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THE MYSTERY OF LANDY COURT.

THE MYSTERY OF LANDY COURT.

BY FERGUS HUME
AUTHOR OF THE MYSTERY OF A HANSOM CAB

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CHAPTER I.

"*FATHER CHING'S PARISH.*"

IT was a mere pleasantry on the part of Sir Piers Lametry. Father Ching, chaplain to the family, was a Jesuit, aged thirty years, and his so-called parish Landy Court. Everybody in Devonshire knew the Lametrys of Landy Court, the most prominent Catholic family in the West Country. Through the darkest periods of English history they held bravely to their faith, property, and title. In what dire straits they had been no one knew but themselves, and they only through assiduous perusal of the family archives, for the dark days were now over, and the Lametrys enjoyed the same privileges as the other gentry of Devon. Yet, lest they should forget their miraculous preservation from Tudor

and Puritan, the priests kept them in mind of the family history. At present, one priest only dwelt at the Court, and that was Father Ching, of whom Sir Piers uttered the above pleasantry.

Landy Court was a fine old Elizabethan mansion, built by Sir Richard Lametry from Spanish spoils. Though a Papist himself, Sir Richard had no stomach for the Dons, and by following in the train of Drake managed to loot sufficient Mexican gold, to mend the fortunes of the family, and build the great house. It stood on the brow of a woody hill, not far from the sea beach, and faced the lengthy bulk of Lundy Island, from whence it took its name. The founder of the family came therefrom in the reign of the second Edward, and called himself Lametry, after the peninsula which juts out below Marisco Castle. What was his original name, no one knew, or cared.

From father to son descended the property, save when it had been necessary to hand it over to the Protestant Lametrys, to save it from the greedy grasp of Elizabeth. The Protestant branch might have kept it with full sanction of Queen and Parliament, had they been so disposed, but they respected the elder line, despite its Romish profession, and returned the property intact, when the laws were relaxed against the Papists. By such shifts, did the Catholic Lametrys keep a tight hold on their fertile acres, and when Sir Piers came into

possession of the estate he found himself one of the wealthiest gentlemen of North Devon.

He had been a widower for many years. Seeing that he had but one daughter, and that the property was strictly entailed, it was a wonder to many that he had not married again. But, as there was no danger of the good old name becoming extinct, and Sir Piers was not particularly anxious for a direct heir, he remained faithful to the memory of his wife. At his death the estate would devolve on his brother, Lionel, and failing heirs of his body (for Lionel was a bachelor), would vest in William Kynsam, claiming through Sir Piers's sister, Margaret.

"And if Will marries my daughter, Eleanor," explained Sir Piers to the priest, "that will bring back the property to the elder branch."

"Always providing your brother does not marry and have heirs," said Father Ching, dryly.

"Lionel marry?" said the Baronet, with a hearty laugh. "No fear of that, sir. Egad, he's always buried in the library, and hardly knows the difference between a woman and a folio."

"That may be," murmured Father Ching, doubtfully. "But he goes to London on occasions."

"To get more books, not to look after a wife," retorted Sir Piers, good-humouredly; and so the matter ended for the time being.

Nevertheless, Father Ching bore the conversation in mind. Lionel was not a favourite with him. As their tastes both inclined to books, it was rather odd they were not more in harmony with one another; but Father Ching, despite his Jesuitical training, could not bring himself to like the man. There was a latent devil in Lionel, which peeped out on occasions, and was especially visible when he returned from London. He invariably told Piers that his business in the Metropolis was confined to grubbing in old bookstalls, and this statement the Baronet believed. Father Ching did not; and, despite the fact that Lionel assumed to be a devout Catholic, and regularly attended confession, there was something in his life of which the priest was ignorant.

The Jesuit was a clever man, but a trifle young for so onerous a post as keeper of the Lametry conscience, and Lionel managed—if not to hoodwink—at least to puzzle him greatly. He had his doubts, as to the genuineness of this ostensible bookworm, but these were so vague, that he often took himself to task for having them at all. There was no visible reason for such suspicions, as, to all appearances, Lionel was a sedate personage of fifty-five, with a turn for dry-as-dust literature, and was never so happy as when buried in the library of Landy Court.

Will Kynsam was different. A gay young man, not yet thirty, he had led a somewhat dissipated life, and never professed to be a saint. One of those men of

whom it is said, "He is his own worst enemy," good-natured, thoughtless, and merry. His father, Major Kynsam, married Sir Piers's only sister, but died before his son was born, and Mrs. Kynsam had nursed the small estate for her idolised child. She died when Will came of age, and he entered on his manhood with a comfortable income and a taste for luxury which not all the asceticism of Stoneyhurst College could crush out of him.

With such leanings, he was not the person to study economy, and rid himself of his property in a surprisingly short space of time. Reduced to such a plight, the future looked very black indeed, and he was thinking of enlisting, when his uncle asked him to Landy Court. Will accepted the invitation, with the intention of settling his future; but in the meantime, and while enjoying Sir Piers's hospitality, contrived to fall in love with his cousin, Eleanor. The Baronet saw this with much satisfaction, and readily consented to the match, with the proviso that Will was to mend his ways. This he did with the aid of Eleanor, and stayed on at the Court as the accepted lover of Miss Lametry, with an occasional visit to London.

As a matter of fact, Will scarcely deserved his good fortune. He had wasted his patrimony in riotous living, and should have suffered for his folly. But it seemed as though Fortune was as fond of him as was everyone

else, for she set his lines in pleasant places, and gave him the love of a charming girl. Miss Lametry was exceptionally beautiful and high-spirited, and would have turned the head of any man, let alone that of the inflammable Will. A consummate horsewoman, she was well known in the hunting-field, when she rode to the meets, escorted by her devoted cousin. All the young men in the neighbourhood, some very well off, were in love with Eleanor, but she rejected these wealthier suitors in favour of Will Kynsam, the pauper. It was true that he had not a penny, that she could hope to make a better match, but he was the handsomest, and most lovable young man of her acquaintance, so she chose him as her husband. Sir Piers, relying on the misogynistic tendencies of his brother, and knowing that Will was heir-presumptive to the estates and title, was delighted with the match. This beautiful young woman and this splendid young man were fine specimens of humanity, and would worthily carry on the old name, for in the event of Will's succession, he was to take the arms and name of the Lametry family.

These four people were the principal inhabitants of Father Ching's parish, but all the servants and most of the tenants were Catholics, so that the chapel at Landy Court was quite full on Sundays. The farmers who clung to the old faith, came to mass with their wives and daughters; and the servants, mostly chosen from the

tenants, were marshalled into their places by Mrs. Westcote. This latter was the housekeeper of Landy Court, a pale, ladylike woman, who had held her position for two years. The old housekeeper having died, Sir Piers, urged by his brother, had not sought her successor on the estate, but had gone to London for someone more abreast of the times. Mrs. Westcote was highly recommended, and Lionel hinted that she was the very woman to modernise the somewhat old-fashioned household. She was also a Catholic, and very devout, so with such perfections secured the position. Two years of her stay had been signalised by no startling event. Her work was done thoroughly; she spared no pains to make Sir Piers comfortable, and was altogether quite a superior person. Yet, strange to say, she was not liked.

From Sir Piers down to the lowest scullion, Mrs. Westcote begot distrust. Her demure manner, her downcast eyes, her stealthy movements, all inspired dislike; and, though no one could complain, her mere presence in the house made everyone feel uneasy. Several times Sir Piers was at the point of dismissing her, but it was difficult to find an excuse for getting rid of so faultless a person. Moreover, Lionel always stood up for her; and he was the only one in the house who liked her. Perhaps, because she looked so well after culinary matters; for Lionel was fond of a good dinner.

"I can't bear her, Will," said Miss Lametry, one day

when Mrs. Westcote was under discussion. "She is so sly, and double-faced."

"I don't care much for her myself," replied Will, carelessly. "Still, she does her duty, and pleases Sir Piers. Why do you say she is sly?"

"Because she looks sly."

"That's a woman's reason, and unsupported by evidence."

"I instinctively feel she is double," retorted Eleanor, nodding her head.

"You can't dismiss people on instinctive suspicions," said Will, laughing. "Let her be as double as she pleases. What can she do, save steal 'the Sacred Ring'?"

"I don't mean to say she is a criminal, or would steal," replied Miss Lametry, impatiently. "You don't understand. It's simply a case of instinctive dislike. She makes my flesh creep every time she passes me."

"My dear girl, your nerves are out of order," said Kynsam, taking her wrist. "The pulse is too rapid. I prescribe a ride."

"I don't mind in the least," said Eleanor, vivaciously. "Wait till I put on my habit, Will. You look after the horses."

Will was already booted, and spurred, so when his cousin flitted away, he went round to the stables. Here he was a great favourite, and knew both horses and grooms intimately. He was a better sportsman than student, much to the disgust of his Uncle Lionel.

"Will has no more brains than a ploughboy," he complained to his brother. "He never opens a book, and is always happy with grooms and horses."

"Pooh! pooh! pooh!" said Sir Piers, bluffly. "The lad is well enough. You've got a sufficiency of learning for the whole family, Lionel. Will is an honourable, God-fearing gentleman, and will make my Eleanor a good husband. That is sufficient for me."

After which opinion, Lionel went back to his books, and Piers came out on the terrace to see the young couple ride away. Kynsam had just put up Eleanor on her horse, and was now mounting on his own. At that moment they were hailed by the Baronet.

"Before you go, Will, take this letter."

"What is it, uncle?" asked Will, bringing his horse under the wall. "A letter to post?"

"No; it's addressed to you, and came this morning. I quite forgot to give it to you."

Will took the letter and glanced at the address. As he did so, his face turned a trifle pale under the tan, and he hastily put it in his pocket. Fortunately, Eleanor was looking at her father, and did not observe his emotion. When they were halfway down the avenue, she rallied him on the glumness of his spirits.

"You were as bright as a lark this morning," said she, "now you are as melancholy as an owl. Did your letter contain bad news?"

"I don't know," replied Will, a trifle sulkily. "I haven't read it yet. I suppose it's a dunning letter, as usual."

"Your debts are like the sands of the sea, Will. Why don't you speak to my father and see what can be done?"

"I do not wish to trouble my uncle until it is absolutely necessary."

"Well, isn't it necessary now?" persisted Miss Lametry, marking his discomposure.

"I'll tell you when I read my letter," he answered, and touched his horse up to prevent further questions. Eleanor followed, and at the turning of the road which led to the village her horse swerved, as a pedestrian briskly swinging his stick came round the corner. He was a red-haired man, with a smooth face, and his dress was remarkably smart. When he saw Will, he made as if to stop, but Kynsam pushed on with a frown, and galloped after his cousin. The stranger stood in the dusty road, looking after them with a smile. There was danger in his smiling.

"Is that Mr. Kynsam?" he asked a stone-breaker, who was busy mending the road.

"Yes, sir. That's the young Squire."

"Oh, he is the Squire, is he?"

"Well, he isn't just now. But he will be one day, when he marries Miss Eleanor, and Sir Piers dies."

"Two rather remote contingencies," said the red-haired man, with a disagreeable smile. "Miss Lametry may take a fancy to somebody else, and Sir Piers may live a long time yet.

"Aye, aye, sir. True enough," returned the stone-breaker, who was of a melancholy turn of mind. "And there is Mr. Lionel."

"Who is he?"

"Sir Piers's brother and heir. He must die also before Mr. Will gets the property."

"Oh! Indeed. Thank you for your information, my man. Good-day."

The stranger turned on his heel, and walked back to the village. As he strolled along, he thought; as he thought, he ticked off certain items on his fingers. "Sir Piers, one; Lionel Lametry, two; Miss Lametry and a doubtful marriage, three. H'm! Kynsam hasn't much chance of getting the property. I shall have to put the screw on."

CHAPTER II.

THE STRANGER.

ELEANOR found her cousin an extremely dull companion during that ride. Whether it was the letter—which he avowed was still unread—or the unexpected appearance of the red-haired man, she knew not, but Will was quite absent-minded, and replied to her questions in monosyllables. Naturally she resented this indifference to the charms of her society.

"I shall certainly not avail myself of your company, when these moody fits are on you," said she, as they turned their horses homeward. "Mr. Creke, or Captain Lavers, would have been much more entertaining."

"Forgive me, Eleanor," replied Will, colouring. "I am very sorry you should have reason to complain. I am a trifle worried over some business; but you will find me in better spirits to-morrow."

"Why don't you explain your trouble to my father?"

"I may do so to-night," muttered Will, and dismounted

to assist her to alight. She patted his cheek, as he did so, and glanced archly at him before entering the house. Will stood on the terrace steps, while the groom led away the horses, and when alone he opened his letter. A single glance confirmed his presentiment of bad news, and he crushed it into his pocket with an impatient stamp of his foot. There was a perplexed look on his face as he entered the house.

"Durrant writes from London, and follows his letter here," he murmured. "I hope he hasn't come down to put the screw on. It is either for that purpose, or to get 'the Sacred Ring.' I wish I hadn't told him anything about it."

At this moment the butler crossed his path, and to him, Will addressed himself—

"Did a gentleman call here to-day to see me, Michael?" he asked, abruptly.

"No, sir; not that I know of."

"He'll come to-night," muttered Will, in a vexed tone. "I may as well be prepared for him. If a gentleman—if a Mr. Durrant calls," he added, aloud, "show him up to my rooms."

"Yes, sir."

Will had a suite of apartments in the left wing, near the chapel, and thither he now repaired, to consider his letter and idle away his time till dinner. His wild oats, of which he had sown a goodly crop in London,

were now sprouting, and this letter was evidently the precursor of the harvest. Not a pleasant prospect to look forward to.

"If it had been anyone else but Durrant," he said, angrily, walking to and fro, "I should not mind so much; but he's such a sly dog. Moreover, he wants that ring, which I can't aid him to get, unless my uncle sells it to him, and that is out of the question."

At dinner he managed to be sufficiently cheerful to escape further questioning from Eleanor; but when she withdrew to the drawing-room, he relapsed into moodiness over his wine. Fortunately, Sir Piers and his brother were too absorbed in a political argument with Father Ching to notice his abstraction, and seeing them thus engaged, he slipped away to his own rooms. Here he found the red-haired stranger, smart and smiling as ever, waiting for him.

"What do you want here, Durrant?" demanded Will, pointedly ignoring the proffered hand of his visitor.

"A little politeness, in the first place, Mr. Kynsam," retorted Durrant, sharply, his smile changing to a frown. "You passed me on the road to-day like a beggar, and now receive me most inhospitably. I don't like such treatment."

Kynsam had a somewhat stormy temper, and would have replied angrily, but a moment's reflection convinced him of the folly of such a course. He could not afford

to quarrel with the man, therefore he strove to smooth down his ruffled dignity. "Your letter upset me, Durrant."

