

In Moated Grange.

IN TWO INSTALMENT—PART II.

She knew in whose possession the gilded sixpence had been last night.

Ought she not to make her knowledge public?

Ought she not to at least confide it to her guardian?

For one moment she was on the point of doing this.

She rose from her seat; she looked at Mr. Prestwich; she had all but begun her confession; but the face of the man she would incriminate rose up before her mental gaze.

She remembered the nobility of his features, his frank, brave, generous look, and, like a woman, she made up her mind in a moment that he was innocent.

She went back in her seat.

The words which had trembled on her lips were never uttered.

She kept her own counsel, and suffered Mr. Prestwick to depart in ignorance of the weighty information she could have given concerning the murder in the Moated Grange.

CHAPTER V.

DETECTIVE FERRET.

Mr. Prestwich had only spoken truth when he said that Detective Ferret was a very able man.

Able as he was, however, the murder of old Richard Whittaker was a mystery which he scarce knew how to unravel.

Deep in his secret heart he held a certain theory concerning it; but when he tried to square that theory with facts, there were difficulties in the way—great difficulties, and many of them.

He did not drop his theory on this account; perhaps he even hugged it all the closer; but he took care to speak of it to no living soul.

On the night of the murder, after he had taken possession of the gilded sixpence, he had also secured a cast of those suspicious footprints on the banks of the river, he had a conversation with Fergusson.

'Now, I want to know at what time you left the house. Can you tell me exactly—exactly—mind?'

'Yes, sir, I can. It was six o'clock.'

'How do you know?'

'I heard the church clock strike as I was fastening the boat. Besides, when I got on to the road, I met Will Mason. It takes five minutes to get across the field to the road, and he always passes along the top of the lane at five minutes past six. It that means, as I suppose it does, that he met his death at that time, it is clear that the murderer, or murderers, watched you out of sight, and then did their work immediately. Now I have another question to ask you. Do you always do your shopping on a Friday night?'

'Always.'

'And at the same hour?'

'I shouldn't think I often differed five minutes.'

'Then any person who knew anything at all about your habits would know that?'

'I should think so, sir.'

'Mr. Reginald Whittaker, for instance, would know it?'

A curious look flitted over the man's face; he hesitated slightly, then said—

'Yes, I should think he would.'

'I believe you went into the town? Do you happen to know what time it was when you got back to The Grange?'

Fergusson considered for a moment or two.

'It's a good two miles to the town,' he said slowly. 'It takes you about half an hour each way. I went first to Smith's, the butcher's, and after to Mason's, the grocer's. Mason's clock was striking seven when I left, and he told me it was ten minutes past.'

'That means it was ten minutes to seven?'

'Yes; that would be it, for I overtook Tom Smith just before I got to the river. He always goes through the Grange field at about a quarter past seven.'

The detective made a memorandum or two in his note book, gave some orders to his subordinates, then buttoned up his great coat and walked briskly into the town.

His first call was upon Mason, the grocer; his second upon Smith, the butcher. Having received from these tradesmen a confirmation of Fergusson's statement, he passed on to the house of Mr. Grady, the principal lawyer in the place.

Mr. Grady had just heard of the death of his old client, Richard Whittaker, and was much agitated as he received the detective.

'I can't believe it! he cried; I can't believe it! Poor old man to think of his coming to such an end as that! It seems too horrible to be true. Who could have done it? What could have been the motive? I am told nothing is missing. Is that so?'

'So far as we can tell, robbery was not the motive,' was the detective's cautious answer. 'I have looked over his account-books, which are kept very methodically. According to them, he would have about twenty pounds in the house, and that sum is lying quite safe in the cash box. It was actually on the table at the time.'

'He never kept more than that by him,' said the lawyer. 'All his money passed through my hands, so of course I know. It was his custom to send Fergusson to the

bank periodically for what he wanted.'

'Robbery, then, was not the motive; but much seems clear,' said Ferret. 'Now, Mr. Grady, I have a question to ask you. Are you in possession of Mr. Whittaker's will?'

