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The Crimson Cryptogram

BY

FERGUS HUME

AUTHOR OF
"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB," "THE SILENT HOUSE IN PIMLICO," "THE BISHOP'S SECRET," ETC.

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The Progress of Pauline Kessler

BY FREDERIC CARREL

Author of "The Adventures of John Johns"

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"Poverty, naked and unconcealed! One can endure that, with some patience, as a beaten soldier in the battle of life. But genteel pauperism—the semi-poverty of the middle-class, that lives a necessary lie at the cost of incessant worry and constant defeat—there you have the true misery of life. Believe me, Cass, there is no torture like that of an ambition which cannot be attained for lack of money."

"I did not know you were ambitious, Ellis."

"Not of setting the Thames on fire. My desires are limited to a good practice, a moderate income, a home, and a wife to love me. These wishes are reasonable enough, Heaven knows, yet some cursed Fate prevents their realisation. And I have to sit down and wait; a doctor can do nothing else. I must listen with such philosophy as I have for the ring of the door bell to announce my first patient, and the ring never comes. The heart grows sick,
the brain rusty, the money goes, the temper sours, and so I pass the best days of my life."

"All things come to him who knows how to wait," said Cass, knocking the ashes out of a well-smoked briar.

"And the horse is the noblest of all animals," retorted Ellis. "I never did find consolation in proverbs of that class."

The two men sat in their dingy sitting-room talking as usual of a problematical future. Every night they discussed the subject, and every discussion ended without any definite conclusion being arrived at. Indeed, only Fortune could have terminated the arguments in a satisfactory manner, but as yet the fickle deity showed no disposition to make a third in the conversation. Therefore, Robert Ellis, M.D., and Harry Cass, journalist, talked, and talked, and talked. They also hoped for the best, a state of mind sufficiently eloquent of their penniless position. Unless they or their relatives are sick, rich people have no need to hope for the best. The second virtue dwells almost exclusively with the poor and ambitious, as do her two sisters.

Supper was just over, but even cold beef, pickles and bottled beer, with the after comfort of a pipe, could not make Ellis happy. The more philosophical Cass lay on the ragged sofa and digested his meal, while the doctor walked up and down the room railing at Fate. He was a tall young man, clean-limbed, and sufficiently good-looking. Poverty and former opulence showed themselves in
the threadbare velveteen smoking suit he wore; and the past recurred to him as he flicked some ash off this relic of bygone days.

"O Lord!" he said regretfully, "how jolly life was when I bought these clothes some five years ago! My father had not died a bankrupt country squire then; and I was a rowdy medico, with plenty of money, and a weakness for the other sex."

"You haven't strengthened in that direction, Bob."

"Perhaps not; but I never think of women now—not even of a possible wife. Matrimony is a luxury a poor man must dispense with, if he wants to get on. I have dispensed with every blessed thing short of the bare necessities of existence, yet I don't get any reward. Every dog has his day, they say: but the day of this poor cur never seems to dawn."

"You are more bitter than usual, Ellis."

"Because I am sick of my life. You have some compensations, Harry, in connection with that newspaper you write for. You mix with your fellow-men; you exchange ideas; you have your finger on the pulse of civilisation. But I sit in this dismal room, or walk about this Boeotian neighbourhood, in the vain hope of getting a start. I can't rush out and drag in someone to be dosed; I can't go from house to house soliciting patients. I can only wait wait, wait, until I feel inclined to blow my brains out."

"If you did that, Bob, the folly of the act would
prove that you have none," said Cass. "Come, old man, buck up; something is sure to turn up when you least expect it."

"Then nothing will turn up, for I am always in a state of expectation. I wish I hadn't set up my tent at Dukesfield, Harry. It is the healthiest London suburb I know; no one seems ill, and the graveyard is almost empty. I don't believe people ever fall sick or die in this salubrious spot."

Cass ran his fingers through a shock of bronze-coloured hair, and laughed at this professional view of the situation. "Haven't you seen any likely patient?" he asked, in his most sympathetic manner.

"Not one!" rejoined Ellis, sitting down and relighting his pipe. "Oh, yes, by the way, that young Moxton."

"Who the deuce is he?"

"A young ass I have met several times in the underground train, and with whom I have had some conversation at various times."

"Why do you call him an ass?"

"Because he is one," growled the doctor; "he is burning the candle at both ends, and killing himself with dissipation. Tallow face, blood-shot eyes, dry lips. Oh, Mr Moxton is making for the graveyard at racing speed!"

"Why don't you warn him?"

"It isn't my business to meddle with a stranger. I don't care if he lives or dies—unless he takes me as his medical attendant. Even then my interest
in him would be purely professional. He is a de­
testable young cub.”

“There is a want of pity about that speech, Bob!”

“Want of money, you mean. I have no pity for
anyone save mine own poor self. Give me success,
give me an income, and I’ll overflow with the milk
of human kindness. Poverty and disappointment
is drying it all up. Hullo! Come in, Mrs Basket.”

This invitation was induced, not by a rap at the
door, but by the sound of stertorous breathing
outside it. Mrs Basket’s coming was audible long
before she made her appearance; so Ellis, fore­
warned, usually saved her the trouble of knocking.
She rolled heavily into the room, labouring like
a Dutch lugger in a heavy sea. Indeed, she was
built on similar lines, being squat and enormously
stout—so bulky, indeed, that she could hardly
push herself through the door. Like most fat
women, Mrs Basket had a weakness for bright
colours; and now presented herself in a vividly
blue dress, a crimson shawl, and a green tulle cap
decorated with buttercups of an aggressive yellow
hue. Her unshapely figure, her large proportions
and barbaric splendour, would have made the eyes
and heart of an artist ache; but as Mrs Basket’s
lodgers knew little of art, they never troubled
about her looks. Moreover, they liked and re­
spected her as a kindly soul, for on several
occasions, when funds were low, she had pressed
neither of them for rent. Mrs Basket was im­
mensely proud of having a medical man under her
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roof; and always personally polished the brass plate with "Robert Ellis, M.D.,” inscribed on it. For Cass she had less respect, as being merely a “writing person”; but she tolerated him as the doctor’s friend. Like the moon, he shone with a reflected and weaker glory.

“Lor’, gentlemen, how them stairs do try me!” said the good lady, panting in the doorway and patting her ample breast; “they’re that steep and that narrer, as to squeeze the breath out of me.”

“You’ll stick half-way up some day!” said Cass, chuckling, “then we shall have to send for a carpenter to saw you out!”

Mrs Basket laughed, in nowise offended, and announced that she had come to clear away supper, which she did with much clatter and hard breathing. Once or twice she glanced at the doctor’s gloomy face, and blew a sigh with considerable noise. She knew of her lodger’s bad fortune, and pitied him profoundly; but not daring to speak, she resumed her work with a mournful wag of the buttercup cap. Ignoring this by-play, which invited conversation, the young men resumed the subject of Moxton. Mrs Basket, dying to join in, at once espied an opportunity of doing so. The mere mention of the name was enough to set her off.

“Lor,’ gentlemen, you do turn me cold to my bones. Moxton! Why, the name makes me shiver,” and Mrs Basket shivered duly to prove the truth of her words.

Usually the lodgers did not encourage their landlady to talk, as her tongue, once set wagging,
was difficult to stop. But on this occasion her speech was so significant of mystery that Ellis wheeled round his chair to face her, and the reporter on the sofa, with true journalistic instinct, was at once on the alert for news. Mrs Basket, pleased with these tokens of interest, improved upon her speech.

"He has a wife!" said she, and closed her eyes with another shiver.

"Is that a remarkable circumstance?" asked Cass, drily.

"P'r'aps not, sir," replied Mrs Basket, with great dignity. 'But what that pore young thing suffers the butcher and the baker do know.'

"Does Moxton ill-treat her?"

"Eaven only knows what he do do, doctor. Nobody's ever seen her save the telegraph boy as called after dark, to be met with a carving-knife."

"A carving-knife! This is interesting. Who had the carving-knife, Mrs Basket?"

"Mrs Moxton, of course. She is young and pretty, I do assure you, gentlemen, yet she came on the child with a knife in her 'and like Lady Macbeth in the play."

"What was that for?"

Mrs Basket wagged her head and the buttercups responded. "She told the boy as she thought he was robbers, and came out with the wepping to protect the silver. But it looks like loonatics to me."

"Do you mean to say she is mad?"

"Doctor, I says nothing, being above scandal.
But this I do say, as she ought to be mad if she ain't. That Moxton"—Mrs Basket shivered like a jelly—"goes out night after night, leaving her shut up in that lonely 'ouse."

"Is the house lonely?"

"Mr Cass, I won't deceive you. It's that lonely as graveyards is company to it. Myrtle Viller they calls it, and it's the larst 'ouse of the row as is spreading out in the brickfield direction. The other villers are unfinished, the contractor as was building them 'aving died with only Myrtle Viller ready to move into. His relatives is a- quarrelling so over his money as they've let the villers be for six months. Mr and Mrs Moxton took up 'ouse in the larst of 'em three months come next week, and they're the only pair as lives in that 'orrible lonely road."

As Mrs Basket drew breath after this long speech and lifted the tray, Ellis put a leading question: "Don't they keep a servant?"

"No, they don't, sir, not as much as a work'us orfan. She is all alone in the 'ouse night after night, as I tells you, and it ain't no wonder as she keeps the carving-knife 'andy."

"Where does Moxton go so regularly?"

"Ah, Mr Cass, where indeed? P'r'aps the perfice may know."

"Come now, Mrs Basket, you have no ground for making such a statement."

"Oh, 'aven't I?" cried Mrs Basket, indignantly. "Why, he's well orf and passes his days indoors doing nothing. 'Ow then does he earn his money?"
A Midnight Surprise

Why does he leave her alone? What’s she doing with no servant and a carving-knife? No grounds!” Mrs Basket waddled towards the door, nose in air, and paused there to deliver a last word: “I shouldn’t be surprised at ’earing of a tragedy between ’em. Oh, that dratted bell! And at half-past eleven, too! Decent folk should be a-bed.”

The night-bell of Ellis’s was ringing furiously, and Mrs Basket, putting down the tray, squeezed through the door as hurriedly as her unwieldy form permitted. As the tail of her blue skirt whisked out of sight, Cass jumped up from the sofa and smote the doctor’s shoulder.

“Here is your first patient, Bob. Fortune is knocking at the door!”

“Ringing, you mean,” said Ellis, joking, to hide his agitation.

As he spoke, the voice of Mrs Basket was heard in wordy expostulation, and a light-footed visitor flitted along the passage and into the room. The new-comer proved to be a woman, young and pretty, bareheaded, and apparently wild with terror. Her entrance and appearance were dramatic.

“The doctor!” she gasped, leaning against the door-post to support her trembling limbs.

“I am a doctor,” said Ellis, advancing. “What is it?”

“My husband—my husband is—dead!” She paused with a catching in the throat, then her voice leaped to alto: “Murdered!”

“Murdered!” exclaimed both men, with a simultaneous movement forward.
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"Murdered, in the garden! Doctor, come! come!"

'Who is your husband?' stammered Ellis, his wits not quite under control. "What is his name?"

"Moxton! Moxton!" she answered impatiently. "Come, doctor, don't lose time! I am Mrs Moxton. My husband has been murdered!"
CHAPTER II

THE WRITING IN BLOOD

The long arm of coincidence was startlingly apparent in this instance. Both men were so amazed at the terrible news fitting in so neatly, not only with the subject of conversation, but with Mrs Basket's prophetic remark when the bell rang, that they looked at one another dumb-founded. Mrs Moxton stared at their motionless figures with indignant eyes.

"Are you not coming?" she demanded vehemently, seizing the hand of Ellis. "Don't I tell you my husband is dead!"

"I am coming, Mrs Moxton," said Ellis, hurriedly. "But if he is dead my presence will be useless. This is a case for the police."

If Mrs Moxton was pale before she became even paler at this last remark, and, shrinking back, spread out her hands with a terrified gesture. "No, no, not the police! Why the police?"

"You say your husband has been murdered," cried Cass, with sudden suspicion; "therefore the police must be called in at once. Who murdered the man?"

"I don't know," murmured Mrs Moxton. Then
his imperious, suspicious tone seemed to stir her indignation. She threw back her head haughtily. "I don't know," she repeated deliberately. "My husband went out this evening. I sat up for him as he promised to return about midnight. Shortly after eleven"—here she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece—"I heard a cry, and thinking something was wrong I ran to the door. There was someone moaning on the garden path. I went to see who it was, and found my husband bleeding to death from a wound in the back. He died a minute afterwards, and I came for you."

"How did you recognise your husband in the dark?"

"I—I had a candle," she replied, in a low voice and with hesitation.

"It's blowing awful," wheezed Mrs Basket at the door, and the other woman turned towards her abruptly. The landlady's full moon of a face had suspicion written in every wrinkle. "Had you the carving-knife?" she asked.

"The carving-knife?"

"Yes, the same as you frightened the telegraph boy with?"

"I had no carving-knife," returned Mrs Moxton, haughtily. "What do you mean by these questions?" She turned again to the men and burst into furious speech. "Have I come to a lunatic asylum?" she cried. "You talk, this woman talks, and I want help. Doctor, come! Come at once! And you, sir, go for the police if it is necessary."
The Writing in Blood

Ellis hastily threw on a cap, snatched up some needful things for a wounded man, and followed Mrs Moxton out of the house. Mrs Basket and Harry were left face to face with the same thought in their minds.

“What did I say about her ‘aving the carving-knife, sir?”

“Yes, by Jove! And her talking of exploring with a lighted candle in this wind!”

“She's afraid of the police, too, Mr Cass,” said Mrs Basket, in tragic tones. “She's done for him, sir.”

“Well — she — might — No,” cried Harry, rumpling his hair. “If she was guilty she would not come for Ellis.”

Mrs Basket snorted in a disbelieving manner.

“Oh, wouldn't she, sir? You don't know the hussies women are. That Mrs Moxton's a deep 'un as ever was.”

“Here,” cried Cass, rummaging about for his cap, “I'm losing time. I must go for the police at once.”

“Come back and tell me if they takes her,” shouted Mrs Basket after him with morbid glee. “I believe she's done it with the carving-knife.”

But Cass did not hear her, as the wind was high and he was already some distance away. As he sped along the silent streets storm-clouds were racing across the face of a watery moon, and a drizzle of rain moistened his face. Being a reporter, Cass was friendly with constables, and knew the station at Dukesfield well, having often
gone there to glean paragraphs. This time he went to give more terrible and sensational news than he had ever received, and stumbled almost into Inspector Drake's arms in his haste.

"Steady there," said Drake, gruffly, then recognising the agitated face of Cass in the flaring gaslight, he added, in a tone of surprise: "You, sir; whatever's come over you at this time of night?"

"Drake, there has been a murder at Myrtle Villa down the Jubilee Road, leading to the brickfields. A man called Moxton has been stabbed. His wife came for Dr Ellis, and I ran on to tell you!"

The inspector heard this startling intelligence with a phlegm begotten by twenty years' experience of similar reports. "Who done it, Mr Cass? Does the wife know?"

"No; she says she heard a cry, and ran out to find her husband dying on the garden path. He died in her arms."

"Did she see anyone about?"