"And my appearance upsets you still more," sneered his visitor.

"I wish you were a thousand miles away," replied Will, frankly. "It is no pleasure to me to be reminded of my former follies."

"Perhaps not. I heard down in the village that you were a model young man, and were about to marry Miss ——"

"Leave Miss Lametry's name out of the question, Durrant, and come to business. I read your letter."

"Then you know what I want."

"You want two thousand pounds, which I am unable to pay."

"I am sorry for that," said Durrant, coolly, "because it is necessary, that it should be paid."

"I was a fool to borrow it from you," said Kynsam, bitterly. "Why, I must have paid you three or four hundred pounds in interest."

"Quite that, if not more."

"And now you've come down here to put the screw on. It's a vile way to treat a man."

"What if I agree to renew the bill?" asked Durrant, watching the young man's face.

"If you would only do so," said the other, facing

round rapidly. "Look here, Durrant. By the end of this year I hope to pay off the principal; but at present it is impossible."

"Your uncle is rich."

"I am not going to ask my uncle for money," said Will, coldly. "Surely if I pay you the interest in advance, you will renew that bill?"

"No, I can't do that."

"But you said just now—"

"I know what I said just now, Mr. Kynsam. I will renew that bill on certain conditions."

Will looked at him sharply. He guessed at what Durrant was hinting.

"You refer to 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"Exactly. I am down here to buy or steal that relic."

"Steal it, you dare not—buy it, you cannot. Why, man, think you Sir Piers would part with an heirloom which has been in the Lametry family for over three hundred years?"

"He might be induced to do so—for money."

"My uncle does not require money."

"I know that perfectly well, Mr. Kynsam. But you require—say, two thousand pounds."

"What do you mean, Durrant? Speak plainly."

Durrant shrugged his shoulders and elevated his eyebrows. He was beginning to find Kynsam a somewhat

unpractical person to deal with. However, he had a purpose in view, and curbing his impatience, continued speaking in a soft, wily voice.

"How much plainer do you wish me to put it, Mr. Kynsam?" said he, coolly. "You are in debt to me to the tune of two thousand pounds."

"Your presence here assures me of that, sir. What of it?"

"Simply this. That if you can persuade your uncle to let me have the ring, I will forgive you the debt."

"Still I don't understand," said Will, eyeing him steadily, "unless it is that you propose I should steal the ring."

"No, no! I don't mean that at all," exclaimed Durrant, hastily. "I wish you to introduce me to your uncle as a friend of yours."

"A friend of mine, you Shylock! Hang your insolence!"

"Come, come! Civil words, Mr. Kynsam. Remember, I have it in my power to make matters very disagreeable for you."

The young man turned away with a sigh. He knew well that such was the case. Sir Piers had only given his consent to the engagement with Eleanor on the understanding that Will was free from debt. He had been at the time this arrangement was made, but since then a bill, which he had backed for an old

companion, had fallen due, and as his friend had failed to meet it, he was responsible to Durrant for its repayment. It was for this that the money-lender had come to Devon.

"If the debt were my own," he said, half to himself, "I should confess its existence to my uncle, but as it is, I dare not tell him."

"Ah! it was a pity Mr. Sexton did not pay up," said the money-lender, with an evil smile; "but you see, sir, he has bolted to America, and, failing him, I am forced to come on you for repayment."

"But why press like this?" cried Will, furiously. "The debt was none of my making. I endorsed the bill in a moment of folly. I cannot pay it, as you well know. I can never pay it if you make trouble now. Sir Piers warned me solemnly, that he only consented to the engagement with his daughter on my assurance that I was free from debt. It was true then, for I did not know Sexton would behave like a scoundrel. Now I dare not tell him. He would break off my engagement, turn me out of the house, and in that case, Mr. Durrant," added he, savagely, "you would not get a penny."

"I am quite aware of that," said Durrant, quietly. "Nevertheless, I wish the money paid now."

"It's not the money you want; it is 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"That is so. And I offer you two thousand pounds for your assistance."

"I can't be of any assistance."

"Yes, you can. Introduce me to Sir Piers as your friend, and I'll manage to buy the ring. I have faith in my tongue. After all," continued Durrant, impatiently, "I don't know why you should be so scrupulous. I am presentable enough. No one but you knows that I am a money-lender, and I offer you two thousand pounds for the introduction. Great heavens!" he added, breaking off, "what is that?"

"Only a peal of thunder," said Will, going to the window. "A storm is coming on."

"I don't mean the thunder, but the music."

"Oh! It comes from the chapel. Father Ching is at the organ, no doubt."

"Well, what about my offer?" asked Durrant, reverting to the subject of conversation.

"Why do you want the ring?"

"That's my business."

"And mine also. Why do you want it?"

"To sell it, if you must know, said the money-lender, tartly. "An American millionaire, who is a devout Catholic, heard the story of 'the Sacred Ring' from me. I heard it from you. He wants to buy it, and offers to give me ten thousand pounds if I get it for him."

"That is a large price, Durrant."

"My client is a millionaire, I tell you, and can afford to indulge his whims. He wants the ring, and I am prepared to give Sir Piers three thousand for it."

"And you sell it for ten, so clear seven thousand by the transaction. Upon my word, that is cool."

"Pardon me, Mr. Kynsam. You forget your two thousand. I only make five thousand by the deal."

"Well, that's a large profit anyhow. But why doesn't this millionaire see my uncle himself?"

"He does not know Sir Piers owns the ring. I told him about the relic, but I did not inform him of the name of its present possessor."

"Suppose I upset your plans, and tell him?" said Will, disagreeably.

"Then I'll come down on you for the two thousand, and spoil your chances with Sir Piers."

Kynsam bit his lip. He saw how dangerous was his position, and that he had no chance with the money-lender. Of two evils he chose the lesser.

"I consent to introduce you to my uncle," he said, after a moment's thought, "though I don't know why you can't introduce yourself."

"I know Sir Piers's temper," said Durrant, dryly. "Alone I can do nothing with him. Backed by your introduction and influence, I may achieve my purpose. You may be certain I wouldn't forego this debt unless I was certain I couldn't do without your assistance."

"And suppose you don't attain your ends?"

"Then you must pay the bill at the end of the year. But if I do get the ring, I'll give you the bill before I leave this house."

"To agree is the only way out of this confounded mess," said Kynsam, in a vexed tone; "come with me, Mr. Durrant. My uncle is in the library."

CHAPTER III.

A SACRED RELIC.

THE storm broke over the house as they left the room, and peals of thunder drowned the organ music. Father Ching was an accomplished musician, and frequently repaired to the instrument, where he passed long hours in rapturous delight. Sometimes Sir Piers and Eleanor were his audience, but to-night they remained in the library, as the Baronet was searching for a special book with his brother. While the two men thus busied themselves at the end of the room, Eleanor, yawning over a novel, sat near the window, looking out at the storm.

Three windows opening on to the terrace gave light to the library. They were somewhat out of keeping with the architecture of the mansion, but had been put in by Sir Piers at the request of his wife. Nevertheless they were very convenient, as they admitted plenty of sunlight to the gloomy apartment, and gave ready access to

the terrace. This latter, flagged with stone, looked down on trim lawns and well-filled flower beds. Beyond was a belt of trees, and far in the distance, the ocean, with the dim form of Lundy Island dominating the outlook. To-night the sea was white with foam, and the flashes of lightning lit up the familiar scene with a livid glare.

Many women would have been scared by the roaring of the storm, but Eleanor Lametry had no such fears. She was almost masculine in her contempt for danger, and gazed at the turmoil of sky, and sea, and tossing woodland, with a serene expression. Despite the grandeur of the tempest, she was thinking less of it than of Will, and his unexplained moodiness.

She learned from Michael that her cousin was in his rooms with a stranger, and recognised, from the butler's description, that it was the same man whom they had seen that day. Remembering the frown on Will's face at the meeting, she wondered if the stranger had come to Landy Court with any evil intent. Will's life, she knew well, had been anything but respectable, but she also knew that he was incapable of a dishonourable act, and could not think what connection he could have with the scampish-looking adventurer.

"If it is a debt, papa can settle it for him," she thought, closing her book. "The man looks like a Jew."

In this she wronged Durrant, who had nothing of the

Jew about him, save in his dealings with young men: when, indeed, he was a veritable descendant of Shylock. Yet she mistrusted his face from the glimpse she had caught of it, and was sure he sought her cousin for no good purpose. A presentiment of evil haunted her vaguely, and, despite her efforts, she could not shake it off.

These musings were ended, by the entry of the very men about whom she was thinking. Sir Piers, who was examining a book when the door opened, lifted his head in some surprise, and glanced inquiringly at his nephew. Will preceded Durrant across the room, and presented him to the Baronet.

"Let me introduce Mr. Durrant, uncle," he said, indicating his follower. "He is a friend of mine who came down from London to-day to see me on business."

"Any friend of yours is welcome, Will," replied Sir Piers, with a slight bow. "I am glad to see you, Mr.—Mr.——"

"Durrant," said that gentleman, loudly.

Lionel Lametry, who had crossed over to speak to Eleanor, turned sharply at the mention of the name. At that moment a flash of lightning lit up the room, and his face appeared white in the livid glare. To be sure, the colour might have been due to the light itself, but Will could not mistake the expression. It was one of genuine terror.

"The deuce!" he thought, startled by the momentary glimpse. "Can it be that my learned Uncle Lionel has had dealings with Durrant during his London visits? If so, good-bye to my chances with Eleanor, for if the reputation of the fellow is known, Sir Piers will turn me out of the house."

After that start Lionel made no sign of recognition, and was introduced to Mr. Durrant by his brother. The room was almost dark, for the lights were few, and Sir Piers rang the bell for more. As he did so, Lionel went out of the library. The whole interval between the lightning-flash, and his disappearance, was not more than five minutes, and during that time Durrant had not once caught sight of his face. Will, who was sharp enough in many ways, noticed this, and wondered greatly at the pointed manner in which his uncle avoided the stranger. Meantime, Sir Piers made himself agreeable to the guest.

"My daughter, Miss Lametry—Mr. Durrant," he said, as Eleanor came forward.

"I think we saw Mr. Durrant to-day," observed Miss Lametry, with a cold bow.

"No doubt," responded Durrant, coolly. "I am staying at the village inn, and was on my way to see Kynsam, when I noticed him riding past. I put off my visit to a more favourable time."

"Sorry I was not at home," murmured Will, in a

savage undertone. Sir Piers did not hear him, but Eleanor did, and threw a glance of wonderment at her cousin.

"You cannot go back to-night in this storm," said Sir Piers, glancing out of the window, "so must stay at the Court."

"I shall be most happy."

"Have you finished your business with Mr. Kynsam."

"Yes, Sir Piers, and would not have presumed to trouble your hospitality, but that my friend Kynsam insisted on presenting me to you."

"Very glad indeed; quite right," said Sir Piers, heartily, while Will ground his teeth with rage at the covert insolence of Durrant's speech. Eleanor touched his arm and led him to the window, ostensibly to look at the storm, in reality to question him, concerning his ill-concealed dislike for the man, whom he introduced to her as his friend.

"Who is he, Will?" she asked in an undertone.

"A friend of mine—Durrant."

"He does not look like a gentleman."

"Perhaps not; but he is a very rich man."

"Will," she said, apprehensively, "he has not come down here to cause you trouble?"

"Of course not," replied her cousin, hastily. "What could put such an idea into your head?"

"The way in which you are behaving."

Annoyed at her acuteness of perception, Will did not answer for the moment. Then he took her hand, and replied earnestly—

"My dear Eleanor, I own I do not like the man, but he came down to see me on business, and I am forced to be civil to him. To-morrow morning he will depart, and I don't think either of us will ever set eyes on him again."

With this doubtful explanation Eleanor was forced to be content. After all, she had no right to pry into her cousin's affairs, and it was only the love she bore him, which made her so persistent in her questioning. Will seemed indisposed to speak further on the subject; so, after a word or two on casual matters, Eleanor, still haunted by a sense of impending evil, slipped off to the drawing-room, and left the stranger alone with her father and cousin. Will drew a long breath of relief when she disappeared, and strolled forward to the table by which Sir Piers and Durrant were seated.

In a dexterous manner, Durrant had led the conversation round to the object of his visit, and Sir Piers was now talking volubly on the subject of "the Sacred Ring." This was quite a hobby with the worthy baronet, and he was never so pleased as when telling the story of the relic. He broke off as Will approached, and addressed himself directly to that young gentleman.

"This is a strange thing, Will," he said, vivaciously; "your friend has heard of 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"Not so very strange, either," said Durrant, with a meaning smile; "it was Mr. Kynsam who told me about it."

"I knew you were interested in such matters," explained Will.

"So I am. Very much so. I long to see the ring, and hear its story."

"You shall both hear and see," exclaimed Sir Piers, gaily. "It is kept in the chapel. Will, pray ask Father Ching to have the goodness to bring hither the casket."

"Why is it called 'the Sacred Ring'?" asked Durrant, when Will left the room.

"It contains a grain of the true Cross," explained Sir Piers, seriously. "Aye, sir, you may well look astonished. It contains a grain of the true Cross wood —a mere atom, indeed; still, sufficient to render it holy and venerated."

"Has it been long in your family, Sir Piers?"

"For over three hundred years, Mr. Durrant. It belonged to the monastery of Kilvers, in Shropshire, and was famous throughout the West Country. One of my ancestors, James Lametry, was Abbot of Kilvers, at the time when the monasteries were suppressed by the tyrant Henry. Knowing how useless was resistance to the Royal authority, he was only intent on saving 'the Sacred Ring.' When the commissioners came down to

suppress the monastery, they demanded the ring. It was known that the King desired it for himself, but sooner than let it fall into the hands of a ruler so obnoxious to our Holy Church, Abbot Lametry fled hither with the relic. Leaving it in charge of his brother Francis, who was then master of Landy Court, the Abbot went southward to Plymouth, hoping to escape the vengeance of Henry. Unfortunately he was betrayed, and brought in chains to Landy Court. He refused to reveal where he had hidden 'the Sacred Ring,' and was hanged in chains before yonder terrace."

"And the ring?" asked Durrant, who listened to this story with rapt attention, with the idea of relating it to the American millionaire, and thereby enhancing the value of the ring.

"Sir Francis Lametry hid it safely, and, despite all search, it was never discovered. Not until the reign of Mary, of pious memory, did our family venture to display it openly. Ah!" added Sir Piers, as the door opened, "here is Father Ching with the casket."

