

A DETECTIVE VICAR.

By MISS M. F. BRADDOCK.

CHAPTER III.
STAGE THE FIRST.

While George Canfield was talking to his mother the vicar of Freshmead was plodding up and down the streets of Grandchester, eager, hopeful, determined to unravel the tangled skein of the nameless woman's fate. Who was she? What was she? Had she really been murdered, and if so, for what reason? Who was the gainer by her death, and by what way?

Mr. Loworthy started at an advantage. Everybody in Grandchester knew him, and he knew everybody. The police were ready to consult him in any emergency. The local magistrates would be glad to help him. But on this occasion he was inclined to rely on his own wit. The police were at work for Mr. Brockham's client. If they succeeded, well and good. But the vicar was not going to work with them.

His first visit was to the office of a daily paper, where he handed in the following advertisement: "Missing, since November 30, a young lady; when last seen she wore a Rob Roy turtleneck, a brown straw hat and blue gauze veil. Any one affording information will be handsomely rewarded on applying to E. L. care of Mr. Brockham, solicitor, Deansgate."

This advertisement Mr. Loworthy took to the three local dailies.

His next visit was to Mrs. Elsdon, of Brinsford.

"A man would hardly make use of another man's card unless he had some business or social relations with that other man," reflected the vicar, as he tramped along, such an interesting determined step. "A man does not pick up a visiting card in the street."

He found Mr. Elsdon elderly and plump, a man who rarely got through a business letter without stopping in the middle to mop his highly polished cranium with a crimson cloth handkerchief. This gentleman was amiable, but not brilliant. He had read the report of yesterday's inquest, and was therefore posted in the facts; but he had no ideas to offer.

"How did that young man get hold of your card?" asked the vicar. "He must have picked it up in some illegitimate way, unless he is among the number of your personal acquaintances."

Mr. Elsdon gave a supercilious laugh.

"I hope my friendships do not lie among secret murderers," he said.

"Of course, we all hope that, naturally, but one can never tell. My friend describes this young man as of gentlemanly appearance and good manners. Good-looking, too, quite an interesting countenance—pale, with dark eyes, silky brown moustache—what is generally called a poetic style of face."

The Grandchester merchant seemed to retire within himself, as he absorbed in a profound thought. Presently he gave a sigh, and began to mop his polished brow and the barren arch above it, whereon no hair had grown for the last decade.

"I don't want to mix myself up in this business," he said at last. "It is sure to entail trouble."

"As a Christian, as an honest man, you are bound not to withhold any information that can tend to exculpate the innocent," urged the vicar, with some warmth.

"But how do I know that I can give any such information?" demanded Mr. Elsdon, testily. "If I give utterance to my ideas I may be only putting you on a false scent."

"Better hazard that than withhold anything," said the vicar.

"I know absolutely nothing. But your description might apply to a young man named Foy, who was in my employment three years ago."

"What character did he bear when you knew him?"

"Excellent. He left me of his own accord, in order to improve his position. He was a talented young man—frank, courteous, good linguist—and I had no situation to give him worthy of his talents. He left me to go to Kibble & Umpleby's, packer in Deansgate, as corresponding clerk. I was only able to give him seventy-five pounds a year. He was to have two hundred at Kibble's. They do a great deal of business with Spanish America and the French colonies, and they wanted a clerk who could write good French and Spanish."

"Is he still at Kibble & Umpleby's?"

"I have not heard the contrary."

"What was Mr. Foy a native of Grandchester? Had he any family or friends here?"

"No, he was quite alone. I believe he was of French extraction. He used to boast that he was descended from some famous family called De Foy."

"I should be very grateful to you if you could give me any further information about this young man."

"What kind of information? My acquaintance with him never extended beyond my office. I know that he was clever. He was regular in his business habits, and I had every reason to suppose he was well behaved. He brought me a letter of recommendation from a firm at Lyons with which I do business. I engaged him on the strength of that letter."

"I see; then he was a stranger in Grandchester? Something you can tell me, however—the house in which he lodged while he was in your employment? You must have known his address then."

"Certainly," replied Mr. Elsdon; and then he put his lips to an ivory mouth-piece, and murmured some order down a gutta percha tube.

Five minutes after a clerk appeared with a slip of paper, which he laid before his employer.

"That is the address, sir."

Mr. Elsdon handed the paper to the vicar. "There it is, sir. You see there is only one address, and the young man was with me nearly two years—an indication of steady habits, I think."