"I don't know. I never asked her. That is your business, Drake. Come along, Ellis is with her and the dead man."

"Oh, he is dead, then?" remarked the inspector, leisurely putting on his cap and cloak.

"So Mrs Moxton says. Come!"

Leaving the station in charge of an underling, Drake called a policeman, and followed Cass into the windy night. The two, with the constable tailing after them, marched military fashion along several deserted and lampless streets, until they turned into the Jubilee Road, a dark thorough-
fare of empty, roofless houses and incomplete pavements. Civilisation had not yet established order in this region, and the street in embryo ended suddenly on the verge of naked lands. Beyond twinkled the red and green signal lights of the railway, and between, piles of bricks were heaped in Babylon-like mounds. Myrtle Villa was the last house on the right abutting on this untrimmed plain; and the three men were guided to it by a winking light in the garden. It was that of a lantern held by Mrs Moxton, and shed yellow rays on the face of the dead man. Ellis, kneeling beside the corpse, completed a startling and dramatic picture.

“Oh!” cried the woman, with something like dismay, as the light revealed uniforms, “the police!”

“Yes, ma'am,” said Drake, glancing sharply at her white cheeks, “we have come to see about this matter. Is the gentleman dead, doctor?”

“I should think so. Look here!” Ellis rolled over the body and showed a wound under the left shoulder-blade, round which the blood had coagulated. “The poor devil must have died within ten minutes after the blow was struck.”

“He died in my arms,” moaned Mrs Moxton. “Oh, Edgar!”

“Did he tell you who stabbed him, ma'am?”

“No; he never spoke a word.”

The inspector took the lantern from her shaking hand, and swung it round between corpse and gate.
The path was of beaten gravel, and no footmarks were visible; but here and there a stain of blood soaked into the ground, and from this Drake drew his conclusions.

"He was stabbed from behind while opening the gate," he said judicially, "and fell forward into the garden. Look at this stain, and this; the poor gentleman had strength enough to crawl these few yards. Wanted to reach the door, no doubt. What brought you out, ma'am?"

"His cry! I was waiting up for him in the back bedroom, and I heard a shriek. At first I was afraid, as this place is very lonely. Then I came to the door with a candle, and ran down the path. Edgar was moaning dreadfully, and died almost immediately afterwards."

"The wind is high, ma'am?"

Mrs Moxton understood his inference directly. "It blew out the candle," she explained; "but I ran from the door, shading it with my hand, and as there was a lull for a moment, I had just time to catch a glimpse of his face and recognise my husband."

"About what time was this, ma'am?"

"Some time after eleven. I can't say when. I did not look at my watch."

"It was exactly half-past eleven when you entered my house," said Ellis.

"Then Edgar was murdered between eleven and half-past. I wound up my watch for the night at eleven, and at that time I had not heard the cry. I ran all the way to your house."
"That would take five minutes, more or less," said Cass.

"And the man must have lived some minutes after the blow, to crawl this distance," observed the inspector, measuring the space with his eye. "Did you come out at once, ma'am?"

"No!" replied Mrs Moxton, with some hesitation. "I was afraid. I heard the cry and waited for a time, thinking I was mistaken. It was about ten minutes, more or less, before I summoned up courage to open the front door."

"On the whole," said Ellis, "it would seem that the murder was committed at a quarter past eleven. Well, Mr Drake, what is to be done?"

"Nothing can be done until the morning," replied Drake. "The man who did this is no doubt far enough away by this time."

"A man!" cried Mrs Moxton. "Do you think a man did it?"

The inspector was on the alert immediately. "Have you any reason to think that a woman killed him?" he asked sharply.

"I! No. I cannot guess who committed the murder." Mrs Moxton seemed anxious, nervous, and sorry she had said so much. "Shall we take the body into the house, sir?" she asked in a low tone.

"It will be as well, ma'am, and I shall leave this constable to look after it for the night."

"Thank you, thank you," said the widow, shuddering. "I should be afraid to stay by myself."
“Let me stay also!” said Ellis, moved by her beauty and distress.

“Oh, do, do. Would you mind?”

“I’ll stay,” replied the doctor, briefly, and assisted the others to lift the body. They carried it up the path, Mrs Moxton lighting them onward with the lantern. It was a strange and gruesome procession pacing through the black and stormy night; and to imaginative Cass the house and garden, commonplace as they were, reeked of the shambles.

When the body was laid on the bed, Drake gave some directions to his subordinate, and departed with Cass. Ellis and the policeman remained behind, and the doctor’s first care was to give Mrs Moxton a bromide tabloid.

“You are worn out with anxiety and nerves,” he said. “I saw that at my house, and so brought these tabloids with me. Lie down and sleep.”

“Shall I ever sleep again?” sighed Mrs Moxton. However, she obediently did as she was told, and then the men turned their attention to the corpse.

It was that of a lean young man with scanty light hair, and a thin, fair moustache. The lines of dissipation, the marks of premature ageing from debauchery, had been smoothed out by death, and the white face was as unwrinkled and placid as a waxen mask. The body was clothed in evening dress, with a light-ecoloured overcoat, and the constable pointed out to Ellis that the watch, chain, studs and links—all costly—were untouched.
“Robbers didn’t bring about this murder,” said the policeman.

They undressed the body slowly. As Ellis drew off the shirt, the cuffs of which were dappled with blood, he noticed strange marks on the left arm. From wrist to elbow, on the inner part of the arm, various signs appeared on the white skin. These were rudely streaked with blood, and Ellis afterwards copied them into his note-book, thinking they might be useful later on, as indeed they proved to be.

“What do these signs mean?” he asked the policeman.

“I dunno, sir; but he did ’em hisself. See, doctor,” and he lifted the right hand of the corpse.

Ellis looked eagerly and saw that the forefinger of the hand was black with dried blood.
CHAPTER III
AN OPEN VERDICT

Next day the body of the unfortunate man was removed to the Dukesfield morgue, and twenty-four hours later the coroner held an inquiry in the coffee-room of the Lancaster Hotel. Public interest was greatly roused over the matter, and the ubiquitous reporters of the great “dailies”—amongst them Harry Cass—attended, note-book in hand, to supply their readers with sensational details. A rumour—first set afloat by the babbling tongue of Mrs Basket—was prevalent that Mrs Moxton had killed her husband with a carving-knife. It was known from the same source that she had lived a lonely life since taking up her abode in Myrtle Villa, that Moxton had neglected her shamefully, that he had left her nightly by herself, and had even denied her the comfort and company of a servant. Hence it was openly declared that cruel treatment and contemptuous desertion had driven Mrs Moxton to commit the crime. But this theory found no favour in the sight of Dr Ellis, and he avowed himself the champion of the pretty widow.

“If she were guilty she would not have an-
nounced the crime as she did,” he argued with Cass. “It would have been easy for her to let the corpse lie on the path all night, and pretend ignorance when it was discovered by the milkman. Also, if she struck the blow she had a whole night at her disposal to vanish into the unknown.”

“Flight would have proved her guilt, Bob. Besides, she would have been tracked down on that tacit confession of her crime.”

“I don’t agree with you. Nothing is known of the Moxtons, as they kept very much to themselves. Hardly anyone saw her or knew her by sight. She could have disappeared like a drop of water into the ocean of London, without leaving a trace for the most cunning detective to follow. Instead of doing this—her wisest plan if she killed her husband—she stays and faces the matter out in all innocence.”

Cass produced a newspaper from his pocket. “I can suggest a theory for her remaining. Here”—he pointed to a paragraph in the death column—“three days ago, Edgar Allan Moxton, the great picture-dealer of Bond Street, died, leaving a large fortune behind him. Now this dead man, as I judge from the similarity of Christian and surname, is probably the son of Moxton. If so, he, had he lived, would, no doubt, inherit the money. As he is dead, Mrs Moxton, the widow, may do so. A fortune is worth running some risk for, Bob.”

But the faith of Ellis was not to be shaken.

“The similarity of names may be a mere coincid-
ence, such as occurs more frequently in real life
than in fiction. Also, even if you can prove the relationship, it does not show that Mrs Moxton is waiting for the fortune, or that she is even aware of the death. Give her the benefit of the doubt, Harry."

"I give her much more than the jury will do, Ellis. Public opinion is against her."

"Bah! what do the tinker and tailor and candlestick maker know of the matter?"

"They may not know much now, but they will soon be primed with sufficient evidence to give a verdict. The jury is chosen from the class you mention so contemptuously."

Dr Ellis knew this very well, and knew, moreover, that rumour spoke ill of the widow. Therefore, it was with some doubt whether she would have a fair hearing that he attended the inquest. By the time he arrived the hotel was so crowded that the people overflowed into the road. The young man pushed his way into the public room and found that the proceedings had already commenced. He glanced round for Mrs Moxton, and saw her seated near the coroner, clothed in black, closely veiled, and listening attentively to Drake's evidence.

The inspector's testimony was brief and meagre, for the police had, as yet, discovered nothing. He described the finding of the body, the futile search for the weapon with which the murder had been committed, and the failure of his attempt to learn where the deceased had so regularly spent his nights. Nevertheless, the identity of the dead
man had been established, for he was the son of a Bond Street picture-dealer, Edgar Allan Moxton. Strange to say, father and son had died within a few hours of one another, the former in the morning from natural causes, the latter shortly before midnight by violence. Finally, Drake stated that hitherto the police had found no clue likely to lead to the identification and capture of the murderer.

"Which shows that the police don’t suspect Mrs Moxton," murmured Ellis to Cass.

The doctor himself was the next witness, and deposed as to his summons by Mrs Moxton, and his examination of the corpse. Deceased had died from the stab of a broad-bladed knife which had pierced the left lung. The blow must have been struck by a strong arm, he averred, since the blade had penetrated through an overcoat, inside coat, waistcoat and shirt.

"Could a woman have struck such a blow?" asked one of the jury.

"An exceptionally strong woman might have done so," responded Ellis.

All eyes were turned on the trim, slight figure of Mrs Moxton, and there was a general feeling that the doctor’s answer exonerated her from having personally committed the murder. She was of too frail and delicate a physique to have struck home the knife with so sure and deadly an aim. Yet she might have put the weapon into another’s hand, for it seemed incredible that she should be ignorant of the tragedy which took place within a few yards of her. When Mrs Moxton’s name was
called out, and she stood up to give evidence, those present drew a long breath and waited eagerly for her to speak. Hitherto public curiosity had been languid; now the appearance of the principal witness stimulated it to fever heat. From the dead man's widow, if from anyone, the truth of this strange tragedy should come.

Mrs Moxton threw back her veil when she took the oath, and revealed a pretty face, somewhat marred by sleeplessness and weeping. She was colourless, red-eyed and low-voiced, but gathering courage as she proceeded, told her tale with great simplicity and apparent truth. The evidence she gave may be condensed as follows:

"My name is Laura Moxton. I married my husband, Edgar, twelve months ago. He was the son of Mr Moxton, of Bond Street, and the heir to great wealth. When he met me I was earning my living by type-writing, and although I refused twice to marry him he insisted that I should do so. At last I yielded and became his wife, whereupon his father cut him off with a shilling. Edgar had some money inherited from his mother, and with this we went to Monte Carlo, where he tried to increase his fortune by gambling. However, he was unlucky, and we returned to London in eight months poorer than when we left. For the sake of economy my husband took Myrtle Villa, as he obtained it at a low rental on account of the unfinished state of the road. For the same reason we dispensed with a servant and hired the furniture."
An Open Verdict

I did all the housework, and for want of money rarely went outside the house. My husband was unkind and neglectful, and accused me of being the cause of the quarrel with his father which had cost him his inheritance. It is now three months since we took Myrtle Villa. My husband, for the first week, remained indoors at night; afterwards he went out regularly. I did not know what he did with himself, or where he went, as he always refused to tell me, and his temper became so morose that I was afraid to insist upon his confidence. He always dressed himself carefully in evening dress, and usually wore a light overcoat. As a rule, he returned shortly after midnight. Sometimes I waited up for him, at other times I went to bed. I was often afraid during the long evenings in the house, as it was so lonely and so near the waste lands where the brickworks stand. On the night of the murder my husband went out as usual. It was August 16th. I waited for his return and shut myself up in the bedroom at the back of the house. About eleven I grew tired of waiting and prepared to go to bed. I know it was eleven as I wound up my watch at that hour. I was brushing my hair when I thought I heard a cry, but as the wind was blowing strongly I fancied I was mistaken. Still, the belief was so strong that, after doing up my hair, I took the candle and went to the door. The light showed me someone lying on the path, halfway to the gate. I also heard a moan. At once I ran down, shading the candle light in the hollow of my hand. For the moment there was a lull in the
wind, and the light burnt long enough to show me that my husband was lying wounded on the path. Then the wind extinguished the light. I took my husband in my arms. He moaned feebly, but could not speak. Then he gave a gasp and died. I was dreadfully afraid, and without waiting to get my hat or cloak, I ran for Dr Ellis. I saw no one; I heard no one; and I do not know who killed my husband."

"In what position was he lying when you came upon him?"

"On his back. As the light of my candle fell for a moment on his face, I recognised him at once."

"How did you know he was wounded, seeing that the wound was in his back?"

"I saw blood on his shirt-front and coat. Also, his face was so white and he moaned so much that I guessed he was hurt. When I took him in my arms I felt on my fingers the blood flowing from his back."

"Had your husband enemies?"

"I do not know. He introduced me to no one he knew. I lived a lonely life. All the time I was at Myrtle Villa I saw no one but my husband."

"Did you know any of his friends abroad?"

"No. He introduced me to no one."

"Did he ever speak of anyone as having a grudge against him?"

"No. He spoke of himself and his father, but of no one else."
An Open Verdict

"Did he know that his father was dead when he left the house on August 16th?"

"Not to my knowledge. He said nothing to me. Until I heard Mr Drake's evidence I did not know myself that Mr Moxton, senior, was dead."

"Did your husband receive any letter on the day of his death?"

"No. He never received letters, nor did he take in a newspaper. We lived quite isolated from the world. I did not like my position, but I feared to complain, on account of my husband's temper."

"Was your husband's temper such as would provoke enmity?"

"I think so: he had a very bad temper."

"Did he drink much?"

"Yes, he drank a great deal of brandy, and was very morose when intoxicated. When I saw him like that, I used to shut myself in the back bedroom."

"Did your husband treat you cruelly?"

"He neglected me and spoke harshly to me, but he never struck me."

"What were your feelings towards him?"

"I loved him when we married, for then he was kind and good. Afterwards I had no feeling towards him save one of terror."

"On one occasion it is reported that you came to meet a telegraph boy with a carving-knife. Is that true?"

"Perfectly true. But I did not know who was
at the door. It was growing dark, and the house was very lonely. I took the knife in case it might be a tramp."

"Did you usually carry the knife to protect yourself?"

"Oh, no! On that occasion I was in the kitchen, and snatched it from the table when the knock came to the door."

"You never went to the door with it on any other occasion?"

"Certainly not. No one else ever came after dark. The tradespeople called always in the daytime. Then I was not afraid."

"For whom was the telegram?"

"For my husband. I did not open it, but left it on the table in the dining-room. He got it when he came home that night."

"Did he tell you what it was about?"

"No. He never mentioned the subject."

"Do you know anything about the marks in blood on the arm?"