Not only Father Ching entered, but also Will and Lionel Lametry. The latter manifested but little interest in the exhibition of the ring, and withdrew to the distant end of the library, where it seemed to Will, that he kept furtive watch on the actions of Durrant. The casket, an exquisite example of Renaissance workmanship in solid gold, was placed on the table by

Father Ching. Sir Piers unlocked it with a gold key attached to his watch-chain, and there, on a pad of blue velvet, lay the relic. It was an antique silver ring, circled with rubies and faced with a cluster of diamonds, upon which was traced a cross of sapphires.

"In the hollow under the diamonds, lies a grain of the true Cross," said Father Ching, crossing himself reverently. "The ring is of Byzantium workmanship, and is believed to have belonged to the holy mother of Constantine. It was brought by a Crusader to the Abbey of Kilvers, and from thence passed into the hands of the Lametry family."

Durrant looked with eager eyes at the famous relic. If he could only secure it, he would be able to gain ten thousand pounds. But he was doubtful whether Sir Piers would sell it; and, moreover, did not like to make him an offer in the presence of the ascetic-looking ecclesiastic. He was relieved from this hesitation by the withdrawal of Father Ching.

"You will excuse me, Sir Piers," said the priest, "but I have to visit Cuthbert Caffin, and shall not see you again to-night."

"Is he better?" asked Sir Piers, knowing Father Ching referred to one of the under servants.

"I am afraid he is worse," said the good Father in a pitying tone. "I may have to watch all night by his bedside. The casket——"

"I shall take it back to the chapel," interrupted Sir Piers. "You can rely on me, Father."

The priest withdrew, and the casket, with its contents, remained on the table, under the eyes of the three men. Durrant spoke first.

"You would not sell this ring?" he asked, abruptly.

"Sell it, sir," said the Baronet, with a look of horror. "Sell an heirloom—a sacred relic which has been in my family for generations! Certainly not, Mr. Durrant. How can you venture to make such a request?"

"I don't exactly make it," said Durrant, in an apologetic tone; "but I told a rich friend of mine about it, and as he is fond of curiosities, he wishes to buy it."

"'Tis not for sale, Mr. Durrant," cried Sir Piers, coldly. "A curiosity, indeed! I perceive, sir, you are not of our faith."

"I beg your pardon, Sir Piers," said Durrant, noting that he had gone too far. "I do not mean to offend you, but my friend is most anxious to obtain 'the Sacred Ring,' and offers a large sum for it."

"Indeed, Mr. Durrant!"

"Yes. He offers three thousand pounds."

"I would not sell it for ten thousand!" declared Sir Piers, indignantly closing the casket. He was so peremptory in his refusal, that Durrant glanced in a discomfited manner at Will, to demand his assistance. But that young gentleman obstinately turned away his

head, and by his silence refused to have anything to do with the matter. Durrant was thus obliged to act for himself.

"Even at the risk of offending you, I must tell you that my friend is willing to pay as much as four thousand pounds."

"No, sir!"

"Five thousand!"

"Not if you offered twenty," said Sir Piers, rising from the table, deeply offended. "Let us close the subject. I decline to part with 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"I'll have it, for all that," muttered Durrant, under his breath, and Will overheard the remark.

CHAPTER IV.

A MYSTERIOUS CRIME.

WHAT happened on that night, no one knew until long afterwards. Hospitably invited to remain by Sir Piers, the money-lender retired to bed at an early hour. After that interview, in which he offered to buy the ring, Sir Piers viewed him with marked disfavour, and regretted his condescension in asking so discourteous a guest to remain at the Court; yet, as the storm continued with unabated vigour, the Baronet could hardly rescind his invitation, and, prompted by a sense of hospitality, made himself thoroughly agreeable. All the same, he did not prolong the interview, and, excusing himself on the plea that he had work to do which would detain him till late in the library, sent Mr. Durrant to the smoking-room under the charge of Will Kynsam.

Here Lionel usually repaired to have a chat with Will, but on this night he kept away, whereby Kynsam was himself forced to entertain Durrant. The task was uncongenial, but he could not afford to be impolite to

one who had him in his power. Therefore, he did his best to be agreeable, and only once reminded Durrant of his failure to purchase the ring.

"I knew you would offend Sir Piers by hinting at such a thing," said Will, with painful candour. "It would have been better, had you said nothing."

"And so wasted my journey to Devon," retorted Durrant, wrathfully. "My good sir, I did not come down here on a fool's errand. That ring I want, and that ring I mean to have."

"How do you hope to obtain it?"

"Never you mind, Mr. Kynsam."

"Oh! but I shall mind. I have no fancy to entertain a burglar. Doubtless, you intend to steal the ring."

"Don't talk nonsense, sir."

"I'm talking sound sense," said Will, angrily; "it is you who talk nonsense. Sir Piers refuses to part with the ring, so you can return to London to-morrow, and renew that bill. It shall be paid at the end of the year."

Durrant looked at the young man with a wicked eye. Twice he opened his mouth to reply, but twice thought better of doing so, and finally subsided into sulky silence. This was not unpleasant to Will, who disliked the man greatly, and for some time they both smoked steadily, without exchanging a word. Finally, Will asked a question which had been in his mind all night.

"Durrant, do you know my Uncle Lionel?"

"I was introduced to him to-night. Very rude, I call him. He scarcely spoke to me."

"Did you know him in London?"

"Never met him before to the best of my knowledge," replied Durrant, with a stare. "To be sure, I didn't see his face very plainly, but I don't know the name. Does he do anything in my way?"

"Not he! A dry-as-dust old chap, who spends most of his time in Holywell and Wardour Streets when in town. He's not the man to borrow money."

"Then why did you ask me if I knew him?"

"Simply out of curiosity. So you don't know him?"

"No; he's an absolute stranger to me."

"Humph! Is that so? Well, good-night, Durrant. I'll escort you to the village to-morrow, and you can leave by the mid-day train."

"Not till I get that ring."

"If you are going to wait for that, you'll spend the rest of your life in the village." With this parting shot, Will went off to bed, and Durrant followed his example. Though the hour was late, Father Ching was still at the organ, and Durrant swore heartily as the solemn music echoed through the house. At length it ceased, and he fell asleep thinking of the ring. An inspection of the relic had greatly excited his cupidity, and he closed his eyes, still devising plans to obtain it by fair means or foul.

Will retired to his room, but, instead of going to bed, sat over the fire thinking of his vexations. The visit of Durrant annoyed him greatly, the more so, as he had been forced to introduce the man as his friend. Should Sir Piers discover that Durrant was a money-lender, and had come down to Landy Court for the purpose of buying the ring, Will felt an uncomfortable assurance that the blame would be laid on him. He had almost made up his mind to go downstairs to the library, where Sir Piers, doubtless, still was, and confess everything; but as he would have to reveal Durrant's profession, and admit that he owed him two thousand pounds, he really could not bring himself to do so. "Besides," he thought, hopefully, "even though Durrant has not got the ring, he has consented to renew that bill for a year. No, I'll keep my own counsel, get Durrant away from the Court, and pay this infernal debt as early as I possibly can."

Then he went to bed, and slept soundly despite the storm which raged the greater part of the night. It was as terrible a tempest as that which blew, when Macbeth killed King Duncan, and the hours of darkness were scarce less ominous of evil.

With the dawn came a faint rumour of foul crime—the murmur swelled into a clamour, and woke the gentry. Already the servants knew all, and huddled together with pale faces; but not until Father Ching and

Lionel Lametry hurried out to see what was the matter, was the word uttered—that word was murder! Sir Piers had been found that morning in the library stabbed to the heart.

Roused by the alarm, Will joined the priest and his uncle on their way to the library. He had a nervous, frightened look which was foreign to his usual demeanour, but Lionel and Father Ching were too much upset themselves to notice his agitation, which was surely natural enough. That a crime should be committed at Landy Court was in itself a terrible calamity, but that the victim should be Sir Piers Lametry was almost too terrible for belief.

It was true, however. The three men entered the room, to find the unfortunate gentleman lying on his back with outspread arms, and an ugly wound in his left breast.

"He has been stabbed to the heart," said Father Ching, kneeling down beside his patron; "but with what weapon?"

Lionel looked all round the room, but could find no trace of any dangerous instrument. All the furniture was in order, so there could have been no struggle between the old man and his assassin. Only the tablecloth was pulled on to the floor, and a corner of it was clutched in the dead man's hand. As Will picked it up mechanically, a gold casket rolled from among the folds.

"'The Sacred Ring,'" cried Will, picking it up. "Why, Father Ching! Uncle! the box is open, and the ring is gone."

"The ring gone," said Lionel, incredulously. "Impossible!"

"Look for yourself," replied Will, holding out the empty box.

"I don't need to look, Will," said his uncle, suddenly, "for, see, the middle window is open."

"The housemaid might have opened it this morning," interjected Father Ching, looking up.

"She did not touch an article in the room," answered Lionel, sharply. "As soon as she saw the body of my poor brother she alarmed the house. No! The window was opened by the robber who stole the ring."

"Do you think he killed my uncle?" said Will, with white lips.

"Of course he did. Robbery was the motive of the crime. Will," continued Lionel with a start, "that man who came last night, who wanted to buy the ring, where is he?"

"Great heavens, uncle! You don't think he is the murderer?"

"Look if he is in his room, Will. He must give an account of himself."

"And send for a doctor—for the police," said Father Ching, as Will went to the door to give his orders.

"Doctor!" replied Lionel, bitterly. "My poor Piers is past all earthly aid, Father Ching, but let the police come. If we cannot save his life, we can at least avenge his death."

As Will reached the door, a white-robed figure appeared on the threshold. It was Eleanor Lametry, wild-eyed, and haggard, who had just been informed of her terrible loss.

"Eleanor! Eleanor! do not come in," said Will, trying vainly to bar her passage.

"I must come in," she said, in a hard voice. "Do you think I will faint? Where is my father? Let me see. Ah!" cried she, hurrying forward, "my father, my poor, poor father!"

"Be calm, be calm, Miss Lametry," implored Father Ching, as she caught the dead man's hand, and pressed it to her breast, as though to bring back warmth to the cold clay.

"I am calm, Father Ching. Uncle Lionel!" she burst out, passionately, "who has done this?"

"No one knows, Eleanor," said Lionel, fiercely; "but when we do know, he'll hang as high as Haman."

"Who could have done it?" muttered Eleanor, taking no notice of this speech. "He had not an enemy in the world. So good! so noble! Oh, God! Who could have the heart to kill him?"

"It was not enmity, but robbery."

"Robbery! What do you mean?"

"'The Sacred Ring' is gone," said Father Ching, pointing to the box. "There is the empty reliquary."

Eleanor arose slowly from her knees, and gazed in silence at the faces of the two men; then her eyes wandered to the empty casket, to the open window, and ultimately rested on Will Kynsam, who entered at that moment. A look of horror flashed across her face.

"Will!" she cried, rushing forward and seizing his hand. "Will! Where is that man—that Durrant?"

"He is gone."

"Gone!" cried Father Ching and Lionel at the same time.

"His room is empty—his clothes are not there. He has fled."

"I knew it! I knew it!" said Eleanor, smiting her hands together. "I felt a presentiment of ill when I saw that man's face. He is the criminal—he is the assassin! Fled? Yes! He fled through yonder window, and this is his work!"

She pointed downward to the dead body of her father with a noble gesture. In her fierce beauty, with the black hair streaming wildly over her white dress, she looked like Jael, the wife of Heber.

"It cannot be! it cannot be!" muttered Will, leaning against the wall, with heavy breathing. "Durrant would not commit such a crime."

"Then why has he fled?" interposed Father Ching, "and how is the ring lost?"

"He came down to buy the ring," said Lionel, looking steadily at Will, "you know that. The ring is gone, Durrant is gone, and my brother is dead."

Kynsam made no answer, but covered his face with his hands, and groaned aloud. The next moment Eleanor had wrenched them away, and was looking searchingly into his eyes.

"Will," she said, in a deliberate manner, "did that man kill my father?"

"I don't know," he answered, evading her look.

She dropped his hands suddenly, and turned away. At the door she met Mrs. Westcote, and then her fortitude abandoned her. With a cry she fell fainting in the housekeeper's arms.

CHAPTER V.

A LOCAL DOGBERRY.

THE news of Sir Piers' death spread like wildfire through the district. He was well known, thoroughly respected, and universally liked, therefore his tragic end was widely regretted. There was a constant succession of visitors to the Court, with advice, and condolence, but Sir Lionel Lametry (as he was now called) refused to see anyone. He took counsel with his nephew and Father Ching, as to the chances of securing Sir Piers' assassin. There was no doubt in anyone's mind of Durrant's guilt; as the theft of the ring, and that suspicious flight were strong presumptive evidence against him.

Eleanor, secluded in her rooms, denied herself to uncle and cousin. Only Father Ching, who did his best to soothe her wild grief with the consolation of religion, was permitted to see her. She listened to his well-meant efforts with rigid face and tearless eyes; but there was no thought of resignation in her heart. Her whole

energies were centred, in tracking down, and punishing the assassin of her father.

"What has been done, Father?" she asked abruptly, when the priest tried to calm her mind; "what steps have been taken to avenge my father's death?"

"The police have been called from Ketterton," replied Father Ching, "and a detective has been sent for to London."

"For what purpose?"

"To find out who killed Sir Piers."

"As if there were any doubt on that point," said Eleanor, scornfully. "My father was murdered by this man Durrant."

"We have no evidence to prove that he is the assassin," remonstrated the priest, mildly. "Do not make hasty accusations, my child."

"What further evidence is necessary? Durrant wanted to buy the ring, my father refused to sell it to him. He stayed one night here, and the next morning disappeared with the ring, leaving a dead man behind him. It can be no one but Durrant."

"Mr. Kynsam does not think so. He says Durrant is of too cowardly a nature, to commit so terrible a crime."

"He evidently knows his friend well," muttered Eleanor, clenching her hand.

"If you asked Mr. Kynsam——"

"I wish to ask him nothing," she said, passionately. "I would rather be left alone, Father, till the funeral."

She broke down at this point, so Father Ching withdrew, leaving her to indulge her grief in solitude. On coming downstairs, he found that the police had arrived from Ketterton. Inspector Dove, an important, loud-talking man, whose personality was hardly in keeping with his name, examined the library, in company with Sir Lionel and Will.

"Nothing has been disturbed since the discovery," said the new Baronet, "save that the body of my poor brother has been taken to his room."

"Good! good! That is as it should be," replied Dove, pompously. "I see the window—the middle window—is open."

"It was so when the housemaid entered the room this morning."

"Where is the housemaid, Sir Lionel?"

"Shall I send for her, Inspector?"

"No. Not at present. Later on I shall examine all the servants."

"You surely don't suspect them?" said Will, disdainfully.

"I have a right to suspect all who were in the house at the time of the murder," retorted Dove, drily.

"Ridiculous," said Kynsam, and turned his back on the Inspector.

