

[From Belgravia.]
A Dreadful Case

I.

I thought it was very good of Messrs. Buckram & Blake to tell me on my sixtieth birthday that they did not believe in working a willing horse to death and that therefore they had decided to allow me to retire from their service on two-thirds of my salary. I had been with them altogether five-and-forty years, and it seemed but yesterday that I was appointed their chief clerk, having two subordinates; but full twenty years had passed since then. Now I had a staff of fifteen clerks under me, and my salary of four hundred pounds per annum will give you some little idea of the responsibility attached to my position. I cannot think for a moment that that unfortunate error of mine a week or two before they invited me to retire—I mean my sending a rather stern application for payment to the wrong parties—had anything at all to do with this event. True, when the blunder was discovered, Mr. Blake said, with a severity which was really quite uncalled for, “Your memory is not what it used to be, Frogg;” but men who thought poorly of the ability of their chief clerk would scarcely on his retirement have made him a present for his wife of a neat little silver tea-service ‘as a trifling tribute’ (so ran the inscription on the tea-pot) ‘to his long and faithful labors’— would they, now? No. I flatter myself that I could have done justice to Buckram & Blake for another ten years and more.

However I was by no means loath to be completely master of my own time at an age when I was still, as Mr. Harry Blake Buckram said, in his funny way, ‘a dashing old youngster.’ Gardening (window-gardening, that is to say,) had long been with me a passion. Yet Claremout-square, Pentonville, afforded far too little scope for my horticultural genius. I do not refer to the square itself, but to the window-sills of the four rooms at No. 45 that my wife and I occupied for many, many years. Here at length was an opportunity, in the large garden of some picturesque suburban villa, for the full development of those powers which had hitherto been exercised after 6 o’clock in the evening on window flowers, and that in a very fitful way. Geraniums in window pots might now yield to geraniums in beds. Perhaps, too (stranger things have happened in history,) the name even of a humble city clerk might be handed down to posterity and the Froggei variety of geraniums flourish in it thousand gardens generations after poor old Frogg himself was dead and gone!

I confess that with these dreams of the future which crowded my brain on my way home, was mingled a feeling of shame at the thought of the vexation I had shown on that very morning on learning that a tenant of mine intended next-quarter day to give up the cottage which he had occupied at Dulwich. Why, as it happened, nothing could suit me better. Of the house itself I certainly never thought very highly. It was simply a rather poor specimen of modern Building Society Gothic semi-detached as they call it. The party-wall which separated my own from its companion house was a marvel of tenurity. The wall had evidently been built for the sole purpose of promoting a feeling of neighboriness; since friendly conversation between the inhabitants of the two dwellings was quite practicable through it; and scandal was checked, thank heaven! by the fact that it could easily be heard. But there was one advantage which my property possessed which to me was unmixed; namely, that a large plot of garden-ground was attached thereto; in none the worse condition, to my mind, because the present occupant of ‘Marie Villa’

(named after my wife Polly, by the way) had no soul for gardening, and had allowed it to become overgrown with weeds. For, beginning my career as a practical horticulturist under such circumstances, the triumph over Nature which I fondly anticipated would be entirely my own, in years to come I could proudly say, "I found a wilderness; I leave the Froggei variety of geraniums in glorious profusion!"

Well, to avoid verbosity—which is the bane of the age—I will just state at once that the autumn following my retirement from the service of Buckram & Blake found me fully established as a gentleman-gardener. It was the noon of a dull September day. The man whom I employed to dig up the ground, and to do the rougher work generally, had just laid down his spade and gone to dinner. My maxim is—as it was when I was Buckram's chief clerk—'Never be seen idle by a subordinate;' so it was not until the gardener's back was turned that I put my pruning-knife in my pocket, yawned lazily, filled my old brier-root pipe, and prepared to look around reflectively. What a strange contrast was the scene around to that which daily greeted my eyes year after year from the top of the Islington 'bus! Thank God! the harsh clatter of the mill of commerce had not become such music to my ears that I could not enjoy the sombre calm of such a day as this. Above was a waste of pale gray sky; a mist hung upon the skirts of the meadows—in that light, a deep soothing green—which stretched toward Dulwich College, and the Crystal Palace; and in a neighboring field chestnut trees, whose leaves were reddening with the decay of autumn, relieved the dullness of the slaty clouds. O to live amid such scenes until I dropped from the tree of life as gently as those decaying leaves! O to find, perhaps, my views about the Froggei geranium appreciated by genial neighbors!