"No. I was shown them by Doctor Ellis, but I do not know what they mean, or, indeed, what they are."

"Do they not look to you like secret writing? Like a cryptogram?"

"I don't know anything about secret writing. They look like blood smears to me. I do not understand them."

"Have you any idea why deceased wrote them on his arm?"

"Not the least in the world."
An Open Verdict

"Did you ever see your husband use a cypher of that kind?"

"Never. I never saw him use a cypher of any sort."

"Did you ever notice marks like them before?"

"No. I know nothing about them."

"Can you throw any light at all on this murder?"

"None whatever. I was amazed to find my husband dying."

"He said no word—no name?"

"He did nothing but moan, and died in a few moments."

This examination, which lasted some considerable time, concluded all available evidence for the time being. On the meagre intelligence to be gleaned from it the jury framed their verdict, and stated that the deceased, Edgar Moxton, had been murdered by some person or persons unknown.
CHAPTER IV

THE READING OF THE BLOOD SIGNS

In these progressive times, the duration of proverbial wonderment has been reduced from nine days to nine hours. The Dukesfield murder case was mysterious and dramatic, yet, even with these elements of popularity, it became stale and out of date within the week. The attention of the masses and the classes was more or less concentrated on the visit of an Eastern potentate, whose amazing jewels, and still more amazing barbarisms, appealed to the popular humour. Moxton's death and the strange circumstances attendant thereon ceased to be commented upon by the newspapers; they faded out of the public mind, and continued to be talked about only in the neighbourhood wherein the tragedy occurred. Yet even in Dukesfield, after a fortnight of discussion, the interest grew languid.

It was just as well for Mrs Moxton that circumstances stood thus, for, in defiance of public opinion, she still continued to inhabit Myrtle Villa. Her husband's maltreated body was quietly buried in the Dukesfield cemetery, so quietly, indeed, that, save the necessary undertaker and his men, not a
single person followed the unfortunate victim to his untimely grave. It is only justice to say that Mrs Moxton would have done so but for the earnest advice of Ellis. Knowing her unpopularity and its cause, he warned her against thrusting herself forward. Like a wise woman, the widow took the hint, but passionately resented the reason for which it was given. When the ceremony was at an end, Ellis came to tell her about it, and she defended herself to him after the fashion of women, with many words and much indignation. As soon as he could obtain a hearing, the doctor assured her that in his case such arguments were needless.

"I am a firm believer in your innocence, Mrs Moxton," he declared, in all earnestness, "and you must not trouble about the idle gossip of the neighbourhood. People will talk, and it is just a chance that they did not call you a martyr instead of a criminal."

"It is shameful that a friendless woman should be so abused!"

"You are not altogether friendless, Mrs Moxton. If you will accept me as your champion, I shall be proud to occupy the position."

The widow looked steadfastly at Ellis, and something—perceptible to a woman only—which she saw in his eyes caused her to lower her own. She replied indirectly, with true feminine evasion,—

"I shall always be glad to have you for a friend, doctor. You have been—you are—very good to me."
But after this speech Mrs Moxton became reserved and hesitating, finally silent; so that Ellis, aware that his eyes had revealed too much, took his leave in a few minutes. By this time he was conscious that he had fallen in love with the pretty widow, and marvelled that he should lose his heart after three weeks' acquaintance. In the opinion of some, love at first sight is a fallacy, and at one time Ellis had been of these wiseacres. Now his personal experience proved the truth of the saying. Mrs Moxton was not a supremely beautiful woman, but she had a young and comely face, and an extraordinarily fascinating manner. It was to this last that Ellis succumbed, and he made scarcely any effort to resist its influence. Yet Mrs Moxton was a woman with a humble—if not a doubtful—past, and there was a slur on her reputation as the widow of a murdered man. Ellis could not help admitting to himself that she was no wife for a struggling doctor, yet, in spite of such admission, he was bent upon marrying her, should the opportunity offer itself. In the meantime he kept his own counsel and told no one—not even Cass—of this new element in his life.

That same evening Ellis and his friend sat down after supper to discuss again their domestic affairs and the state of the exchequer. The outlook was now considerably improved, for Cass had returned with a good piece of news, which he lost no time in imparting to the doctor.

"The gods of things-as-they-ought-to-be have awakened to the injustice of my terrestrial treat-
ment, Bob," he announced gleefully. "I have been made theatrical critic for the *Early Bird*, and a story of mine has been accepted by the *Piccadilly Magazine*.

"Good news, old boy; I congratulate you. What is the reason for this sudden discovery of your merits?"

"Moxton's murder, I think. My editor was pleased with the blood-and-thunder report I gave of it."

"Hence he sets you to criticise the drama," said Ellis, drily.

"I suppose so. Perhaps he thinks that if I can describe the murder of a human being I can deal with the slaughter of drama and comedy by incompetent actors."

"The profession would be flattered by your preconceived ideas of their capabilities, Harry."

"Nonsense! I am thinking of extreme cases only. But now that I have a better salary I can help you, Bob. I shall be like the Auvergnat carrier in Balzac's story, and aid a great physician to reach his rightful position for the benefit of humanity."

"Thank you, Harry, but I fear I am not sufficiently gifted to deserve your self-denial. Besides, I have been discovered also."

"What? You have a patient?"

"Yes, a morbid lady with nerves. She saw my name in connection with the discovery of that poor devil's body, and came to see me about her own trouble."

"Nerves and murder. I don't see the connection."
"She did, however," said Ellis, with a shrug, "and asked me to save her life. It is in no danger, as you may guess. She is nothing but an excitable female with too much money and no employment. I wrote her a prescription, humoured her hypochondria, and so pleased her that she departed, pronouncing me to be a charming young man who thoroughly understood her 'system.' She intends to send all her friends to me."

"That's capital," cried Cass, shaking hands with his friend. "Once you get the start you will soon roll on to fame and fortune. I'll meet you on Tom Tiddler's ground, Bob, and we'll pick up the gold and silver in company. Dr Robert Ellis, of Harley Street, specialist in eye diseases, and Henry Cass, the great, the only novelist! But I say, Bob," added the journalist, "don't degenerate into a humbug, old man."

"My dear fellow, in dealing with women, one must be a humbug more or less. They like it."

"That is true in every case. Women always prefer the graceful humbugs of this world to the genuine, honest creatures. That is why I have not been snapped up by a rich heiress."

Ellis laughed absently, being more taken up with his own thoughts than with the humour of his friend. "Yes, I believe this patient will send me others, and that, sooner or later, I shall scrape together a practice in Dukesfield. In years to come I may even be able to set up as an eye specialist."

"In Harley Street, Bob, in Harley Street."
The Reading of the Blood Sign

"In any street so long as I can make a good income. When I become known as an authority on diseases of the eye—"

"You are known, Bob," interrupted Cass, vigorously. "That book on the eye you wrote is well known."

"Stuff! My book fell still-born from the Press. Besides, if it is known, only my medical brethren have the knowledge. I wish to be popular with the masses, Harry, to have a name with them, for it is the public who pay."

"Well, well, that will come. I believe in your future, Bob. You will have all you wish for—an income, a name, and a wife."

"A wife!" Ellis turned restlessly in the comfortable old arm-chair, and laughed in a somewhat embarrassed fashion. "A wife!" he repeated doubtfully.

"Of course; you don’t intend to remain single all your days, do you? You must marry, Bob, for a doctor without a wife, a tactful wife, mind you, is like a coach without wheels. I hope, however," and here Harry’s tone became serious, "that you will not marry a widow."

"A widow! I don’t quite understand."

"Or," continued Cass, inattentive to the interpolation, "or the wife of a man who has met with a violent death."

"Harry, what makes you think that Mrs Moxton—" So far Ellis proceeded violently, then stopped with the conviction that he had betrayed his secret.
"The cap fits, I see," remarked Cass, pointedly, and shut up in his turn.

For the next few minutes there was an embarrassed silence, neither man being willing to speak, lest a word should act like a spark in a powder magazine. Ellis threw down his pipe, and, as was his fashion when annoyed, took to rapid walking in the limited space of the sitting-room. Cass eased his position on the sofa and waited developments.

"Yes, it is true," said the doctor, in a loud voice, so as to drown opposition. "I am in love with Mrs Moxton. Now, what do you say?"

"Only this. It is hard enough for you to make a career without seeking for a clog which will prevent you rising in your profession."

"How do you know Mrs Moxton would prove such a clog?"

"I don't know; I surmise only. I am ignorant of the lady's personality, save from what I have learnt in chance moments. You are in the like position."

"I know her better than you do."

"Possibly. But do you know her well enough to risk making her your wife?"

"I didn't say that I intended to ask her to marry me."

Cass laughed. "That is a quibble. With honourable men a declared passion is always the prelude to marriage."

"But I have not declared my passion," argued Ellis, in vexed tones.
The Reading of the Blood Sign

"Not yet, maybe, but you will do so when the time comes."

"After all, Harry, she is a charming woman."

"Charming and pretty, no doubt. But is she the wife for you? Before you can answer that question, you must know her past and whitewash her present."

Dr Ellis sat down aghast. "Good heavens, Cass! Surely you don't think her guilty?"

"I don't know enough about the case to say," said Cass, meditatively; "but Mrs Moxton puzzles me, I confess. For instance, she tells lies."

"Tells lies!" repeated the widow's champion, with great indignation.

"Yes, and in the most unblushing manner. At the inquest she said that she took her husband's body in her arms and felt the blood flowing from the wound in his back. Now, it is my impression that she never touched the body."

"How can you prove that?"

"Very simply. When she came into this room she wore a plain black dress, with cuffs of white linen. Now, if she had handled the body and had touched the wound, it is only natural to suppose that those cuffs would be stained with blood. I noticed, however, that they were not."

"But that is all the stronger proof that she is innocent."

"Of the actual murder, maybe, Bob; but it does not prove that she is ignorant of who killed the man. She told lies about the handling of the
body, as I said. It seems to me," added Cass, reflectively, "that Mrs Moxton is shielding the assassin."

"But why should she shield a murderer?"

"Ah, that you must learn from the woman herself. But if she is completely in the dark about the matter, why does she tell falsehoods? Then that cypher, those blood signs on the arm—the dying man wrote them to indicate to his wife the name of the murderer."

"You can't prove that!" cried Ellis, much excited.

"Only by deduction. Why should the man write in a cypher if his wife did not know the cypher?"

"The information, whatever it is, might have been intended for someone else."

"I don't think so. Moxton knew that his wife would be the first to discover his dead body, and wrote the message in cypher for her information. It is only reasonable to think so."

"Mrs Moxton says she does not know what the cypher means."

"Precisely. She is telling lies and shielding the true criminal."

"How do you know that the cypher contains the name of the criminal, Harry?"

"Because I can read the cypher," was Cass's unexpected reply. "I found out the key yesterday. Look here, Bob." He jumped up from the sofa and, crossing to the writing-table, hastily scrawled two diagrams. "You see," he added, "here is a
The Reading of the Blood Sign

criss-cross, and a St Andrew's cross with two letters in each angle which exhausts the alphabet."

Ellis looked at the diagrams with amazement and shook his head. "I am as much in the dark as ever. Explain."

"Well, you use the angles and the central criss-cross square for letters, with an added dot for the second letter. If you wish to write your name, 'Ellis,' in signs, you take the first letter of the third angle in the criss-cross, the two second letters of the sixth angle; the first letter of the square, and the first letter first angle St Andrew's cross."

"I see, and 'L' being the second letter of the sixth angle you put a dot."

"Of course. If I wrote 'K' I should put no dot," replied Harry, and took a morsel of paper out of his pocket. "Here," said he, "is a copy of the sign on the dead man's arm. The second letter of ninth angle criss-cross: the first letter second angle St Andrew's cross, and the second letter fourth angle of the same. Do you see? Now take this pencil, Bob, and use the key to turn them into letters."

Ellis did so, and produced three letters on the paper given to him. "'R U Z,'" he read slowly. "What does that mean? Is it a word?"

"I don't think so. There is no word spelt 'Ruz' in any language that I am acquainted with. I believe those three letters are the initials of the man who killed Moxton. For some reason the dying man did not desire to give up his murderer to justice, but at the same time he wished to let
his wife know who struck the blow, hence the cypher. Mrs Moxton can read the meaning, depend upon it, Bob."

"It seems strange," assented Ellis, surveying the letters thoughtfully. "Do you think there are three names here, or only two?"

"I can't say. 'R U' may mean Rupert or Rudolph, but I am in the dark so far. I have discovered the letters, Bob; it is for Mrs Moxton to explain them to you."

"What about this other sign?" said the doctor, evading a reply.

"Well, at first I thought it was a serpent, but as it has four feet and a wriggle of a tail, I conclude it is a lizard. Mere guessing, you understand."

"What connection can it have with the letters?"

"I don't know. Ask me something easier, or rather," said Cass, with a peculiar smile, "ask Mrs Moxton. She knows the truth about letters, and lizard and murder. But she won't tell it to you."

"Why not?" asked Ellis, angrily.

"Because, my poor fellow, I firmly believe that the murderer of Mr Moxton is the lover of Mrs Moxton."
CHAPTER V

MRS MOXTON SEEKS COUNSEL

Needless to say, Ellis, in his then state of mind, declined to believe that the widow had intrigued with a lover, or had—according to the theory of Cass—armed his hand with the knife. In her evidence she declared that she knew no one in Dukesfield and went nowhere, and this statement was substantiated by Mrs Basket. The landlady, with feminine curiosity about matters which did not concern her, was as good as a detective, and from the first coming of the mysterious Moxtons to Myrtle Villa, she had watched their movements. Knowing this, Ellis made a few inquiries when Mrs Basket was clearing the breakfast-table. Harry having already departed to Fleet Street, the doctor was alone, and conducted the examination as he pleased and at his leisure. Mrs Basket, only too willing to talk, chattered like a parrot, and, indeed, her green dress with yellow trimmings resembled the plumage of that bird in no small degree. She was a gaudy, irresponsible gabbler.

"Bless your 'eart, sir, she didn't know no one," declared Mrs Basket. "A prisoner in a gaol, that is what she was at Myrtle Viller; not but what she oughtn't to be in a real one. I don't say as
"The jury did not think so, Mrs Basket!"

Mrs Basket snorted. "A jury of them swindling tradesmen," said she, contemptuously. "What do they know of it? Mrs Moxton killed him with the carving-knife, and threw it away afterwards."

"How do you know she threw it away?"

"'Cos it ain't in the 'ouse. Yes! you may look, an' look, doctor, but it ain't in the 'ouse. I've bin there and know."

"You have been in Myrtle Villa?" said Ellis, astonished. "Do you know Mrs Moxton, then?"

"For the sake of law and order and Queen's justice I made it my business to know her, sir. The other morning I went over to offer to buy some of her furniture, 'earing as she was leaving Dukesfield."

Ellis jumped up. "She is not leaving Dukesfield," he denied.

"Oh, that was my idear of getting into the 'ouse," explained Mrs Basket, complacently. "She said she wasn't, and told me so in the kitching, where it was I wished to be. Then she looked so poorly that I offered to make 'er a cup of tea, and she said I might, asking me questions about the people 'ere in the meantime."

"What sort of questions?"