"Ridiculous!" repeated the police officer, growing red. "You are impolite, sir."

"I beg your pardon, Inspector. I am upset by this terrible affair."

"Hum! Indeed!" muttered Dove, staring at him. "You are upset. Indeed. By the way, Sir Lionel," he added, turning to the Baronet, "can you tell me if you had any visitors last night?"

"One only. A gentleman called Durrant."

"And who is Mr. Durrant?"

"A friend of my nephew's."

"Where is he now? Why is he not here to give evidence?" demanded Dove, sharply.

"He left the Court this morning."

"Oh! oh!" said Dove, in a distinctly offensive manner. "He is a friend of Mr. Kynsam, and left this morning. By what train? Or is he a resident in the district?"

"He is not a resident," replied Sir Lionel, reluctantly, "and he left this morning without giving anyone notice. I know no more."

"Ah! He bolted?"

"Well, it looks like it."

"And by that window," said Dove, pointing towards it meaningly.

"Yes; at least, I suppose so," said Lionel, with some hesitation.

Inspector Dove's face lighted up. He saw in the affair an easy case, which would cover him with glory as a smart and capable officer. Already, and without any knowledge as to the motive of the crime, he suspected Durrant. That he was a friend of Kynsam's only rendered him more culpable in Dove's eyes. The Inspector disliked Will for his late behaviour, and was determined to make him pay for, what he termed, his insolence. For the first time in his life Will had made a bitter enemy when he could ill afford to do so.

"What do you say to all this, Mr. Kynsam?" asked Dove, significantly.

"I cannot say more than has been already said," replied Will, shrugging his shoulders. "'The Sacred Ring' is missing; and as it was in the possession of Sir Piers last night, I have no doubt that he was murdered by someone who desired it."

"Did Durrant desire it?"

"Yes," interposed Lionel, seeing Will hesitate; "he offered to buy it from my poor brother last night. Of course, the offer was refused."

"And this morning the ring is gone—also Mr. Durrant."

As he spoke, Dove looked at Will with a meaning smile on his lips. The young man, goaded to a pitch of fury by that smile, turned fiercely on his tormentor.

"If you think that Mr. Durrant is guilty, you are

wrong, Inspector. I know the man well; he is too much of a coward to commit so terrible a crime."

"It is generally cowards who do commit these kind of crimes," retorted Dove; "they are afraid of open warfare, so seek to gain their ends by secret assassination."

"I think you are wrong in this case."

"I am not so sure about that," responded the Inspector. "So you know this Mr. Durrant well. Who is he?"

"A money-lender."

"What was he doing down here?"

"Am I bound to answer all your impertinent questions?" demanded Will, angrily.

Inspector Dove answered back smartly—

"You are bound to assist me by every means in your power. I have charge of this case, and I wish to know all about Mr. Durrant."

"You have charge of the case at present," retorted Kynsam, making for the door, "but to-morrow it will pass out of your hands, into those of Mr. Drage. I decline to tell you anything. What I know, throws no light on the subject, but it shall be told to the London detective."

And with that the young man left the room, banging the door loudly as he made his exit. Dove looked after him with a very red face. His temper was not a golden one, and he had some difficulty in keeping it under control. Both Father Ching and Sir Lionel looked

distressed at Will's conduct, which was utterly foreign to his usual demeanour, and the former apologised to the ruffled Inspector.

"You must excuse Mr. Kynsam," said Father Ching, hurriedly; "he has a great deal to try him at present. This terrible calamity has upset us all."

"Oh, I'll excuse him," replied Dove, drily; "but I'll also suspect him."

"Suspect him!" said the Baronet, furiously; "what do you mean, sir?"

"I mean that he knows more about this matter than he chooses to tell."

"Than he chooses to tell you," interposed Ching, amending the Inspector's speech, "but I've no doubt he'll reveal all to Drage."

"I have charge of the matter, at present," said Dove, stiffly.

"In that case you had better attend to your business," said Sir Lionel, abruptly, "and pray, Mr. Inspector, don't make any further accusations against my nephew. You have no grounds for your suspicions."

Whereupon Sir Lionel also departed, presumably to see Will, and left Father Ching alone with Dove. That worthy individual was in a great rage, but, not wishing to quarrel with so powerful a personage as the Baronet, he restrained his wrath. With a sickly smile he turned to the priest.

"I am afraid I have offended those gentlemen."

"I am afraid you have," replied Father Ching, coldly. "Pardon me for saying so, but it was somewhat unwise of you to speak about Mr. Kynsam as you did."

Dove thought so too, and felt that he had gone rather far, but was too narrow-minded to admit his fault. Without making any reply, he turned away and busied himself in searching for evidence likely to elucidate the mystery.

It is a painful thing to say, but Inspector Dove was a most incompetent person. Although, doubtless a good policeman, he was utterly at sea in dealing with a delicate matter of this sort. Having received full power from Sir Lionel to act as he thought fit, he went roughly to work, and upset the household. The servants were examined, and their boxes searched; while Dove and his subordinates treated them with marked suspicion. Such an ill-advised course was not conciliatory, and from Michael downwards the servants were furious with the Inspector. Instead of aiding him, they put obstacles in his way, and when night came Dove was as far off discovery, as he had been in the morning.

There was not the slightest evidence likely to betray the criminal. None of the servants had heard any noise in the library that night, as their sleeping apartments were situate at the back of the Court. Kynsam had

retired to bed at the same time as Durrant; and Sir Lionel had sought his apartments half-an-hour later, leaving his brother in the library.

"Were the windows closed, sir, when you left Sir Piers in the room?" asked Dove.

"Yes," replied Sir Lionel. "There was a storm last night, as you know, so the windows were all closed."

"What was Sir Piers doing when you saw him last?"

"Reading a book; and 'the Sacred Ring' was in its casket on the table beside him. I have no doubt he was assaulted while reading."

"Does 'the Sacred Ring' generally remain in the library?"

"No; it is invariably kept in the chapel. Father Ching brought it therefrom, as my poor brother wished to show it to Durrant."

"Oh, *he* saw it!"

"Yes, and offered to buy it. Of course Sir Piers refused to sell the relic; I myself wondered at Durrant's insolence in asking such a thing."

"He is a great friend of Mr. Kynsam's, is he not?"

"That I can't say," responded Lionel, drily; "my nephew introduced him to us as a friend; but I can scarcely conceive that he would be on intimate terms with a money-lender. But all young men are extravagant."

"Very likely," replied the sagacious Dove; "but all

young men don't make friends of money-lenders without good reason."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Lionel, turning pale.

"I mean that Durrant stole the ring, and that Mr. Kynsam is aware of the fact."

CHAPTER VI.

VIDOCQ OF LONDON.

AT five o'clock on the following day Drage arrived to take charge of the case. Vidocq of London, as he was sometimes called, was a somewhat remarkable individual, whose earlier career closely resembled that of the celebrated French thief-catcher. Like Vidocq, he had been in opposition to the law during his early life, and had consorted with the lowest of the criminal classes. Finding the law too strong for the indulgence of his natural instincts of rascality, and a life of perpetual alarm, rather trying for his nerves, he amended his ways, and turned honest. With his hereditary instincts it was by no means an easy thing to do; yet in the end his ingrained stubbornness gained him the victory. He not only turned honest, but even made use of his capabilities for the preservation of society, instead of, as heretofore, for its destruction. It was truly a case of the leopard changing its spots.

At first he sought admission into the regular staff of detectives employed at Scotland Yard, but his career being too notorious for this, he compromised the matter by setting up a private inquiry office. In this business he flourished greatly; and, though the authorities were at first suspicious of this sudden reformation, yet in the end they recognised his laudable endeavour to live down the past. Once convinced of the change, they encouraged him in his new-born uprightness, and not infrequently availed themselves of his wonderful capabilities. The man was a born detective, and his experience among the criminal classes, stood him in good stead in his new vocation. The thievish fraternity dreaded this deserter from their ranks far more than any other detective. He knew most of them personally, and was undeterred by early friendships from arresting them when necessary. With their favourite haunts he was well acquainted, and, conceal themselves as they might, Drage always ran them to earth in the end. He was at once hated and feared.

Drage soon found plenty of clients willing to pay him largely for his cunning and dexterity, so that he speedily began to accumulate money, and found his new vocation much more profitable, and less hazardous, than the old one. In this case honesty paid. As a rule, unless tempted by large sums, he refused to take up ordinary cases, but confined his attention solely to those difficult

problems of crime which it was his delight to unravel. Such an enigma he discovered in the murder of Sir Piers Lametry, and in the theft of "the Sacred Ring."

It was Lionel who sent for Drage. Determined that nothing should be left undone to secure and punish the assassin of his brother, he selected the most capable man in London to achieve this end. Drage accepted the commission, and duly presented himself at Lametry Court. He was at once taken to Sir Lionel, and in a lengthy interview made himself acquainted with the facts of the case. Then he proceeded to make use of his knowledge.

Inspector Dove could hardly conceal his scorn when a mean-looking little man, in shabby clothes, presented himself as the famous Vidocq of London. This dull-brained "Jack-in-office" saw neither the intelligent face nor the sharp eyes of the man before him. All he took stock of were the shabby clothes, and thereupon he treated Drage in a supercilious manner, highly amusing to that keen reader of character. There was a latent antagonism in Drage's breast towards the police, no doubt begotten by his early career, and he took every opportunity to make himself obnoxious to those in authority, if he could do so with safety. In this case he saw the kind of man with whom he had to deal, and proceeded to lower the pride of this local Dogberry.

"What have you done, Mr. Inspector?" he asked, with assumed meekness.

"I have examined all the servants," said Dove, pompously. "I have searched their boxes, I have forbidden one and all to leave the house, I—"

"Have you made any more blunders?"

"Blunders?"

"I call them blunders," replied Drage, calmly. "By examining the servants, you have put them on their guard. By searching their boxes and treating them with suspicion, you have raised their anger. In such a frame of mind they will now rather hinder than help us."

"I am not here to be insulted," protested Dove, indignantly.

"You are here to do your duty, and you have not done it."

"I have done what I could."

Drage shrugged his shoulders. Dove was not worth his anger.

"You have done what you could to put things wrong, I admit. Now we must put them right. What about Durrant?"

"He has escaped," replied Dove, sulkily, feeling that Drage was more than his match.

"Have you traced him?"

"No, I did not think it was worth while. Mr.

Kynsam knows his address in London. I have no doubt Durrant has returned there. When we get the address he can be arrested."

"Certainly! If he is found at his London address," said Drage, derisively; "but does it not strike you as probable, Mr. Inspector, that if this man is guilty, he will do his best to conceal himself from the police?"

"Only Mr. Kynsam knows the address," answered Dove, significantly, "and Durrant may rely upon Mr. Kynsam refusing to give us that address."

"Why should Durrant rely on Mr. Kynsam's so refusing, and why should Mr. Kynsam refuse?"

"Because Mr. Kynsam is a friend of Durrant's."

"That is no reason why he should screen him, always presuming that Durrant is guilty."

"I am convinced that Durrant is guilty, and that Mr. Kynsam is screening him."

"Oh, indeed!" said Drage, looking sharply at him. "Have you any reason for such a belief?"

"You may be sure I do not speak without reason," responded Dove, loftily. "Durrant came down to buy that ring. Finding he could not gain it in an honest manner, he secured it by killing Sir Piers. Then he fled to London, and there intends to dispose of 'the Sacred Ring,' and share the proceeds with Mr. Kynsam."

"Why should he do so?"

"To secure the silence of Mr. Kynsam."

"Do you think that Mr. Kynsam was privy to the murder of his uncle?"

"I don't go so far as to say that," replied Dove, hastily; "but his conduct is very suspicious."

Drage walked to the window and looked out. They were in the library, and the detective was following in his mind the probable course taken by the assassin. After a time he returned.

"Your theory is excellent, Mr. Inspector," he said, deliberately. "Still, it is only theory. As yet we are not certain that Durrant committed the crime or stole the ring."

"His flight proves it."

"His flight proves nothing of the sort," retorted Drage, sharply. "Do you think a man would be such a fool as to commit a crime so openly? He came to buy the ring; it is refused him, the owner of the ring is found dead, and the ring itself disappears, while the man who wanted it disappears also. I tell you, Mr. Inspector, that you are making a mistake. Durrant would not behave in such a foolish manner. If he acted according to your theory, where does his gain come in? Nowhere. The law could catch him red-handed, without any trouble. To my mind," added Drage, quietly, "this man Durrant is innocent."

"Then who is guilty?"

"That is what I wish to find out. Now answer a few questions."

"Go on, Mr. Drage," grumbled the Inspector, ironically. "You sneer at my theory. Let me hear yours."

"I don't put forward any theory at the present time. When I have evidence to go on, I may do so."

"Well, what questions do you wish to ask?"

"Did Durrant stay at the Court?"

"No. He was lodging at 'The Three Bells,' in the village."

"How was it he remained here on the night of the murder?"

"Because there was a heavy storm, and Sir Piers asked him to remain."

"Did Durrant come to see Sir Piers?"

"He came to see Mr. Kynsam."

"On business, no doubt?"

"I don't know. To my mind, it was on business connected with 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"That is a mere assumption on your part," replied Drage, tartly. "Mr. Kynsam alone can answer that question."

"But he won't do so."

"Oh, yes, he will. I shall interview Mr. Kynsam later on. Meanwhile, I intend to pay a visit to 'The Three Bells' at—at—what do you call your village?"

"Botsleigh. I suppose you mean to ask about Durrant?"

"Precisely. I'll have some news for you to-morrow."

"I am content to bet you a pound," said Dove, deliberately, "that your visit to 'The Three Bells' will result in no discovery."

Drage took no notice of this offer, but left the room. He was doubtful himself as to the result of his inquiries, but did not tell Dove of his doubts. With the Inspector's theory Drage entirely disagreed. Experience taught him to mistrust appearances, and the inference that Durrant had committed the murder was so obvious, that he was inclined to believe him guiltless. "If Durrant is guilty," he thought, hastening down the avenue on his way to the village, "he would not be such a fool as to leave so plain a trail behind him. But if innocent, why did he leave Landy Court in so stealthy a manner? Dove evidently suspects Kynsam of being the instigator, if not the perpetrator, of the crime; but so far as I can see at present, that young man had no motive to commit the murder. I'll see him when I return from the village, and can guess from his demeanour if he has anything to conceal. If anything would make me believe him innocent, it is the fact that Dove says he is guilty. Dove is an ass."

With this very flattering estimate of the Inspector's mental capacity, Drage walked rapidly through the solitary street of Botsleigh, and entered "The Three Bells." It stood at the end of the village some distance

back from the main road which led to Barnstaple, and thus gained considerable custom from thirsty wayfarers. Benches were set outside the inn for the convenience of ale-drinkers, and these were now crowded with gossips discussing the death of Sir Piers.

