on a picnic day, and a piece of bread-and-butter, by some law of gravitation undiscovered by Sir Isaac Newton, always fall with the buttered side downward, that on this particular evening the squire, instead of remaining in his study till dinner-time, as usual, came up to his daughter's boudoir, which he entered just as Ashley's fiftieth kiss was being given and returned.

"The devil!" roared Mr. Alstone, who, like certain other "English gentlemen of the old school," was wont to swear like a trooper, in a lady's presence as well as out of it.

Ashley jumped up as if the potentate thus invoked had answered the call in person, and there was a moment of silent dismay.

"What the deuce do you mean, you cursed young puppy," thundered the squire, "by coming here again after I'd turned you out? I'll have no such sneaking scamps hanging about my house, I can promise you. And as for you, you hussy," he went on, turning to his daughter, "I'll teach you to look as modest as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, and then go kissing and slobbering on the sly, when you think nobody sees you."

At this brutal insult to the woman he loved, Ashley's patience gave way altogether.

"Say what you like of me," cried he, fiercely, "but please remember that Miss Alstone is a lady, in spite of her being your daughter."

The words were scarcely spoken when the squire's fist—a pretty heavy one for a man of fifty-eight—fell like a sledge-hammer upon Ashley's temple, knocking him backward against the wall.

Almost stunned, less by the blow than by the tempest of rage which it excited, the young man sprang forward, but Evelyn threw herself between them and whispered, imploringly:

"Remember that he is my father, Edward. If you love me, go at once."

Ashley obeyed; but at the door he turned and shouted to his assailant:

“Thank those gray hairs which you dishonor, you foul-tongued coward, that I don’t kill you like a dog; for I should think it no murder to rid the world of such a ruffian!”

Many a bitter tear did poor Evelyn shed that night, after her father, having fairly stormed himself into exhaustion, had locked her into her room and gone away. Toward morning she sank into a feverish, unrefreshing slumber, which was broken by the sudden bursting in of her maid, screaming:

“Oh, miss, miss! your poor father!”

“What’s happened to him?” cried Evelyn, starting up.

“*Murdered*, miss—and they all say it’s young Mr. Ashley that’s done it.”

CHAPTER II

GUILTY, OR NOT GUILTY!

IT is an ill wind that blows no one good; and the “Alstone Grange murder” proved such a windfall as the little town of Birchampton had not had for many a long day. From far and near people came flocking to the centre of attraction; and the amount of beer consumed over the discussion of the case made the heart of every tavern-keeper leap for joy.

In every corner eager groups were talking over all that was known of the affair; and the local papers were in their glory, picking up all available details, inventing twice as many more, and lavishly promising “further particulars in a later edition.”

The road leading to the Grange was like the approach to Jerusalem during the Easter festival; and the house itself was only saved by its high boundary-wall, and the presence of two inflexible policemen at the avenue-gate, from becoming the goal of a second “Pilgrim’s Progress.” As it was, scores of enthusiasts kept peeping all day through the bars of the gate (which commanded no view whatever except a thick mass of trees and a hundred yards of carriage-drive), with that singular power of extracting amusement from staring hard at nothing for hours together, which is the leading characteristic of an English crowd.

But, as we have seen, public opinion had already fixed upon Edward Ashley as the criminal, a conviction shared by both police and magistrates who heard their report. Indeed, many a man has been hanged upon much lighter evidence, as a glance at the official summary of the case may suffice to show:

“1. The accused is known to have had a violent quarrel with the deceased only a few hours previous to the murder, when he was heard by a passing servant to say, in a tone of extreme violence, that ‘he would think it no murder to rid the world of such a ruffian.’”

“2. Blood has been found on the clothing of the accused, who can only account for it by saying that he *thinks* it must have proceeded from a hurt inflicted by the deceased during the quarrel aforesaid.

“3. The door of the conservatory (by which the accused admits having more than once entered the house clandestinely, was found *unlocked* the morning after the crime, and footprints led up to it exactly corresponding to those of the accused himself.