"Oh, what was thought of her, and if they called her names," returned Mrs Basket, incoherently. "But I made 'er the tea and she 'ad it. For a few minutes she went into the front parlour, and
I looked in all the dresser drawers for the knife, but it wasn't there. No, doctor," repeated Mrs Basket, with emphasis, "I do assure you it wasn't in the 'ole of that there kitching, though I searched most perticler."

"Someone might have stolen the knife."

"There weren't nobody in the 'ouse to steal it. Not a soul ever went near the viller but tradesmen, and they never got no further than the back door. Sir, I do believe as she murdered him with the knife, and 'id it way arterwards—p'r'aps in them brickfields," concluded Mrs Basket, vaguely.

"Well, we can't be sure of that. You are certain that Mrs Moxton had no visitors?"

"Quite, sir."

"And she saw no one?"

"Not a blessed soul save 'er 'usband as she did for. And if you'll excuse me, doctor; I've my work to look arter," whereupon the gossip waddled away with the breakfast tray.

It may appear strange that a cultured man like Ellis should listen to the coarse babblings of an uneducated woman, but he had a reason for doing so. For the sake of protecting Mrs Moxton it was needful that he should know the gossip of the neighbourhood, and none could so well enlighten him on this point as Mrs Basket. Several times her openly-expressed conviction of Mrs Moxton's guilt made Ellis wince, and but for the above reason he would have ordered her out of the room. However, his self-control gained him two pieces of information; firstly, that Mrs Moxton had received
The Crimson Cryptogram

no masculine visitor since her arrival in Dukesfield, and, secondly, that the carving-knife with which the murder—from the nature of the wound—might have been committed, had disappeared. Ellis was now satisfied that the widow had no lover, but he was disturbed over the concealment or loss—he did not know which to call it—of the carving-knife. If no one but Mrs Moxton was, or had been, in the house, she must know the whereabouts of the knife. For enlightenment on this point, and in order to satisfy his doubts, Ellis made up his mind to call on the widow, and, acting on the impulse of the moment, did so.

Strangely enough Mrs Moxton not only welcomed him eagerly, but informed him that his arrival was opportune. "If you had not come I should have sent for you," said she, and conducted him into a cheerful little sitting-room all white paint, Chinese matting, and furniture covered with bright-hued chintz.

"What is the matter, Mrs Moxton? There is nothing wrong, I hope."

"Oh, no! but I want your advice. You are my only friend."

"I am proud of the position, Mrs Moxton, and I hope you will permit me, as a friend, to ask you a few plain questions?"

The little woman's resolute face grew pale. "About the death?" she murmured.

"Yes! You know that there is a slur on your name in connection with that. As your friend, I wish to remove that slur by assisting you to hunt down the murderer."
Mrs Moxton seeks Counsel

It was an odd but true thing that Mrs Moxton had the same habit as Ellis of walking up and down the room when annoyed. At the conclusion of the doctor's last speech she rose suddenly and took a turn to compose her mind. "It is very good of you to think of helping me," she said abruptly, "but why should you?"

"Because I wish to be your friend, and I know that you are in danger."

"I am in no danger if you allude to this preposterous accusation that I killed my husband. If needs be I can protect myself should the occasion arise."

"By denouncing someone else?"

Mrs Moxton turned on Ellis with a frown. "What do you mean?"

"Rumour says that if you did not murder Moxton yourself you know who did, and that you are shielding him."

"Him! Oh, I am shielding a man," said the widow, catching at the final word. "Set your mind at rest, doctor, I am shielding no man."

"Mrs Moxton, why not be candid and tell me all?"

"I told all I knew at the inquest," she replied sullenly.

"Can you swear that you do not know who killed your husband?"

"I was on my oath at the inquest, I tell you," cried the woman, passionately. "I will not swear again—to you."

"Very good," said Ellis, coldly. "I see that you doubt me."

"I doubt you! I trust you more than you think."
Doctor Ellis, in spite of what I said to you before, I am surrounded on all sides by difficulties and dangers. One false step and Heaven knows what may happen! I can’t tell you all—I dare not. But you are my friend and must help me."

"How can I when you won’t confess the truth?"

"If I only dare!" Mrs Moxton took another turn up the room, and came back to Ellis with a more determined expression on her face. "Listen, doctor! I will tell you what I can. Afterwards you can ask me what questions you will, and I shall reply to the best of my ability. Thus we shall understand one another."

Ellis looked at her trim little figure in the black dress, at the widow’s cap on the fair hair, at the candid face beneath it. As has been before stated, Mrs Moxton was comely rather than pretty, but she had a firmly-moulded chin, a resolute expression on her lips and in her grey eyes, and was, on the whole, a woman of courage and resource. How one so sensible could have tied herself to a brute like Moxton, and could have submitted to neglect and cruelty for long months was more than Ellis could understand. Perhaps it was one of those unanswerable problems of the feminine nature which women themselves cannot explain. Ellis was puzzled, and in the hope of gaining some insight into this apparently contradictory nature, waited eagerly for the promised explanation.

"On the day after the murder—in the morning, that is," said Mrs Moxton, "I had a visitor. His card, with the name Richard Busham, was brought
Mrs Moxton seeks Counsel
to me by a charwoman I engaged, but owing to the
events of the previous night I refused to see him.
He went away saying he would call again, but up
to the present he has not done so.”

“Who is Richard Busham? Do you know him?”

“Not personally. I never saw him, and he has
never met me. But he is the cousin of my late
husband, the nephew of Moxton of Bond Street.
Now, I believe that he came to see me about the will,
and I am vexed at not having admitted him.”

“Why not call on him? Have you his address?”

“I heard it from Edgar. Mr Busham is a
solicitor, and has his office in Esher Lane, near the
Temple. The late Mr Moxton, of Bond Street, was
a mean, shabby man who employed the cheapest
labour he could get, and I believe his nephew
did all his legal business for him. Now, Edgar
and Mr Busham hated one another, and when my
husband was disinherited Mr Busham was declared
heir by old Moxton. If that will held good he
would not waste time coming to see me, but from
the very fact of his visit I believe that Edgar's
father repented at the last moment, and made a
new will, leaving the property to us.”

“You can make certain of that by seeing
Busham.”

Mrs Moxton looked troubled. “I am afraid,” she
said faintly. “I am terribly afraid.”

“I do not see why you should be.”

“Mr Busham called on the morning after the
murder; he must have learnt then of my loss.
Yet he has never repeated his visit, has never
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written a line. I can't conceive his reason for acting in this way, unless," here she hesitated, "he believes that I murdered Edgar."

"He would not be so foolish as to believe that without evidence, and even if he did, the inquest must have disabused his mind of the idea."

"For all that I am afraid to call. I have heard Edgar talk of Mr Busham; he is a dangerous man, Dr Ellis, and for all I know may be laying a trap for me."

"Tell me the truth and I will prevent your falling into this trap."

Mrs Moxton hesitated, and then burst out defiantly: "What is it you wish to know?"

"Firstly, if you know the meaning of the blood signs on your husband's arm?"

"No! I do not."

"Then I am wiser than you, for I do."

"You!" Mrs Moxton bit her lip. "What do you know?"

"That the signs stand for the letters R. U. Z. What the lizard, as I think it is, means I don't know. Mrs Moxton, what is the meaning of the three letters R. U. Z.?"

"I don't know, really I don't!"

"Had your husband any friend with a name beginning Ruz, or with initials R. U. Z.?"

"Not that I ever heard of."

"What about the lizard?"

"I cannot understand its meaning."

"And you don't comprehend either the letters or the cypher?"
Mrs Moxton seeks Counsel

“No! no! no!”

This triple denial was so emphatic that Ellis was forced to believe her. Yet it appeared strange that she should be so ignorant of matters which virtually concerned the death of her husband. He looked keenly at her for some sign of confusion, but the brow of Mrs Moxton was as open as the day. If she lied she was a wonderful actress, but Ellis did not believe that she lied, being too much in love to consider her so deliberately base.

“Well!” said he, making an attempt in another direction to fathom the mystery. “My landlady, Mrs Basket, called to see you the other day.”

“To spy out the land. Oh, I saw through her pretended kindness at once. She wished to find some proof of my guilt, but as I had nothing to conceal I gave her the opportunity of convincing herself that I was innocent.”

“The very proof you gave convinced her of your guilt,” said Ellis, warmly. “Mrs Basket is a dangerous woman, Mrs Moxton; one of those well-meaning people who do so much harm. She has no special grudge against you, but she has got it into her mind that you killed your husband with the carving-knife.”

“But I did not. It is nonsense talking like that!”

“Then where is the carving-knife? Mrs Basket searched but could not find it, and now she believes that you have hidden it.”

“What rubbish!” said Mrs Moxton, with contempt. “Edgar threw it away.”

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"Threw it away? Why?"

"Because he knew that I kept it by me to protect myself against tramps or burglars, so, out of sheer devilry, the week before he died, he threw it into the garden behind some bushes."

"Is it there now?"

"No. I searched everywhere for it after the murder and could not find it. Why do you ask?"

"Because a broad-bladed knife was used to kill your husband, and it might have been the carving-knife. The murderer must have picked it up and made use of it. And—"

The woman appeared uneasy, and interrupted Ellis. "How would the murderer know that the knife was in the garden? Only two people knew where it was thrown. One was Edgar, the other myself."

"I would not advise you to say that in public, Mrs Moxton, as people might count it as good circumstantial evidence that you killed Moxton."

"Oh!" cried the widow, clenching her fists. "Do you believe me guilty?"

"No, I do not. Is there any need to ask me that question?"

"Why? why? You have plenty of evidence against me. I have placed myself in your hands by confessing about the carving-knife. Why do you not denounce me as guilty?"

"How can you ask?" cried Ellis, carried out of his usual equable self by her vehemence. "Don't you know—can't you see—I love you! I love you! that is why I believe you guiltless."
CHAPTER VI

A FRESH DISCOVERY

In placing herself in the dock, so to speak, Mrs Moxton had been defiant, loud-voiced and reckless, daring Ellis to denounce her for a crime of which she knew herself innocent. His refusal, and the cause he gave for such refusal, took her by surprise. Long since she had guessed that the doctor loved her, but she did not count on his proclaiming the fact so soon. Nor would he have done so had he not been thrown off his guard by her appeal. But her demand and his answer to it produced on both sides a stupefied calm. Ellis, frightened at his own boldness, remained silent after uttering the fatal words; Mrs Moxton, on the other hand, felt her wrath die away in sheer surprise. Then her cheeks flushed from an unexplained emotion, and a light beamed from her eyes.

"You love me!" she murmured softly, and looked at Ellis.

Something in her regard, her tone, in her whole attitude, seemed to melt the frozen silence of the man. He sprang forward and touched her hand.

"You are not angry?" he asked, with eagerness.

The touch recalled Mrs Moxton to a sense of what she owed to herself, and woke in her a feel-
ing of wrath at the audacity of the man, who could speak the word to a woman lately widowed in so terrible a manner.

"How dare you!" she cried angrily, retreating. "What must you think of me to talk like that!"

"I think the world of you," replied Ellis, doggedly. "I have said the truth."

"You deceive yourself. What you take for the truth is fantasy. You cannot love one whom you have known only three weeks."

"Love can be born of a glance."

"In romances, I grant, but not in real life." She paused and burst out laughing. "Oh, it is too absurd."

Ellis was piqued. "I fail to see the absurdity. I speak as I feel."

For the moment Mrs Moxton appeared to meditate an answer to this plain statement. Suddenly she bit her lip, drew back and shook her head. "You speak folly. You think madness," she said. "Consider! I am a three weeks' widow. My husband died by violence, and his death is not avenged. My name is smirched. My—no! This is no time for such talk. Let us forget the words you have uttered."

"I cannot forget."

"Then I must lose my friend," said Mrs Moxton, determinedly. "I really cannot meet you on these terms. I am a newly-made widow, not a possible wife for you."

"But in the future?"

"Let the future look after itself," she cried
petulantly. "What we have to do, is to attend to the present. You wish to help me. Do so by leaving this crime to be punished by Heaven."

"But your smirched name?"

"I can bear that. I have borne worse things. Oh, do not look so astonished, Dr Ellis. I have had a queer up-and-down, topsy-turvy sort of life. Some day I may tell it to you, but we don't know each other well enough for that yet. If I find that you deserve my confidence—" She broke off the sentence abruptly. "Never mind that now. I have work to do. Yes! I shall take your advice about calling on Mr Busham. This very day I shall call and ask him about the will. Could you meet me here at three o'clock, doctor?"

Ellis felt his breath taken away by the boldness of the demand. "If you wish me to come."

"Of course I wish it or I would not ask. Remember, doctor, you are my friend. No, don't repeat that folly. We are comrades at present, nothing more. You do not understand me now. You will when I explain."

"Will you ever explain?"

"Yes! No! I can't say. So much depends upon what kind of a man I find you to be. Now, go, please, as I must dress for my visit. Mind, I shall expect you at three o'clock, to tell you the result of my interview."

"At three o'clock," repeated Ellis, earnestly, and so they parted.

When the doctor found himself in the broad, cheerful sunshine of the Jubilee Road he was not
quite certain if he was asleep or awake. To him Mrs Moxton was more of an enigma than the murder itself. He could not understand her attitude, nor could he guess what motive she had in acting thus strangely. She was apparently pleased that he loved her; she was angry at his abrupt declaration; he could not gain her confidence; yet she requested him to meet her at three o'clock to ask his advice about her visit. What was he to understand from such a medley of contradictions? He sought in his own mind for every possible explanation, but could find none, so concluding that it was the more sensible course to possess his soul in patience until this sphinx explained her own riddle, he returned home. Here, to his surprise, he found a friend of the morbid lady's come to consult him about her heart, and in the joy of such promise of an increasing practice he forgot Mrs Moxton and her eccentricities. In a similar situation a woman would not have forgotten, but Byron's lines give the reason for that:

"Man's love is of man's life a thing apart;
'Tis woman's whole existence."

Nevertheless, when his mind was less occupied with material things, the feeling about Mrs Moxton revived, and he waited impatiently for the hour of three. It would seem that circumstances were about to involve him in the drama—it might be tragedy—of this woman's life, and he felt eager for the call to step on the stage. What part would be assigned to him he could not guess. Was he
to be the husband of the heroine or merely the friend, or would he pose as the foil to that shadowy lover in whose existence and guilt Cass believed? Altogether Ellis was in the dark, afraid to venture forward for fear of the unknown. He waited for a hand to draw him on to his doom—in plain English, for the hand and guidance of Mrs Moxton. These strange thoughts, passing through the doctor's mind, made him fear that its usually accurate balance was disturbed.

Shortly after three o'clock struck from the bran-new brick tower of the bran-new Dukesfield church, he saw her walking briskly down the road. Even in his pre-occupation he noted her trim figure, the decided way in which she set down and lifted her feet, and the general air of alert resolution which stamped her whole being. Here was a woman of mind, of decision, of character, with few feminine failings, and more than ever Ellis wondered at her past history, as related by herself at the inquest. He began to suspect that there might be something after all in the ideas of Harry Cass. Mrs Basket declared the woman "was a deep 'un." That also might be true.

"Good news! good news!" cried Mrs Moxton, when she arrived. "I have seen Mr Busham and I am right. Old Moxton made a will leaving the property to Edgar."

