

The Coiner's Wife
by an English Ex-Detective

I shall never forget the 13th of December 1879. The streets of the great city of Manchester had grown depressingly desolate, and a dense, black fog prevailed over all the town.

I was hurrying, as fast as the night would allow, from Victoria railway station, along the then old and dingy Deansgate, in the direction of my office just as the Cathedral bells were chiming the hour of twelve.

Benumbed with cold, I found to my great joy a cheerful fire blazing in my room, which thanks to my comrade, who had retired for the night, was considerably prepared for me. I took off my great coat and muffler, drew a chair close to the fender, and began thinking over the incidents of a case I had that afternoon brought to a successful issue when, with the suddenness of a startled night-bird's scream, I heard a piteous and prolonged shriek issuing from beneath the unshuttered window.

I sprang to my feet, and gazing in the direction of the sound saw a sight I shall never forget while memory holds a seat in my brain. A wild, white face, with long, disheveled hair hanging over an ill-clad form, was gesticulating in a beseeching manner close to the fire-lit panes.

Cool and collected as I usually am under extraordinary circumstances, I must confess to a feeling of terror taking possession of my whole frame at that instant, and I sat there rooted to the spot. It was only for a moment, though—or perhaps, as long as it would take one to count ten—before the apparition, as it seemed to be, vanished as suddenly from my transfixed gaze as it had in coming upon me with all its ghastly whiteness.

“This is very strange,” I involuntarily exclaimed, “and puzzles me not a little. What can it mean?”

Then striding toward the door, I flung it wide open; but there was nothing before me—only the black, choking fog and the dead silence of the street.

For a little while I stood like one bewildered. I strained my ears in the anxious hope of catching the sound of some one's footfall; but it was all in vain—the quiet remained unbroken. Pushing back the door, I turned to reenter the room, when my eyes caught sight of a piece of white paper that lay upon the wide sill of the window.

“Ah,” thought I, “here then, is the explanation of this deep mystery.”

I took it to the light, opened it, and much to my astonishment found a message of deep anguish addressed to me, in almost undecipherable characters. The note was wet in places as if with tears, and it bore indubitable evidence of having been hurriedly written. This is what it said:

If you would stop more crime perhaps murder, come at once to 13 Tomson's court. Am

followed. Heaven save me and my child! What shall I do? Rescue us, and God bless you.

LIZZIE THORNLEY

Be careful. Conceal yourself. Watch. Top room at back.

Thornley—Thornley! The name appeared familiar to me. I went to the diary, turned to the letter T, and found following entry:

November 24 1878,—Bill Thornley, alias Springer, alias Saxley, coiner—wanted.

Could this, then, be the man who for nearly eighteen months had successfully eluded our most vigilant pursuit? It seemed more than probable. Was the information, however, contained in that mysterious message of a genuine character? Or was it meant to lead me into a fatal trap? The promptings of my heart answered me, and that answer was: Bill Thornley, desperado, you are in Tomson's Court, and I will have you, my slippery beauty, before another day is over.

It was very late, or rather, I ought to say, the day was young, when I put out the office lights; for the bell of St. Peter's had just rung out the hour of one. I had decided, whatever might be the consequences to my unknown visitor, to go home and sleep over the matter and then report the circumstances to the inspector, so as to receive his sanction to the step before putting my plans into execution. With this resolution strong upon me, I started upon my journey home. My way lay in the direction of Greengate, and several times ere I reached Blackfriars Bridge, I saw the vision of that white face, with its look of unutterable terror fixed immovably upon me.

Late in the forenoon of the same day I returned to the office and duly reported my experience of the previous night:

"This looks like a serious job for you Lomax," said Inspector Jones, as soon as I had finished my report. "Just turn to the album there and look at S and T for a portrait of 'Springer,' or 'Saxley,' or 'Thorndyke.' He has done seven years, but has not accounted for himself for a long time past. Is that it? Ah, good! Take it with you, and if you get a chance of comparing it with the original, and you find they agree, nab him, that's all. Would you like Schofield with you?"

