

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

THE mind of the Wise easily shunts to strange speculations before taking again to the main line of severely controlled thoughts. Associations of ideas—your name is Harpy. How you do catch unheralded the mortal uncautious! The Wise knows you ; he is aware of your jumpy step ; he makes ready ; he fights and . . . *væ victis!* he yokes you. But the fool . . .!

However, we digress and progress not. I ought to be relating a personal experience. One night, one sleepless night, I was allowing my eternal enemies, the harpies to whom I have already referred, the following of their fancy for a while. They were poachy enough for me not to fear them.

Earlier in the evening I and a few friends had been discussing affinities and mysteries, among other subjects, and as I lay in bed one of the recent mysteries gave mental food to the harpies. My thoughts were of course utterly passive and need no record. But something which subsequently happened causes me to mention this. Let me recall the main facts of the Brighton murder.

On the night of the crime there had been a dinner-party at the house of Mrs. Ridley. Towards midnight the hostess remained alone with her servants : a butler, two footmen, a

THE EQUINOX

cook, and two maids. Mrs. Ridley's apartments have a full view of the sea, as has also the room of her maid Jane Fleming. The cook and the other maids, as well as the three men, slept in rooms at the back of the house.

At the inquest James Dale, the footman, and the butler deposed that they heard no noise whatever during the night. Now, Harry Carpenter, the other man, had been found murdered in the first-floor bathroom. And it has been ascertained that he could not possibly leave his room without being heard by the others, who slept one on each side of him, as neither of them *did* sleep on that particular night, for some reason or another. But of course this is public knowledge. The police and the papers have received scores of anonymous letters denouncing Jane Fleming, the butler, and Dale as the authors of the crime. They have not been arrested. Why?

I am certain that they are entirely innocent; yet the police cannot be aware of the reasons which lead me to this certainty, and in the absence of these proofs they ought to be suspected.

Mrs. Ridley's bed stood with the foot towards the fireplace, a door being on either side of the head, the window on her left hand.

When her maid entered the room in the morning she found the body of her mistress lying at the foot of the bed, the head towards the window. It was entirely naked. Near the body was a shift, and over the neck a white shawl had been carelessly thrown. It had upon it in various parts as many as sixteen wounds, cuts and bruises of various importance. The most serious and only mortal one was behind the left ear; the great vessels of the neck were destroyed and the skull much injured. The most ugly wound to the sight was under the

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

nose, which had been so entirely damaged that it rendered the whole face almost unrecognisable. Yet there has been, I must say, no doubt as to the identity. The wounds had been inflicted with an instrument edged but blunt, used by a very weak person, possibly a woman. The bedclothes were not disarranged, and there was some strangeness in the fact, for the maid swore to having seen her mistress in bed, while after the discovery of the murder the bed was found made as if no one had either lain in or even sat on it. The police took it as a proof that Mrs. Ridley had some connection with the murderer or murderers, and, after her maid's departure, had been preparing herself to go out. She was known to be a most tidy and cautious lady. Had she obeyed an instinctive need of leaving everything in order?

But let us turn to the bathroom. There also was a murdered body. Carpenter, the footman, had been killed with the same or with a similar instrument. Not without a severe conflict, however. How was it that his left hand held tightly hidden in its grasp a small piece of lace which was recognised as belonging to Mrs. Ridley? It had been torn from a handkerchief belonging to her. The strangeness of the discovery was all the more striking because the handkerchief referred to was found later on by the maid in a drawer between many others, neither on top nor at the bottom. The piece of lace found in the hand of Carpenter corresponded exactly.

So much for the victims. Now for the motive. Mrs. Ridley was a wealthy widow, and possessed many valuable pictures. She had a well-known dislike for cheque-books; and a firm of London bankers came forward at the inquest, having written a private letter to the coroner to the effect that

THE EQUINOX

the deceased lady was their client, and deposed that on the morning before the murder she had received the sum of £1200 in banknotes and gold, which sum was to be handed over to Mr. —, a representative of a well-known firm of art dealers, in payment for a certain picture.

Well, the police and the public knew that too; it had leaked out somehow. But beyond this they knew little. That is, they had forgotten. Because there *were* other facts. These facts, however, could not help a detective to realise their importance because they were loose facts—events, that is, which were in contradiction with one another. Yet still they afforded a clue. The murderer might be a criminal thief, a temperance reformer, a madman, a clergyman, a novelist, or a devil-worshipper—any person, in fact, in the whole world whose hand is weak or unsteady. But the whole world is comparatively too large to allow of any certainty in picking out the murderer of Mrs. Ridley. I say comparatively, because to the Wise the world is small. . . .