"But he is dead. How do you stand now?"

The widow let the gate click behind her, and walked up the path with a wrinkled brow, betokening thought. "That depends upon Edgar's will."
"Did he make one?"

"I think so. In one of his good humours he made a will leaving all his property to me. I believe the will was signed and witnessed at Monte Carlo. He told me about it, but I never saw it."

"Then how do you know it exists?"

"Edgar told me of it," repeated Mrs Moxton. "It will no doubt be in his despatch-box, or in this room."

By this time the pair were again in the cheerful parlour, and her gaze was fixed upon a well-filled bookcase. "I should not wonder if it was hidden amongst the books," said Mrs Moxton, pensively.

Ellis showed some amazement at this strange remark. "Why should he have put a valuable document amongst his books, Mrs Moxton?"

The widow sat down and signed to Ellis to do likewise. "My dear doctor, do you know anything about drunken men?"

This was even a stranger remark than the former. "I have come into contact with them," said Ellis, with a slight smile, "but what has that to do with this will?"

"More than you think," she retorted. "Edgar was never very sane at the best of times; but when drunk, as he often was, he took leave of his senses completely. Drunken men, as I daresay you know, have each their various idiosyncrasies which display the true animal within. Edgar's indwelling animal was a magpie."

"Oh!" The doctor seized on her meaning at once. "You believe that he concealed things!"

"Yes! When drunk he would hide his watch,
chain, jewellery, money, and when sober could not remember where he put them. I was set to hunt them out, and often found them in that book-case. Lately he took to hiding papers, so it is not unlikely he concealed his will. However, it may be in his despatch-box after all. That is in the bedroom, and I have the keys, so I shall go and look. In the meantime, doctor, would you turn out those books and see if it is concealed there?"

"Certainly; but one moment, Mrs Moxton," he added as she was about to leave the room; "if your husband has left no will, what becomes of the property?"

"Half goes to Mr Busham as the next-of-kin, and half to me as the widow, but, of course, I get all if Edgar left a will in my favour."

"Mr Busham won't like that."

"No!" Mrs Moxton frowned. "I'll tell you what he is," she burst out; "a mean, grasping miser. His manner to me was most disagreeable. I feel sure he suspects me of the murder. While he can get half the property I daresay he will hold his tongue, but if all comes to me I am certain he will make trouble."

"About the murder?"

"Yes, but I am not afraid. I can defend myself, and I have you for a friend."

"But what can I do?"

"Defend me!" Mrs Moxton threw a searching glance at the amazed face of Ellis. "Look for the will," she said abruptly, and left the room.

By this time the doctor's capacity for astonish-
ment was completely exhausted. Mrs Moxton's conduct became more extraordinary at every interview, and it was worse than useless trying to account for it. Only further acquaintance and observation could explain her personality and apparently purposeless remarks; therefore Ellis, taking this sensible view, devoted himself to the task of searching for the will.

The bookcase was of white-painted wood, of no great size, and with three shelves. French novels in yellow and green paper covers predominated and Ellis tumbled these ruthlessly on to the floor. To all appearance the taste of the late Mr Moxton had not been over-refined, for the majority of the novels were by the most sensual Parisian authors. But mingled with these decadent works were a number of old-fashioned books, mostly educational, with here and there a slim old-fashioned volume of travels. For the first ten minutes of his search Ellis paid no attention to these, but looked for the will at the back of the shelves. It was not to be found in any one of them, but he came across an amazing number of music-hall programmes, headed: "The Merryman, Viper Street, Soho." Evidently someone had been an assiduous attendant at this place of amusement, if the programmes were to be taken as evidence.

"Moxton!" said Ellis to himself, when this idea occurred to him. "So this is where he went night after night." He examined the dates of the programmes. "Yes! all within the last three months, one night after another. H'm! Mrs Moxton said
A Fresh Discovery

that she did not know where her husband went, yet these programmes must have informed her even if he held his tongue. Extraordinary woman! I can't understand her actions or denials."

Failing to find the will on the shelves, Ellis examined the books. One of these, a fat little brown volume, entitled, *The Universal Informer*, was inscribed on the flyleaf, "Janet Gordon, from her father, Thomas Gordon, Edinburgh," both of which names were unknown to Ellis. The book opened of itself at a turned-down page, on which was set forth a list of the towns and cities of the world. Now, what struck Ellis as strange was the fact that the turned-down page was towards the end of the list, and contained the towns beginning with "Z." This was one of the letters concealed in the blood signs, and to say the least it is not a letter generally used. Wondering if he was on the track of a discovery, Ellis glanced down the page. His eye caught the word "lizard," and he eagerly read the paragraph in which it was contained. Four lines informed him that "Zirknitz is a town in Austria, and that in its environs is found a peculiar species of lizard." Ellis reflected. "On the arm was the letter 'Z' concealed in a sign, and the representation of a lizard. This book, which opens of itself at this particular page, mentions an Austrian town called Zirknitz and a peculiar lizard. There must be some connection between the murder and this paragraph, but I can't see it myself. What can an Austrian town have to do with the crime in Jubilee Road?"
Finding no answer to this question he pursued his search. The old-fashioned books seemed to belong to Thomas Gordon, of Edinburgh, but in one or two he had inscribed their presentation to his "daughter Janet," or to his "daughter Laura."

"Laura!" murmured Ellis. "That is Mrs Moxton's name. Perhaps she is the Laura Gordon who owns these books. In fact, she must be. If so, she has a sister Janet; it is the first I have heard of her sister. Hullo, what's this?"

"This" was a novel of Catulle Mendes, which had a name scribbled in pencil on the outside. The name was "Rudolph Zirknitz."

"R. U. Z.," said the doctor, staring at the pencilled autograph; "so it stands for Rudolph Zirknitz, who evidently takes his name and the totem of the lizard from that Austrian town."

At this moment Mrs Moxton entered with a disconsolate air. "Have you found the will, doctor?" she inquired; "it is not in the despatch-box."

"No, Mrs Moxton, I have not found the will, but I have learnt the name of the man who killed your husband."

The widow became as grey as the wall-paper, and leant against the door for support. "What? Who? I—I do not understand," she gasped.

"The murderer is called Rudolph Zirknitz," explained Ellis. "Now, who is Rudolph Zirknitz?"

Mrs Moxton made no attempt to answer this question. Closing her eyes she slipped quietly on to the floor, and lay at the feet of Ellis, white and insensible.
When Cass returned from his day's work he found Ellis impatiently expecting him. The doctor looked ill and worried. On hearing his friend's footstep he rushed into the passage and half-led, half-dragged him into the room. Harry was much surprised at this unusual excitement on the part of Ellis.

"What the deuce is the matter, Bob? You are as pale as a muffin, and your hair is all over the—"

"Harry! Harry! Never mind my looks. I am nearly worried out of my life by this—this murder."

"Or by Mrs Moxton—have you made any discoveries?"

"Yes. I have discovered the meaning of the letters R. U. Z., and of the lizard sign."

"By Jove!" Cass in his turn became excited. "Well, well, go on—go on."

"The letters are the initials of a man's name."

"The murderer's name?"

"I don't say that, and yet he might be the criminal. I said so to—"
The Crimson Cryptogram

"But the name, Bob, the name?"
"Rudolph Zirknitz."
"H'm! A foreigner?"
"An Austrian. He takes his name from a town called Zirknitz, in Austria, which has in its environs a peculiar sort of lizard found nowhere else."

"Ho! ho! Now comes in the 'totem' of our assassin. How did you find this out?"

The doctor sat down and rapidly detailed his discoveries, and how they were brought about by the search for the will. "I revived Mrs Moxton from her faint," he concluded, "but she refused to answer a single question. In the end I was forced to leave her, and for the last few hours I have been in a state of distraction. I am so glad you are back. Put your sharp wits to work, Harry, and tell me what it all means."

"I told you before," replied Cass, coolly, "and you flew in a rage with me, saying that I had no grounds for the statement. Now you have learned the grounds, and I repeat my belief. This Zirknitz is the lover of Mrs Moxton, and she is shielding him from the consequences of having killed her husband—no doubt at her request."

"I can't—I won't believe it of that poor woman, Harry."

"Facts are stubborn things, Bob. The case is as clear as noonday to me."

Ellis, still believing in the innocence of the woman he loved, would have replied somewhat violently to this declaration, but that Mrs Basket
entered with the supper. It was now seven o'clock, for since Cass had been appointed critic to the *Early Bird* they had altered the meal from nine to seven. In a few minutes Mrs Basket, not being encouraged to chatter on this particular night, left the room wondering what could be the matter with her gentlemen. Ellis trifled with his food, feeling too worried to enjoy it, but the less nervous Cass did full justice to Mrs Basket's idea of an Irish stew. Between mouthfuls he talked and answered the doctor's objections.

"It is all nonsense Mrs Basket saying that Mrs Moxton had no visitors. Both she and her husband, from what you tell me, must be shady people. Poor devil! He is dead, so let us say no ill of him. But Mrs Moxton. I daresay she received visitors at night when Mrs Basket and her tradesmen spies were not about."

"You have no grounds for making such an accusation," fumed Ellis.

"Keep calm, Bob. I am speaking without prejudice. No grounds! Well, if I have not, why did Mrs Moxton faint at the mention of that name? Why did she lie about the signs? Why did she feign ignorance of the place where her husband went every night? She must have known. I tell you, Bob, that Mrs Moxton is fighting every inch, and I daresay she is angry at your persistence in following up the case. Come, now, own up! Did she not ask you to leave the matter alone?"

"Well, she did," admitted the doctor, with
reluctance. "I confess that I do not understand Mrs Moxton. Her acts are doubtful, her words are strange, and I agree with you that she knows more about this matter than she chooses to confess. All the same, Harry, I am not an absolute fool, even where women are concerned; and there is something in Mrs Moxton's looks and manner which satisfies me that she is a true, good, pure, brave woman."

"H'm! her conduct does not justify the use of a single adjective of that sort."

"I know! I know! All the same, I believe in her."

"Because you are in love, and love is blind."

"Rubbish! I don't believe in that worn-out saying, I can see Mrs Moxton's imperfections as plainly as you can. She is not a saint by any manner of means,—but a sinner? No, Harry, I cannot believe she is what you make her out. If she inspired the murder, why does she not run away?"

"Because she is fighting for her fortune, old boy."

"But she is not even certain that a will is in existence."

"So she says," replied Cass, pouring himself out some beer; "but I beg leave to doubt that artless pose. It is my firm conviction that she knew of old Moxton's repentance and eleventh-hour testament, that she got her husband to make his will in her favour, and that she induced her lover, Zirknitz, to put him out of the way so that they
What the Cabman knew

might enjoy the money together. It is to reap the fruits of the crime that she stays on here, Bob.”

“That is all theory.”

“So was my earlier statement, yet it has been proved true by yourself. I daresay M. Zirknitz came to see Mrs Moxton in the evening when her husband was at the Merryman Music-Hall.”

“I never heard of that place, Harry.”

“Perhaps not. It has been in existence only for two years. The usual variety entertainment, you know. A man called Otto Schwartz keeps it.”

“A German?”

“A typical lager-beer German. Not at all a bad fellow, either.”

Dr Ellis slowly lighted his pipe. “I wonder why Moxton went so regularly to that place?” he said reflectively.

“Well, he might have gone there to make love to one of the ladies who do the turns, but I rather think,” said Cass, significantly, “that his object was to gamble. From all his wife says about Monte Carlo and other places the man was a confirmed card-sharper.”

“But gambling is not allowed in London.”

“No doubt. A good many vices are not allowed in this most immaculate of cities, in this Tartuffe of capitals, but they exist all the same. I don’t know for certain, nobody does, but it is rumoured that there is a secret gambling-hell connected with the apparently innocent music-hall of Herr Schwartz’s.”

Ellis glanced at his watch. “It is getting on for
eight o'clock," he remarked. "Let us go to Soho to-night."

"If you like. I have no particular engagement. But your reason?"

"I want to learn all I can about Moxton. If he went there to gamble, Herr Schwartz will know of him. Also we might learn something of Zirknitz. As the book proves, the autograph also, he was a friend of Moxton's, so it is not unlikely he went with him to this secret hell you talk of."

"Very good; let us go at once," said Cass, rising.

"But as you and I seem to have become amateur detectives, let us conduct our case with due discretion. There is one piece of evidence we have overlooked."

"What is that?"

"The cab-stand."

"The cab-stand! And what has that to do with the murder?"

"Bob! Bob! You can write about eyes and their diseases, but you cannot make use of your own optics. It is probable that the murderer of Moxton, this Zirknitz, wished to get away as speedily as possible from the scene of his crime, so it is equally probable that he made for the cab-stand."

"Or the railway station."

"That is much further away. The cab-stand is comparatively near the Jubilee Road."

"But no cabman came forward at the inquest."

"I daresay. No cabman had any right to suspect his fare of murder. But we will question
What the Cabman knew

those on the rank before we go to Soho. Let us find out if Mr Zirknitz took a cab between a quarter-past and half-past eleven.”

Ellis shrugged his shoulders. “As you please. But it seems to me futile to waste time in asking questions which cannot be answered.”

“We have yet to learn if our time is being wasted,” retorted Cass, and ending the conversation for the time being, the young men left the house.

By this time Cass had become quite eager to solve the mystery, and willingly placed his quick wit and indomitable perseverance at the service of his friend. He admired Ellis greatly, and there was quite a David and Jonathan feeling between the two. It annoyed Cass to think that the doctor might throw away his life on such a woman as he believed Mrs Moxton to be; and he undertook the case in the hope of proving her unworthiness. At the present moment appearances were decidedly against her, yet in the face of such black evidence Ellis still clung to his belief in her. This instinctive feeling, based on no reasonable foundation, was so insisted upon by Ellis that his friend became quite angry.

“It is the most sensible men who become the greatest fools on occasions,” he said, with the rough speech of intimate friendship. “You have known this woman only three weeks, and you are absolutely ignorant of her past life save what she has chosen to tell you. The circumstantial and actual evidence points to her not only as a
shady person, but as a positive criminal, yet in the face of it all you look upon her as a saint."

"No, I don't. I told you so before; but I feel sure she is a good woman. I can give you no reason, but I myself am satisfied without one. As to your evidence, Harry, you know the most innocent person can be wrongly accused, can be even hanged on evidence which, false as it is, appears sufficient. There is the Lesurques case, for—"

"Oh! the Courier of Lyons. I know. And I can quote you at least a dozen others. All the same, I don't believe in Mrs Moxton."

"Well, I do. For all you know she may be protecting her sister."

Cass stopped short. "Has she a sister?" he asked.

"I believe so. At least, in the books I told you about, Thomas Gordon had written the names of his daughters Laura and Janet Gordon. The first is, of course, Mrs Moxton, the second name must be that of her sister."

"Perhaps. But the sister may be dead, may be absent from England. In any event, I do not see how you can connect her at all with the murder."

The doctor had no reply to this pertinent observation, as, after all, his remark about the sister had been made vaguely and without any ulterior meaning. A turn of the street brought them to the cab-stand at which Cass, as a journalist, was well known. He immediately began to question the men in a chaffing, popular way.
What the Cabman knew

They were ready enough to answer his questions, the more so as these were concerning the murder; but one and all declared that no particular man had hired a cab between eleven and twelve on the night of August 16th.

