

THE SHADOW OF A SIN.

I.

"A gentleman to see you, sir," announced Mr. Meredith's clerk, holding the door of his master's room on the wing.

There was just the least little hesitation in his manner of saying the word "gentleman," and Mr. Meredith's practised ear caught it. He looked up sharply from the pile of big blue folios on his table.

"What name, Matthews?"

"He wouldn't give any name, sir; but he said that you'd see him as soon as—well, as soon as you saw who he was, sir."

"All right; Matthews; ask him to come in, will you?"

The man who entered the room was tall, spare, and apparently of about fifty or five and fifty years of age. His face was thin and hollow, with very prominent cheek bones, and dark, blood-shot eyes. He wore a drooping, black moustache and long black hair, carefully oiled and brushed very smooth. His frock coat, buttoned tightly across his chest, and his silk hat, which seemed to have undergone much the same treatment as the hair and the moustache, were both of the fashion of several years ago. And the state of his linen was such as to justify the clerk's hesitation in announcing him as a gentleman.

He walked deliberately to the nearest chair, drew it up closer to Mr. Meredith's table, and seated himself. Then there was a moment's silence before Mr. Meredith spoke, slowly and in a tired, constrained sort of voice.

"Haven't I told you, over and over again, that I will not have you coming to my chambers?"

"Yes, you've told me, and you may go on telling me as many times as you please; but it doesn't follow that your telling will keep me away."

"Then I shall order my clerk not to admit you."

"No, you won't, Mr. Meredith." There was a covert insolence in the man's tone.

"Oh, no, you won't. You're a clever man, Mr. Meredith, and a shrewd man, and I don't think—I say I don't think—you'll do anything so unwise, so childishly imprudent, as to provoke a row with me."

Mr. Meredith took off his gold-rimmed glasses and laid them down, with a gesture of resignation, on the table at his elbow.

"Well," he said, "I suppose I must listen to you. What is it that you want with me? Money, as usual, I have no doubt."

"You have guessed it, Mr. Meredith; you have guessed quite correctly. Money is the object of my visit. To put the case concisely, and in a business-like way, I find it quite impossible to keep up, on such a beggarly allowance as you make me, the position which my talents and inclinations entitle me to claim. I demand, therefore—and you will admit the reasonableness of my request—in the first place,—that my—"

hem—salary be henceforth doubled, and, in the second, that the new arrangement be made, to a certain extent, to operate retrospectively. You grasp my meaning?"

"You mean that you want a lump sum at once. How much?"

"Well, let's say—five hundred?"

The visitor tilted his chair back, stuck his hands deep in his trousers pockets, and gazed with studied indifference, at the ceiling.

"Five hundred?" Mr. Meredith rose, and began to pace angrily up and down the room. "Now, look here; I cannot and will not endure this vile blackmailing any longer. I am going to put a stop to it once and for all. I am going to—go—"

The stranger had not moved a muscle, nor desisted, for one instant, from his calm contemplation of the ceiling. But an expression of quiet amusement had begun to play over his sallow face, and Mr. Meredith, catching sight of it, broke off suddenly.

Then he resumed, in a different tone—"You know, of course, that I haven't five hundred pounds' worth of notes here in chambers. And I suppose you want notes?"

"Notes, if you please, Mr. Meredith. There's a certain negotiability about Bank of England paper which a cheque—even your cheque—drawn for so large an amount, might fail to command. But I am not in any immediate hurry. To-morrow—let me think—yes, to-morrow afternoon I shall be disengaged. About this time to-morrow, then, I will give myself the pleasure of calling on you, again, and by that time, no doubt—"

"No, no, not here!" exclaimed the lawyer. "I will send you the money. Or, stop; what is your address? I will bring it."

"Perhaps that would be the most convenient way. My present place of abode is No. —. My place of abode may have changed before to-morrow evening. Meet me at Cambridge Circus, in front of the theatre; and I shall then have the pleasure of personally conducting you home. And at what hour may I expect you?"

"Oh, late in the evening—nine; half past nine."

"Half-past nine will suit me admirably. Till then—Ah! you are not well? Heart?"

For the lawyer had sunk into a chair, one hand pressed against his side. "You should be more careful, Mr. Meredith. Let me recommend you to take life rather more easily; not to overwork yourself; and, above all, to avoid any sort of excitement." Then opening the door and speaking aloud for the benefit of the clerk—

"Good-afternoon, Mr. Meredith. I will see that your name duly appears on the list of subscribers. Good-afternoon, sir, and many thanks."