"If you please, sir, the mistress says as they've come."

The owner of the voice which thus interrupted my meditations at a most, interesting stage was that very worthy woman Ann Lightbody, our middle-aged servant-maid.

"Ah!" I exclaimed, somewhat vacantly; the influence of the thoughts which had just been passing through my mind conspiring with Ann's vague statement to prevent a more expressive response.

"The mistress can't make 'em out a bit, and she have her doubts, sir."

This satisfactory addition to my information was made while Ann held open the French window of the drawing-room, in order to allow me to pass into the house.

"You mean that you have your doubts, Ann," said I, "and that your mistress did not contradict you."

"Well, sir, the Pantegon man's at the door, and you can see for yourself. Sech a 'eap of lumber I never see, in all my exper'ence."

The drift of Ann's critical remarks began to be plain to me. We had been expecting fresh tenants of the adjoining house for some days, and now they were moving in.

“I cannot think he is a gentleman,” said my wife, as I approached the front window my wife, as I approached the front window to inspect the “lumber,” as Ann called it. “I do hope there are no children,” she added, evidently feeling that the offspring of a man who was not a gentleman must necessarily be ill-mannered and unruly.

The person to whom she referred—clearly judging by his actions, the owner of the van’s contents—was leaning against the railings of the next house, and from time to time cautioning the men—very much to their annoyance, I thought—as to their way of carrying in the goods. He was a tall, sallow man, with a closely cropped beard, and a long ferocious moustache. His hands were in the pockets of a rather seedy serge jacket, and on his head was a wideawake that had evidently suffered very much from the rain. A short clay pipe, black with long service, gave the finishing touch to the disreputable appearance which he presented. My wife’s opinion, that he was not a gentleman, seemed not altogether so groundless as I should have imagined. Discernment of character is not one of her strong points.

It was this that made me pause before replying to her comment on our neighbor, for I knew from long experience that she would feel so flattered by my agreeing with her judgment that her imagination would soon get quite beyond her control; and this tall sallow man, in addition to being not genteel, would rapidly reach, in my wife’s estimation, yet more distinguished positions in crime. In a week he would be a possible forger; in ten days a probable murderer.

Ah! little did I think when these thoughts were passing through my mind that very shortly I, Joram Frogg, the experienced, cool-brained commercial man, should deem my wife’s most extravagant speculation a strong probability.

“What do *you* think, Joram, dear?” she inquired anxiously.

“I have not made up my mind.”

“I wish we had never left Claremont Square,” exclaimed my poor wife; of course interpreting my hesitation unfavorably to our neighbor. “There, now! I have been watching every single thing that has been taken out of the van, and there is not a shrub, nor a plant, nor a garden tool among them. And how you have talked, to be sure, about nice neighbors who had not a taste for flowers!

My heart sank as I reflected on the latter part of my wife’s remarks. The feeling of repulsion I experienced on seeing that tall, carelessly attired man, was intensified when I realized that I dare not hope for neighborly sympathy with the taste which had mainly induced me to live in Dulwich. Neither Polly nor myself was happy when we retired to rest that night, separated from an unsatisfactory neighbor by the thinnest of walls.

II.

A November morning. The rime upon tree and shrub and the hard bare earth is slowly yielding to the rays of a winter sun. I, Joram Frogg, a frozen-out gardener, have come out into the air to

enjoy the sudden burst of warmth, and to watch the glistening icicles turn to dew drops, as it were, and sparkle, each one, with the glory of the rainbow.

There is more to be done, however, than simply enjoying the unwonted sunlight. The easy life I have spent during the last month or two has, notwithstanding my energetic gardening, begun to affect me in a very disagreeable and unexpected manner. I have been getting fat! But I flatter myself that I have a peculiar talent for meeting and overcoming difficulties of every kind. The heavy garden roller which I bought on entering Marie Villa would have lain by, gathering the rust of idleness, during the winter months, had not the happy idea entered my brain of employing it in the interests of health. Consequently, every morning, be it wet or be it dry, sees me for at least half-an-hour, manfully trotting round the trim gravel paths of my flowery domain, with the garden roller behind me.