“4. This and other facts, more especially the circumstance of the murderer having made his way to the deceased’s room without any noise or disturbance, tend to show that he must have been perfectly familiar with the interior of the house.

“5. On hearing the charge against him the accused became violently agitated, and muttered some words which were understood to be, ‘All is over now.’

“6. On the night of the murder the accused is known to have gone out between ten and eleven, and not returned to the hotel till daybreak.”

This formidable accumulation of evidence was totally confirmed by Ashley’s own behavior.

He seemed completely stunned and bewildered, and, when questioned, answered so much at random as to be more than once cautioned by the presiding magistrate.

But the thought which unnerved him was not that of his own peril, but the fear that Evelyn, too, might suspect him like the rest.

To the poor girl herself, meanwhile, the long hours of that terrible day passed like a hideous dream.

Her father murdered, her lover branded as his assassin, her whole life seemingly wrecked at one blow, it might well be hard to believe that all these fearful changes could really have been brought about in a single day.

Again and again did she reproach herself for not feeling her father’s death as deeply as she ought; but it was in vain that she strove to do so, for he had never been a father to her.

Alas! for the man whose own children cannot regret his loss!

But Ashley—*there* lay her keenest torment. Ever and anon the maddening thought would force itself upon her: Might he not be guilty, after all?

Guilty of deliberate *murder* she knew he could not be; but he might have ventured back to the house in the hope of one last word with her, and, encountering her infuriated father, might, perhaps, in self-defense, or goaded by some unendurable provocation—

But no—it *could* not be! Had she not herself seen him patient for *her* sake, under the worst outrage that could be offered to him? No—come what might, he was innocent. But how could his innocence be proved?

Was she, then, to sit here with folded hands while a life dearer than her own was in mortal peril? And yet, what could she do? Would *they* listen to her—these hard, cruel men, who would gladly prove him guilty only for the sake of exalting their own cleverness in finding him out? Was there *nothing* that she could do to help him? Yes, she could pray for him; and she did so, with all her heart and soul.

The prayer seemed to be answered as soon as uttered; for she had scarcely risen from her knees, when a servant entered with a visiting-card at the sight of which she uttered a cry of joy, and bade him admit the visitor at once. In another moment the door opened again with the announcement, “Mr. Morton Delancey.”

CHAPTER III.

WHAT WAS FOUND IN THE CLAY

THE newcomer was a slight, fair-haired man, with a very handsome but rather effeminate face, whose appearance had nothing in it to account for the air of extreme reverence with which the footman ushered him in. But this quiet little man was really a celebrity of the first order, known in every civilized capital from Washington to St. Petersburg.

Born of an English mother and American father, he had inherited the beauty of the one with the keen intellect of the other, and had made his nickname of “The Amateur Detective” famous in every part of the world.

Why he had taken up this singular pursuit, devoting himself to hunting down criminals, as other men take to botany or geology, no one could tell; but his name had long since become a proverb for reckless daring and super-human ingenuity, and it was a common saying with the police of London and New York, that “for anything with a knot in it, there wasn’t nobody like the “Amateur.”

His acquaintance with the Alstones dated back to Evelyn’s earliest childhood, and it is probable that no man living—except, indeed, Edward Ashley himself—could have been more welcome to her at that moment.

“I wouldn’t have disturbed you at such a time, my dear,” said Delancey, kindly, “if I had not hoped to be of use to you in this sad affair. It’s too late to do anything for your poor father; but I’ll try my best to clear Mr. Ashley, and with God’s help I hope to succeed.”

Evelyn answered only by pressing her old friend’s hand in both her own, with a look of gratitude which said more than any words.