"No," I answered.

"Well, in any case, be quite prepared to face rough work, for if your man should turn out to be the one I suspect, look sharp, I advise you."

After these and other timely hints, I retired to the wardrobe adjoining Jones' room. I went in a clean-shaven, good-looking man of twenty-seven, and in half an hour afterward came out again in the character of a middle-aged woman, dressed in rather seedy suit of black.

I had on a faded dress of cashmere, a long circular cloak of the same material, and a matronly-looking bonnet, from beneath which hung longish locks of iron gray hair, while a thick veil drooping down in front completed the transformation. I must not forget to mention, though, that I

took with me a small wallet of pins needles and tape under the pretext of having these for sale. My get-up was perfect. I looked to all the world like one who had seen better days, but was reduced now to a state of genteel poverty.

It was close upon 3 o'clock in the afternoon when I sallied out of Albert Street, and a drizzling rain was making matters most uncheerful. I had no difficulty in finding Tomson's Court. It was situated in Little Peter Street, and in that direction I turned my footsteps. I must confess my mind was not without some misgivings as to the successful accomplishment of my plans. Still I had before played two or three bold games as a detective with considerable credit; and why should I fail In this?

Proceeding along the dark and narrow yard of Tomson's Court, I noticed a knot of unkempt women of most repulsive appearance, standing talking together, and by their earnest demeanor I knew they had some serious business at hand. Sudden as thought my wallet was out, and I stood before them cringingly, beseeching them to buy my wares. But of course it was all to no purpose. I neither sold anything nor heard a word that would give me the faintest clue. Watching my opportunity, I got away from them and passed into No 13, unseen by any one. The room was situated at the end of a long, dark, and winding lobby, and the stench that met me was almost overpowering. I paused a moment listening, but not a sound did I hear. Then I knocked at the door, very feebly at first then louder and louder, and yet there came no response to me.

"Surely I am the victim of a hoax," I thought to myself. "The room is evidently tenantless."

Stooping down, I peered through the keyhole, and by the very dim light that shone within saw what I thought was a chair upset. I knocked again, so as to be certain there was no one in the room, and still received no answer. My curiosity was now aroused. I took from my pocket a small bunch of skeleton keys—I never went out without them—and noiselessly opened the door. As soon as I entered, I stood aghast at the sight that met my eyes. In one corner of the room, stretched upon a heap of straw, I saw the form of a woman, half naked and motionless, with her eyes closed, as if in death. I staggered toward her, turned her face to the light, and, merciful heavens, recognized in her the mysterious midnight visitor whose wild look had so possessed me. I turned her head more to the light, and was horrified to see a thin stream of blood oozing from her snow-white brow down upon the face and hands of a little babe that nestled to her breast. I knelt beside them, and placing my ear to the heart of the woman, found it was still breathing. In an instant I requisitioned my brandy flask, and after considerable difficulty, succeeded in pouring a few drops of the liquid down her throat, and was soon rewarded by perceiving signs of returning consciousness. Her eyes opened, and her lips began nervous twitching at the corners.

A few moments afterward she fixed a steady, wondering gaze on me, then tried to speak.

"Pray do not for the present agitate yourself," I exclaimed, in a well-assumed female voice. "You will feel better presently, and then we will speak a little."

Her beautiful black eyes expressed their gratitude to me, then she relapsed into a fitful slumber. This was a very opportune circumstance for me, because it enabled me to take stock of the

miserable surroundings. Three chairs, an old deal box and a dilapidated table formed the principal articles in the room. Two other things, however, attracted my attention more than all besides. They were a long wooden bench, such as is used by carpenters, and from the nature of the tools I saw lying about—with dies and moulds of various sizes—my suspicion became confirmed.