'Yes; I am.'

'Who benefits under that will? I ask you a plain question, and I think you ought to give me a plain answer. You see it is a question of motive. The person who had most to expect from the old man's death is, in a sense, the most likely to have killed him.'

'I'm afraid you'll get no clue here; for the person named as the heir in this will—and the lawyer, as he spoke, drew forth from a tin box a great sheet of parchment—it is believed to be dead.'

'You mean the elder nephew—John Whittaker?'

'Yes.'

'He was to be the sole heir?'

'He was.'

'Was there nothing left to Reginald Whittaker?'

'Not a farthing. The will was drawn up about six months ago, when the old man was furiously angry with Reginald. He ordered me to try and find his elder nephew, who went out to Australia some years ago. I advertised for him, and made all possible inquiries, but without success. I fear he is dead.'

'You are sure he was the sole heir?'

'I am quite sure. I have a draft of Mr. Whittaker's instructions here, so I am not trusting to memory.'

'There was no legacy to Fergusson?'

'None whatever. Surely you don't suspect him?'

'I might have done so if he stood to profit by the old man's death,' said the detective dryly.

'Well, he did not. On the contrary he stood to lose, for his master paid him a hundred a year. You must not suspect him.'

And Mr. Grady spoke with some warmth.

'As it happens, I do not,' said the detective smiling. 'And I tell you why—not because he has been a faithful servant for twenty or thirty years—but because I have accounted for his movements, and proved an alibi for him. The doctor is certain that death could not have taken place until after six o'clock; and, luckily for Fergusson, he can prove that he was away from six to a quarter past seven when the body was found. But now, what about Reginald Whittaker? You say he takes nothing under the will; but has it occurred to you that, if his cousin is dead, he would inherit everything as his next of kin?'

'Why, yes, of course he would.'

And the lawyer looked very blank.

'Did he know how his uncle's will was made?'

'He did.'

'Then he knew that he was, to all practical intents and purposes, the heir.'

The two men looked at each other in silence.

The lawyer could not speak a word.

He saw what was in the detective's mind and a terrible suspicion was flashing through his own.

CHAPTER VI.

REGINALD WHITTAKER.

Reginald Whittaker had apartments in a small street leading off Russell Square.

He had been living in London ever since his uncle, in a violent fit of passion, had forbidden him his house, and stopped his allowance.

The old man had, in truth, been unjust to both his nephews.

He had brought them up since their orphaned infancy, and had so treated them, that they were justified in looking to him for the means of subsistence.

Then he had quarrelled with them both for a mere caprice.

John's offence had been that he would not marry a wife of his uncle's choosing; Reginald had asked for the right to choose his own profession.

The old man had wanted him to be a lawyer; his own tastes were literary and artistic, and he had rebelled.

For this rebellion he had been renounced and disinherited.

Flushed with youthful pride and self-confidence, he had gone up to London to seek his fortune, had failed, got into difficulties, and, as we know, had at length been reduced to appeal to his stern old uncle for pecuniary help.

On the morning after the murder he sat at breakfast in his rather dreary lodgings.

He sat at the breakfast table, that is to say, for of food he did not eat one morsel. He looked with a shudder at the eggs and bacon, pushed away the toast, and, having gulped down a single cup of tea, drew on his boots, and prepared to go out.

He was a slight, gentlemanly looking young fellow, of perhaps three and twenty years of age.

Most people called him handsome, and so, in a sense, he was; but there was a restlessness in his light blue eyes and a look of irresolution about his well-cut lips which would have made his face, to thoughtful observers, a not altogether pleasing one.

A physiognomist would probably have said he was a weak man, one who would be easily tempted into sin, or even into crime.

He went up into his bedroom, and, when he returned, he carried a fair sized parcel under his arm.

He carried this furtively, as it were, pressing it as close to his body as he could and seeming to be anxious for it to escape observation.

His landlady was in the passage as he walked out.

She glanced at the parcel.

'Some more pictures, Mr. Whittaker?' she said.

