

A Dreadful Case

“Gems!” he exclaimed, the expression of his countenance changing from that of the reflective sage, I was going to say, to one that was almost miserly. “Ah, now you talk of something I understand. They are not watching us, are they?” he broke off, looking nervously in the direction of the house.

“No, no,” said I, with subdued excitement, wondering what was to happen next.

He deliberately unbuttoned his long ulster coat, shivering in the cold winter air as he did so; then he began to fumble at a belt which he wore. Several diamonds of great value, as I judged, in a moment more sparkled before my astonished eyes. He had apparently drawn them from a little leather pocket curiously concealed beneath this belt.

“Ah! those are gems, if you like, sir,” he exclaimed, with an exulting chuckle, which brought to my mind the impression created at our first interview, that he was not quite right in his head.

“They are splendid,” I said; “but why do you carry them about with you? Suppose any one, dishonestly inclined, were to learn that an elderly man had property of such value upon him? The thought of it makes me tremble, sir.”

“I am not in the habit of exhibiting the treasures which it has taken my lifetime to amass. I dare not. But I trust to you sir.”

As a man of business I thought there was here another proof of mental weakness, in the fact that he should confide in one of whose antecedents he knew nothing, and of whose honesty he had no further proof than a love of nature might suggest.

But I chanced at this moment to look up at the first floor window of our neighbor's house; and there, watching with a strange and, as I thought, scornful smile, stood the tall, sallow man of whom both my wife's and my own impression was so distinctly unfavorable.

I motioned to the old man to put away his jewels, for the servant was approaching again; most likely sent by her master.

My strange acquaintance did not appear in the garden any more.

I have an innate horror of eavesdropping, and, as I have repeatedly said to my dear wife, whose feminine curiosity tempts her to attach far too little attention to this evil, “Conversation not intended for her ears ought to be regarded with the same feelings as a letter not written for her perusal. She would feel deeply insulted did anyone suggest that she would be capable of reading another person's letter simply because the seal happened to be broken, and she could therefore do so without the fear of detection.” But women, alas! are never logical; and she will not see nor, perhaps, cannot, that her conduct is not less culpable when she greedily listens to the private conversation of others, just because accident or carelessness on their part has placed her within earshot.

Well, a few days after we sat in our cheerful, cosy front parlor; we were sitting, I say, in our cosy parlor; my wife, with her knitting in her hands, on an ottoman which was drawn close into a recess by the fireplace; I, in my good old arm-chair, by the table in the middle of the room, and reading the last number of the *Gardener's Magazine*. The entrance of Ann with our customary "nightcap" of weak toddy and thin bread and butter, interrupted my study of an article on "Trenching," and caused me to look up at my wife.

"Eavesdropping!" I was about to exclaim, when my speech was arrested by observing the strange look of horror on Polly's face. She had dropped her knitting, and sat with hands tightly clasped across her breast, and head pressed closely against the wall.

"My dear girl, whatever is the matter with you?" I said.

"Oh! it is dreadful," she whispered, holding up her finger to check me. "Pray come and hear what they are saying."

Exulted though my principles were about listening. I could not resist the impulse of the moment, but hastily rose from my seat and placed my ear against the wall likewise. Ann Lightbody, too, forgetting our relative positions, dropped the tray of toddy on the table as if it were a hot coal, and rushed to the opposite side of the mantelpiece to imitate our example. To any one entering the room at that moment the scene presented must have been absurd beyond description. But we were earnest enough, for what we heard seemed to freeze our very blood.

"Is he dead yet?" we heard Mrs. Malden ask her husband, with a low, musical laugh that seemed to us like the mirth of a fiend.

"Thoroughly," responded he in a deep voice, which betrayed no signs of remorse or agitation; "your hint, that I should dispose of him in his sleep, like Hamlet's uncle did his troublesome brother, was capital."

There was silence for several minutes. Then we heard Mrs. Malden ask gravely, "What shall we do with the body?"

"Oh, that is just the difficulty. As the neighbors must not have their suspicions roused, it must be buried at night and a report put about that the silly old man has gone into the country."

"Oh, dear! there is the property to dispose of, is there not?"

"Uncut diamonds tell no tale," said this sallow neighbor of mine, in his deep voice, laughing loudly. "Nothing could have been luckier than my witnessing that little scene between my uncle and our fat neighbor over the garden wall."

In an ordinary moment I should have felt keenly the insult conveyed in his remark, but my feelings were too highly wrought for it to touch me then.

But Polly pressed my hand and murmured, “The horrid villain!”

We listened painfully for several minutes more. We heard Malden's wife heave a sigh. She was human, then. I had scarcely thought it.

“I can't bear to think—it is too dreadful!” she said, her voice trembling for the first time during the fearful conversation.

Again her husband laughed loudly, and said, in a theatrical tone, “What, my Lady Macbeth trembling! ‘Come, we'll to sleep. We are yet but young in deed.’”

In a moment more we heard the door of the apartment closed. We three sat and looked at each other—blanched and speechless with horror.

Ann was the first to recover her presence of mind. “Shall I go an' fetch the perlese, sir?” she said in a subdued voice.

“Oh, don't leave me, Ann!” sobbed my poor wife, yielding to her pent-up emotions and clasping our servant round the waist! This was the first time in her life that she had been so undignified.

“You go, Joram,” she continued. Then a sudden fear seized her. “But we shall both be murdered while you are gone.” The poor soul wrung her hands and began to laugh hysterically.

I felt that everything depended upon me controlling my nervous system. Polly was beginning to get silly, and Ann might at any moment break down, too. I took out my pipe, and slowly filled and lit it, in order both to study myself and to impress these women with my self-command.