Leonard Meredith, Q. C., was not a popular man. Standing, as he did, in the front rank of his profession, a brilliant talker, a politician of no small celebrity, there was yet a certain something about him—an insincerity of speech, a curious secretiveness of manner, that had always set up an impassable barrier between himself and those who might have been his friends.

"When old Meredith says that he thinks so-and-so," one of his juniors had once remarked, "you may be quite sure he's thinking something else."

Not that this characteristic of the lawyer's was confined to his relations with mere professional acquaintance. His own family, his children, even his wife, would have had to confess, if questioned on the subject, that they knew little or nothing of him. He was affectionate, sympathetic, appreciative—nay, more, he was intensely unselfish. But how much genuine sentiment, no one could have told.

And the man's appearance bore out his character. Squarely built and hard featured, with a singular immobile face and grey eyes almost entirely void of expression, he looked, when he stood up in court, the very model of what a barrister should be—cold, calculating, unimpressionable. And probably it was to these attributes that he owed his success in life. For Mr. Meredith, like so many of his distinguished brethren of the law, had risen from the ranks; risen too, without money, without interest, without any assistance other than that which his own talent and his own unflagging industry had supplied. There was many stories current concerning the suddenness of his success and the obscurity of his origin; but no one seemed to know much about him. And when, being then no longer young, he had proposed for the hand of his present wife, she and her family had been content to accept him as a self-made man, with no further credentials than his assured position and his own respected name. And their married life had been perfectly happy; with a monotonous, unimpassioned happiness, certainly, but happy notwithstanding.

II.

It was about a fortnight after his interview with the mysterious stranger that Mr. Meredith came into chambers, as he almost invariably did, a few minutes after ten. He had been far from well during the last few days, and still looked pale and lagard.

"Two briefs sir; Treasury prosecutions for the next Old Bailey Sessions," said his clerk. "They came in just after you had gone last night." And he pointed to the folded blue papers laid out on Mr. Meredith's table.

"Ah, good! Let's see what they are, Matthews. John Duckworth—forgery—Morton Jones with me; and—what? Ernest Vale—willful murder of—here, Matthews, I—I can't—Yes, all right, Matthews, I'll just glance over these now. I'm not in court this morning, am I?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. If any one calls, I am not to be disturbed, on any account, for half an hour. Not on any account; do you see?"

"Yes, sir."

The clerk went out; and Mr. Meredith, left alone, seated himself at the table, and became absorbed in the papers before him.

The "Ball's Building Murder," as it was called, had attracted but little notice, even at the time of its occurrence, which was now some days before. A man, who was described as being middle aged and apparently respectable, and who was subsequently identified by the name of Burke, had been found murdered in a room on the fourth floor of some model dwellings near the Charing Cross Road. That murder had been done there could be little doubt, for a heavy stick, stained with blood, was lying beside the corpse, and there was no question as to its having been the instrument with which the deed had been perpetrated. A man, on whom suspicion at once fastened, had been noticed coming out of the room shortly after the time when deceased was last seen alive; but he had disappeared, and had evaded the police for several days. When found, in circumstances which certainly did not point to any attempted concealment, he had denied his guilt, at the same time admitting that the stick was his property, and had been at once committed for trial. This was the man, Ernest Vale, whom Mr. Meredith had been selected to prosecute, and the sight of whose name had so affected the lawyer.

People noticed—or so, at least they said afterwards—something very strange about Mr. Meredith during the few days that elapsed before the trial came on. True, he made no alteration in his manner of living. All his social engagements were fulfilled; all his professional duties carried out with his usual skill and conscientiousness. Toward his own family he showed himself even more affectionate, if that were possible, than he had ever been before.

But it all seemed to be something of an effort to him. At dinner, for instance, when he was not actually joining in the conversation, he would become, all in a moment, curiously absent and abstracted; and if any one spoke to him, or anything

occurred to recall him to a sense of what was happening around him, he would start and look round with a puzzled expression on his face, and then recollect himself suddenly and resume his wonted air of calm politeness. Also, he would sit for hours alone in chambers. Matthews, entering the room quietly, used to find him standing by the window gazing vacantly out across the wide expanse of the Temple Gardens, or seated, with both hands pressed to his forehead, at the table on which his briefs were laid.