“Now, I’ll just tell you what I’m going to do,” he resumed. “Your old friend, Justice Rawdon, is downstairs, having been good enough to ask my assistance in going into the case, and we’re very lucky to have such a clearheaded man like him to deal with, instead of those Birchampton blockheads, who can’t see an inch beyond their noses. With your permission, he and I will go over the house together, and if we find, anything in Mr. Ashley’s favor, as I have no doubt we shall, I’ll get you leave to carry him the news yourself tomorrow.”

In a moment Evelyn was upon her feet, with a glow of life and energy on her beautiful face, such as had not been seen there since the fatal news reached her. The “something to do” for which she had been hungering had come to her at last, and she was her own brave self again in a moment.

“My physic has worked wonders,” muttered Delancey, eying her approvingly. “She’ll be ready for anything now. After all, for real courage in facing trouble, there’s no one like a woman.”

Mr. Justice Rawdon, one of the few local magnates with whom the morose squire had been at all familiar, was a portly, grave-looking man of middle age, whose broad face had somewhat a heavy look, amply contradicted, however, by the ever-watchful keenness of his deep-gray eyes.

He held out his big hand to Evelyn with a hearty “God bless you, my dear,” which went further to comfort her than anything else could have done, and then turned expectantly to Delancey.

“Now, Mr. Rawdon,” said the latter, “I think I’m pretty safe in assuming that a man of your sense does not consider the evidence of this morning as in any way conclusive?”

“Certainly not,” answered the justice, promptly.

Evelyn’s face brightened at once.

“Nor I,” said Delancey; “and I need scarcely tell you why. In the first place, no man but a born idiot would attempt to kill another just after telling him, in the presence of witnesses, that he would think killing him no murder. Secondly, if Mr. Ashley *had* intended murder, he would certainly not have entered the house by the very floor which was well known to be his favorite entrance. Thirdly, it’s quite intelligible that a young man who had just receives a violent insult, to which we need not allude further at present, should be too much excited to sleep, and should take a moonlight walk to calm himself, without intending to murder anybody.”

“Just so,” assented the magistrate.

“As to the blood,” pursued Delancey, “it very probably *did* come from the cut on his forehead, just as he says; but these wisecracks, having first made up their minds that he’s guilty, snatch at every trifle that looks like a proof of it, and then call *that* a fair trial! Now, let us see these footmarks which they make so much of.”

The three went round to the conservatory-door. Delancey knelt down to examine the footprints, and after a brief inspection, arose with a look of strong contempt.

“So much for the sagacity of a country policeman! Look at those marks through my spyglass, Mr. Rawdon, and you’ll soon see that they couldn’t have been made as lately as this morning; they’re simply the traces left by Mr. Ashley when he came here yesterday afternoon.” The justice made an entry in his notebook. “As to the door not being locked,” pursued Delancey, “the servants most probably left it unlocked themselves. But all that matters little either one way or the other, for the murderer didn’t enter by that door at all.”

He spoke so confidently that his two companions looked at him in silent amazement, and Mr. Rawdon asked, eagerly:

“How on earth can you tell that?”

“Nothing simpler. I always follow one rule; namely, whenever I see some perfectly obvious proof, which a child might read, in one direction, I turn round and look exactly in the other. As a rule, criminals *don’t* take the greatest possible pains to show you which way they went to do a murder, and how they did it. Your police say, ‘Here’s an unlocked door, with foot-marks leading to it, therefore he must have gone that way.’ I say, ‘No man would be such a fool as to go in the dark right through a house full of servants, with the chance of raising an alarm any moment, while there was another way to be had.’ Let us see, now, if there *is* any other way. Tell me, Evelyn, which side does your father’s room lie?”

“In the west wing, right on the opposite side of the house.”

“As I thought,” muttered Delancey. “We’ll just go round there, if you please.”

Round they went, accordingly. The window was on the third floor, partially hidden from them by one of a line of enormous elms that stood like sentries along the front of the house.

“There’s the *real* approach,” said Delancey, quietly. “That room was entered, not from the inside of the house, but from the outside.”

“But where on earth could he have got his ladder?” asked the justice, measuring the height with his eye.