"No doubt. I dare say Mr. Foy is a most estimable person. But I must find the darkest, pale-faced young man who gave you your card to my friend; and whether I find him in Mr. Foy's shoes or in anybody else's, I'll make it rather hot for him."

And with this unchristian speech the vicar took leave of Mr. Elsdon.

CHAPTER IV.
THE MYSTERY OF ROSE COTTAGE.

Mr. Loworthy's next call was at Kibble & Umpleby's. Here he saw the head clerk, and informed that gentleman that he had been recommended to enquire about the small services which he had been unable to get done anywhere else. He wanted a letter written to a correspondent at Cadix, and he had not found anybody in Grandchester who knew enough Spanish to write such a letter for him. He had particular reasons for not writing in French or English, as his communication was of a strictly private character, and the gentleman to whom he had occasion to write understood no language but his own.

"I am told you have a clerk who is a first-rate Spanish scholar," Mr. Loworthy said, in conclusion.

"Quite true, sir. Our foreign clerk, Mr. Foy, knows Spanish as well as he knows French, and can write as good a letter in Italian or Portuguese as in either. It's his hobby, and he looks in this morning, though, tomorrow would have been too late."

"Why is he leaving you?"

The clerk grinned.

"Only for a fortnight's holiday—rather an important event in his life. He's going to be married to-morrow morning—to the daughter of our junior partner, the youngest Miss Umpleby."

"Oh, he is going to be married to-morrow morning! I congratulate him—and the young lady. Has it been a long engagement?"

"A year and a half. The old gentleman was very much against it at the first—thought his daughter might have looked higher—as of course she might, though she was one of a large family. But the firm had been pleased with the young man, and the young man had got a footing in the firm's houses, which is more than can be said of most of our clerks. So, in a consoling way, which we may appreciate or not, according to the bent of our mind, but this young Foy is musical, and he's half a foreigner, and those two things have stood him in good stead with the firm's families; and the upshot of it all is that he is going to be married to the youngest Miss Umpleby the day after to-morrow."

"Could I see him for a few minutes. I should like to detain him long."

"Certainly, sir. I'm sure he'll be happy to oblige you," said the clerk, who knew all about the vicar of Freshmead, and the most popular man within twenty miles of Grandchester.

The clerk went to fetch Mr. Foy, and returned presently with that accomplished young man. The vicar was the student of character. He had not spent all his days amid the green pastures of Freshmead. Seven years of his life had been devoted to

preaching and teaching, and doing all manner of good works, in one of the vilest and most populous districts of East London. He had had plenty to do with cynicism in his time; he knew a scoundrel when he saw one, and his first glance at Gaston Foy convinced him that this young fellow was far from being as dark a villain as ever wore a smooth face to gild the world.

Yes, despite his polished manners, his gentle and insinuating smile, and the oily blandness of his legato tones, the vicar made up his mind that this was the villain he wanted. This was the man who had brought his dying victim to the railway station and transformed the burden of his crime to a stranger.

George Canfield had minutely described the man's appearance, and this man, in every feature, corresponded with that description. That he seemed perfectly happy and at ease did not surprise Mr. Loworthy. To a creature of this kind dissimulation was second nature.

The vicar started his business, and sat down at the clerk's desk to write a rough draft of the letter to be translated, but after writing a sentence he stopped abruptly.

"It's a business that requires some thought," he said. "If you'll look in at my hotel this evening, and let me dictate the letter quietly there, I shall esteem it a favor. I won't keep you half an hour, and you'll be doing me an inestimable service."

Mr. Loworthy took the letter to his hotel, and dictated it to a waiting maid. The letter was written, and the vicar of Freshmead was satisfied.

He knew a scoundrel when he saw one.

Mr. Foy looked at him rather suspiciously. "My time is not my own just now," he said. "If you'll send me your letter I'll put it into Spanish for you, but I have no time to call at your hotel."

"This was said with a decided tone that settled the question."

"I see," thought the vicar. "He is not the man to walk into any little trap I may set for him."

"I'll send the letter to your private address this evening," he said.

"You had better send it here. I have a little way out of Grandchester."

The vicar assented, wished Mr. Foy "Good morning," and went away. Ten minutes afterward he went back to Kibble & Umpleby's, saw the clerk he had seen first, and said:

"I may as well have Mr. Foy's address, in case I shouldn't be able to get my letter written before he leaves business."