'Yes; some more pictures,' said the young man, in a nervous kind of fashion, and hurried out, as if fearful of being questioned further.

He walked very quickly until he came to a pawnshop; then he stood for a moment or two staring up at the three golden balls, as if irresolute, and finally passed in at the pledge entrance, and laid his parcel on the counter.

When he came out, which he did in about ten minutes, he looked very pale and nervous; he even took out his handkerchief to wipe away a slight perspiration which had gathered on his brow.

He was too engrossed with his own thoughts to notice anything that passed around him, or he might perhaps have observed that a man who had stood at the street corner when he came out of his lodgings, was now looking in at the window of the pawnbroker's shop, and was most certainly watching him though under cover of an air of great indifference.

When Reginald Whittaker moved Citywards, this man moved after him; but he did not follow him far.

He watched him get on to a bus bound for Liverpool Street, then he quietly retraced his steps to the pawnbroker's shop and went inside it.

Half an hour later, a man in semi official dress knocked at the door of the house in which Reginald Whittaker had lodgings.

To the servant who opened the door he said he had come to look at the gas meter and was admitted at once.

Having examined the meter, he professed to find some defect, and asked to look at the fittings in one or two of the rooms.

'There is certainly an escape somewhere he said, as he examined one fitting after another. 'Should you mind my stepping into the bedroom?'

No objection was made, and he went upstairs.

The first bedroom he entered was Reginald Whittaker's.

He closed the door behind him, and, instead of looking at the gas fittings, crossed over to a heap of clothes which lay on a chair beside the bed.

They were a complete suit of Reginald Whittaker's.

The trousers up to the knees, were wet and muddied, for all the world as if their wearer had waded in them through some pond or river.

There was a pair of boots pushed far away under the bed; these, too, were wet and muddy.

The man drew them forth, and looked at them attentively, then very coolly stowed them away in a black bag he carried with him.

He went straight downstairs without entering any other bedroom, and, remarking that he had made all right, quitted the house.

CHAPTER VII.

What They Found in The River.

It was two days after the murder.

The inquest had been held, and the stereotyped verdict returned: 'Murder, by some person or persons unknown.'

Detective Ferret spent a great deal of his time at the Moated Grange.

Lawyer Grady had told him that old Richard Whittaker had been in the habit of keeping a journal, or diary, and it was for this he searched hour after hour with tireless care.

At length his patience was rewarded.

In an ancient chest he found a secret drawer and there lay the journal.

The detective opened it with eagerness.

He believed he should find there, in the dead man's own handwriting, a clue to the murderer.

As he turned page after page over, his eye glittered and sparkled.

He made notes of four entries, then restored the journal to its place.

'That will do,' he muttered. 'The motive is plain, and, I think, the method of the crime. The next thing is to drag the river. It's odd to me if we don't find the great secret there.'

He walked out of the house, musing deeply. In the garden he was met by Fergusson.

There Mr. Prestwich and Miss Moreland in the field, sir. I think they are wanting to speak to you.'

'All right. Just row me across Fergusson.'

Fergusson did as he was bid.

As the detective was stepping into the boat, he asked him a question—

'Have you heard how Mr. Reginald Whittaker is?'

'Yes; he is confined to his bed. The doctor fears he will have rheumatic fever. It seems he got a terrible wetting a night or two ago.'

Ferret, as he spoke, looked keenly at Fergusson.

He, however, did not seem conscious of the scrutiny; at any rate, his countenance moved not a muscle.

'I shouldn't be surprised,' he said quietly. 'He always was a rare careless sort, was Master Reginald.'

The boat reached the other bank, and there, in the field, stood Mr. Prestwich and Ruby.

Ruby looked pale and agitated. The last two days had been full of wretchedness for her.

The secret which she kept locked in her breast might well rob her eye of its sparkle and her cheek of its bloom.

Sometimes she told herself she could keep the secret no longer. She must confide it to someone, or it would forever destroy her peace of mind.

She wondered what would happen if she were to tell it.