"Old Ike is the one to know, though," said a red-faced cabman. "He 'ave a memory like 'is own 'orse."

There was a murmur of assent at this, and old Ike, shaky, lean, ancient, more like a grey wolf than a man, was routed out of the shelter in which he was refreshing himself with tea.

"A fare on that murder night, sir? Lor', I don't quite know wot t' say 'bout that. 'Leven an' twelve was it? Well, now, sir, the chapsies at that time were at the station waiting the thayater trains. Weren't you, chapsies?"

"Ah! that we were, but you worn't, Ike," said the red-faced cabman, replying for the others. "You never does go fur them late fares."

"I wos alone on the rank, Mr Cass, now I thinks of it, and I 'ad a fare to Pimlico, to Geneva Square, where that Silent 'Ouse murder took place."

"What was the man like?" asked Ellis, eagerly.

"It weren't no man, sir, but a gal, a short gal with a grey dress and a black cloak, straw 'at, fair 'air, plump figger, and small 'ands."

"Why, Cass, he is describing Mrs Moxton," said Ellis, wonderingly. "At what time did she take your cab, Ike?"

"Just afore arf-past 'leven, sir. Came tearing
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down the road wild-like and crying fit to break 'er 'eart. Jus' tumbled into m'keb, she did, an' tole me to drive t' Pimlico."

"Mrs Moxton was in our room at half-past eleven," said Cass, when finding that this was all the information obtainable they walked away. "The woman can't be Mrs Moxton. Yet the description, fair hair, trim figure, might pass for her. I wonder who she is?"

"I know, Harry. I was right, after all. The woman who cried and fled like a guilty person was Janet Gordon, the sister of Mrs Moxton."
CHAPTER VIII

A MUSIC-HALL STAR

It would seem, then, from this fresh discovery, that a third person was implicated in the matter, and that person a woman. Cass and Ellis argued the matter at great length in the train, and continued their argument as they drove from St James’s Station to Soho. The doctor was convinced from old Ike’s description that the woman could be no other than Mrs Moxton’s sister, but Cass was more than doubtful.

“It might be a general resemblance,” he said. “Besides, if Janet Gordon came to see Mrs Moxton on that night, why does not her sister say so?”

“She is shielding her, I tell you,” insisted Ellis. “That accounts for the way in which she keeps silent even to me, whom she knows as her friend.”

“Why should Mrs Moxton shield her sister, Bob? You don’t suspect Janet of the crime?”

“Oh, no. From the blood-signs it is plain that Zirknitz murdered him. I don’t know what to think. But it is plain that Janet was at the house that night, and perhaps she fled in terror on seeing the crime committed. However, I shall ask Mrs Moxton about the matter.”
"She will tell you nothing."

"Now that I have found out so much I think she will, if only to exonerate her sister," retorted Ellis. "If she refuses, I shall go to Geneva Square, in Pimlico, and interview Miss Gordon myself. She may have seen Zirknitz kill the poor devil, and then have fled to avoid being mixed up in the matter."

"Well," said Cass, as the cab drew up before a brilliantly-lighted portal, "it seems to me that Zirknitz is the man to catch and question. We may hear about him here, as it appears he was a companion of the dead man. But the case gets more involved at every fresh discovery. First we suspect Mrs Moxton, then our suspicions rest on the Austrian, finally an unknown sister seems to be implicated in the matter. It will be a queer story when all things are brought to light. I hope we shall find Zirknitz here."

"If he is a wise man you will not," replied Ellis, as they alighted. "Remember, a fac-simile of these blood-signs appeared in all the papers. Zirknitz may know the cypher, and, having read his own initials, has, no doubt, made himself scarce."

"H'm! There is something in that. We shall see."

The music-hall was vast and palatial, with a domed roof, two galleries, and much ornate decoration. The seats were cushioned with red velvet, the promenades were carpeted. In many corners tall mirrors reflected back the moving crowd, and
A Music-Hall Star

everywhere there was gilding, light, crystal and colour. The whole place was filled with changing hues like a king-opal, and glittered with overpowering splendour in the floods of white radiance pouring from clusters of electric lamps. A fine orchestra was playing a swinging waltz, the last movement of a ballet, and the stage was filled with a multitude of gyrating, pirouetting women, constantly moving and tossing in gorgeous costumes, like a bed of tulips in a high wind. For a few moments the two men, coming out of the dark night, were dazzled by the glare, and stunned by the crash of the music and babel of voices. Cass drew his friend aside to a marble-topped table and ordered drinks while he looked at the programme. Suddenly he caught sight of a man he knew and jumped up to shake hands.

"Hullo! Schwartz," he cried. "Here is a friend of mine I wish to introduce. Captain Garret, I hope I see you well?"

The German was a fat, fair man, quiet in looks and dress, and with a somewhat careworn face. His companion, a tall, dissipated, military gentleman, in accurate evening dress, answered to the name of Garret, and bowed distantly. This latter had a bad expression and a pair of shifty eyes.

"Ah, mine goot Cass," said Schwartz, with a beaming smile, "you haf not peen here for dis long time. And your frend?"

"Dr Ellis," said Cass; "a well-known medical man, who has written a standard work on 'Diseases of the Eye.'"
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Ellis laughed, and was about to protest against having this greatness thrust upon him, when Captain Garret turned his worn face towards him with a look of keen interest.

"Dr Ellis," said he, in an abrupt voice, "glad to see you, very glad. Have read your book, so has Schwartz here."

"Dat is zo, mine frend. It is a goot book, and I am glad zat you gome here, doctor. Why did you not zay you gome, Cass? I would haf given tickets."

"Both of you have read my book?" said the doctor, considerably taken aback by this unexpected fame. "In Heaven's name why? It is unusual for laymen to read a treatise of that kind."

"Ah," replied Garret, with infinite sadness, "Schwartz and I are old friends, and we have good reason to read your book." He paused for a moment, then added abruptly: "My daughter is blind."

"Ach! Zat liddle Hilda. She has gatterack of the eyes, poor anchel."

"My daughter has cataract of the eyes, doctor," translated Garret, "and we have tried every surgeon in Europe to cure them, but without success. Your book impressed us greatly, and now that we have met you I hope you will come and see my poor girl."

"Come and zee her effry tay, doctor. I vill pay money. If zat—" Schwartz never finished his speech. At that moment a tumult, created by some drunken man, called him away, and with a nod to Ellis he hurried off. The Captain waited
only long enough to thrust his card into the doctor’s hand, and also departed, while the two friends resumed their seats at the table.

"Captain W. E. Garret, Goethe Cottage, Alma Road, Parkmere," read Ellis from the card. "Why, that is the next suburb to Dukesfield."

"Oh, Schwartz lives in that quarter, does he?"

"No! not Schwartz—Garret."

"That is the same thing," replied Cass, sipping his brandy and soda; "they live together—have done so for years. Garret has the gentlemanly looks, and Schwartz the money."

"A strange pair. Who are they?"

"A couple of adventurers. Schwartz is the better of the two, though, for, from what I hear, Garret was kicked out of the army for cheating at cards. The German started this show two years ago, and took Garret to live with him; why, I don’t know, unless it is that he is so fond of the daughter."

"Hilda Garret," said Ellis, recalling the name; "is she blind?"

"I believe so. Schwartz is an old bachelor, and has given all his heart to the poor girl. She is sixteen years old, I believe, and he takes care both of her and her father."

"Garret seems to be fond of his child."

"Oh, that is a pose for the benefit of Schwartz. If he didn’t love Hilda the German would kick him out. Garret killed his wife with ill-treatment, and was on the fair way to exterminate Hilda when Schwartz interposed and became her good angel. Now the old scoundrel, Garret, behaves
well to her, knowing that in such way he can
manage Schwartz."

"You seem to know all about it, Cass!"

"I hear all the gossip, Bob. It may be true or
it may not, but I am certain that Schwartz and
Garret have been together these ten years carrying
on their rascalities."

"Are they rascals?"

Cass laughed and nodded. "Rumour says very
much so, but Schwartz is the more lovable
scoundrel of the two. There is something pathetic
in the way in which he clings to that blind girl."

"'There lives some soul of good in all things
evil,'" quoted Ellis. "Well, I shall call at Goethe
Cottage and see what I can do for the girl. If I
can cure her after all the European surgeons have
failed it will be a feather in my cap. Business is
rolling in at last, old fellow."

"About time," said Cass, in satisfied tones.
"You'll ride in your carriage yet, Bob."

The doctor laughed at this prophecy. It did
not seem so impossible of realisation now as it had
once been. Then he turned his attention to the
stage, on which a stout lady in the shortest of skirts
was favouring the audience with a song and inter­
polated dance of the orthodox pattern:—

"For I 'ave a little feller on the string,
(Dance)
And on me 'and he's put a little ring,
(Dance)
To the little chorch this little gal he'll taike,
She'll kiss 'im for his own sweet saike,
And he'll love 'er as 'is little bit of caike."
(Dance).
"That is Polly Horley," said Cass, referring to the singer of this gem. "She is a great favourite here."

"I don't wonder," replied Ellis, drearily; "the song is senseless enough to please even this brainless audience. Why must a music-hall ditty consist of bad English and worse grammar, delivered with a Cockney accent? Polly Horley! I know her! When I was house surgeon at St Jude's Hospital she was brought in with a broken leg. We were excellent friends."

"Or great pals, as Miss Horley would put it. Let us send round your card and ask for an interview."

"For what reason? I don't want to see that stout female."

"My dear fellow, Polly has been a star here since Schwartz opened the hall, and she, if anyone, will know about Moxton and Zirknitz."

"By Jove! that is true, Harry. You are a better detective than I am. Get that waiter there to take round our cards."

A small fee soon accomplished this, and the venal waiter vanished, shortly to reappear with the message that Miss Horley would be pleased to see Dr Ellis and friend in her dressing-room after the singing of her great patriotic song. Almost immediately afterwards she marched to the footlights in the costume of Britannia, and carrying the Union Jack. Then followed the usual piece of Jingoism about "never shall be slaves, while the banner waves, earth is thick with British graves," etc., etc. The flag was duly waved at the end of each verse, and the audience, as in duty bound,
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joined in with imperial ardour. While Miss Horley treated the listeners to an extra verse bearing on the local situation, Ellis and Harry Cass were guided into the back regions of the stage by a smart page-boy. He led them through a wilderness of scenes, along dark passages, and past rooms thronged with ballet girls, ultimately ushering them into a small apartment, barely furnished and flooded with unshaded electric light. Here the visitors were accommodated with two chairs, and shortly Britannia, flag and all, made her noisy appearance. She literally threw herself on the doctor.

"I'm that glad to see you again, doc," cried Britannia, effusively. "Where have you been hiding all this time?" Then, without waiting for an answer, she turned to Harry: "You're a stranger, too, Mr Cass, but better late than never. I am glad to see you. You'll both have drinks, I s'pose?"

"No, thank you, Miss Horley. We just wish to congratulate you on your new song."

"Ah, it knocks 'em, don't it?" said the fair Polly. "They never let me off without a triple encore. You are looking ill, doctor. It's that 'orridd murder, eh?"

"What murder?"

"Why, the Dukesfield murder, silly! I saw all about it in the papers; your name was there, too, and I said: 'Here's my dear old pal Ellis, who mended my spar.'"

"Oh, you said that, did you?"

"Rather. It was queer that you should be the doctor to see after that poor chap. I call him poor chap because he is dead," explained Miss Horley,
A Music-Hall Star

"but I never did like that Moxton. A miserly, insulting crab-stick."

"Oh, so you knew Moxton?"

"Of course I did. He came here nearly every night. What is more, he took his wife from here."

Ellis was painfully excited. "Mrs Moxton? Was she a music-hall singer?"

"Not she," replied Polly, disdainfully. "She hadn't the brains to sing. She typed for a living, I believe, but her sister was a programme-seller here."

"Janet Gordon?"

"Oh, you know her, Mr Cass, do you?"

"No, I don't, but I have heard of her."

"Then I'll bet you heard nothing but good of her," cried Miss Horley, warmly. "That girl is as square a woman as ever lived. If it hadn't been for her, goodness knows what would have become of that silly little Laura."

"I don't call Mrs Moxton silly," said the doctor, annoyed by this description.

"Oh, don't you, doctor, then I do. She was silly to marry that beast of a Moxton, the horrid little cad. It was against Janet's wish that she did so, and Janet was right. A nice mess she made of her life. He neglected her, and came here to make love to me—me, a married woman with five of a family. But I slapped his face for him," said Polly, complacently, "that I did."

"Mrs Moxton met her husband here?"

"Yes. Janet let her come to the hall sometimes, and she met Moxton. Both girls are decent, doc, so don't say that I run 'em down. Janet is a girl
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in a thousand. She left us a week or two ago. I expect she has gone to live with her sister now. They will have old Moxton's money, I daresay."

"Who do you think killed Moxton?" asked Cass.

"My dear boy, ask me something easier," said Polly, applying the powder-puff to her nose. "I haven't the slightest idea. He was nasty enough to have any quantity of enemies."

"Do you know a man called Zirknitz, Miss Horley?"

Polly turned round with a smile. "Do I know the nose on my face?" she said lightly. "Of course I do. It is funny you should talk of him, for he is coming to see me in a few minutes. If you'll wait, I'll introduce him to you."

Ellis and Cass exchanged looks of congratulation at this good fortune, and the unsuspicious Polly, little thinking she was weaving a halter for a man's neck, babbled on. "He might have found out the truth if he'd only gone to Dukesfield on that night as he intended."

"Did he go there?" asked Ellis, eagerly.

"No. Janet was there on that night. She got leave from Schwartz to see her sister. Zirknitz, who is a friend of Janet's, intended calling for her to take her home, but Moxton got drunk here, and Zirknitz didn't go lest there should be a row. So—come in." She broke off as there was a sharp knock.

The door opened, and a handsome, light-haired young man appeared.

"Oh! here you are," cried Polly, jovially. "Doc, this is Mr Rudolph Zirknitz."
CHAPTER IX

THE AUSTRIAN

Cass and Ellis examined the new-comer swiftly as they returned his bow. It was a foreign bow, including a smart click of the heels. Zirknitz was tall, slim, and remarkably handsome, his good looks being set off to the fullest advantage by the quiet perfection of his evening dress. He wore no jewellery, the whitest of linen, the neatest of bows, and a silk hat with a wonderful lustre. As the night was chilly he had on a fur-lined coat with sable cuffs and collar, and his slender hands, encased in grey gloves, held a gold-topped bamboo. Altogether Mr, or Monsieur, or Herr Zirknitz was, to all appearances, a man who valued his looks as part of his stock-in-trade to enable him to carry on his business of adventurer. But, in spite of his care, the hoof betrayed the devil, for there was a rakish, fast air about him which stamped him as dangerous. Ellis thought that such a scamp would not draw the line at murder, so long as he could save himself from punishment.

"I am charmed to meet your friends, madame," said Zirknitz, in good enough English, but with a pronounced foreign accent. "And the names?"

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"This is Mr Cass; that gent is Dr Ellis."

The smile died away on the Austrian's lips. "Ellis!" he said, in a hesitating manner, "and a doctor—of Dukesfield?"