Crunch, crunch, crunch—tramp, tramp. The perspiration stood upon my brow in beads as I gave myself to my laborious task this sunny morning. I had made half a dozen circuits of the garden with my eyes bent upon the path before me, when the sound of a voice trembling, as with age, caused me to stop and look toward our neighbor's garden.

“Hi! Good morning to you, sir.”

“Good morning, sir,” I replied, bowing to the elderly, infirm-looking man who greeted me.

He had a long beard of snowy whiteness, save round his mouth, where it was jet black. His eyebrows, also were of the same hue. This contrast alone gave him a very singular look; but for the addition of a huge sealskin cap, with great flaps covering his ears, and a long rough ulster coat, the collar of which was turned up, would have made his appearance comical in the extreme, save that the soft, almost beseeching expression of his dark eyes forbade the thought.

This old man, plainly an invalid, with a tendency to limpness, had arrived in a cab along with our suspicious neighbor's wife toward the close of the day on which the house was tenanted. This the first time, to my knowledge, that he had stirred out of doors since then.

He coughed violently for about a minute, and then said, as he wiped the moisture, from his eyes:

“You are a very young man, sir, and a rather lively young man, sir.”

“Sixty-one next birthday, sir,” I answered with all the boastfulness of youth.

“Bless my soul, sir! Three years younger than I am, but you have led a quiet life I suppose; and I have become sapless by long exposure to a tropical sun.”

“A traveller, sir?”

“Forty thousand miles in India and Persia.”

“Deary me, sir: deary me!”

“But I have made money by it,” he said, chuckling feebly.

I do not know whether it was the whispered tone in which he uttered these last words, or the vacant look in his eyes, but I began to feel that a tropical sun had affected my new acquaintance mentally as well as physically. I had no opportunity, however, for testing this suspicion of mine, for just then a stout-built, moon-faced German servant, whom our neighbors had brought with them, came from the house and approached the old gentleman. He submitted to take the arm which the maid silently proffered him and be led indoors like an offending child.

A week passed before I again had a chance of meeting our old neighbor. Every morning I had prolonged my garden-roller exercise in the hope of seeing him. My good wife suggested that his nephew (she was indebted to the thinness of the wall, by the way, for her knowledge of this relationship) had some sinister motive of preventing intercourse between us. I chid her at the time for her malevolent thoughts, and she was huffed; so the matter dropped.

I fancied, though, that old Mr. Lea (another fact revealed by the walls) displayed, as it were, something of the spirit of an emancipated schoolboy as he greeted me. The first half-hour of our chat was delightfully pleasant, I talked of flowers, he of adventures he had met with during the years of his foreign travel. He further showed a generous admiration for my “tasteful arrangement”—the words were his own—of phloxes, asters and chrysanthemums, and sympathized with my ambition to associate the name of Frogg with that ever cheerful favorite of both rich and poor, my much-loved geranium. But he did not profess to understand those delicate distinctions in flower and leaf which mean so much to the English florist.

“Nature delights to work on a bolder scale in those regions where I have been most familiar with her,” he said; “and amid the overpowering magnificence of tropical scenery, the quiet beauties of an English garden would solicit us in vain.”

These words were uttered in a gentle, thoughtful way, that impressed me very much.

“But still, sir, you can feel the beauty of our floral gems in their proper place?”

“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 dangerously 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 you? Suppose anyone, 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 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 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 German servant was approaching again; most likely sent by her master.

My strange acquaintance did not appear in the garden any more

III.

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 feeling as a letter not written for her perusal. She would feel deeply insulted did anyone suggest that she was capable of reading another person’s letter simply because the seal happened to be broken and she could therefore do so without fear of detection.” But women, alas, are never logical; and she will not see, or, perhaps, cannot, that her conduct is no 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. I know I have jested about the thinness of the wall between us and our neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Maiden, permitting friendly talk or checking scandal, etc., but, in sober-earnest, I was annoyed with Mrs. Frogg that what was to me a subject for fun was to her a serious and practical means of picking up information concerning the tall man and his wife, and the strange being, Mr. Lea.

Well, a few days [after] my interview with the latter, we sat in our cheerful, cozy front parlor (I hate that word “drawing-room” when applied to an apartment sixteen feet square;) we were sitting, I say, in our cozy front 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, reading the last number of the “Gardener’s Magazine.” The entrance of Ann, with our customary “night-cap” of weak toddy and thin bread and butter, interrupted my study of an article on “Trenching,” 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 clasped tightly 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.”