“Yonder’s one ready-made for him. Do you see that big bough running out toward the window?”

“Well, I do, now that you point it out,” said Mr. Rawdon, adjusting his glasses; “but you don’t mean to say that any man could get on to the window-sill from *that!*”

“Judge for yourself,” rejoined Delancey, swinging himself up into the tree, and mounting it as nimbly as a squirrel till he reached the bough in question, along which he went without the slightest hesitation, although it was more than sixty feet from the ground. In another moment he was standing upon the window-ledge. “Are you satisfied, justice?” cried he.

“Not quite,” said the magistrate, “for very few men can climb like you.”

“Come up here, then, and I’ll show you something that *will* convince you.”

The two hurried into the house; but when Evelyn reached the door of the fatal chamber, the thought of being again confronted by the corpse of her murdered father proved too much for her nerves, strong as they were. She hung back, and Mr. Rawdon entered the room alone.

“Now, justice,” said Delancey, “you see, don’t you, that I have not stirred from this place where I’m standing. Well, look at the woodwork of that sill, and tell me if you notice anything.”

The order was easily obeyed. The whiteness of the newly-painted wood threw out in strong relief a long brown scratch, evidently made by the sole of a shoe.

“You are right,” said Mr. Rawdon; “the fellow must have got in here.”

“Yes, it’s all plain enough now. The night being hot, the window was open, and he could hear the squire’s heavy breathing, showing that he was fast asleep. The fellow took off his shoes, and put them down just inside (you see where one of them has left a smear of mud upon the wainscot), and then stole into the room. Now, of course he came to rob; so the next thing is to find out what he took.” He opened the door, and asked, in a whisper: “Evelyn, my dear, can you tell us if your poor father kept any money in his room?”

“I’ve heard him say that there was a good deal in the walnut-wood bureau by the fireplace,” answered the girl from without.

Delancey stepped up to the bureau, and tried it. It was fast locked, and no key was to be seen.

“Well, the rascal didn’t carry off his booty, that’s one comfort,” said Mr. Rawdon.

“The squire used to keep his keys on his watch-chain,” was Delancey’s only reply, as he moved toward the chair on which the dead man’s clothes were lying, and drew out the watch. But the keys were not there.

Delancey’s eye instinctively sought the floor. For a moment or two he looked in vain; and then, close to the bed, almost hidden by the fringe of the curtain, he espied the missing bunch.

The next moment the bureau flew open, while the magistrate, whose interest in the search had long since mastered his official dignity, pressed forward as eagerly as a schoolboy to look into it.

His first glance was followed by a loud exclamation. The interior was quaintly carved and gilded in the Louis XV fashion, and had six drawers, three on each side, leaving space for a small, movable casket in the centre. But the place usually occupied by the casket was now *empty*.

“Thank God!” cried Mr. Rawdon, fervently. “Poor Ned’s safe now, even if we do nothing more. Here’s plain proof that the motive of the crime was robbery, and no magistrate in the county could be fool enough to think that Ned Ashley, with all the money he’s got, would go robbing and murdering to get more.”

While he was speaking, Delancey had again approached the bed, and was carefully examining the position of the body, which had been left undisturbed by order of the head inspector.

“I think I have it all pretty pat now,” said he, at length, as coolly as if he had been merely working out a problem at chess. “These police of yours were right in one point—the murderer *was* well acquainted with the house and its ways. He knew where the money was kept, and he knew where to find the keys, and how to open the bureau. Having taken out the casket, he intended to put back the keys where he found them, in order to delay the discovery of the theft as long as possible. Do you follow me?”

“Perfectly.”

“Well, just then the squire awoke, and hearing something stirring, asked who was there? The robber sprang upon him at once, got the pillow over his mouth before he could cry out, and stabbed him in the throat, killing him at once (the moon would give him light enough for that, you know).”

“I understand.”