Passons!

Some time before her sudden death Mrs. Ridley had had a guest in her house whose unaffected manners had much offended the dignity of the male servants. He was said to be a distant relation of the late big-gun maker, James Ridley. But he was *not*. The late Ridley had no relations whatever on earth—at least among human beings. I happen to know that the so-called relation was a spiritualist. This sounds bad enough. Was Mrs. Ridley in agreement with him or was she not? It is nothing more than a question. Suppress the query, give the mere words another place in the sentence and you have two affirmations: *She was* or *She was not*. How

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

infinitely clearer is the point! Any intellectual bloodhound ought to find out which is *the* affirmation. That is, if the so-called relation was the murderer. I say he is, though I have no human proofs whatever to offer. The police—that is, my friend Inspector Bennet—tell me he is not, but he may know something. One of our great dailies has (alone) come very near the truth on the matter. It was given as an editorial opinion that the widow of the gun-maker was a little out of her mind and had committed suicide, with the help of some one, in spite of her footman, who had been attracted by the noise. Curious blend of truth and imagination!

A few hours after I had allowed the furies to play havoc with my brains I received the following letter; and that is why I know so much. For the very reason of its strangeness I felt at once that it could be the work of no practical joker. The mysterious part of the adventure can, I believe, be solved without much difficulty.

“Dear Sir,” it ran,—“You do not know me; but I know you. I have followed you through the world with the eyes of my spirit. I once saw in the window of a Paris photographer a portrait of yours which arrested my attention, and since that day your personality has been the constant, though not unpleasant, obsession of my life. I am perfectly acquainted with you and your life, your work and moods and ways of living. I came to England a few weeks ago and I saw you. To-day I write. I am aware that you are interested in the strange happenings which are to be studied in this world. My last adventure will cause you to be interested in the Brighton murder. I have been nearer than any one else to be the criminal author of that murder. Only, when I arrived

THE EQUINOX

it was too late. Had I not been already a madman during the years 1897 and 1898, and eventually cured, this strange adventure would certainly have sent me into a state of complete insanity. As it is, I am in a certain way vaccinated against madness.

“Monsieur, as true as I am a Frenchman born in America of a German mother by a poor Spanish hidalgo who forgot to give her his address—you see, I am French by naturalisation (I wanted to make up for their declining birth-rate)—the footman of Mrs. Ridley has been murdered by that lady herself because he tried to save her life. I don't know her past, but I am certain that she had been a near relation of mine in some former existence, and that she was much interested in spiritualism. *Voilà la clef du mystère!*

“Señor, you will realise that a crime is composed of a great number of circumstances extending over a long or short period of time and different in their importance. If a woman is seen to stick a stiletto into another person's breast, that is a stronger circumstance than if she is seen pulling it out; and this would be stronger than if she were standing over the dead man with a bloody knife. Two of the cases at least are compatible with innocence. Evidence, you understand it also, is nothing more than grounds for reasonable guesses, and crimes are collections of circumstances connected together, the proof of any one of which is a reasonable ground for guessing that the others existed. But, *pocos palabras!*

“*Sehr geehrter Herr!* Nine times out of ten an innocent man does not know the strength of his own case, and he may, real *Schafskopf*, by mere asinism allow suspicious circumstances to pass unexplained which he could explain perfectly

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

well. How much more so, then, when the innocent is no more among the living—or when, being alive, he stands in a blessed ignorance of the suspicions to which some unexplained circumstances have given birth!

“To the point, sir! One lives again in order to complete, or improve, an action which in a previous life has been left incomplete or inferior; and also to make a fresh attempt at mastering, in very similar circumstances, some powerful original tendency. It’s fierce, but it’s true. Had you previously been a packer of canned meat, or a guard on the railroad, or a Wall Street man, there would have been in your life some incidents, causing certain thoughts in your brains, and eventually actions. Yes, it would have been so, and you would to-day probably be doing your best not to improve upon the action which was the resultant of those thoughts. I say ‘*not to improve*,’ because we are human, all of us.

“As it is, you were a Redskin in North America, your name was ‘Faim de loup,’ and you are placed in such circumstances that you must find it difficult not to fall again into your old uncivilised ways.

“Now, Mrs. Ridley was a spiritualist. And she was not a widow! Her husband was not dead! He was the great gun-maker whom you know, and whose obsequies you may remember. His coffin contained but another man’s remains. . . .

“Love, my dear sir, is a much-mistaken phenomenon, which only perhaps the most loutish among us could understand because of its very simplicity. Love belongs to the spiritual world; it is an attraction, based on affinities. There were such affinities between Mrs. Ridley and her husband.