What would Detective Ferret do if she were to say to him: I know who dropped the gilded sixpence. At any rate, I know whose possession it was in on the night the murder was committed.'

He would of course conclude that the dark, handsome man, in the guise of a tramp, was the murderer.

Ruby felt convinced of this, and the conviction sufficed to hold her back from speaking.

She could not bear the thought of betraying the man who had trusted her, and whom she trusted.

Other people might think what they might; but she would never believe he was guilty of crime.

She believed he knew who had committed the murder, and was trying to shield someone; but that he had done it himself—never! never!

So Ruby declared, in her own heart, again and again; but that Reginald Whittaker should be suspected was dreadful to her, too.

She had known him well when he was living with his uncle at The Grange; had known him, and liked him, and could not bear to think evil of him now.

Her guardian accosted Detective Ferret.

'We've heard Reginald Whittaker is ill. Is it true?'

'Yes.'

'His illness is sudden, isn't it?'

'Rather. He was well enough two days ago.'

'What is the matter with him?'

'They do say rheumatic fever.'

'Does he know his uncle is dead?'

'Oh, yes, he knows,' said the detective drily.

Mr. Prestwich drew nearer and spoke in a low voice.

'You don't really suspect him, Ferret?' he said gravely.

'It's no matter what anyone suspects, if he can prove an alibi, Mr. Prestwich,' was the evasive answer.

'Well, and can he do so?'

'That remains to be seen. At present he is ill in bed, and I suppose the matter may rest for a little while. You know what the verdict is of course?'

'Yes, I noticed, Ferret, that you did not put in as evidence that letter which Reginald wrote to his uncle.'

No; I had my reasons, Mr. Prestwich.'

Ruby stood in silence, listening.

At one moment she thought the detective did suspect Reginald; at another, a strange fancy seized her that he was only pretending to suspect him.

If it were so, did he suspect anyone else? Did he know anything of that stranger to whom she had given the sixpence?

Ferret touched his hat, and moved away as if anxious to bring the conference to an end.

'You'll excuse him, Mr. Prestwich. I've some particular business to attend to,' he said.

He beckoned to a constable who stood near, awaiting his orders.

'Where is the nearest drag kept?' he asked.

'At Simon's Farm.'

'Go and get it—get men also, of course. I want to drag the river.'

The drag was fetched.

A couple of stout men came with it and speedily set to work.

Mr. Prestwich and Ruby remained to see the result.

Ferret walked away as if indifferent.

For some time nothing was found of the least importance but at last the men gave a shout of surprise, for the drag had got entangled in some object.

'Whatever is it?' said Mr. Prestwich, as he saw the difficulty the men had in bringing the object to the surface.

'Is it a body?' whispered Ruby. 'Oh, guardian! and she clung to Mr. Prestwich shuddering.'

No, no, my dear! Whose body should it be?'

But even while he thus reassured her, he himself looked grave.

The next moment, however, there was an end to all suspense.

The drag was lifted and with it the object that encumbered it.

A cry of amazement rose from every one who saw it.

It was, in truth, the strangest thing—a bicycle!

The first burst of amazement had scarcely subsided when Detective Ferret came straggling back.

One of the men ran to meet him, eager to be the first to tell the news.

'Well, my man, you've found something, have you? What is it?'

'The rummiest thing you ever knew, sir—a bicycle.'

'A bicycle? H'm! A queer thing to be at the bottom of the river, as you say, unless the body of the man who used to ride it is there as well?'

'No, sir, there's no body.'

'Well, then, I don't see that it throws much light upon this present business.'

But anyone who knew Detective Ferret, and who saw the expression of his face when he was well pleased and satisfied, would have said that the drag had brought up the identical object which he had hoped and expected to find in the river-bed.

Moated Grange.

It did not need the sight of the old red brick house, standing amid the trees of the island, a file's length from the road to remind her of the tragedy which had been enacted there.

That tragedy was forever in her mind.

Night and day she thought upon it; and always with a haunting fear that she was doing wrong in concealing what she knew concerning the gilded sixpence.