For a few minutes Drage mingled with the throng, to hear the general opinion. Durrant was constantly spoken of as the murderer, and local opinion was strongly in favour of his arrest. With whimsical obstinacy, this corroboration of Dove's story only served to confirm Drage in his belief that Durrant was innocent.

"All these fools take their cue from Dove," he said, entering the inn. "I'll hear what the landlord has to say."

The landlord had a good deal to say. Drage presented himself in the character of a traveller anxious to know the reason of the concourse before the inn, and the landlord told the story again. That Sir Piers Lametry was murdered, that a London gentleman had done it, and that the London gentleman had been in the room the morning after the crime was committed. All this with a liberal consumption of beer.

"Oh, was he?" said Drage, pricking up his ears. "I thought you said he passed the night at Landy Court?"

"So he did, sir," replied the landlord. "But he came

here at seven in the morning, just as I was up. He said he had slept at the Court, and had to come over early to get his bag, and catch the London train at Barnstaple."

"Was he agitated?"

"Not at all, sir. He joked and laughed with me just as you might be doing. As cool as ice he was, yet I daresay, sir, he had just come from killing Sir Piers."

"Well, did he catch the train?" asked Drage, dismissing the landlord's theory as idle.

"He did, sir. I drove him over myself with his baggage, never thinking I was with a murderer. He was in time to catch the half-past eight train to London."

"You are sure he wasn't agitated or nervous?"

"Certainly not, sir! He was as gay as though he were off for a holiday. Had a drink with me at Barnstaple railway station, and said he hoped he'd meet me again."

"Did he say anything about Sir Piers?"

"If you'll believe it, sir, he had the impudence to say as how Sir Piers was a nice old gent."

"Did he mention Mr. Kynsam?"

"No, sir; only Sir Piers."

This was the sum total of the landlord's information, and it sent Drage back to the Court in a somewhat thoughtful mood. Durrant's demeanour was quite at

variance with the supposition that he had murdered Sir Piers. No man, however strong were his nerves, could joke and laugh after committing so terrible a crime. Yet, if he was innocent, why had he left the Court at such an untoward hour, and why was he so anxious to catch the early train to London?

"I think," said Drage, after some cogitation, "I think Mr. Kynsam may throw some light on this affair."

CHAPTER VII.

AN OBSTINATE WITNESS.

IT must be premised that, despite his reputation, Drage was not infallible; and, though careful, cautious, and keen-sighted, sometimes made mistakes. He was not that great creature, the detective of fiction, who, assisted by the prescience of his creator, can see through stone walls, and form rightful conclusions on the slenderest evidence. Such a chimerical monster, is no doubt, admirably adapted to fulfil the purpose of his being, which is to satisfy the reader's curiosity; but he does not exist in real life. Drage was no Lecoq, but only a man, and therefore, faulty; so if, hereafter, he suspects the wrong people, and follows the wrong clues, remember that he is working in the dark, and can only judge which way to turn, by uncertain lights, which in nine cases out of ten prove to be false. You, who can solve the mystery by simply glancing at the last chapter of this book, may scoff at, what appears to be, Drage's incredible errors; but a moment's reflection will convince you that without

those very errors which you blame, the mystery would remain unsolved. After which homily, it will be as well to resume the history of Drage's groupings in the dark.

The behaviour of Durrant greatly puzzled the detective. That a man who, to all appearance, had committed an atrocious murder, should laugh and joke while escaping, seemed almost incredible of belief. Yet without doubt the evidence of the landlord was given in perfect good faith. Convinced that Durrant had killed Sir Piers, it is probable that the landlord would rack his memory for signs of guilt, and perhaps assert that the presumed criminal was nervous and anxious-looking. Instead of this, he declared that Mr. Durrant's demeanour was that of an innocent man.

"And innocent I believe him to be," muttered Drage, "notwithstanding the common opinion. Even a man with nerves of iron, would have been unable to carry off matters with so high a hand. He might not have betrayed fear, seeing his life was at stake, but he would have held his tongue. No, no! Durrant is innocent. Joking doesn't go with the perpetration of a cold-blooded murder."

Drage was satisfied on that point, but that hasty departure from Landy Court fairly bothered him. If Durrant was innocent, why should he leave in so stealthy a fashion? The detective bit his nails, and considered; and finally took a sudden resolution.

"If Dove's suspicions are correct, and Kynsam was privy to the murder, he is the man to question. He has kept out of my way since I came here. That looks bad. I'll see him at once, and insist upon an interview."

It was now close on nine o'clock. On his return from "The Three Bells," Drage saw Sir Lionel, and told him of his opinion regarding the behaviour and flight of Durrant. The Baronet agreed, that it looked as though the man were innocent, but recommended Drage to have a personal interview with the money-lender.

"If he is innocent, as he appears to be," said Sir Lionel, thoughtfully, "he has, doubtless, gone straight to London, quite ignorant of the committal of the crime, and of the suspicions attached to his hurried departure. Find out his London address, and see him. Then you can force him to explain."

"Have you his address?"

"No; but Mr. Kynsam can give it to you."

With the idea of obtaining this information, Drage requested an interview with Will, but received a refusal. Kynsam did not come to dinner, and persistently remained in his own rooms. This conduct raising Drage's suspicions, he went to Kynsam's apartments, and insisted upon admission: which, after some delay, was granted. Will, in a dressing-gown, was seated by the window with a pipe in his mouth; while a lamp on the table near him illuminated his pale, and haggard countenance. He arose

to meet Drage with an obvious reluctance, and spoke in a hesitating manner, as though he were afraid of saying more than he intended. This reticence, coupled with his ill-suppressed agitation, impressed Drage in a disagreeable manner.

"I must apologise for this intrusion, Mr. Kynsam," he said, sitting down in the chair pushed forward by Will, "but you know my business."

"About the murder?"

"Yes. I wish to ask you a few questions. I have examined Sir Lionel and Father Ching, and I have also questioned Inspector Dove. Yourself, and Miss Lametry, are the two people, whom I now desire to see."

"I don't think Miss Lametry can tell you anything," replied Will, laying down his pipe. "She went to bed early that evening, and knew nothing of the affair till next morning."

"I presume you are likewise ignorant, Mr. Kynsam?"

"Yes; I know nothing. I saw nothing. I can tell you nothing."

"Not of your own knowledge, perhaps," replied Drage, smoothly; "but you can perhaps tell me about Mr. Durrant."

Will smiled contemptuously, and wiped his forehead. With a great effort he managed to appear at his ease; but Drage was not deceived by such feigning.

"I suppose Dove has been putting ideas into your head about Durrant."

"Mr. Inspector certainly suspects Durrant as the criminal."

"I know he does, and without any reason."

Drage looked at his boots and smiled dubiously. It suited his purpose to feign doubt on that subject.

"Not without any reason," he corrected, gently. "There are suspicious circumstances."

"What circumstances?"

"The desire of Durrant to obtain the ring; the open window of the room, wherein the crime was committed; the sudden departure which more than hints at flight."

"I admit such things look suspicious, Mr. Drage. Nevertheless, Durrant is innocent. He would not hurt a fly."

"Then why did he depart so mysteriously?"

"He can best answer that question himself."

"Precisely!" said Drage, seizing the opportunity. "Therefore, if you will give me his address, I shall go up to town and seek an explanation."

"I don't see why you should suspect Durrant," protested Will, with a shade of uneasiness in his tone. "I am convinced that he is innocent."

"So am I," responded Drage, quietly; "nevertheless, an interview with him will be more satisfactory than your conviction."

Kynsam jumped up from his chair, and began walking up and down the room. Knowing the value of silence at

a critical point, Drage waited quietly for him to speak. At length he stopped, and in a hurried manner addressed the detective.

"Mr. Drage, I feel sure that you are too capable a man to judge by appearances; and although I own that circumstances look black against Durrant, yet I feel certain he is guiltless."

"Have you any grounds for such a belief?"

"Yes. I have grounds."

"What are they?"

"I cannot tell you."

"Pardon me, Mr. Kynsam, but you must tell me."

"Must!" said Will, his eyes glittering angrily. "I don't like that word, Mr. Drage."

"Nevertheless, it is a word which it is necessary to use. If you don't tell me all you know, I'll learn the truth from Durrant himself."

"You have not got his address."

"No. I must ask you to supply me with that."

"And if I refuse."

"You won't refuse," said Drage, significantly. "It is to your interest, that Mr. Durrant should prove his innocence."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Will, turning even paler than usual. "Mr. Durrant is nothing to me."

"He is your friend."

"He is not my friend. He is a money-lender with whom I have had certain dealings."

"I understand. You have borrowed money off him, and he came down here, to put on the screw. Oh, do not look so astonished, Mr. Kynsam. Your story is common gossip at Botsleigh."

"You heard nothing bad, I am sure."

"No, sir. Only the ordinary follies of a young man. Durrant is your creditor, and you didn't like him coming down here; so made an arrangement to put him off."

"I introduced him to my uncle on the understanding that he would not press his claim, till the end of the year."

"That is, you introduced him to Sir Piers so that he might buy 'the Sacred Ring?'"

"Well, yes," hesitated Kynsam, frowning, "though why you should think so, I can't——"

"I simply keep my eyes open, and put two and two together," said Drage, taking out his note-book. "Come now, Mr. Kynsam, give me the address of this man."

"If I do so you will go up to town to-morrow?"

"Yes, by the mid-day train."—The moment Drage mentioned the time he saw his mistake, and could have bitten out his tongue for its folly. Will's face brightened, and he strolled across to his writing-table, where he busied himself with a Bradshaw.

"Hullo," said Drage to himself, "you have some scheme in your head. I'll catch the eight-thirty train

from Barnstaple. You can't get up to town earlier than that."

"I have no objection to giving you the address," said Kynsam, turning round with a card in his hand. "Here it is, but I warn you that Mr. Durrant can tell you nothing."

Drage looked at the card. Written thereon in pencil was the name, "Horace Durrant, 21, Peck Lane, City."

"This will be sufficient," said Drage, slipping it into his pocket. "I suppose you know nothing of this sad business?"

"No. I have no idea who murdered my poor uncle."

"Do you suspect anyone?"

"Great heavens, man, whom should I suspect?" demanded Will, in a fiery tone.

"I thought you might know if your uncle had enemies," said the detective, in an apologetic tone.

"None that I know of," responded Will, coldly.

"Did you leave your room on that night?"

"I did not."

There was silence for a moment, and then Will, walking up to Drage, looked steadily into his eyes.

"Mr. Drage," he said, in a low, stern voice, "do you think I committed this murder?"

"Why should I think so? You had no reason, so far as I know, to wish ill to your uncle."

"He was the best friend I had in the world," replied

Will, covering his face with his hands. "God knows I would not have injured a hair of his head."

Drage paid no attention to this speech. When Will lifted his hands to his face, the detective saw on the under cuff of his dressing-gown sleeve a dark stain. At this he gazed with an expression of astonishment on his usually impassive face, for the sight took him by surprise. Receiving no answer Will removed his hands, and noted the significance of that look.

"What is the matter?" he asked, in a startled tone.

For answer, Drage caught him by the right arm, and twisted the sleeve round so that the cuff was exposed to view. Then he pointed to the stain, and looked at Will, who stared back with a rigid countenance.

"What is that?" asked Drage, in a low voice. "How did it come there?"

"Only an ink stain, I suppose—that is, I——"

"It is not an ink stain, Mr. Kynsam. It is blood."

"No! no! For God's sake don't say it is a——"

Will's voice died away in a whisper, and he turned away, unable to meet the gaze of the detective. Drage said nothing, being busy with his own thoughts. At length he spoke.

"You may as well confess all," he said, coldly.

At the sound of his voice Kynsam plucked up courage, and faced his accuser.

"I have nothing to confess," he declared, boldly. "This

stain *is* blood, but the blood of a dog. My fox-terrier hurt his foot—cut it a few days ago. I bathed and bound it up while wearing this dressing-gown. My sleeves, no doubt, were stained in that way."

"A very ingenious story, Mr. Kynsam, but one which does not deceive me."

"It is the truth."

"Do you know I can obtain a warrant and arrest you on suspicion?"

"Arrest me!" cried Kynsam, furiously. "You dare to accuse me of murdering my uncle!"

"Yes I do."

The next moment Will had him by the throat. Drage was powerless as a child in the grasp of this unhappy young man, and expected to be choked. For one second he closed his eyes, and the next was dashed violently to the ground.

"Get out of my sight," said Will, hoarsely, flinging open the door; "out of my sight, or I'll kill you."

Hardly able to speak, Drage still held his ground.

"I shan't leave this room," he said, faintly, trying to rise.

"I'll make you," said Kynsam, and, picking him up, hurled him outside the door.

With violence of the fall, Drage, not a strong man at any time, fainted, and heard the key turned in the lock as his senses failed him. When he came to himself, he was still lying where he had fallen.

Will's apartments were in a distant part of the house, and he had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. Hence no one came to succour Drage. How long he had lain he never knew, but on recovering his senses he staggered downstairs. In the hall he met Michael, who looked at him in alarm.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"Nothing! Nothing! Where is Mr. Kynsam?"

"He has just driven off to Barnstaple, sir."

"Driven to Barnstaple!" shouted Drage, and dashed to the door. He was just in time to see the dog-cart conveying Will and a groom, turn the corner of the avenue.

"He's going to London to see Durrant, and get him out of the way," was the thought which flashed across Drage's mind, and he at once questioned Michael concerning the purpose of the young man.

"Is Mr. Kynsam going to London?"

"Yes, sir."

"To-night?"

"No, sir! The last train left Barnstaple at four-fifteen. Mr. Kynsam won't be able to go to London till to-morrow, by the half-past eight in the morning."

"Good," muttered Drage, quite satisfied. "I'll travel by that train also."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN PURSUIT.

THERE was not much difficulty in guessing that Kynsam was going to London for the purpose of seeing Durrant. He evidently counted on Drage not leaving Barnstaple till noon, as had been incautiously admitted. If this were so, Drage could not arrive in town till seven in the evening, whereas Kynsam, starting by the eight-thirty train, would reach Waterloo Station at half-past two o'clock. In this way, as Drage could not call on Durrant till next day, Kynsam would have plenty of time to concoct a plan for baffling the detective. Placed on his guard by his accomplice, Durrant would invent some story to show his innocence, and thus it would be impossible to prove either of them guilty.

"He'll warn Durrant," said Drage to himself, "and then return to Landy Court. The only evidence against him is that stain of blood on the dressing-gown sleeve, and that he will explain away by means of the dog story. A very nice little plan, but I'll baffle it."

With this idea, Drage saw Sir Lionel, and explaining that he was compelled to go to London on business connected with the murder, took his departure that evening from Landy Court. Whether Sir Lionel knew Drage was tracking his nephew it was impossible to say, but if he was aware of it, he made no remark.