THE EQUINOX

“Of course, you know something about wireless telegraphy. A wireless message can be intercepted by some one for whom it is not meant, even if that some one had no inclination towards that kind of French game. He unwillingly receives the message which is for another, and it may so happen that he obtains a similar knowledge of the answer. Such is the case also in the spiritual world: such was the case of Mrs. Ridley. Her love-thoughts went to her husband; her husband’s love-thoughts went to her, but . . .

“Have you ever taken into your field of consideration how many ‘buts’ there come into the field of our actions? I submit to you that every painful, or sinful, or harmful, or simply unpleasant incident of our lives is the outcome of the best intentions—relatively best, at all events, *our best*—and I am sure that you agree with me. There were two ‘buts’ in the case of Mrs. Ridley.

“The first was of a personal character. Mrs. Ridley had nothing more than love-thoughts to give to her gun-maker husband. She was deprived of temperament—as the French understand the word—and her husband was like the candle which has never seen itself aflame, and is in consequence unaware of what it misses through its having had no acquaintance with a lighted match. Their love was not of this world, and the Powers which rule ‘here-below’ resented what they considered to be a contempt of their Majesty; and no children were sent to the couple. It was an ethereal love which they both knew to be somewhat incomplete. Mr. Ridley had little experience of the world, and still less conversation. Apart from his gun-making business and his spiritual bride, he cared, in his own words, not a shell for anything. Nevertheless, in

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

his semi-conscious anxiety, he attempted to devise some alterations in the appearance of his future widow. Did he see a hat which he thought somewhat suggestive of earthy sentiments, he would at once buy a similar one for Mrs. Ridley. Alas! with as without it his wife looked the ethereal spirituality that she was. He went to Paris on business, and, finding himself in that materialistic city, bought a complete set of befrilled and dainty underlinen; Mrs. Ridley etherealised even the appearance of that *lingerie de cocotte*.

“We are far from the crime, you think. *Carajo*, I guess not! We cannot be any nearer. Who killed Mrs. Ridley? I don't know. I was very near doing it.

“Why was she killed? The murderer did not know.

“Who killed the footman? Mrs. Ridley.

“Why did she kill him? Because he tried to prevent her from being murdered.

“Here, in a nutshell, my dear sir, you have all the crime and its explanation. When I say that I do not know who killed Mrs. Ridley I mean at the same time that it matters not. *The murderer is innocent.** Listen to what happened to me.

“I saw a man. He had the most wonderful eyes I ever saw; they could at times brighten one's face by merely looking into it; yet they chilled me, drying my blood and sending a cold shiver all over my bones. They reflected the sky as an ape imitates man, in a way inferior, poorly, servilely. And a certain uncanny look which never quite left him made that man an undesirable neighbour to me. Had I not seen him I would refuse to admit the reality of his existence.

* Underlined with red ink in the original letter.

THE EQUINOX

“ I met him during a journey. Comfortably seated in a corner of the railway compartment, I was reading a book of the sixteenth century in France merely to occupy my mind, so that I should not be tempted to look through the window at the too commonplace scenery.

“ We had just passed a station, as I knew by the disturbing voice of a porter ; and, on resuming my journey, I felt sorry that no companion of travel had entered the lonely carriage. I attempted another perusal of my book, when, without any opening of the door or of the window, I noticed a stranger seated in the opposite corner. His eyes were on me. He left me no time for much thinking, speaking almost immediately.

“ ‘ May I beg you to forgive a stranger, sir ? ’ he said, ‘ but I cannot endure this temperature. Will you allow me to open the windows ? ’

“ I like fresh air myself ; but it was so very cold on that day that I had carefully shut both windows. Something in his appearance and his look, intensely heavy on me, led me to refrain from answering. I merely nodded, grunted, gathered my rug higher around me, and resumed my reading.

“ He thanked me profusely, opened the windows, both of them, as wide as they could be, and, without taking any notice of my evident displeasure, addressed me anew.

“ ‘ You are wondering, no doubt, sir, as to the way by which I came in. Well, I do not mind telling you I came through this hole. ’

“ He pointed at the ceiling with his hand, and I raised my eyes. The only aperture to which he could be referring was a tiny little hole in the glass which protected the imaginary

296

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

light provided by the railway company. I shrugged my shoulders, grunted again, and plunged back into my book.

“‘You do not believe me, I see,’ he went on, ‘yet I speak the truth. I came through this broken glass to you—to you, sir, on purpose to see you, to speak to you. I came from the sky. Now, do not look at the alarm bell. My message is a pleasant one. You are chosen for a mission.’