"Certainly, sir," Mr. Foy lives at Parmenter-Rose Cottage, Lawson lane."

"Thanks. I may not want to send to him there, but it's as well to be on the safe side."

"Good morning, sir," said the clerk, aloud. "Fidelity old gentleman," he ejaculated, inwardly.

Parmenter-Rose Cottage was a rustic village seven miles from Grandchester. It did not lie in the direction affected by Grandchester merchants or Grandchester tradespeople. Here were no Gothic mansions, no fair Italian villas, springing like mushrooms from the soil—one year a confusion of lime and mortar, the next stacked flooring boards and rough-hewn stone, and the next all smiling among more or less of the same kind.

Parmenter-Rose Cottage was a small, square house with plaster walls, bright with greenery and scarlet berries, even in this wintry season. A bow window below, rustic lattices above, just such a house as a man with considerable taste and an inconsiderable income would choose for himself. The small garden in front of the bow window was in admirable order, yet the place had a deserted look somehow. Mr. Loworthy thought, as he rang the bell.

He rang once, twice, three times, with no more effect than if Rose Cottage had been a toy house inhabited by Dutch dolls. This was aggravating. There was a meadow on one side of the cottage, where half a dozen sheep were grazing contentedly. The vicar climbed the hurdle which divided this pasture from Lawson lane and went round to the back of the cottage. Here there was a small garden, neatly and tastefully laid out, but there was no more appearance of human life at the back of the house than in the front.

"I suppose my gentleman came home at night and hid himself in a latch key," the vicar said to himself, much provoked at having traveled seven miles without result.

He was climbing the hurdle on his return to the lane when a small girl in a very short skirt—a girl of timid aspect, carrying a beer jug—dropped him a courteous and said:

"Please, sir, was it you a-ringing of that bell just now?"

"Was it me?" ejaculated the vicar, impatiently. "Yes, it was."

And then, smiling at the small girl, for he had a heart large enough for ever so many parishes of children, he said:

"I am not vexed with you, my dear; I am angry with fate. Tell me all you know about that cottage and I'll give you half a crown."

The girl gasped. She had never possessed a half-crown, but she had an idea it meant abundance. Her father counted his wages by half-crowns, and there were not many in a week's wage.

"Please, sir, Mr. Foy lived there with his sister, but they've left."

"Oh, they've left, have they? When did they leave?"

"Last Monday, sir, and the lady she was very ill, sir, and he took her away in a cab."

"And Mr. Foy has not been back since?"

"No, sir. He left for good, and he gave the key of the cottage to my mother, and the agent is to put up a board next week, and the house is to be let. It was look finished, and it is to be let furnished again."

"Did they live quite alone? Had they no servants?"

"No, sir, never no regular servant. Mother used to do the cleaning twice a week. Mother's very sorry they're gone. They was good to mother."

"How long had they lived there?"

"Nigh upon a year."

"And the lady was Mr. Foy's sister?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now take me to your mother."

The girl looked wistfully at the vicar. "If you please, I was to fetch father's beer, sir."

"I see. And if you don't father will be angry."

"Yes, sir."

"Then you shall go; but first tell me where your mother lives from one arm to another. She gave a deprecating cough."

"I never seen her, sir, for I scarce ever see Mr. Foy. He was off to Grandchester before I went of a morning, and he didn't come back till after I left. I used to go for the half day, you see, sir—not the whole day. But I don't think that young lady was quite happy in her mind. I've seen her fretting, and people will talk, you see, sir—neighbors don't do that. I scarce ever heard them at high words, in summer time, when the windows was all open, or when they was in the garden."

"I see. Had the sister been long ill?"

"No, sir; not above a week."

"What was the matter with her?"

"Well, sir, I can't say exactly. It was a sort of wasting sickness like. She couldn't

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Keep nothing on her stomach of late, poor dear; and she had pains that racked her, and used to complain of a burning feel in her throat; out of sorts altogether, as you may say. I believe it all came from fretting."

"Why did she fret so much? Was her brother very unkind to her?"

"No, sir. I don't think it was his unkindness that worried her. But he used to keep very late hours—hardly ever coming home till the last train—and that worried her. Not that he was ever the worse for drink. He was the soberest young man as ever was; but she was a jealous, spiteful creature, and she thought that he was out enjoying himself with other people used to prey on her mind."

"That was hardly fair, if he treated her kindly when he was in the house. A sister has no right to be jealous of a brother."

"This was said with a decided tone that settled the question."

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