"Do as you think best," he said, emphatically, "but find out who killed my unhappy brother."

Father Ching said nothing. He was in the room when Drage took his leave, and looked worn, and ill; doubtless, because he was attached to Will, and guessed the purpose for which Drage was following the young man to London. This was clearly shown by his action when the interview terminated, for he accompanied Drage to the door.

"Will you see Mr. Kynsam in town?" he asked, abruptly.

"Possibly, sir," answered Drage, rendered suspicious by the directness of the question.

"If so, tell him to come back within the next two days. The body of the late Sir Piers will shortly be taken to the family vault, and Mr. Kynsam must be at the funeral. Moreover, his presence is necessary at the inquest."

"He'll be at the funeral, never fear, sir," was the grim reply, "if I bring him back myself."

Father Ching passed his handkerchief across his lips and sighed faintly.

"I know what you mean. Mr. Kynsam told me of your suspicions. Believe me, you are wrong. He is innocent of this terrible crime."

"If that is so why did he refuse to answer my questions and bolt to London?"

"He has gone up on business," said the priest, with some hesitation.

"I know that," retorted Drage, sneering; "on business connected with Mr. Durrant."

Looking at him steadily for a moment, Father Ching sighed again, and turned back into the house without making any reply. Drage was rather puzzled by this odd behaviour of the priest, but put it down to Ching's anxiety for the young man's safety. A startling thought occurred to him.

"Kynsam is a Catholic," he thought, setting his face towards Botsleigh. "Can it be that he has confessed to the priest that he is guilty? Or is he really innocent, and this Jesuit knows the guilty person, but is forbidden to reveal the name by the laws of the Church? Well, we'll see when I bring back Mr. Kynsam to Barnstaple Gaol."

It can be seen that Drage was quite convinced of the young man's guilt. The spot of blood, the agitation displayed when that discovery was made, and the hurried flight of Kynsam to London, all confirmed his suspicions. He was sure that Will was guilty of the

crime in conjunction with Durrant, and intended to warn his accomplice that there was danger of discovery. Drage's departure by the same train might enable him to baffle the plot, and arrest both men. These were his plans, and he had every reasonable hope of carrying them out.

At "The Three Bells" he asked the landlord to drive him over to Barnstaple. It was now past ten o'clock, but the night was fine, and the town only a few miles away, therefore the landlord had no hesitation in complying with his request. During the drive Drage, by artful questioning, discovered that Mr. Kynsam usually slept at the Harp Hotel when in Barnstaple. On his arrival, he dismissed the landlord at the outskirts of the town, and took his way to the inn. Here, on making inquiries, he learned that Kynsam was stopping for the night; that he was going to London by the early train, and that he had already retired, leaving instructions that he was to be called at seven o'clock.

Drage took up his quarters in an hotel near the railway station, quite satisfied that he would be able to see Kynsam next morning, and keep him in sight. Before retiring he looked at the card given to him by Will, on which Durrant's address was written.

"This is a blind," decided Drage, after some consideration. "He has given me the wrong address to gain more time, or to prevent me seeing Durrant at all.

No matter, Mr. Kynsam; I can follow you to-morrow, and arrive at Durrant's office at the same time as yourself. We shall then see how you will extricate yourself from this dilemma."

After settling this little matter, Drage restored the card to his pocket-book and went to bed, where he indulged in dreams of triumph. Next morning he was up early, and after breakfast paid his bill, and went to the railway station at a quarter-past eight to watch for Kynsam. In due time that gentleman, looking rather worried, made his appearance, and took his seat in a first-class smoking carriage. Drage bought a third-class ticket, and shortly afterwards the train started.

All the way to London Drage kept an eye on his man, in case he should give him the slip during the journey. There was really no danger of such an event, as Kynsam, thinking the detective would follow by the mid-day train, never for a moment suspected that he was being watched. Drage skilfully evaded recognition, and when they arrived at Paddington had the satisfaction of still keeping Kynsam under his eye without the slightest suspicion having been excited. In five minutes a hansom containing Will rattled out of the station, followed by a second hansom, wherein Drage was seated.

"Keep that hansom in sight," said Drage to his driver, "and I'll treble your fare."

As the detective anticipated, Kynsam drove at once to the office of Durrant, and, as he had suspected, the address on the card was wrong. The leading hansom did not go on to the City, but stopping midway in the Strand, turned down one of those dingy streets leading to the river. Down this Drage directed his driver to drive slowly, and had the satisfaction of seeing Kynsam's cab standing at the lower end of the street.

At the bottom of the street he paid and dismissed his driver, then walked to where a brass plate was inscribed "Durrant and Co." As a matter of fact, Durrant was the sole representative of the firm, but added the "Company" for the sake of euphony. Drage entered the dark passage, mounted a flight of precipitous steps, and found himself before the door of the office. Opening this he entered a large bare room, and saw a small boy seated at a desk, busily engaged in writing. At the far end of the apartment was a green baize door, evidently the portal to Durrant's sanctum.

"Is Mr. Durrant in?" asked Drage, as the small boy came forward.

"Yes sir. But he is engaged."

"With Mr. Kynsam?"

"Yes, sir," replied the boy, rather astonished at the stranger's knowledge of the name. "Shall I tell him you are here, sir?"

"No; I will wait."

Drage did not want Durrant and his accomplice to be put on their guard, and intended to walk in suddenly, so as to disconcert the pair. He therefore strolled slowly across the room to the desk, at which the boy had again seated himself. By this means he hoped to edge, without suspicion, sufficiently near the door to enter.

"You seem to be busy writing?"

"Yes, I am," said the lad, with a scowl. "It's a kind of story master wants sent to an American gentleman."

"A kind of story?" asked Drage, rather puzzled by this remark. "I should not have thought Mr. Durrant would have wasted your time in setting you to write out stories."

"Oh, this is business. It's for an American gentleman."

"What is the story about?" said Drage, yawning. He really did not feel much interest in the matter.

"It isn't a bad story," answered the office boy, in a patronising manner. "It's about a ring."

"About a ring?"

Drage was now on the alert. The remark was pertinent to the business he had in hand, and he instinctively felt that he was on the verge of a discovery. With assumed indifference he bent over the boy's shoulder, and glanced at the manuscript. Flattered by such interest, the boy ran a grimy finger along the lines, and read out loud—

"'"The Sacred Ring," as it is called, belonged at one time to the mother of Constantine. Brought from the East by Sir Guy Pomfret, it was presented by him to the Abbey of Kilvers, in Shropshire, where it was the object of great veneration for many years, and——'"

"That is very interesting," said Drage, his heart beating rapidly; "but is there any description of this Ring?"

"Here you are, sir," said the boy, moving his finger down the page.

"'"The Sacred Ring" is of silver, set round with rubies. A cluster of diamonds, whereon is marked a cross of sapphires, covers the receptacle of the grain of the true Cross.'"

"That's enough," interrupted Drage. "I'm glad I know the description of 'the Sacred Ring.'"

"Why are you glad?"

"Oh! because the story is so interesting," said the detective, evasively. "When did your master set you to write out this story?"

"Yesterday."

"It is for the benefit of an American gentleman?"

"Yes, sir. He wants to know all about the Ring."

"Has your master the Ring in his possession?"

"I don't know, sir," said the boy, growing restive under this examination. "I never saw it."

Drage turned away with a grim smile. He felt that

his journey would be crowned with success. What had occurred was plain enough. Durrant had murdered Sir Piers, and had been interrupted by Kynsam, who——

"But, no; it can't be that way," soliloquised the detective. "Kynsam would have denounced Durrant, and have got rid of his creditor in that way. I dare say he was in a hole for want of money, and Durrant offered to let him off the debt if he got him the Ring. I don't think he intended to kill the old man, but went into the library to steal the Ring. While he was doing so Sir Piers entered, and then the tragedy occurred. He gave the Ring to Durrant, and got him out of the house before he knew of the murder. The landlord's evidence shows that Durrant was ignorant, that a crime had been committed. Kynsam hoped that Durrant would dispose of the Ring, before the police got on his track. Now he comes to town either to warn Durrant, or to make a bolt of it. I've no doubt they'll deny everything, but, thanks to the boy's blabbing, I can circumvent them."

At this period of his reflections the boy went to the door to parley with a new visitor. Without a moment's hesitation, Drage crossed the room and snatched up the manuscript copy of the Ring story made by Durrant. This he stuffed into his breast pocket, and advanced towards the door of the sanctum.

"Now I have you, Mr. Durrant," he said, as he laid

his hand on the handle of the door. "You can lie as you choose, but you can't deny your own hand-writing."

There was a murmur of voices within, but Drage could not hear what they were saying. Not a moment was to be lost, as at any moment the boy might return, and, discovering his loss, would surely make a disturbance. In that case Durrant and his accomplice might escape. Drage wished he had brought a warrant, so as to arrest the pair at once, but hitherto he had not had sufficient evidence against them to obtain one.

"Never mind," he said, aloud, "I'll try a game of bluff."

He turned the handle, and entered the room. Durrant and Kynsam, seated at a table, both jumped up with startled looks, and the former, not knowing who the detective was, looked indignant. But Drage paid no attention to them. He stared at the table, as if spell-bound, and well he might, for on the blotting-paper in front of Durrant, lay "the Sacred Ring."

CHAPTER IX.

A WEAK DEFENCE.

SO startled were the two men by the unexpected entrance of the detective, that for a moment or so, they stared at him in silence. Will flushed red, then became pale, and, evidently recognising that it was all over with him, sank back in his seat with a groan. Still staring at Drage in astonishment, Durrant saw him walk up to the table, pick up the ring, and slip it into his waistcoat pocket. Then for the first time he found his tongue.

"What the deuce do you mean, sir?" he cried, furiously. "Who are you? Why are you here?"

"I am a detective," replied Drage, quietly, "and I came for him, for you, for this Ring."

In absolute bewilderment Durrant looked from one to the other; but as yet had no suspicion of the horrible truth. Still he could see from Kynsam's pale face that something was wrong.

"I don't understand. I cannot quite see," he said,

disjointedly. "I—that is. For God's sake, Mr. Kynsam, what does this mean?"

Will shook his head and pointed to Drage, who at once accepted the responsibility of answering.

"It means, Mr. Durrant, that Sir Piers Lametry has been murdered."

"Murdered?"

"For the sake of this Ring, and I am here to arrest Mr. Kynsam for the crime, and to arrest you as his accomplice."

Hardly able to comprehend the terrible meaning contained in these few words, Durrant fell back into his chair, and looked from one to the other in a dazed manner. His companion, however, arose to his feet, and spoke in hard, unnatural tones.

"I am innocent of this crime. I did not kill my uncle."

"Then how did this Ring come into your possession?"

Before Will could answer, Durrant was on his feet again, speaking rapidly. He laboured under such deep emotion, that he could hardly utter a coherent speech.

"Sir Piers dead!—murdered!—that Ring!—I know nothing of it—this is the first I have heard of the murder."

"And the Ring?"

"It was given to me by Mr. Kynsam. You can't deny it—you can't! You woke me up in the dawn and gave me the Ring."

"I admit it," said Will, raising his head. "Be calm, Durrant. No harm shall come to you."

"Say I am innocent! Say I am innocent!"

"You are innocent, and so am I."

The detective burst into a laugh, and shrugged his shoulders.

"I am afraid you will find some difficulty in getting a jury to believe that assertion. Sir Piers was murdered on account of the Ring. I find it in your possession. Explain that if you can."

"Let me explain! Let me explain!" babbled Durrant, overcome with terror. "I am not guilty—I know nothing. Mr. Kynsam gave me the Ring. I——"

"Sit down, man!" said Will, with sudden energy. "Don't I tell you, that no harm shall come to you? Sit down!"

Thus adjured, the wretched creature resumed his seat with a terrified expression, and shrank from Kynsam as though he believed him to be guilty of the crime. Will saw this, and smiled bitterly.

"What, you also, Durrant? I gave you credit for better judgment. Mr. Drage," he added, turning to the detective, "let me tell my story, and you can judge for yourself of my innocence or guilt. Pray be seated, and give me your attention."

"It will be difficult for you to convince me of your

innocence," replied the detective, taking a chair. "Your behaviour at Landy Court—the blood-stain on your dressing-gown sleeve—your treachery in giving me the wrong address of that man—and, above all, the possession of the very Ring for the sake of which the crime was committed—all these facts confirm my belief that you are guilty."

"I acknowledge that matters look black against me," responded Will, quietly, "hence my treatment of you at the Court, for which I apologise. But you there accused me of a crime of which I am innocent. It was hardly to be expected that I should tamely submit to have such a charge brought against me. I have kept silence as long as I was able. Now that my liberty and life are threatened, I must defend myself by telling you the truth. Suspend your judgment, Mr. Drage, till you hear my story."

Despite his prejudice, Drage could not but be impressed by the firm tones of the young man. There was no sign of guilt on his pale face, and he spoke with the utmost deliberation. Against his better judgment this calm demeanour created a favourable impression on the detective, and he made a reasonable reply.

"I am ready to hear your story, Mr. Kynsam, and I trust you will be able to exonerate yourself from the charge."

Will glanced at Durrant, who was still mumbling

incoherently to himself, and, without taking further notice of the terrified creature, related his version of the matter.

"Durrant came down to see me about a bill for two thousand pounds, which I had backed for a friend. My friend made default in paying it, and Durrant looked to me for the money. I am not in a position to pay so large a sum, and asked him to wait till the end of the year, when I could discharge the debt. This he refused to do, but promised to let me off payment altogether if I introduced him to my uncle, and aided him to buy 'the Sacred Ring.' Is not that true?" he added, looking at Durrant.

"Quite true," replied Durrant, in a low voice. "I wished to buy the Ring for an American millionaire, who promised to pay me ten thousand pounds for it. But Sir Piers refused to trade."

"He did then," said Will, with marked emphasis on the last word, "because my Uncle Lionel was in the room, and he dared not sell the family heirloom. When I went upstairs I retired to bed, but was unable to sleep. My worries made me feel anxious and wakeful. Knowing my uncle, Sir Piers, was sitting up late in the library, I determined to go down and confess all my troubles, in the hope that he would help me."

"Why did you not confess them before?" asked Drage, sharply.

"Because my uncle only sanctioned my engagement to Miss Lametry, on the condition that I was free from debt. At the time I was, and it was only the default of my friend, that let me in for this two thousand."

"I understand, Mr. Kynsam. Go on."

"I thought it best to throw myself on his mercy, as the fault was not mine, nor had I spent the money. With this idea, I put on my dressing-gown, and went downstairs. As I anticipated, my uncle was still in the library, looking at 'the Sacred Ring,' which had been brought from the chapel by Father Ching. He heard my story, and then made a revelation which astonished me."