"Yes, M. Zirknitz," replied Ellis, grimly, "of Dukesfield."

"You saw the body of my poor friend Moxton?"

"Yes. Were you a friend of his?"

"The best friend he had, monsieur. If I knew who killed him so cruelly, I would spend my life trying to bring him to justice. Helas!"

"H'm!" repeated Cass. "So you think a man killed Moxton?"

"I go by the evidence at the inquest," said Zirknitz, with a bow. "The doctor explained at the inquest that a man must have struck the blow."

"I said that indeed, M. Zirknitz. But a woman may be mixed up in the matter."

"Here, all of you!" cried Polly, with impatient good humour, "I can't have you three talking here all night. I want to dress and go home to my chicks. Rudolph, you must come and see me on another night. Mr Cass, doctor, look up yours truly whenever you get a chance, and good-night to you, my dears."

In this way the star bustled them out of her dressing-room, and the three men repaired to the front of the house. It seemed, indeed, that Zirknitz was inclined to leave them, but after a glance at the haggard face of Ellis he changed his mind. Cass invited him to sit at their table, which he did, and accepted a lemon-squash.
"I never take anything stronger," he said gracefully. "It is bad for the nerves; it makes the hand shake."

"I can understand that as applying to a doctor like myself, M. Zirknitz, but to you—how does it apply to you? What profession do you follow that requires nerve?"

"I play cards, doctor. I earn my living in that way; and, let me tell you, one who does so must have a steady hand, a clear brain, and nerves of steel."

As he spoke, Schwartz, all alone, strolled past. He nodded to the Austrian, but frowned slightly when he saw him with Ellis. Then pausing by the table, he tapped Cass on the shoulder with a plump, beringed hand.

"Mr Cass, mine goot frend, vill you with me gome? I haf pisness with you that gannot wait."

"Is there money in it, Schwartz?"

The German cast another look at Zirknitz, who was trifling with a cigarette which he took out of a handsome silver case. "I dink zo," he said pointedly.

"In that case I'll come. Wait for me here, Ellis. M. Zirknitz, I wish you good-evening," and Cass went off in high spirits with the fat Schwartz, so that Ellis and the Austrian were left alone.

The table at which they were seated was placed at a comparatively secluded corner, out of the crush of people and the glare of the light. Yet, quiet though it was, Zirknitz, after a glance round, appeared to be annoyed by the position.
“Will you come to my box, monsieur?” he said, rising. “I fancy it is more comfortable there.”

“But my friend Cass?”

“I shall instruct the waiter to bring him to the box when he returns here. Come, doctor,” added Zirknitz, in a whisper, “I wish to speak with you—about the murder.”

A thrill ran though Ellis as he followed the Austrian up the stairs. Was the man about to confess to his crime? That was hardly probable. Perhaps he intended to explain the cypher. Yet that, also, was doubtful. By this time Ellis had seated himself in a shady corner of the box. He was thoroughly puzzled, and could conceive of no reason why Zirknitz should seek this interview. The young man closed the door, removed his coat and hat, and offered Ellis a cigarette. The doctor refused on the plea that he had smoked enough, for he could not bring himself to accept anything from the hands of M. Zirknitz. They were those of a card-sharper, a swindler—a murderer! In this belief Ellis decided to let the Austrian do most of the talking, hoping to trap him—if not into confession at least into damaging admissions. His own rôle was to say nothing—to know nothing and to give M. Zirknitz a sufficiency of rope to weave a halter. The situation was uncomfortable, and Ellis felt as though he were dealing with a graceful but dangerous tiger which required dexterous and diplomatic handling.

“I am glad to meet you, doctor,” said Zirknitz,
in his quiet voice. "Indeed, had I not done so here by chance I should have called on you."

"With reference to the murder?"

"Say with reference to Mrs Moxton and her husband's will. Also, monsieur, with reference to her husband's cousin. Ah, scélérat!"

"Busham?"

"Ah, yes, that is the name. Mr Richard Busham, the advocate."

"Do you know him?"

"Moi, monsieur? Non! but I hope to know him if he does not behave well to my sister."

Dr Ellis leant back in his chair with a gasp of astonishment. "Your sister!"

"Mrs Moxton, or, rather, I should say, my half sister. Did you not know? Quel dommage!"

"How should I know?" muttered Ellis, not yet recovered from his amazement.

"Because my sister, Mrs Moxton, told me that you were her best friend."

"I hope I am her friend. But I confess that I am astonished to hear that you are her brother. Are you not a foreigner?"

"Yes, to speak truly there is no blood relationship. Mrs Gordon, the mother of my sister, married my father, Adolph Zirknitz, who was a widower. The marriage of our parents is the bond between us."

"I see. And you have two sisters?"

"Oui! Mrs Moxton, who is Laura, and Miss Janet Gordon. Who told you?"

"Polly—Miss Horley."
"Ah," muttered Zirknitz, with a look of dis­pleasure, "she talks so much, oh, so very much."

Here was a discovery. The mythical lover of Mrs Moxton, the murderer of her husband, if the blood signs could be believed, turned out to be her brother by marriage. A queer sort of relationship truly, which Ellis had not met with before, still, one sufficiently close to put any question of love out of the case. If so, what was Zirknitz's motive for committing the crime? Ellis felt that he was floundering in deep water.

"Why do you tell me all this?" he asked suspiciously.

"Because Laura says that you are her friend, and will help her through with this matter."

"Of the murder."

"Partly, and of the will. Busham is not an easy man to deal with, and he is annoyed that old Moxton's money should go to Laura."

"How do you know it will go to her?"

"Laura told me she thought there was a will leaving it to her."

"M. Zirknitz," said Ellis, after a few moments of reflection, "will you answer a few questions?"

"Oh, yes, most certainly. I have much confidence in you, Dr Ellis."

The other did not reciprocate this sentiment, but had sense enough to keep his doubts to himself.

"You knew Moxton very well, I presume?"

"Oui da!" Zirknitz shrugged his shoulders; "but we were not friends. He was always drinking and quarrelling. I do not like such men."
“You disliked him?”
“No. I dislike no person. It is troublesome to do that.”
“Did you visit him at Dukesfield?”
“I did not. He hated me, you understand. Sometimes at night I went to see my sister when all was quiet.’

Ellis reflected that these visits must have been conducted with considerable secrecy, seeing that Mrs Basket was ignorant of them; but, to be sure, they took place after dark. “Were you at Myrtle Villa on the night of the murder?”
“No,” answered Zirknitz, coolly and promptly. “I thought of going for my sister Janet, but I changed my mind. Moxton was drunk, so I fancied he might make trouble.”

“Then you saw Moxton on that night?”
“Oh, most certainly! He was—he was—” Zirknitz hesitated.

“He was in the secret gambling-room of Schwartz,” finished Ellis, guessing his thoughts.

The Austrian’s face became as blank as a sheet of white paper. “But I do not understand,” he said with a shrug.

“Oh, well, as you please,” returned the doctor, coolly. “I know nothing about the matter myself. To continue where we left off. Where did you see Moxton last on the night he was killed?”

“Oh, at the bar in there,” Zirknitz was clever enough to take his cue; “he was drunk—not very bad—but noisy and troublesome. He drove away in a cab.”
"Right down to Dukesfield?"
"That I do not know. I went home to bed myself."

This was a lie, as Ellis shrewdly guessed, but the Austrian carried it off with an air which showed that he was an adept at falsehood.

"When did you hear of the murder?"
"I saw it next day in the papers."
"Then why did you not go to Dukesfield to help Mrs Moxton?"

"Why should I?" said Zirknitz, with a charming smile. "Murder is not pleasant. I don't like such things. And I might have got into trouble. I do not mind saying, doctor, that mine has been a life of adventure, and I care not for the police."

"You are afraid," said Ellis, wondering at the selfishness and brutal candour of the confession.
"Certainement! I am afraid. Oh, think badly of me if you like. I am so bad that I can be no worse. But I shall help my sister over the money."

"Because you hope to get some?"
"Eh! why not? I am extravagant."

Ellis felt a strong desire to kick this handsome, smiling rascal, but he doubted if even a kick would rouse any shame in him. The man seemed to have no moral sense; just such a soulless, brainless being who would commit a crime. The doctor began to look upon him as a psychological curiosity, and felt more convinced than ever that he had killed Moxton. The want of money supplied the motive.
The Austrian

"Who do you think murdered Moxton?" he asked, resolved to startle the man into a confession.


Ellis jumped up. "On what grounds do you make such an accusation?"

"Ah, I will not tell you that now," replied Zirknitz, coolly. "I do not yet know you well. If Mrs Moxton agrees I may do so."

"But if you will—"

"Oh, no, I tell nothing. See, the performance is over. We must go."

While the Austrian was reassuming coat and hat, Ellis felt sorely tempted to tell him about the blood signs and accuse him of killing Moxton. But as yet he had not sufficient evidence, and it was unwise to put Zirknitz on his guard until he could get him into a corner. Before he could decide, the Austrian nodded and, still smiling, slipped out of the box. Ellis stooped to pick up his stick and followed almost immediately, only to find that Zirknitz had vanished into the crowd. What his attitude was towards himself, the doctor could not quite determine. "I shall question Mrs Moxton about her brother," he reflected, as he went in search of Cass.

The journalist was in the office of Schwartz, but came out when he heard Ellis inquiring for him.

"How did you get on with Zirknitz?" he asked, as they hailed a hansom.
"Oh, pretty well. He talked a great deal, and declared that Busham killed Moxton."

"The deuce! How can he prove that?"

"I don't know. He refused to give any proof, and cleared out before I could question him further. What did Schwartz want to see you about?"

"To warn you and me against cultivating Zirknitz."

"Is he a bad egg?"

"The worst in the nest, from all accounts. I believe he killed Moxton on his own hook."

"He denies that he was at Dukesfield on that night."

"Denies it? Like his brass. Why, he left this hall to take Moxton home."

"Who says so?"

"Schwartz."

"Do you believe Schwartz?"

Cass drew a long, long breath. "I don't know what to believe," he said. "All these men form part of the gang of rogues. There is more devilry in this case than we know of, Bob."
CHAPTER X

A STRANGE DENIAL

On arriving at their lodgings, both men were too excited over the case to feel inclined for sleep. Instead of going to bed, they made up the fire, lighted their pipes, and continued the discussion commenced in the hansom. It was then that Ellis repeated the statement of Zirknitz anent his connection with Mrs Moxton and her sister.

“So you see, Harry, the man is Mrs Moxton’s brother, or half-brother—not her lover.”

“He is really no relation at all,” retorted Cass, rather amazed by what he heard. “Mrs Moxton’s mother married the father of Zirknitz, did she? That makes the young man brother by marriage, but so far as parentage and blood go, he could marry Mrs Moxton to-morrow.”

“I tell you the man isn’t her lover.”

“Possibly not, after what Zirknitz has told you—that is, if it is true. But he may be the murderer for all that.”

“Oh, I agree with you there,” said the doctor. “The creature is one of those selfish, soulless beings without moral feelings. So long as he could do so, without risking his neck, I quite believe he would go so far as murder. Then he is a spendthrift and a Sybarite; so to get this money it is just possible
he killed Moxton. But if he is guilty, Mrs Moxton does not know of his wickedness."

"Then why did she faint when his name was mentioned?"

"Because no doubt she is aware of his dangerous nature, and perhaps may think him guilty. What I mean is that, up to the moment I mentioned the name, she did not suspect Zirknitz."

"Humph!" said Cass, looking at the fire. "It might be so. What do you intend to do now? The situation is complicated."

"I will see Mrs Moxton and tell her that I have met Zirknitz."

"Will you tell her also that he accuses Busham?"

"Yes! because from what he said, Mrs Moxton may know the grounds upon which he bases his accusation."

"Then she must be inculpated in the crime," cried Cass, decisively.

"I don't see that," said Ellis, much annoyed. "Come what may, I believe that poor little woman is innocent."

"Because you are in love!"

"It may be so," assented the doctor, gloomily. "Love warps my mind, perhaps, but the whole case is so extraordinary and mysterious that it is difficult to say who is, and who is not, concerned in it."

"In my opinion the whole lot are concerned in it," said Cass, "and the desire for money is the cause of the crime. By the way, I asked Schwartz about the Gordon sisters."
"He knows both, I suppose?"
"Yes; but he praises only one—Janet Gordon. Mrs Moxton he appears to think very little of."
"That may be because he does not know her so well. Janet was in the employment of Schwartz as a programme-seller and attendant, but Mrs Moxton, being a type-writing girl, only occasionally visited the hall. In any case I admit that the Gordon girls appear to be shady."
"Yet you think of marrying one."
"I shall not do so if I find out anything wrong," said Ellis. "It is true that I am in love with Mrs Moxton, but should her past be a bad one, I am sufficiently reasonable to crush down my feelings. Still, I believe that she is more sinned against than sinning; and it will be my task to solve the mystery of this murder—to prove that my belief is a true one."
"I am with you there, Bob, and I shall help you with all my heart. But I tell you plainly that Schwartz has no very good opinion of Mrs Moxton. He declares that she is frivolous, vain and foolish."
"She is none of the three, Harry, believe me. And Janet?"
"Janet is staunch, honest, clever and honourable. Schwartz respects her highly, and he is not the man to bestow praise unduly."
"I should like to see this girl," said Ellis, thoughtfully, "particularly as she may throw some light on the murder. From the description of old Ike, I believe the woman he drove to Pimlico was
Janet Gordon. She must know something or she would not have been crying on that night, nor would she have given up her situation at the Merryman Music-Hall so suddenly."

"Perhaps you consider her guilty?"

"No. On the authority of those signs on the arm of the dead man, I believe Zirknitz killed him."

Ellis rose and stretched himself. "We have a terrible tangle to unravel, Harry," he said after a pause.

"I don't see why we need trouble ourselves to do it, Bob."

"I do. Mrs Moxton must be proved guiltless."

Cass shook his head. "Even if she is innocent of the murder her past is shady," he said. "She is not the wife for you, Bob."

"When the crooked is made straight we shall see about that, Harry."

With this confident assertion Ellis retired to bed, but not to sleep. In spite of his love, he could not but see that Mrs Moxton's reputation was in peril. So much as he had gleaned of her past from herself and other sources was, to say the least of it, shady. The people with whom she had associated were scarcely reputable. Her husband had been a dissolute scoundrel, and Zirknitz, the so-called brother, was an idle vagabond, devoid of self-respect and morals. Then the sister! Schwartz praised her, but Schwartz was not over-clean himself in character, and the employment of the girl at a second-rate music-hall was not the style of thing to recommend her to respectable
people. Then, again, Mrs Moxton's conduct was shifty and underhand. She declined to tell the truth, yet from the surrounding circumstances it was plain that she knew it. Taking these things into consideration, many a man would have cut himself off root and branch from the widow; but some instinct told Ellis that she was not so evil as she appeared to be, and made him anxious to sift the matter to the bottom. Therefore he got up in the morning still bent upon dealing with Mrs Moxton and her doubtful past. After all, she might prove in the end worthy of an honest man's love.

Shortly after breakfast Mrs Basket waddled in with the announcement that Mrs Moxton was at the door. Ellis was surprised. This was the first time she had come to his house since the terrible night of the murder, and their first meeting since her fainting at the name of Zirknitz. The doctor hailed this unexpected visit as a good omen. If she were guilty, she would scarcely take such a step; and it might be that, weary of fencing, she had come to confess the truth.