She was at some little distance from The Grange when snow began to fall.

It came faster and faster; she looked about for shelter.

There was a barn in a field just beside the road.

She made her way to it, intending to stay there until the storm should be over.

But scarcely had she reached it, when, as she stood in the doorway, she saw a man advancing swiftly along the road she had just quitted.

Her heart gave a great bound.

Even through the whirling snowflakes she recognized him.

It was the man on whom her thoughts were running—the man in the guise of a tramp.

He came straight towards the barn.

She knew that he must have been following her on the road.

He took off his hat, baring his head to the driving snow, as he approached her.

'I beg your pardon most earnestly for presuming to come here to you,' he said. 'There is something which I wish very much to say to you—something which it is almost necessary I should say.'

She simply bowed her head in assent.

She was intensely curious to hear what he had to say; intensely interested, but not at all alarmed.

She could not understand her own feelings.

It seemed to her she ought to have been frightened at this man; she ought to have trembled at his presence, and shunned the very sight of him; for did not a dark cloud of mystery overshadow him—a cloud which might even be that of an awful crime?

These she told herself would have been the feelings of most girls concerning him; but, how it was she knew not, she could not reason herself into any such frame of mind.

A secret voice in her heart bade her trust him, and she obeyed the voice.

He stepped just inside the barn, with an air of profound and almost chivalrous respect.

He still wore the thick, common shoes and the shabby overcoat; but she looked at his face, and again she told herself that that face was noble, and frank, and true.

'Miss Moreland,' he began, in a low earnest voice, 'will you honour me by permitting to give you my confidences? Let me first tell you who I am.'

He paused, and looked at her.

He saw she was palpitating with interest. Her very heart throbbed in her eyes.

'I am not what I seem. I am a gentleman.'

There was a simple dignity in his bearing as he spoke, which became him well.

None but a gentleman could have uttered those words.

Ruby's heart beat fast.

A new and nameless joy thrilled through every fibre of her being.

'I need not only tell you went on her companion, I can understand how it is I know you, John Whittaker.'

'John Whittaker?'

She repeated the words, with checks and shining eyes.

John Whittaker?

What had been her hero a dozen years ago when she a child and he a handsome, daring, a lad of sixteen.

She had gone away to live in part of England when she was years old, and had not returned thence until after she had gone ralia, and so they had never so other in all these years but his still lingered sweetly and pleasantly heart.

No wonder she had felt so drawn towards him.

No wonder she felt able to trust him in the face of all.

The only wonder was—so she told herself reproachfully—that she had not recognized him; though surely this was not a range it were consider how great a difference there necessarily must be between the tall bronzed man of twenty eight and the smooth faced stripling of sixteen.

There was silence for a moment after her first delighted exclamation; then, frankly, sweetly, charmingly, she stepped forward, and put her hand in his.

'Why didn't you tell me before?' she said, with the kindest look. 'Oh! I wish I had known!'

Then you wouldn't have given me the

ice with you? he asked, holding her hand a moment, and smiling down upon her. It was, glowing face, as if he found it very pleasant picture for his eyes to rest on.'

The excitement of the mile faded, and he sighed.

Pauline's thoughts had intruded on his mind.

'You shall not have half confidences, he said; I will tell you all. Then you will understand how that unlucky coin got into The Grange.'

He paused a moment to arrange his thoughts; then began—

'I presume you know I had a serious quarrel with my poor old uncle five years ago. He was unreasonable, and I was proud spirited, and so we came to grief. I went away to Australia, and for a long time I did badly enough there, though I worked like a negro slave. Indeed, I was so dreadfully hard up that I vowed my uncle should never know anything of me or my concerns. I lived under an assumed name; and, although I saw I was being

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE BARN.

The next day was Christmas Eve.

It broke with a grey, woolly sky which beaked snow; and, indeed, a thin layer of snow lay on the ground already, hardened by a touch of frost.

Ruby, gone in a costume of warm crimson cloth with a pretty muff and fur of soft chinchilla, walked along the road which lay between her own home and the

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