“‘I thought I had borne enough, and expressed at once the idea that my strong desire was to be left alone. The stranger laughed in a queer manner, and as my eyes met his once more, I felt a peculiar sensation of mixed sympathy and fear. It was then that I noticed how brightening to any one his eyes could be. He spoke in a gentler tone.

“‘I am going to explain to you the object of my coming. You are going back to Brighton to-morrow night, are you not?’

“‘Yes, I am ; but that is no concern of yours.’

“‘Be silent. Look at me. All right. Listen now!’

“‘I heard no more his human voice. As I raised my head a feeling of lost consciousness overcame me. I was unable to control my brains, my will, my movements. He spoke again and at great length, but I could neither answer nor interrupt him. I could not say that I was in a subconscious state, but neither would I care to say that I was in a normal one. He took my hands and held them in his own. I could not move.

“‘It is necessary that a certain person be freed from the material envelope which gives apparent shape to her ethereal spirit. Mrs. Ridley lives at 34 — Street, Brighton. By the way, my name is Ridley.’

THE EQUINOX

“Here I tried to speak, but found it impossible. He went on :

“‘You seem to be surprised. I thought you would. But remain in the state of receptivity! I am Ridley, the late Ridley, as they say, though I am very much alive. Some stories have been told of how I died suddenly, 600 miles away from England. But I only disappeared. The wicked spirits tempted me, and I fell into their trap. Time passed, and the love messages which the spirit of my wife sent all over the earth succeeded in reaching me after a period of burning knowledge. She claimed death as a right, though she knew well enough that, dead or alive, I could not help her in that way. We must die both at the same time if we are to enjoy in an after-life the joys of spiritual love, which I found on this earth but too mild for my burning and anxious curiosity. I have chosen you for the deed because you have been at times the recipient of some thought messages which were addressed to her by me. Besides, in a former existence you were kin to my . . . to Mrs. Ridley.

“‘To-morrow night you will go to — Street, and my wife will await you as the promised liberator. Some one else will “do” for me at the same time, but in another part of the world. I shall be far by then. No one is to see you, and Mrs. Ridley will open the door to you. **KILL HER, man! Kill her at 9.30 P.M. When you have done, GO! Go away; and when a whole week has passed, REMEMBER! And now, my dear sir, good-bye for the present.’**

“As he spoke the last words I was again conscious; but my head felt so heavy that I did not make any motion. I could not. It was as if I had just awakened from a profound sleep.

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

The stranger disappeared, seemingly through the hole in the glass.

“When I had collected myself I tried hard to make out whether I had seen or heard any one. But I could not remember what had been said to me, save the few words of preamble about opening the windows and the ironical words of the parting: ‘Good-bye for the present.’”

“I shut the windows, and presently arrived at my destination. The cold air on the platform finished waking me up. I dismissed the conversation as a dream due to the discomfort of the journey; and set out towards the hotel where I usually stay when in Bristol.

“I must here remind you, sir, that I had no other recollection than a few words, which were so absurd, especially those about coming from the sky through a hole, that they must have been dreamt by me. Such were my thoughts; and I went to sleep thinking no more about my supposed nightmare.

“On the following morning I attended to my business and started on my journey back to Brighton, though I was asked by a very dear friend to stay another day, and though I had no reason whatever to refuse him and myself such a pleasure as we always derive from our mutual company.

“The journey passed without incident. My carriage was never empty; and I could not in a full compartment indulge in such weird dreams as I had on the previous day. On my arrival at Brighton I went to the hotel. At least I thought I did. I am not so sure now. How is it that I remember to-day that part of the stranger’s discourse which I could not recollect after his departure? But I anticipate.

“I awoke in the morning with a strong headache; and

THE EQUINOX

proceeded to clean my coat; which (I remembered) I had soiled on the previous evening during my meal, while waiting for my train in London. I was perfectly certain about that stain; I knew where it was. I COULD NOT FIND IT. This is a trifle, no doubt, and I took it as such, at first. I do not . . . now . . . now that I REMEMBER. I must have washed my clothes according to the orders.

“Yet I am not the murderer, monsieur. If you could see me you would dismiss all doubts. My eye is a truthful organ. But of course you cannot; and there is an end of the matter.

“Shall we go back to the beginning? Well, suppose we do. Who is that human creature *qui languit sur la paille humide d'un cachot*? A neighbour! The very man who ought not to be suspected. Does ever a neighbour kill a neighbour in that way, for such a vague reason? It is sheer madness . . . Madness . . . MADNESS!