It was with Judas-like affability that Mrs Basket introduced the widow into the room. She believed in Mrs Moxton's guilt. She wished to see that guilt made clear, and desired that it should be punished. Yet she smiled and gabbled, and was ostentatiously friendly until dismissed by Ellis. Mrs Moxton breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed on the treacherous creature. She looked pale, but was as pretty as ever, and Ellis felt the charm of her manner sap the doubts he
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entertained of her honesty. At first he thought that she had come to explain about Zirknitz, but at the outset of the conversation Mrs Moxton did away with this idea. Her opening remark revealed the reason of her call.

"I have found it, doctor," she said, producing a legal-looking blue envelope. "The will of Edgar is in this packet."

"Where was it hidden, Mrs Moxton?"

"You will never guess. Under the matting of the sitting-room. I expect he concealed it there in one of his magpie-fits when he was drunk, and forgot its whereabouts when he got sober. This is the will, doctor, and it leaves all his property, real and personal, to me."

"So you are a rich woman, Mrs Moxton," said Ellis, eyeing her gravely. "I congratulate you."

"Don't be in too great a hurry to do that," she rejoined coolly. "I have yet to reckon with Mr Busham and his suspicions."

"You can disprove those, can you not?"

"I do not know; I cannot say. I must first learn what his suspicions are, and that will be easy enough. I have only to show Mr Busham the will and he will come out with his accusation. Whether I can refute it remains to be seen; and it is for this reason that I wish you to visit the lawyer with me."

"Visit Mr Busham?" said Ellis, considerably astonished at this unusual proof of confidence. "But what can I do?"

"Two things. Firstly, you can be a witness to
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the charges, which, I feel certain, Mr Busham will bring against me."

"Then you trust me so far as to let me hear those charges?"

"I do, because in the face of all circumstantial evidence to the contrary you believe that I am innocent. For that reason I regard you as my friend, for that reason I ask you to stand by me in my time of trouble."

Ellis looked at her doubtfully, not knowing what to make of this speech, which, indeed, was puzzling enough. An honourable woman, entangled in the net of villains: a scheming adventuress, bent upon arriving at her own ends—Mrs Moxton was one or the other; and the love which Ellis had for her inclined him to believe she was honourable. Still, there must have been some shadow of doubt on his face, for Mrs Moxton became bitter and angry and unmeasured in speech.

"Am I mistaken in you?" she demanded sharply. "Have you repented of what you said to me the other day? Is it with you as with other men—words! words! words! If so, tell me, and I go—go never to trouble you or see you again. You must trust me in all or not at all."

The doctor was astonished at this sudden outburst, and hastened to assure Mrs Moxton that she did him an injustice. "I firmly believe in your innocence, and I feel certain that you can explain away the charges against you."

"They have yet to be made, doctor," replied the widow, cooling down. "And when they are I wish
you to be present. That desire will show you whether I can answer them or not. Another reason why I desire you to visit Mr Busham in my company is that I am anxious for you to protect me from his violence."

"Confound the fellow!" cried Ellis, firing up. "Will he dare to lay hands on you?"

"Not on me, but on the will. If I defy Mr Busham, he is quite capable of taking the will from me by force and destroying it."

"We shall see about that," said Ellis, after a moment's thought. "However, I guess from what you say that Busham is a tricky, shifty scoundrel. Certainly I will come with you, Mrs Moxton. When are you going?"

"To-morrow morning. We can take the underground railway to Esher Lane."

"Very good. I will see you in the morning. In the meantime will you leave this will for me to look over?"

Ellis made this demand with the intention of seeing how far Mrs Moxton would trust him, as it was scarcely fair that the confidence should be all on one side. To his secret astonishment and openly-expressed pleasure, she agreed at once to the request.

"As you trust me, I shall you," said Mrs Moxton. "Keep the will by all means till to-morrow morning; but take care of it, as it is an original document."

"I will put it away now"; and Ellis locked the document up in a despatch-box which stood near his desk. "And I thank you for this proof of confidence, Mrs Moxton; you will not find it misplaced."
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"I am quite sure of that, doctor. I trust you thoroughly."

"In some ways, yes, in others, no. For instance, why will you not tell me about Zirknitz?"

Mrs Moxton turned pale. "I cannot tell you about him—yet."

"Ellis was vexed. "Well, there is no need," said he, a trifle crossly. "I know about this man."

"About Rudolph? About—"

"Yes, about your brother by marriage."

The widow, who in her excitement had half risen from her chair, fell back into it again thunderstruck. "Where did you meet him?" she stammered.

"At the Merryman Music-Hall."

"Do you know that place?" shrieked Mrs Moxton, much agitated.

"I was there last night. There I met Zirknitz, and he told me of his relationship to you. Also," and here Ellis grew grave, "he informed me who murdered your husband."

Mrs Moxton's capacity for amazement was exhausted by these repeated shocks, and she sat limply in her chair. The last remark, however, seemed to brace her up for the moment.

"And who does he say killed Edgar?" she asked, with an anxiety she strove vainly to conceal.

"None other than Busham, the man who—"

Mrs Moxton interrupted him with a burst of hysterical laughter. "Dr Ellis," said she, in a choking voice, "I know that is false. Mr Busham did not kill my husband."
Mrs Moxton made the statement regarding Busham's innocence with so much decision that Ellis looked at her in surprise. It was strange that she should defend a man she disliked. "How is it that you think him guiltless?" he asked anxiously.

"Because he is a coward, and too timid to kill a man."

"Your husband was stabbed in the back in the darkness. That looks like a coward's deed."

"All the same, I feel sure he is innocent," persisted the widow. "I can see no reason for his killing Edgar. He knew that old Moxton made another will shortly before dying, and that he would not inherit. No! look at it which way you will, Mr Busham is not the murderer. I detest the man, but I must be just to him. What else did Rudolph tell you, or, rather, on what ground does he accuse Mr Busham?"

"He refused to tell me the grounds without your permission."

"My permission! Why, I know nothing about the matter."

"From what Zirknitz hinted it would appear that you do," said Ellis, a trifle drily.

"Then he shall tell his story in your presence,"
rejoined Mrs Moxton, quickly, "and you will see that I know nothing."

"I shall be glad to be convinced. Tell me, why did you keep silent about this young man?"

"Because of the blood marks on the arm of Edgar."

"Oh, so you knew the secret of the cryptographic signs, in spite of your denial?"

"I did! I do! As a matter of fact, I taught that cryptogram to my—" here Mrs Moxton closed her mouth with the nervous gesture of one who thinks she is saying too much.

"To your sister," finished Ellis, quietly.

Mrs Moxton fenced. "How do you know that I have a sister?"

"From the books in your house, some of which contain your name and that of your sister Janet. Also from a cabman on the rank here, who described to me a woman so like you that I am convinced she is your sister—possibly, from the exact likeness, your twin sister."

The widow became the colour of chalk at these words. "Where did the cabman see her?"

"He drove her to Pimlico on the night, and about the time, your husband was murdered."

For a moment or so Mrs Moxton looked doubtfully at Ellis, and passed her tongue over her dry lips. The doctor could see that she trembled. His unexpected knowledge evidently inflicted a shock on her nerves. Yet, for all her emotion, she still strove to baffle his curiosity. "You seem to know a good deal about my husband," she said irritably.
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"I do. Because I am anxious to clear your name and extricate you from a difficult position. Mrs Moxton"—Ellis rose and bent over her with great earnestness—"why will you not be frank with me? You tell me much, but you will not tell me all."

She moaned and moved away from him. "Heaven help me, I dare not tell you all."

"Yet I am your best friend."

"I know it, but you would shrink from me did you know the truth."

Ellis took her hand gently. "Tell me who murdered your husband?" he whispered urgently.

"I don't know! I swear I don't know!" cried the widow, with much vehemence; "if I did I would tell."

"The blood marks hint at Zirknitz."

"Yes, yes, but I am sure he is innocent. Rudolph is foolish, vain, shallow, but he never killed Edgar, I swear."

"Yet the name on the dead man's arm?"

"I don't know the reason of that; I can't say why Edgar wrote it. I read it myself, although I denied all knowledge to you. It was for Rudolph's sake that I lied. I was afraid lest he should get into trouble. I asked him if he was in Dukesfield on that night, but he denies that he was."

"And your sister Janet?"

A tremor passed through the frame of Mrs Moxton. "She came to see me on that night, and we quarrelled; she left before Edgar came back, and, I suppose, went crying down the road to take a cab home."
"Did she see the murder committed?" asked Ellis, tentatively.

"I don't know," said Mrs Moxton, under her breath. "I am—oh," she burst out, "I can't tell you more. I have had to do with villains and rogues all my life, and I am paying the penalty of their sins, not of my own. I have tried to be a good woman, so do not shrink from me. I swear that I do not know who killed Edgar. Some day I may tell you more, but at present I cannot—I cannot."

She hastily let down her veil and stood up to go. "You trust me still? you believe in me yet?" she said entreatingly, and with tears.

"I do," replied Ellis, touched by her emotion. "You puzzle me more than I can say, yet I am sure you are innocent of all evil. But if you would only tell me—"

"Some day! some day!" she interrupted hastily; "but not now. Yet what you should know, you shall know. Come to me between four and five today, and you will meet Rudolph. He shall confess what he means by hinting at my knowledge of Mr Busham's guilt."

"I will come with pleasure, but do you think Zirknitz will come?"

"Yes. I will telegraph for him now. He loves me and trusts me, and I have great power over his weak nature. In my hands he is like wax, and if the truth is in him you shall hear it this afternoon. But I know that Rudolph is innocent. I am certain that Mr Busham did not strike the blow. Heaven
alone knows the secret of Edgar's death. Good-bye, good-bye, Dr Ellis, and do not think badly of me. Indeed, indeed, when the moment comes I can put myself right in your eyes. What other people say or think, I do not care, but you must be shown that I am more sinned against than sinning. Good-bye!" She stretched out her hand, and withdrew it abruptly ere he could touch the tips of her fingers. "Not yet, not yet," she muttered, and swiftly glided from the room before Ellis could recover from his surprise.

This woman was more inexplicable than ever. Apparently she knew a great deal, as could be seen by the information which Ellis had dragged out of her. Yet she refused to be candid, although at the same time she admitted that she wished to preserve her friend's good opinion. The hints dropped in her last hasty speech showed Ellis that he was right in trusting to his instinct concerning her nature. Whatever Mrs Moxton might be,—mysterious, shady, dangerous,—she had a straightforward, honest mind. It was warped by the circumstances in which she found herself placed through no fault of her own, and she was forced to fence and lie, and act a tricky part for some strong reason which she refused to impart to Ellis. Privately he thought that all her energies were bent upon shielding her sister, as formerly she had striven to shield Zirknitz by denying all knowledge of the cryptogram. Could Janet Gordon be the guilty person? Ellis twice or thrice asked himself this question, but could find no answer to it. Her
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hasty flight on the night of the murder, her tears, her silence, her absence from the music-hall hinted—if not at personal guilt—at least at guilty knowledge. If she did not kill Moxton herself,—and on the face of it she could have had no reason to do so,—she must have seen the crime committed. Perhaps she had met with the assassin face to face, and had fled horror-struck and weeping to the cab-stand. The way to learn the truth would be to see her. No doubt she had confessed the cause of her terror to Mrs Moxton, and it was this secret which Mrs Moxton, loyally doing violence to her nature, wished to conceal. But if the widow would not speak, Ellis made up his mind that Janet Gordon should; therefore he resolved to find out the number of her lodging in Geneva Square, and call upon her. Failing Mrs Moxton, Zirknitz might supply the information. In her own despite Mrs Moxton must be rescued from the dangers which appeared to surround her. She had confessed with less than her usual caution that she was paying for the sins of others, and Ellis was bent upon bringing the truth to light and making the actual sinners suffer for their own wickedness. The fact that he was more deeply in love than ever, greatly assisted him in arriving at this conclusion. Yet a wise man, a worldly man, would have called him a fool to still love and trust Mrs Moxton in the face of all he knew about her. But in this instance instinct was stronger than argument, and Ellis was satisfied that the woman he loved would yet emerge vindicated and spotless from the
dark cloud of troubles which obscured her true nature.

Precisely at half-past four he presented himself at Myrtle Villa. The door was opened by Mrs Moxton herself. Apparently she had been watching for his arrival, and Ellis, guessing as much, felt his heart swell with joy. Strange that his love at this moment should move him to emotion.

"Rudolph is here," whispered the widow. "Let me question him. I know how to make him speak out."

Ellis nodded, and when ushered into the sitting-room was sufficiently composed to meet Zirknitz with a smile. The Austrian looked an Adonis in the day-time, and was admirably dressed in a smart frock-coat, fawn-coloured trousers, and patent leather boots of high polish. He was a modern D'Orsay in looks and dress—just the handsome kind of scamp to attract silly women. Ellis had no doubt that one day or another Monsieur Rudolph would pick up an heiress, and become respectable. The young man was shallow and selfish, yet—if one could judge by his smiling face—harmless enough in other ways.

"I am delighted to see you, doctor," said the Austrian, blandly. "You must forgive me for leaving you so abruptly the other night. But you were beginning to ask me indiscreet questions, so I—vanished."

"Rudolph always considers himself first," observed Mrs Moxton, who was making tea. "He is the most selfish creature in existence."
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"The most selfish!" assented Zirknitz. "I think of no one by myself. Why should I? Quelle bêtise."

"Every man should think of others!" said Ellis, hardly knowing what to say in the face of this cool confession.

"Oh, mon cher monsieur, that doctrine is out of date. Thank you, Laura. I will have some tea. Three sugar bits, my dear. I love sweets, and sunshine, and pretty girls—as a butterfly should."

Mrs Moxton looked at the pretty youth with something of contempt. "You need not blazon forth your follies, Rudolph. I know what you are; and Dr Ellis will soon find you out. What is this story you have been telling him about me?"

"Story? None! What is it, monsieur? Point de moquerie!"

"You accuse Busham of this murder!"

"Ah, yes, now I remember; and I refused to tell you my reasons until permitted by my sister. Have I your consent, ma chère Laura?"

"Tell everything you know," cried Mrs Moxton, with a frown. "Why you should bring my name into the matter I don't know. There is no need for you to explain, Rudolph; you will only romance. Why do you suspect Busham?"

Zirknitz looked at Ellis. "Can I speak freely?" he asked doubtfully.

"Certainly. The doctor is my best friend."

"Ah! so charming to have a best friend. Hear, then, monsieur, and you, my dear Laura. When I was at Dukesfield on the night Edgar was killed—"
“Why,” said Ellis, with something of anger in his tones, “you told me you were not at Dukesfield on that night.”

Zirknitz shrugged his handsome shoulders. “I told a lie! Oh, yes, I always tell a lie when necessary. I did not know Laura wished me to speak, so I told what was not true. What would you, monsieur? Your questions were indiscreet. My answers were false. *Voila!*”

“Never mind excusing yourself, Rudolph. What about Mr Busham?”

“Eh, my dear sister, I believe he killed our poor Moxton! Why not? I saw the excellent Busham in Dukesfield on the night of the death.”