“I'll telegraph to Chittick— that will be best,” I said, after pacing the room once or twice.

“You can't telegraph tonight, sir; the orfice 'ull be shut,” said the practical Ann.

Mr. Chittick was an inspector in the detective force at Scotland Yard. After some internal debating I decided that it would be better to wait till the morning and then telegraph than to go off to the local police station that night. I have often since wondered at my courage and calmness. The wife and servant seemed to catch something of my spirit. We were unanimous that to go to bed was impossible, so Mrs. Frogg lay on the sofa, Ann in a sofa chair which we wheeled out of the next room, and I sat up in my good arm chair prepared to watch the night through.

Happily, nothing transpired during that tedious night to create further alarm. In the morning when the postman called I got him to take a telegraphic message, which simply urged my friend the inspector to come as early in the day as he possibly could, as I wanted to see him on business of a very pressing and extraordinary character.

About noon he came. Not a soul had stirred from the neighboring house, and I had heretofore the satisfaction of feeling that the delay would not frustrate the ends of justice.

When we were alone, I told the story of Mr. Lea's eccentric conduct; his disappearance after his nephew had seen him showing me the diamonds in the garden; and, finally, the strange conversation we had overheard the night before. At first my friend was merely politely attentive; but, as I went on, he took out his note-book and carefully wrote down the words we had overheard. He asked for particulars, too, of the appearance of Malden and his wife, and of the murdered man.

"Do you know anything of the business or profession of Malden?" he then asked.

I could only admit that on this point I was entirely in the dark.

"But has not your maid learned anything on this subject from your neighbor's servant?" he inquired; "servants are always gossiping, you know."

"The woman next door is a foreigner—a German—I think."

Inspector Chittick pursed up his mouth and tapped his note-book with his pencil.

"That looks like a plan," he remarked; after a moment's meditation. "That fact is the strongest point in the case. It seems as though it were designed that nothing should transpire through the chatter of servants."

"Yet surely the real point is the confession of murder which we overheard?" I urged deferentially.

"That has to be proved," he replied. "In the meanwhile, I must compliment you on your shrewdness in sending for me in this quiet way. I shall at once telegraph for one of our men to stay with you here, and for another to be posted within a convenient distance of the house."

Day after day passed and nothing transpired to clear up this mystery. At length, after an interval of nearly a fortnight, we had for the first time, a communication from Inspector Chittick, in the shape of a telegram:

I have made an unexpected and startling discovery in *re* Maiden. I will call this afternoon, and hope to do business. Maiden is at home; intends leaving home tomorrow morning with wife and German servant.

I did not show his message to Polly for I knew it would upset her. My nerves too, were a little unstrung, and I actually trembled when Ann ushered Mr. Chittick into the front room. After greeting me, he gravely took a newspaper from his pocket and passed it to me.

"Read that," he said pointing to a portion marked at top and bottom with ink. In a mechanical fashion I took the paper and begun to read. It was part of an article on the "Magazines of the Month," and *Tybunia* was the periodical, the criticisms of which he had marked. I read.

“*Tybunia*, as usual, is very strong in fiction. But it scarcely sustains its reputation by inserting the highly melodramatic tale, ‘The cap of Midas.’ The hero-villain of the story is a young Greek who is assistant to an old diamond merchant in Syracuse.”

My heart began to beat as I read the last few words.

“This young gentleman is fired by the ambition to play an important part in the political life of the coming Greek confederation. To obtain wealth, and with it influence, he murders his aged master for the sake of certain priceless gems which the old fellow has concealed in a velvet night cap he is in the habit of wearing. This is the cap of Midas, we presume. Justin Corgialeno—the murderer— had read ‘Hamlet,’ and drops poison into his master’s ear, and steals the night cap. This poison, however, fails to do its work, so the assistant at once stabs the old man, and begins to feel the first difficulties of his lot, namely how to dispose of the body of the murdered man.”

I looked up at Inspector Chittick sheepishly. A mocking smile lurked in the corners of his mouth, I thought.

“Well, the hero buries his master in the garden of his house and starts off with his cap, which contains the wealth that is to give him political power. Here comes the melodramatic part of the story. The diamonds in this cap were of such enormous value that the murderer dare not sell them, feeling sure that inquiries will be made as to how he became possessed of such precious gems. Tortured by fear, and desperate with hunger, he at length committed suicide with this cap of Midas placed mockingly upon his own head. The story is ingenious in some of its parts, but is really, to speak plainly, unworthy of the reputation of that promising young novelist, Mr. Ernest Maiden.”

“Mr. Ernest Maiden,” I muttered vacantly, “—a—novelist!”

The inspector rose from his chair and slapped me on the back, and poked me in the ribs, and shook me by the shoulders, laughing the while with such tremendous boisterousness that Mrs. Fogg and Ann burst into the room in a state of speechless amazement which I shall never forget. Their appearance gave just the finishing touch of absurdity to the situation, and as the grotesqueness of the blunder which we had one and all made dawned upon me, I, too, began to laugh until the tears rolled down my cheeks.

“Polly!” I gasped, as soon as I could speak. “Mr. Maiden is a novelist, and oh! such a vile murderer—on paper! Ha, ha, ha! oh! oh! he, he! ha, ha, ha!”

We really never saw poor Mr. Lea again for he died at Brighton of softening of the brain a few weeks after his nephew and niece joined him. Their leaving town—referred too in the inspector's telegram—was with this object. The old gentleman as we afterwards learned was taken away from next door in a cab one evening when we must all have been at the back of the house. Had we but seen him go, we should have been spared a great deal of terror and many unjust suspicions of our neighbors' characters. —*Belgravia*

The Juneau [WI] County Argus, February 17, 1881
Bath Independent, March 5, 1881