“And I will tell you something else. The man they have arrested has probably been a witness to the murder. He may have some secret longing for a period of suffering. He may want a cure for his soul; and that may be the reason why he does not do anything against the mountain of evidence which is slowly being heaped against him. . . .

“I have just had to leave this letter in order to see that a couple of nice crisp cabbages do not during their ebullition throw too much water over the gas-stove. And as I return to you it occurs to me that you may know the great masterpiece of Dostoievsky. I have only read it in the French. ‘Crime et Châtiment’ they call it. Well, there is a similar case in that terrible story. MIKOLKA confesses to the

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

murder of the old female moneylender and her sister Elizabeth, when the real murderer is Rodion Romanich Raskolnikoff. Mikolka is longing for expiation ; he wants to atone for a wasted life ; he is neither a madman nor an insane, but a mystic, a fantast. You will object that he is a Slav. . . . Quite so, but there might be some Anglo-Saxons with a similar turn of mind.

“What of the theft? What if there has been no theft? if Mrs. Ridley had hidden or destroyed the money? if she had burned the banknotes? What are banknotes to a woman who is going to die?”

“The police have made a great point of the fact that Harry Carpenter could not come out of his room without being heard. Fools! Mayhap he did not enter his room that night. Maybe he was in love with some lady fair. Maybe he went out and was killed by Mrs. Ridley when, returning, he had come to her assistance and struggled with Mr. Ridley’s messenger.

“The dinner-party! Here we come to the most foolish, silly, ridiculous, absurd, and preposterous example of the preposterousness, absurdity, ridiculousness, silliness, and foolishness latent in the brains of your C.I.D. members. I believe that all the guests who attended that party have been shadowed, that their entire families have been watched and followed about, that their correspondence has been ransacked and their whole past raked into. They have of course no connection whatever with the case. Mrs. Ridley thought of a party as of the thing most likely to *donner le change*. Of course she did not want people to think of anything else but of an ordinary unforeseen murder.

THE EQUINOX

“ All the rubbish talked about with regard to her lace handkerchief and the piece in her footman’s hand shows still more the folly of all scientific systems of investigation. She put it there after having killed the footman.

“ I have but one incident to mention ; and it is once more a personal recollection. But as it is the last you will forgive me. I am sure you appreciate my goodwill and believe in *Wahlverwandschaften*.

“ When, after a week had elapsed and my memory was allowed to resume its work, I became conscious of the deed which had been commanded to me, I entered into a state of mixed feelings. If I would indulge in psychology, I should now retrace step by step the mental journey which I then took. I think I can spare you this ; and I now come to the evening which concluded the ninth day after the murder.

“ For my personal edification I was murmuring the words of the Clavicula Salomonis ; and had just arrived at the invocation, ‘*Aba, Zarka, Maccaf, Zofar, Holech, Zegolta, Pazergadol,*’ when a gentle breeze caressed my forehead. I must tell you that I had not placed in my left hand the hexagonal seal, but held instead at intervals a well-dosed ‘rainbow.’ By the way, have you ever tasted that scientific and picturesque mixture of liqueurs ?

“ The breeze spoke. At least I heard its voice, which recalled somehow the voice of the late—very late now—Mr. Ridley.

“ ‘*We are here.*’

“ A buzzing sibilation ; *un susurrement*. Then the voice again. ‘We have come together, man, to set your mind at rest, if indeed it is restless. You are not the liberator of a longing soul, as you thought. A nearer of kin has been

THE BRIGHTON MYSTERY

found—that is, a man whose spirit was in a previous life the spirit of a dear brother. He was ordered to kill at 9.20. But you came at your own appointed time and went through the—er—process, unaware that all had been done before. We chose that man because he was a nearer parent. We are now happy—happy beyond your actual comprehension. Adieu!’

“That’s what I call *laver son linge sale en famille*. And the part I played in that affair reminds me of that other expression: *enfoncez une porte ouverte*.

“That is all, my dear sir. You know as much as I do. And I must return to my cabbages.

“Your illuminating

“PEDRO PIERRE PETER SCAMANDER.”

Is there anything to be added? For my part I took the word of Mr. Scamander for the candid expression of real happenings, without trying to explain any theory. More curious still is the fact that I heard from Inspector Bennet. He said that the evidence against the arrested man was built on moving sand, utterly impossible and nonexistent; and they will have to release him, in spite of apparent elements of certainty which have for so long misled the public—aye, and even the police.

From *to-day's* papers:

“The man arrested in connection with the Brighton murder has confessed. He will be tried at the next assizes.”

Well! maybe he is a new Mikolka. But where is the absent relative, the spiritualist?

GEORGE RAFFALOVICH

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THE EQUINOX

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