"What was it?" asked Durrant, curiously.

"That he was deeply in debt. I always thought he was very rich, but it appeared from his story that Landy Court was heavily mortgaged, and unless the interest was paid, the mortgagee would foreclose within the next few weeks."

"What had he done with the money?"

"That I cannot tell you," replied Will. "He refused to tell me what had become of it. Under these circumstances he thought it best to sell the Ring to Durrant for five thousand pounds."

"Yes," interposed Durrant, "I offered that sum for it."

"Naturally enough Sir Piers wished to dispose of it secretly, unknown to my Uncle Lionel, and to Father

Ching. He, therefore, asked me to take it to Durrant and get him out of the house before dawn."

"Why before dawn?"

"Because he was afraid lest Durrant might speak about the Ring, and Father Ching should get wind of the contemplated sale."

"He might have trusted me," murmured Durrant, "and then all this trouble would have been averted. I never blab about business."

"It was a mistake I admit," said Will, coldly; "still it was Sir Piers' desire, and I carried out his instructions. He gave me the Ring, and I took it up to my room, intending to act as desired in the morning."

"Did you leave Sir Piers in the library?" asked Drage, disbelievingly.

"I left him safe, and well, sitting by the table, whereon was placed the golden casket which had contained the Ring. Of course it was then empty, as I took the relic to my room."

"You did not see him again that night?"

"No. There was no necessity. I had my instructions, which were to deliver the Ring to Durrant, and did so."

"Yes, at six in the morning," said Durrant. "I remember you waking me up."

"Go on, Mr. Durrant," said Drage.

"I got up and dressed," pursued the money-lender. "Then Mr. Kynsam told me his uncle intended to sell

the Ring, and wished me to take it to town at once. I agreed to do so."

"And to pay the money for it?"

"Yes, but I did not pay it on the instant. As soon as I arranged matters with the American, Sir Piers was to have the five thousand. Mr. Kynsam agreed to these terms, so I put the Ring in my pocket, and Mr. Kynsam let me out of the house."

"By what door?"

"A private door, which led out of my own rooms," said Will. "I did not take him downstairs to the hall, in case we might meet the servants, and they would think it strange. I took him by the private way, and he left the house."

"It was half-past six o'clock," continued Durrant, "when I walked to 'The Three Bells.' There the landlord drove me over to Barnstaple, and I caught the early morning train."

"And you knew nothing of the murder?"

"I never heard of it till you came here to-day."

"And you, Mr. Kynsam?"

"I did not know of it, till the alarm was given by the housemaid."

"Did you not go down to the library after you let Mr. Durrant out by the private door?"

"No," replied Will, with some surprise. "There was no reason why I should go down. Thinking, as was

natural, that my uncle had retired, I did not hope to see him till we met at breakfast."

"And the first news you had of the murder was the housemaid's alarm?"

"Yes; I swear that was the first I heard of it."

"Why did you not tell me of this before?" asked Drage, eyeing the young man keenly.

"Can you ask me such a question? Circumstances looked black against me. I thought if I confessed I might be accused of committing the crime. Now I have been forced to tell all. Do you believe me?"

"I can't say yet," replied Drage, cautiously.

"Do you intend to arrest me?"

"No; but I must ask you and Mr. Durrant to return to Landy Court. There we can thrash the matter out."

To this course, which seemed the most sensible, Will and Durrant agreed, and the three men left London by the afternoon train.

CHAPTER X.

CROSS EXAMINATION.

IN the train Drage resumed his examination of Kynsam. He had sufficient evidence to warrant the arrest of that young man, yet hesitated to do so. Like many other people, Drage had his weak side, and in this instance, it was a dislike to submit any case for prosecution, unless it was absolutely flawless. The collected evidence incriminated Will, yet there was a certain degree of probability about his defence, which precluded Drage from taking any hasty step. Moreover, the statement was corroborated by Durrant, and the two narratives agreed on all points.

It seemed improbable that Will should commit a crime without a strong motive, yet Drage could not bring himself to believe that a desire to pay off the two thousand pounds, was one sufficiently powerful to urge the young man to such desperate lengths. By Durrant's confession, the payment was deferred till the end of the year; therefore, there was no necessity for immediate action on

Kynsam's part. If his assertion that Sir Piers desired to sell the Ring were true, the rest of the story was feasible enough.

But on that one point Drage was doubtful. It appeared incredible, that the master of Landy Court could be in need of money. While at Botsleigh, the detective had heard on all sides of the wealth, and importance of the Lametrys; yet, if Will's defence could be believed, Sir Piers had been so hardly pressed by his creditors, as to offer a family heirloom for sale. Only one person could determine the truth of this question, and that was Sir Lionel Lametry.

He was now in the possession of the estate; his lawyer was with him; and he would soon learn his position. About that position Drage intended to question him. If he corroborated Will's statement that Sir Piers had died in debt, then the detective foresaw a possibility of truth in the defence. On the other hand, if Sir Lionel denied that the estates were in any way involved, it would be difficult to believe that the dead man had voluntarily parted with the Ring. These considerations, among others, prevented Drage from arresting those whom he now suspected, perhaps wrongly, of committing the crime.

They made no objection to accompanying him to Devonshire. Will, in any case, had intended to return by that train, and Durrant was too fearful for his own safety to question the dictates of the detective. He was selfishly

eager to afford Drage all the information in his power, and by his attitude towards Kynsam, showed that he did not believe him to be altogether guiltless. Will maintained a calm demeanour. He saw in what a perilous position he was placed, and how his ill-advised actions had increased the suspicions against him. Yet he noted that Drage wished to afford him every opportunity to defend himself, and felt grateful to the detective for his consideration in not arresting him forthwith, as he could easily have done. In this frame of mind he was particularly careful how he answered Drage's questions, not knowing what use might be made of them in the future.

"You needn't answer me at all, unless you like," said Drage, when they left Paddington. "I have no right to question you closely. Still, for your own sake, it will be best to instruct my ignorance as far as you can, and prove your innocence if possible. I shall assist you to the best of my ability."

"Do you intend to have me arrested?"

"If necessary I can have you arrested at Botsleigh," replied the detective, quietly. "With the evidence now in my possession, there would be no difficulty in lodging you this very evening in Barnstaple Gaol. You and Mr. Durrant, also."

"You can't put me in gaol," growled Durrant, turning pale. "I am quite innocent."

"So you say. However, I shall arrest neither of you—

as yet. To all appearances you, Mr. Kynsam, are guilty of this crime; yet, as I do not like to present an incomplete case to the magistrate, I give you the benefit of the doubt until such time as I am absolutely certain of your guilt."

"That you shall never be."

Drage shrugged his shoulders. Despite his doubts as to the guilt of Kynsam, he was by no means satisfied that the young man was entirely innocent. He might not have killed Sir Piers, but he certainly might have stolen the Ring; and, to hide the theft, have trumped up the story of his uncle's insolvency. The whole solution of the case lay with Sir Lionel, and, until he heard his story, Drage declined to commit himself to an opinion.

"I sincerely hope you may be able to prove your innocence, Mr. Kynsam."

"It will be proved at the inquest," was the curt reply.

"That takes place to-morrow, and for that reason I wished you and Durrant to come down to-day. Your evidence may be necessary."

"I have no evidence to give," said Durrant, determinedly.

"You have the same story to tell as you told me," replied Drage, carelessly, "and when the coroner asks you questions you must reply to them."

"Why did not the inquest take place before?" asked Will.

"It was put off till to-morrow at my request. It should have taken place to-day, but for your flight to London."

"It was not a flight."

"Then why did you take the journey?"

"Because I foresaw how black things would look against me, were it known that Durrant had 'the Sacred Ring,'" replied Will, vehemently. "I wished to tell him all——"

"You did not say a word to me of the murder," interrupted Durrant, insolently.

"I was about to tell you of it when we were disturbed by Mr. Drage."

"And what help did you expect from Durrant?" asked the detective.

Will passed his handkerchief across his lips, and looked embarrassed.

"I can hardly say. I started from Landy Court, with no definite purpose in my head. All I desired to do was to assure Durrant of my innocence before he read the story in the newspapers."

"Why did you not tell the truth to Sir Lionel?"

"I thought he might misjudge me; but I told all to Father Ching."

"Under the seal of the confessional?"

"No. I told him openly. He was at perfect liberty to make use of the information, but he did not. He knows I am innocent."

"So he said."

"God bless him for that!" said Will, fervently. "I shall have at least one friend, at the inquest."

"Why not two?" observed Drage, slily. "There is Miss Lametry."

"Pray leave Miss Lametry's name out of the discussion."

"That is impossible," answered the detective, smoothly. "She is engaged to you, and her name must come out in the evidence."

"She knows nothing of my story."

"I should have thought you would have confided in her rather than in the priest."

"Do you think I would blacken my character in her eyes?" demanded Will, indignantly.

"It could not be blackened if she loved you, and believed in your innocence."

Will vouchsafed no reply to this remark.

"Does Miss Lametry believe in you?" persisted Drage, in an insinuating manner.

"How can I tell? I have only seen her for a moment since the murder."

Drage whistled softly, and looked out of the carriage window. He did not like the evasive replies of Kynsam, and began to think that all was not right between the young man and Miss Lametry.

"Have you quarrelled?" he asked, delicately.

"What the deuce is that to you, sir?" retorted Will, fiercely.

"Pardon me. I won't question you further," replied Drage, coldly. "As I said before, you are not called upon to incriminate yourself. Yet, Mr. Kynsam," added he, with emphasis, "I am well-disposed towards you, and wish to do all in my power to establish your innocence. Unless you tell me all, I cannot do so."

"I have told you all," replied Will, sullenly. "What more do you expect me to say?"

"As to Miss Lametry," began Drage, when the other cut him short.

"I don't wish to discuss Miss Lametry with you, sir; and if you mention her name again, I shall pitch you out of the window."

He looked so determined as he said this that Drage shrank back in his corner with a terrified expression. This shabby little man was a terrible coward, and had more of the fox than the lion in his composition. Not caring about testing Will's strength a second time, he left off asking him questions, and sulkily began to examine his pocket-book. Durrant was willing to speak and tell all he knew, but Drage did not encourage him to do so. Already he had exceeded his duties as a detective in examining them so closely; and feared to continue lest he might get into trouble with the Judge when the trial came on. He, therefore, remained silent, and Durrant also held his peace, while Kynsam, as far away from his companions as the narrow confines of the carriage

permitted, stared out of the window and considered his position. It was not a pleasant one.

He had told Drage so much of the events of that night as suited his purpose, but he had concealed certain things. These referred to a personage whom he had seen at six in the morning when he went to waken Durrant. Who that person was he feared to confess even to himself, and locked the secret up in his breast, in the hope that it would not be necessary to reveal it. Yet he could not bring himself to believe that this person had aught to do with the murder of Sir Piers.

At the inquest he intended to tell the same story as he had related to Drage. If the jury believed him all would be well, if they did not he dreaded lest he might be arrested on suspicion. He could offer no further defence, and yet, on second thoughts, his story seemed weak. All he could hope for, was, that Sir Lionel might substantiate his statement as to the mortgages on the estate, and thus supply Sir Piers with a motive for parting with the Ring.

The relic was in Drage's pocket. On hearing of the murder Durrant made no attempt to retain it, nor did Kynsam remark on Drage's cool appropriation of the same. Durrant was not without a secret hope that the Ring would yet come back into his possession. If the Lametry estates were mortgaged, the new Baronet would still require money. The Ring could be sold for

five thousand pounds to him, and then he would gain double the amount from the American millionaire. He intended, when this matter of the murder was settled, to buy the Ring if possible from Sir Lionel. The money-lender was sorry that Sir Piers was dead, but sorrier still, that he should be placed in so perilous a position. However, he relied on Will's promise that he should be exculpated, and only hoped he would be able to return to town with the Ring, which had caused all this misery, in his pocket. Even in the midst of trouble Durrant remembered his business.

So each of the three in the railway carriage was busy with his own thoughts, as the train sped on to Barnstaple. Will had wired from London to his groom, and found the dog-cart waiting at the Barnstaple station. Into this he bustled Durrant and Drage, then drove to Landy Court, where he arrived at nine o'clock.

Father Ching met him as he entered the hall, and advanced towards him with an eager face.

"You have come back of your own free will?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes; with Mr. Durrant and this gentleman."

"I persuaded Mr. Kynsam to return," said Drage, equably; "but my journey to London was not in vain."

"You are convinced, I hope, of Mr. Kynsam's innocence?" said the priest, with great dignity.

"I can't say that I am," responded the detective, drily.

"What evidence did you find likely to make you believe him guilty?"

Drage pulled the Ring out of his pocket, and held it up twixt finger and thumb.

"I found this."

To his surprise, Father Ching evinced no astonishment.

"I expected that you would find the Ring," he said, in an icy manner; "but let me tell you, Mr. Drage, that this gentleman," laying his hand on Will's shoulder, "is innocent."

"Who can prove him to be so?"

"Dr. Sinclair, who examined the body of Sir Piers."

Drage looked at Will, looked at the priest, then turned away whistling. He was puzzled.

CHAPTER XI.

THE EVIDENCE AT THE INQUEST.

THE evidence of Dr. Sinclair :—

"I was called in on the 15th day of June to examine the body of Sir Piers Lametry, of Landy Court. It was then nine o'clock in the morning; and he had already been dead eight hours. Death was caused by the stab of some sharp instrument, probably a stiletto, which penetrated the heart. Death must have ensued instantaneously. The orifice of the wound is triangular in shape. He was struck with considerable force. I should say the deceased had been murdered between one and two, in the morning." (Here follow medical details not pertinent to this narrative.)

The evidence of Ann Evans, housemaid :—

"I am a housemaid at Landy Court. It is my duty to attend to the library every morning at seven o'clock. On the 15th day of June, when I entered the library as usual, I saw that the middle window was wide open.

It is a French window, and leads on to the terrace. Astonished at this, I looked round to see if anyone was in the room who could have opened the window at so early an hour. I then noticed that the cloth was half pulled off the table. I went to put it straight, and found on the other side of the table (concealed by the cloth) the body of Sir Piers. He was lying on his back, with outstretched arms; and in his left hand a corner of the tablecloth was tightly clutched. Sir Piers was in evening dress; his shirt-front was covered with blood, oozing from a wound in the left breast. On making this discovery I gave the alarm."