And in all this trouble he sought no comfort or assistance from man or woman. Men of his quiet, uncommunicative nature always suffer silently. Long habit has made it impossible for them to lay their hearts bare; and if they feel the want of the sympathy at all, they know not how to ask for it.

As time drew near, however, to the opening day of the Sessions, a change came over Mr. Meredith. He grew at first morose and silent; then restless, nervous; at times even irritable. The sudden banging of a door startled him; the sound of a footstep in the hall outside made him sit upright in his chair and listen intently, as though he expected some unwelcome visitor. Then, when all was quiet again, he would sink back with a sigh of relief, and once more concentrate his energies upon his work.

And so, when at last it came round, the day of Vale's trial found him.

Some one said in court that morning that there was death in Mr. Meredith's face. It had long been known that his heart was affected, and to this, as well as to the strain of overwork, people attributed his strange, almost uncaring, appearance. His face was of an ashen-grey colour; his eyes looked large and deeply sunken, with great dark circles round them, as though he had not slept for weeks. And all the time, while he was not actually speaking, his hands were nervously turning the pages of his brief backwards and forwards, though he never once glanced down at it.

When the prisoner—a slight, delicate looking man of about fifty—was placed in the dock, he at once turned towards the counsel's benches and looked Mr. Meredith full in the face.

For an instant the lawyer returned his gaze; then, as though unable to endure it, his eyes dropped. Nor did he again, during the whole course of the trial, cast more than an occasional furtive glance in the direction of the dock.

But this momentary discomposure passed unnoticed; and if there was a slight tremor in Mr. Meredith's voice when he first rose, every vestige of it disappeared as the trial proceeded.

At no time had Mr. Meredith been what is termed a "sensational" speaker. The strength of his eloquence lay in a calm, persuasive manner, and a power of always giving his hearers the impression that he himself was convinced of the truth of what he was saying, which carried more weight with juries than any amount of fervid rhetoric or impassioned appeal; so that there was nothing unusual in the quiet, formal, emotionless style of his opening address.

Then the witnesses were called—a constable, who proved the fact of the arrest and the prisoner's admission that the stick—the instrument of the murder—was his property, and a woman who had seen him coming out of the deceased's room, looking frightened and agitated, just after the hour when the crime must have been committed.

Next came two tenants of a room on the floor below, both of whom deposed to hearing angry voices, as though of persons in violent altercation, in the room above them; and, lastly, several neighbors of the deceased, who deposed to having seen him on more than one occasion with the prisoner.

The defence was weak, and every one in court noticed its feebleness. Not that Vale's counsel were incapable, or did not exert themselves to the very utmost on his behalf; but the weight of the evidence was too strong against them—two overpowering in its circumstantial accuracy.

Witnesses were called to testify to the prisoner's previous good character; and stress was laid upon the fact of his having made no attempt to evade arrest, and upon the utter absence of any motive which could have prompted him to commit such a crime. As to his possession of the stick, it was admitted that he had been in the murdered man's room during the day, and he had probably left the stick there then.

But from the very first, things looked black against him; and, when Mr. Meredith had finished his reply on the whole case, there seemed to be little doubt as to how the verdict would go.

The judge's summing up was absolutely impartial. If anything, it inclined rather in the prisoner's favour. Unless he pointed out to the jury, they believed the evidence against Vale to be absolutely conclusive, they ought to give the prisoner the benefit of the doubt, and to acquit him. And let them remember, he concluded, that the duty which had been laid upon them that day was the most solemn that it could fall to the lot of any human being to discharge, and deserved therefore, their gravest thought and their most conscientious deliberation.

And then the jury retired to consider their verdict.

III.

Twilight had begun to fall before the judge's charge was ended; and the court during the first half hour of the jury's absence was in comparative darkness. Then the gas was lit, and its yellow glare fell upon the densely packed rows of white faces, all turned in one direction—that of the door by which the jury must return.

The judge had retired, and most of the counsel had also left the court; but Mr. Meredith sat on still in his place—his eyes closed, his features set in a hard, indifferent expression, as though he were quite unconscious of what was going on.

Half an hour passed—three quarters—a whole hour; and still no sign of the jury. The suspense was becoming almost intolerable.

At last a low, "Hush!" and a murmur of "Here they come!" ran along the crowded benches; and, led by their foreman, the jury filed back into the box one by one.