Exalted 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 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 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,” he responded in a deep voice, which betrayed no sign 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!”

“O the wretch!” exclaimed Ann Lightbody, at this point, in a tone so loud that I felt sure it would be heard through the wall and cause this dreadful man and his wife to cease their dialogue.

In the excitement of the moment I forgot myself, and I shook my fist at the stupid servant. “Hold your tongue, woman!” I said in a hoarse whisper.

She obeyed, and at the same time motioned toward my wife, who began to show a tendency to go off into screaming hysterics.

I shook her thoroughly and whispered:

“For Heaven’s sake, Polly, do command yourself, or we shall hear nothing more.”

The possibility of such, a disaster seemed to be a sufficient restorative; and though she trembled violently, she controlled the hysterics, and again we bent our ears to listen.

There was silence for several minutes[.] Then we heard Mrs. Maiden ask gravely:

“What shall you do with the body?”

“Oh, that’s 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?”

I felt paralyzed with horror to think that a young and beautiful woman could talk with cynical calmness of disposing of the property of a man who had been done to death by her own husband! I had only seen her once or twice, and if my reading had not told me that the fairest form may sometimes be tenanted by the foulest spirit, I should have thought it utterly impossible for one so lovely to participate in the awful deed they were discussing, or for those tender lips to frame such a speech as the last one. All this flashed through my mind in an instant, and I listened fearfully for her husband’s reply. It was what I expected.

“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 this 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 Maiden’s wife heave a deep 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 low tone, “What, my Lady Macbeth trembling! Come, we’ll to sleep. We are but yet young indeed.”

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

IV.

Ann was the first to recover her presence of mind “Shall I go and 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 [around] 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 yon are gone. Oh, why did I leave Claremont Square? We did have respectable neighbors there.” The poor soul wrung her hands and began to laugh hysterically.

I felt that everything depended upon my 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 steady 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 office ’ull be shut,” said the practical Ann.

Mr. Chittick was an Inspector in the detective force at Scotland Yard. Several years back, Messrs. Buckram & Blake were the victims of a forgery, and Inspector Chittick impressed me very much at the time with his sagacity and cool methodical style of investigating the crime. A feeling of friendship between us sprang out of this business; why, it is impossible to say, since the whole current of our lives—our tastes, our pasttimes—differed widely; but I simply state a fact. The fact was a source of great satisfaction to me under the present trying circumstances. The Inspector would, I felt sure, lose no time in reaching Dulwich on the receipt of my telegram, and would spare all unnecessary distress to Polly and myself as he proceeded to take the requisite steps for arresting Malden and his wife.

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. My wife and the servant seemed to catch something of my spirit. We were unanimous that to go to bed was impossible; so Mrs. Frogg laid on the sofa, Ann in a sofa-chair which we wheeled out of the next room, and I sat up in my good armchair, prepared to watch the night through. By dint of a little coaxing I persuaded the two women each to take a stiff glass of whiskey and water, into which I had very slyly dropped, a little, laudanum, so that sleep might soothe the terrors of that awful night.

I sat, and sat, and sat, perplexed and sorrowful. That the savage should kill his fellow man I could understand, but that a beautiful, cultured woman, and an intellectual man—for Ernest Malden was that, I judged—should brutally slay a gentle old creature like Mr. Lea, with one foot already in the grave, made me shudder, did I say? Nay, made me wonder on what dark foundation of guilt nature rested. I had read of murders and thought them shocking, for a moment or two—until I got to the next article in the newspaper. But now the thing seemed brought so close—a murdered man lying but a few yards from me, and his murderer sleeping, as far as I knew, nearer to him than I—that I felt simply baffled as I contemplated the problem that such a foul tragedy suggested

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 therefore the satisfaction of feeling that the delay would not frustrate the ends of justice. The Inspector was a very cheerful fellow; in appearance and build a well-to-do country gentleman. He complimented my wife on her youth, as he greeted her; said he envied me for a lazy old dog; and then with a

sudden change to the character of the keen man of business, frugal of his time, inquired what was the meaning of my urgent message. As a precautionary man I requested Polly to leave the room; since I knew from long experience of her nature, she would be sure to break in upon our conversation with sighs and exclamations did she remain.