“In the scuffle he dropped the keys, and naturally didn’t care to waste time in hunting for them. The blow once struck, he made straight for the window, carrying the casket with him.”

“He descended, then, the same way as he came?”

“Just so; for he could easily sling the casket round his neck by a handkerchief, so as to leave both hands free, See here!”

He clutched the projecting bough, and swinging himself into the tree again, descended it as nimbly as he had mounted; but when about twice his own height from the ground, he slipped suddenly, and fell to the earth.

“Good gracious! are you hurt?” cried Mr. Rawdon, anxiously.

“Come down directly!” was all the answer he received.

But Delancey’s tone was so eager and excited that even the sober magistrate scudded downstairs as if for a wager; but, fast as he went, Evelyn was there before him.

“That was a lucky fall for me,” said Delancey, “for it’s shown me something which I had quite overlooked, although I ought to be ashamed of myself for missing it. Do you see *that?*”

The two bent forward to look.

All around the tree the ground was so hard as to show no trace, but in one particular spot, between two outcropping roots, lay a patch of soft clay, in which was the perfect impression of a *human hand*, palm downward, as if some one had slipped and fallen there.

“Well, but didn’t you do that yourself in falling?” asked the justice, with a puzzled look.

“Too big for *my* hand, as you see,” replied Delancey, placing his fingers in the indentations; “but there’s something else about it worth noticing. Evelyn, can you get me a glass of water and a handful or two of crumpled wall plaster?”

Miss Alstone, delighted to be of any use in the investigation upon which so much depended, hastened into the house, and returned almost immediately with the articles required.

Mixing a handful of the dust with the water, Delancey shook the rest of the plaster into the hand-print, and then let fall the mixture upon it, drop by drop.

“There,” he said, quietly, “when that hardens we’ll have a good enough cast of that hand to hang the man that owns it. You see, he had the casket with him when he tumbled, for here’s its dent in the turf; but just then he must have heard a noise, and set off running, as you may see by these two footmarks, with the toe so much deeper than the heel. Unluckily, the ground’s too hard further on to give us any more than those two; but it may be worth while to make a tracing of them on paper, if only to show that they don’t tally a bit with Mr. Ashley’s footprints over yonder.”

“I’ll do so at once,” said Mr. Rawdon, producing his pencil

“And now,” resumed Delancey, going back to his plaster-cast, as soon as the tracing was completed, “look at this.”

He held it up as he spoke. It was a perfect model of a large but rather well-shaped hand, which had lost *the uppermost joint of its little finger*.

“Now,” said he, “unless Mr. Ashton has lost the top of his little finger since yesterday, this alone should be enough to clear him. What say you, Mr. Rawdon?”

“Undoubtedly,” answered the justice.

“Then that ends our day’s work,” quoth Delancey, “and a pretty good one it’s been. Evelyn, my dear, I see you’re looking tired; and you can sleep in peace now, for Ashley’s life is as safe as mine. You shall tell him so yourself tomorrow; and tonight, by your leave, Mr. Rawdon, I shall stay here to take care of the house.”

The kindly words came almost too late. The firmness which had enabled Evelyn to bear up so long and so bravely, had fairly given way at last; and it was only with the support of her two friends that she succeeded in dragging herself back to the house, where she was at once consigned to the motherly care of the old housekeeper.

“I don’t know how to thank you enough,” said the justice to his companion, as soon as they were alone again. “I should have done my duty as a magistrate, I trust, even if it had broken my heart;

but I really think it *would* have broken it to see my old friend George Ashley's only son found guilty of a cold-blooded murder."

Delancey shook his head gravely.

"I'm glad Ashley's saved," said he; "but this is a more serious affair than you think. Do you remember the murder of the Honorable Stephen White, at Salem, a good many years ago?"

The magistrate looked at him for a moment with an air of utter bewilderment, and then turned pale as death.

"Why, you don't mean to say—"

"I mean to say that the man who committed this murder is the squire's own nephew, and Evelyn's cousin."