The judge resumed his seat, and an usher stood by and commanded "Silence," though there was no need for the admonition, so intense was the stillness. Then, the prisoner having been put back in the dock—

"Gentlemen, are you all agreed upon your verdict?"

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"We are!"
"Do you find the prisoner guilty, or—"
"Stop! Stop!" Mr. Meredith had suddenly started to his feet. His face worked violently, his voice harsh and strangely agitated. "My lord, there has been some—The prisoner is not—I mean, I—I—Ah!"

In an instant the court was in an uproar of excitement, which the ushers tried in vain to subdue. Mr. Meredith broke off abruptly. A sudden spasm of pain contracted his features, and he fell backward into his seat, striking his head heavily against the ledge of the desk behind him.

"Water! Bring some water!" My learned friend has fainted," exclaimed one of the counsel sitting next to him; and then the crowd was pushed back, and a doctor forced his way through and hurried to Mr. Meredith's side. But all the doctors in London could have done nothing then. Mr. Meredith was dead.

They carried him into the judge's private room, whither the judge himself also retired for a few minutes; and, on his returning into court, the prisoner's counsel asked permission to mention to his lordship a matter which had just come to his knowledge, and which he believed had some connection with the question of the prisoner's guilt.

"The application is extremely irregular, Mr. Anson," said the judge. "What does it relate to?"

"Well, my lord, one of my learned friends has just handed to me this packet, addressed to me and endorsed 'Re Ernest Vale,' which was found among the papers relating to the prosecution. I put in that packet, as it reached me, with the seal unbroken, and ask your lordship to read it."

Amid breathless silence, the judge took the envelope which was handed up, opened it, and began to peruse its contents. After reading the first few lines, he gave a slight start; and, when he had come to the end, he turned to the jury and said—

"I must ask you, gentlemen, to listen attentively to the document, which I am about to read to you, and which will, I believe, leave no doubt in your minds as to what verdict you will bring in." And he read—

"I, Leonard Meredith, being aware that my death may take place at any moment, make this statement, in case I should be prevented, by any accident, from declaring publicly—as I intend to do—the substance of the facts contained in it. The prisoner, Ernest Vale, is my brother. Accused, twenty-five years ago, of a crime, which, if proved against him, would have condemned him to penal servitude for life, he escaped from the country, with my assistance, and returned only a few months hence to England, changing his name, and hoping that the lapse of time would have enabled him to evade discovery. What that crime was, and whether, in my opinion, he had actually committed it, are matters of no moment now. For a couple of weeks he remained in safety. Then his identity was discovered by the man Richard Burke, who had known him formerly, and who now threatened to expose him. From that time began a most atrocious system of blackmailing, to which inasmuch as Burke had the power to involve not myself only but my whole family in the scandal, I was weak enough to submit. On the day preceding that of the murder, he visited me at my chambers, demanding larger sums than any he had yet received. I made an appointment with him. He took me to his room, and there I paid him what he asked, five hundred pounds. Thereupon he told me that my brother was in London, in that very building, and that, unless I was prepared to pay over a further sum of a thousand pounds, he would at once communicate with the police. What then followed I am unable to describe accurately. I can recollect striking him, in a blind

fit of passion, with a heavy stick which I found near my hand. He fell to the floor, dead; and I then made my way quietly out of the building, scarcely knowing what I did. From that time to the present my life has been one continual struggle, my conscience urging me to make a full confession, my horror of what the consequences would be to myself, and still more to my family, holding me back. I have put off the disclosure, now, to the very last. To-morrow at some time, somehow, it has to be made, and may Heaven help me to go through with it!—Leonard Meredith."

The jury found the prisoner "Not Guilty."

RAILWAYS.

Intercolonial Railway.

After Oct. 17, Trains leave St. John, Standard Time, for Halifax and Campbellton, 7:00; for Halifax, 10:30; for Sussex, 10:30; for Point du Chene, Quebec and Montreal, 10:55.

Will arrive at St. John from Sussex, 8:25; from Quebec and Montreal (Monday excepted), 10:25; from Point du Chene, 10:25; from Halifax, 10:00; from Halifax, 12:30.

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LEAVE ANAPOLIS—Express daily at 12.55 p. m.; arrive at Yarmouth 4.55 p. m.; Passenger and Freight Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday at 6.00 a. m.; arrive at Yarmouth 11.15 a. m.

LEAVE WEYMOUTH—Passenger and Freight Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 8.25 a. m.; arrive at Yarmouth at 11.50 a. m.

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