The other object which arrested my attention was a strong, capacious wardrobe in the opposite corner, facing the bench. Its folding doors stood a little ajar, and I grew curious to know the character of its contents. I was just rising from my seat with the intention of making a closer inspection, when the woman opened her eyes again and beckoned me to her side. Then in a voice just raised above a whisper, she said:

“Who are you that have found your way into this miserable dwelling?”

“I am a woman peddling a few simple wares,” I answered, “but how I managed to find myself here is more than I can tell; yet I am thankful that I have reached you, if it is only that I may be of some simple service to you, for I see you need a helping hand.”

“Ah, ‘tis true—‘tis true,” she replied; “but I fear your kind assistance has come too late—yes, too late!”

“I hope not. Tell me, though, how you have come by that wound in your temple. Is it the result of a fall?”

“No, no; it was done by him—my husband. He struck me with a hammer because I would not consent to his taking away my child.”

”Merciful heavens, can such things be? Where is he now?” I somewhat eagerly inquired.

“I—I cannot tell,” she answered; and she appeared to be growing fainter by the exertion. “Last night, a little before twelve, he came home in a terrible temper. I saw murder lurking in his eyes, and after listening to his fearful oaths, I ran to the police station, pursued by him. I could not attract attention. He overtook me just as I re-entered this room and,—Hark! What is that?”

Instantly we were as silent as the dead and listened. The faculty of hearing is remarkably keen with me, and I soon came to the conclusion that some one was crouching behind the door. I motioned to the woman to be silent, while I crept noiselessly into the open wardrobe. I closed the folding doors from within, and, as good fortune would have it, discovered a large crevice through which I could see the movements of any one who might choose to enter the apartment.

The poor woman’s head sank on the pallet of straw, apparently in a swoon, and all was stillness again.

The minutes that elapsed seemed hours to me, and I was beginning to think that, after all, my ears had deceived me, when very slowly, and without the faintest sound, the door opened, and

the figure of a short, stout, bushy-bearded man crept in. He stole to where Lizzie Thornley lay; he bent over her, as if to assure himself that she was aware of his presence.

“Um!—she must have been muttering in her sleep, I reckon. I could have sworn, though, I heard two voices. Curse her! And you would have split on me, would you?” he growled between his set teeth. “I wonder if she’ll croak this time?”

As he said this his voice sank in a hoarse whisper, and he turned toward the bench. A momentary fear came over me lest he should open the wardrobe doors, and with this feeling upon me I placed my hand in readiness on my revolver.

The rays of the setting sun were just glinting through the latticed pane; his face was straight before me, but I did not recognize it. To my unspeakable surprise, however, he proceeded to divest himself of his flowing beard and wig, and then I beheld him the long-looked for coiner, Bill Thornley. My first impulse at that moment was to spring suddenly upon him, but his next movement deprived me of any such intension.

Slipping his fingers in his waistcoat pocket, he drew forth a small key. With this he opened a secret panel in the wainscot of the wall, and there I saw great piles of glittering coin which my practiced eyes told me were spurious. One by one he placed them noiselessly in a bag beside him, then relocked the panel and after closely examining his pistol, laid that on the bench preparatory to resuming his hirsute disguise.

With the rapidity of a panther springing on its prey I flung open the wardrobe doors and sprang on him. The suddenness of my appearance struck him motionless and dumb. He could but glare at me, while I held him in a vice-like grip, and his lips trembled and grew ashy pale.

At such a moment as this a detective needs all the coolness and determination he can command, for then it is that his victim is almost powerless of resistance. He becomes semi-paralyzed with surprise, and before he knows the meaning of it he finds the bracelets on his wrists. At least such was the case with the ruffian Thornley. I made short work of him. As for his wife and child (for such they proved to be) I had them tenderly conveyed to the Royal Infirmary, where for ten long days and nights of suffering she and her baby lay, and then their spirits crossed the confines of a better world.

Thornley was found guilty, and I had the satisfaction of hearing him sentenced to a long term of penal servitude.

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