CHAPTER IV.

A MIDNIGHT VIGIL.

To be the inmate of a gloomy old manor house, in which a horrible murder has just been committed, is not the most tranquillizing situation in the world; and it can scarcely be wondered at that the second housemaid at Alstone Grange should find herself unable to sleep on the night following Delancey's researches, and be moved to get up and look out of her window in the highest story. But she would have been wiser not to do so, for the sight that she beheld made her flesh creep.

Far below, a pale light was gliding among the huge elms in front of the west wing—a light which, as she observed with inconceivable horror, seemed to surround and accompany a shadowy human figure—probably the ghost of the old squire, searching for some money that he had buried.

The figure paused at length beside the largest elm, and appeared to be digging a grave there. Susan's curiosity so far overcame her terror as to enable her to face even this objectionable performance without screaming, but when the phantom actually proceeded to lay itself down in the grave which it had dug, her overwrought feelings found vent in a shriek that made the air ring. Rushing back into bed, she dived headlong under the blankets, and rolling herself up in them so tightly that all the ghosts in Christendom could scarcely have got her out again, lay trembling there till morning.

Just at the time when this terrific recital was arousing the wonder of the servants' breakfast-table, Birchampton was similarly excited by the passage through its main street of a carriage containing Evelyn Alstone, Justice Rawdon, and Mortimer Delancey. The latter had kept his word, and Evelyn was on her way to give the good news to her lover with her own lips.

What passed at that interview no one could say, her two chaperons having considerably remained outside; but Ashley's farewell words, as overheard by the policeman on guard at the door, showed that the visit had not been thrown away, so far as *he* was concerned.

"God bless you, darling! I can bear whatever may come, now that I've seen *your* face again!"

But a still greater "sensation" was in store for the little town that day. It was suddenly noised abroad that the chain of evidence was now complete—that the police were to be withdrawn from the Grange, Miss Alstone to go on a visit to Justice Rawdon and his wife, and the house to be shut up immediately after the squire's funeral, only the old housekeeper and two servants being left to take care of it.

To the community at large (Delancey's discovery having been kept perfectly secret), this seemed to imply that Ashley's fate was sealed; but they might have changed their minds had they overheard the conversation which had taken place in the Grange garden that morning between Mr. Rawdon and Delancey.

"And you think, then, that this nephew—Colville, or whatever you call him—*is* the man?"

"I'm sure of it. I knew him at once by that maimed finger of his, which he got in a row in one of those London slums that he was so fond of frequenting. He must have cost poor Alstone a pretty penny, first and last, for he was always wanting money, *I* nearly got him convicted once, but he'd been sharp enough to leave no tangible proof against him."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, he was a pretty black sheep. Evelyn tells me that, a few weeks ago her father got a letter, which seemed to put him in a great rage, directed in a very curious hand, which, as she described it, was certainly Colville's. He must have been asking for money again, and as his uncle wouldn't give him any, he decided to take it, and this is the result."

"And how will you set about catching him, if it's a fair question?"

"Ah, that's the best part of the whole story. Last night, as I was lying awake, thinking it all over, I got quite an inspiration. I said to myself, 'Now, supposing I'd committed a murder and were carrying off some stolen money, and heard a noise that startled me. what should I do? Why, I'd pop my plunder into some hole, so as to have nothing suspicious about me if I met any one.' I jumped up at once, got my lantern, and went out and grubbed into that hollow by the big elm, just where we found the last traces of the casket. Some of the servants must have taken me for a ghost, for I heard an awful screech overhead just as I dived into the hole; but I found the casket, anyhow."

"Did you? Bravo!"

“Yes; that’s our best stroke of luck yet, for now we have the fellow fairly hooked. Men don’t commit murders just to leave their plunder and run away. He’s safe to come back after that money sooner or later.”

“And what are we to do, then?”