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 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. As soon as they arrive I shall go and find out something about the antecedents of this Mr. Malden; that is, if you can tell me the name of the person who conveyed his furniture here."

Fortunately I could do this. Mr. Chittick duly noted the fact, and then closed his note-book, wrote out the telegram on a form which he had with him, and sent Ann without delay to the post office, cautioning her not to say a word to any one about the affair of the previous night.

When she was gone he resumed the character of a country gentleman by asking me how I liked my present life, and what progress I was making in gardening.

I was amazed at his coolness. "How on earth, Mr. Chittick, can you talk of such things when there is a murdered man next door?"

“If the poor old chap is dead,” he answered, “there is no occasion for hurry; and I cannot bring his murderer to justice by looking and speaking in a very important fashion at the present moment. Besides, I always avoid getting into an official habit, and this I find I can best do by dismissing a case completely from my mind whenever I reach a point where nothing further can be done for the time being. Excuse me if I have wounded your feelings by my conduct. I know this has been a terrible ordeal for you and your poor wife, but I am only too accustomed to such things, unfortunately.”

The intelligence and strength of character which these remarks suggested, easily explained why Inspector Chittick was held to be so far above the ordinary run of detectives; and, further, made me reluctant to inquire, as I intended doing, his reason for not arresting Malden there and then. Was it possible that his keen eye saw a weak link in the chain of testimony I had placed before him? “Ah! Joram Frogg, there is more in heaven and earth and the Criminal Investigation Department than is dreamt of in *your* philosophy[.]” I kept saying to myself, until the morning crept slowly away, and Inspector Chittick left.

Day after day passed, and nothing transpired to clear up this mystery. Several times Malden left the house for a few hours, and we then observed that the detective officer who lounged about the road followed him at a little distance. Once Ann burst into the room with the startling intelligence that there was a great noise of shoveling in the adjoining house, in the vicinity of the coal cellar. Our resident detective, who was a grim, taciturn man, the very reverse of his chief, uttered the words, “Burying him,” and quietly went to our coal cellar to listen, leaving us in a state of the wildest agitation. 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* Malden. I will call this afternoon, and hope to do business. Malden is at home; intends leaving town with wife and German servant, tomorrow morning.”

I did not show this message to Polly, for I knew it would upset her. She was nearly broken down already with the suspense of last week or two, and that fool of a woman, Ann Lightbody, kept priming her with horrors until the very sound of my own footsteps was a terror to her—fancy that! My nerves, too, were a little unstrung, and I actually trembled when Ann ushered Mr. Chittick into the front room. He looked as solemn as the officer who had been living with us, and 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 the top and bottom with ink. In a mechanical fashion I took the paper and began to read. It was part of an article on the “Magazines of the Month,” and *Tyburnia* was the periodical the criticism of which he had marked. I read:

“*Tyburnia*, as usual, is very strong in fiction. But it scarcely sustains its reputation by inserting the highly melo-dramatic tale, ‘The Cap of Midas.’ The hero-villain of this story is a young Greek who is assistant to an aged diamond merchant in Syracuse.” My heart began to beat as I read the last few words.

“This young gentleman is fired by an ambition to play an important part in the life of the coming Greek federation. 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 which he is in the habit of wearing. This is the cap of Midas, we presume. Justin Corgialeagno—the murderer—had read ‘Hamlet,’ (Query, ‘Has “Hamlet” been translated into modern Greek yet?’) and drops poison into his master’s ear, and steals the nightcap. 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 melo-dramatic part of the story. The diamonds in this cap are of such enormous value that the murderer dare not attempt to 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 commits 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 Malden.”

“Mr. Ernest Malden?” 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. Frogg and Ann burst into the room in a state of speechless amazement which I shall never forget. Their appearance gave 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. Malden is a novelist! and oh, such a vile murderer—on paper! Ha, ha, ha! oh, oh, eh! he, he! oh! ha, ha, ha!”

We really never saw poor old 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 to in the Inspector’s telegram—was with this object. The old gentleman, as we afterward 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. Yet, on the other hand, this tale would never have been written, and I should have lost an opportunity, to say the least, of opening my heart to a sympathetic public about the Froggei variety of geranium. The “variety” will be a reality ere long, be it known to all men.

Gardiner [ME] Home Journal, July 5, 1882

This is a longer version of “A Dreadful Case” (*The Juneau County [WI] Argus*, February 17, 1881).