“I’ll tell you. As soon as the funeral is over, we’ll call off the police, send Evelyn on a visit to your wife, and pretend to shut up the house altogether. Then Colville, thinking the coast clear, will come back to look for his casket, and you and I, with one of your men to help us, will watch here secretly every night till he does, and then we’ll collar him in the act.”

“Excellent!—just the very thing! I’ll set about it this very day.”

Three nights later just as utter darkness was setting in, three men stood in the garden of the seemingly deserted Grange, whispering eagerly together.

“Are you quite sure he’ll come?” asked Justice Rawdon, in a tone of undisguised anxiety. “We’ve been here two nights already, and no sign of him. Remember, a man’s life is worth more to himself than any amount of money, and the fellow’s scarcely likely to come back if he expects to get himself hanged by doing so.”

“Never fear,” rejoined Morton Delancey, as confidentially as ever. “It was only to be expected that he should wish to be on the safe side, by waiting a day or two after the house was cleared. Besides, these two last nights it’s been bright-moonlight, whereas tonight there’ll be no moon at all. I’d bet all I’m worth that we won’t be disappointed *this time*.”

“We’d better get to our places, then,” said the justice. “I suppose we can’t do better than post ourselves as before?”

“Scarcely, I think. You get in behind that buttress yonder, and take care not to rustle the ivy.”

Mr. Rawdon obeyed at once.

“You, Stokes, double yourself down between those two bushes, and mind you keep your ears open.”

“Ay, ay, sir,” rejoined the policeman, placing himself as directed.

The next moment Delancey swung himself up on the lowest bough of the elm, and lay so close that, the keenest eye could not have detected his crouching figure. And so, in gloom and silence, the three hunters sat watching for their prey.

Weary, weary work, crouching there in the depth of the chill, ghostly darkness, with ears and eyes strained to the utmost, and every nerve tense as if on the rack.

The prospect of a hand-to-hand struggle with a desperate man, certain to be well armed, was, perhaps, no very inviting one; but, compared with this gnawing suspense, it appeared absolutely delightful.

Hark! was that the distant sound of a cautious footstep?

The less practiced ears of the two Englishmen had heard nothing; but Morton Delancey, who had listened many a time to the stealthy thread of the tiger in the depths of an English jungle, was on the alert in a moment.

Again came the sound—this time too plain to be mistaken; and Delancey's keen eyes distinguished amid the darkness the barely perceptible outline of a human figure, gliding stealthily toward the tree in which he lay ambushed.

On came the midnight prowler, pausing ever and anon, as if to assure himself that all was safe. At length he was right underneath Delancey's perch, and bending over the hollow at the root of the tree.

Now or never! With a spring like a panther, Delancey flung himself right upon his crouching enemy, prostrating him with the shock, and falling heavily beside him.

In another moment the two men were grappling like wild beasts.

Mr. Rawdon and the policeman, who had hurried up at the first alarm, stood over them in perplexity, not daring to strike, so closely intertwined were the two bodies, and so rapid their movements, as they rolled over and over each other.

Despite his slender frame and delicate features, Delancey was one against whom few men could have held their own. But, for this once he was fain to admit that he had fairly met his match, if not more.

Suddenly there came a quick grasp, and then a deep, gurgling groan. The stranger's grasp relaxed and he rolled over on his side, to all appearance lifeless.

"It was his own fault," said Delancey, rising as composedly as if such a death-grapple were one of his everyday amusements. "He drew a knife upon me, and as we were tumbling one over another, the blade ran into him somewhere, and I fancy it's pretty well done his business."

But although the wound was mortal, its effects were, fortunately, not instantaneous. Matthew Colville—for it was he—lived long enough to make a full confession, and appended his name to the written statement of it drawn up by Delancey and the justice, declaring that the murder was his doing, and his alone.

Ashley was at once released; and, six months later the old house was thrown open once more to admit a merry party which had come straight from the celebration of a wedding in Birchampton Church, where Morton Delancey was "best man," and Justice Rawdon gave away the bride.

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