The evidence of Sir Lionel Lametry:—

"I am the brother of the deceased. On the previous night I retired to bed early. I left my brother in the library with my nephew, and Mr. Durrant, a friend of my nephew's. They were looking at 'the Sacred Ring,' which Father Ching brought from the chapel for the inspection of Durrant. Before I left the library I heard Durrant offer to buy the Ring of my brother, for five thousand pounds. That offer was refused. Shortly afterwards I retired, but instead of repairing to the smoking-room, as usual, I went to bed. I heard no unusual sound during the night, and knew nothing of the murder, till I was alarmed in the morning. My brother's body was in the position described by the

housemaid. I presume that, when struck by his assassin, he clutched at the tablecloth to save himself from falling, and so dragged it to the ground. The casket which usually contained 'the Sacred Ring' was entangled in the folds. My nephew picked it up, and found the Ring was gone. I cannot say who stole the Ring. The middle window leading to the terrace was wide open. It was shut on the previous night. I don't think my brother would have opened it during the night, on account of the storm. To my knowledge, my brother had no enemies. He was very much beloved."

The evidence of Ignatius Ching :—

"I am a priest of the Catholic Church, and occupy the position of confessor at Landy Court. On the 15th of June Mr. Kynsam introduced to Sir Piers a friend of his, by name Mr. Durrant. I was not in the library when the introduction took place. It is my custom to play on the organ in the chapel during the evening. I was doing so on the 15th, when Sir Piers sent a message requesting me to bring 'the Sacred Ring' to the library, as Mr. Durrant desired to see it. 'The Sacred Ring' is always kept in the chapel, and I am supposed to be its guardian. In pursuance of Sir Piers' request, I brought the casket containing 'the Sacred Ring' to the library, and showed it to Mr. Durrant. Afterwards I

left the casket in the charge of Sir Piers, who promised to restore it to the chapel. I then departed to visit Cuthbert Caffin, one of the servants who was very ill. I did not see Sir Piers again during the night. About ten o'clock Mr. Lionel Lametry came to my room, where I was sitting by the bedside of Caffin. He was very indignant, and said that Mr. Durrant had offered Sir Piers five thousand pounds for 'the Sacred Ring,' an offer which the Baronet had very properly refused. I soothed the indignation of Mr. Lionel Lametry by pointing out that, as Sir Piers declined to part with the Ring, no harm was done. Afterwards Mr. Lionel retired to rest, and I remained with the sick man till close on midnight. Then I also retired. I heard no unusual sounds during the night. Next morning I was alarmed by the report of the murder, and repaired to the library, in the company of Mr. Lionel Lametry and Mr. Kynsam. The window was open, as described by the other witnesses. Sir Piers was lying on his back, with a corner of the tablecloth clutched in his left hand, and a wound in his left breast. He was quite dead. Mr. Kynsam picked up the casket, and saw that the Ring was gone. The late Baronet was much beloved and had had no enemies. Later on I heard that Mr. Durrant had left the house early in the morning. At first I connected his flight with the crime, but have since seen fit to alter my opinion."

The evidence of Miss Eleanor Lametry :—

"I am the daughter of the late Sir Piers Lametry. On the 15th of June I was in the library, after dinner, with my father and uncle, when my cousin, Mr. Kynsam, entered with Mr. Durrant. He introduced him to us all as his friend. I saw Mr. Durrant during the day while out riding. My cousin assured me that Mr. Durrant was down to see him on business. After some talk, I left the library for the drawing-room. There I played the piano for an hour, and retired to bed between nine and ten o'clock. I did not see my father again on that night. Next morning I heard my father had been murdered. I came down to the library, and saw the body. It was lying as described by the other witnesses. The middle window was open, and the casket which usually contained the Ring was empty. While I was kneeling beside my father's body, Mr. Kynsam left the room, and returned with the news that Mr. Durrant had left the Court. I cried out that he must have killed my father, and have afterwards escaped through the open window. I did not know at the time that he wished to purchase the Ring. I had no reason to connect him with the murder, but was so overcome with grief that I did not know what I was saying. My father had no enemies. He was beloved by everyone. I knew that he set a great value on the Ring, and would not have thought of parting with it at any price."

The evidence of William Kynsam :—

"I am the nephew of the late Sir Piers Lametry, and stay at Landy Court by my uncle's invitation. I have been two years at Landy Court, and, with my deceased uncle's full consent, was engaged to my cousin, Miss Lametry. He approved of the match on receiving my word, that I was not in debt. At the time I gave the assurance I was free from debt. On the 15th of June I received a letter from a money-lender called Durrant. It was about a bill for two thousand pounds which I had endorsed for a friend of mine, a Captain Saxon. The letter informed me that Saxon had failed to meet the bill, and that I was responsible for the payment. The same evening Mr. Durrant arrived at the Court. Mistrusting the effect of his letter, he concluded a personal interview would be more likely to settle the matter. After dinner I went to my room, and found Durrant waiting for me. It was then about a-quarter past eight o'clock. We had a long interview about the bill. Durrant wanted the money, and I informed him that I could not possibly discharge the debt till the end of the year. Meantime I offered to pay interest over and above that, which I had already paid. He refused this offer, and then made a compromise. In London I had told him the story of 'the Sacred Ring,' and he, in his turn, had repeated it to an American millionaire. This American, a devout Catholic, offered to buy the Ring for ten thousand pounds.

"Seeing a chance of making money, Mr. Durrant did not tell his client the name of the owner of the Ring, but came down to negotiate a purchase for three thousand pounds. Knowing that Sir Piers would resent a stranger offering to buy a relic which had been in the Lametry family for so many years, Durrant promised to wipe off the bill if I would introduce him to Sir Piers as my friend, and aid him to buy the Ring for three thousand. At first I was unwilling to do so, but under pressure, and a fear lest Sir Piers might discover my indebtedness, and break off my engagement with my cousin, agreed to aid Durrant to buy the Ring. I took him down to the library, and introduced him to Sir Piers as my friend. The night was stormy, and though Durrant intended to sleep at Botsleigh, Sir Piers insisted that he should stay at the Court that night. As I had introduced him as my friend, I could offer no objection to this, and so the matter was arranged. Father Ching then brought in the Ring, and retired to sit by the bedside of Caffin. After examining the relic, Durrant offered to buy it for three thousand pounds, which my uncle refused. He bid four thousand, afterwards five thousand, but Sir Piers still refused, and replaced the Ring in its casket. Shortly afterwards I left the library with Durrant, and took him to the smoking-room. Though he had not been successful in obtaining the Ring he agreed to let the payment of the two thousand

pounds stand over for a year if I paid interest, which I agreed to do. Then we retired to bed. I remained awake for some time debating as to the advisability of confessing my indebtedness, and so throwing myself on the mercy of my uncle. Ultimately I determined to do so, and went downstairs to the library about eleven o'clock. He was still there, with the Ring in its casket on the table. I told my story, to which he listened in silence. Then he said he could not help me, as the Court was deeply mortgaged, and he was in sore need of money. I suggested that he should sell the Ring for the five thousand. He replied that he intended to do so, if the sale could be kept from my Uncle Lionel and Father Ching, neither of whom, he knew, would approve of his action. Seeing how badly Sir Piers was in need of money, I agreed to aid him; upon which he told me to give the Ring to Durrant, and get him out of the house at dawn, so that he would not be questioned by Father Ching, when he found the Ring missing. Sir Piers desired to tell all to Father Ching himself. I then took the Ring, and left the library, with the understanding that I was to give it to Durrant, and see my uncle in the morning. I then went to bed. My uncle was in good spirits when I left him about midnight. At six in the morning I went to Durrant's room, gave him the Ring, and told him to leave the house. He gave me a receipt for the Ring, and a promise to pay the five thousand pounds, as soon

as he settled with the American. I then let him out of the house by a private door, communicating with the grounds, from my room. Between midnight and six in the morning I was asleep and heard no unusual noises. When the alarm was given at seven, I went to the library with Father Ching and my Uncle Lionel. All happened as described by the other witnesses. I did not say anything at the time about the sale of the Ring, because I felt that, through the murder of Sir Piers, I was in a very dangerous position. I said Durrant had left the house, intending to go up to London and explain all to him, so that he could corroborate my evidence at this inquest. I was suspected and followed to town by the detective Drage. I am unaware of any enemies my Uncle Piers may have had. He was a general favourite."

The evidence of Horace Durrant :—

"I am a money-lender. I had transactions with Mr. Kynsam and Captain Saxon over a bill for two thousand. Saxon made default, and I came down here to get the money from Mr. Kynsam. I wanted to sell 'the Sacred Ring,' of which I had heard Mr. Kynsam speak, for ten thousand pounds, to an American. Mr. Kynsam agreed to help me to buy it, if I forgave him the debt, which I promised to do. Sir Piers refused to sell the Ring, and I went to bed. At six I was awakened

by Mr. Kynsam, who brought the Ring and said Sir Piers would sell it for five thousand pounds, but that it was to be done secretly, and that I was to leave Landy Court at once. I gave a receipt for the Ring, and a promise to purchase it for five thousand on settling the terms of sale with the American. Then I left the Court by a private way, walked to Botsleigh, and got the landlord of 'The Three Bells' to drive me to Barnstaple, where I caught the half-past eight train to London. I knew nothing of the murder till Drage came to town while I was speaking to Mr. Kynsam. Drage took the Ring away with him. I never saw Sir Piers after I left the library. I am innocent of all knowledge regarding the crime."

The evidence of Luke Trevor :—

"I am valet to Mr. Kynsam. On the 15th June he retired to bed about ten o'clock, or between ten and eleven. I had a bad toothache, and he dismissed me early, out of kindness. My room is near Mr. Kynsam's, as he prefers to have me close at hand. To go downstairs he has to pass the door of my room. On that night I was so sick with the toothache that I forgot to close my door, and threw myself dressed as I was on the bed. My door was slightly ajar, and I could hear anyone who came past. I heard Mr. Kynsam go downstairs. He returned at twelve, for the hall-clock rang

out the hour, as he repassed my door. I was awake all night, and heard him pass again at six or thereabouts. I swear that between midnight and six o'clock he did not leave his room. Had he done so I could not have failed to have heard him. I heard no unusual sound during the night, and was much astonished when I was told of the murder."

The evidence of Stephen Drage :—

"I am a detective in charge of this case. Mr. Kynsam had some blood on his dressing-gown sleeve, and I fancied for the moment he was guilty. When I taxed him with it he treated me very roughly. I followed him up to town and found him in the company of Mr. Durrant, the money-lender. 'The Sacred Ring' was on the table. I took the Ring and persuaded them to return to Landy Court." (The evidence of this witness was lengthy and prolix, but as it is mostly recapitulation, it need not be here set forth.)

The evidence of John Fann :—

"I am Mr. Kynsam's groom. The blood on his dressing-gown sleeve is that of a fox-terrier. The dog cut its foot a week ago, and Mr. Kynsam, who was in his dressing-gown, bound up the foot. I brought the dog up to his rooms. His sleeve was spotted with the

dog's blood, and I called his attention to the fact at the time."

The Coroner summed up, and the jury brought in a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown.

"Under the circumstances," said Drage, disconsolately, "they could bring in no other verdict."

CHAPTER XII.

DRAGE MEETS WITH AN OLD FRIEND.

WHAT Drage said was perfectly true. The jury could have brought in no other verdict than that of wilful murder against some unknown person. He had suspected Durrant, but the evidence of Will, showing how the Ring came to be in the money-lender's possession, exonerated him from complicity in the crime. He had suspected Kynsam, but the valet's evidence proved his innocence, when taken in conjunction with the assertion of Dr. Sinclair.

The doctor declared that Sir Piers was murdered between one and two o'clock in the morning, while the evidence of Will proved that he had retired to his bedroom at twelve o'clock, and did not emerge therefrom till six in the morning, when he went to awaken Durrant. This assertion was supported by the evidence of Luke Trevor, who asserted positively that he was kept awake all night with toothache, and knew that Mr. Kynsam did not

leave his room after midnight, or before six o'clock. If the crime was thus committed at the time alleged by the doctor, it was quite impossible that Will could be the guilty person. The *alibi* was clearly proved.

Then as to the blood on the sleeve of the dressing-gown. Contrary to the expectations of Drage, who disbelieved Will's story, the groom, John Fann, proved that it was the blood of a fox-terrier, and that he had drawn Mr. Kynsam's attention to it at the time the sleeve was soiled. No evidence could be clearer, and it entirely did away with Drage's theory; therefore, with due regard to the statements of these three witnesses, Will Kynsam was quite innocent of the crime laid to his charge. There was not an atom of evidence against him.

Furthermore, as if to clinch the matter, Drage discovered indirectly through the family lawyer that Will's statement concerning Sir Piers' poverty was quite true. Far from being a rich man, he was comparatively poor; and in some mysterious way he had spent the large sums of money raised on the estate. Drage was unable to learn what he had done with them, and the lawyer, a pompous gentleman of the old school, disdainfully declined to give the shabby little detective any information. He asked Will, but here he fared no better, as the young man pleaded ignorance of Sir Piers' private life. Yet Drage, in one way and another, ascertained, beyond

all doubt, that only the motive of poverty—certainly a strong motive—had induced Sir Piers to sell the relic which had been in his family, for so many hundreds of years.

The funeral was attended by all the gentry and poor people from far and wide; for Sir Piers, a good landlord, and an excellent neighbour, had been greatly respected by the county. At the burial everyone talked of his good qualities, and upright life. Not a dissenting voice was heard.

"That's queer," said Drage to himself, on overhearing these eulogies. "If he was so good as all that, it doesn't jump with his secretly spending large sums of money. What the deuce could he have squandered them on? Was he secretly a profligate or a gambler? Scandal is silent, yet if he was either the one, or the other, there would certainly be some talk. But I don't hear a word against him. Queer—it's very queer!"

After the funeral Sir Lionel sent for Drage, and, paying him his fee, advised him to go back to town and give up the search as a bad job.

"I'm afraid you'll discover nothing," said the new Baronet. "Durrant has been proved innocent; Mr. Kynsam has been proved innocent. I never suspected either of them, and am not astonished that things have turned out in this way."

"You were angry at my suspecting Mr. Kynsam?"

"I should think I was, Drage! My nephew is the last man in the world, who would be guilty of so heinous a crime. But now all has been cleared up, and 'the Sacred Ring' has been restored to its casket, I suppose you'll abandon the case."

"No, Sir Lionel; with your permission, I won't do that."

"Why not? There is not the faintest chance of your finding out who killed my poor brother."

"That may be, sir; but all the same, I intend to try."

"You have my full permission to do so. Still, as I have paid you your fee, and do not wish to engage you further, it is scarcely to your advantage to proceed with the matter."

"Sir," answered Drage, seriously, "some cases I take up for money; others because they are interesting to unravel. This is one of the latter. Since it came into my hands, my interest in it has greatly increased. It is no common crime, but one of those problems, which I like to work out. My pride is touched—my professional reputation is at stake; and with your permission, Sir Lionel, I'll go on with the matter."

"Hitherto you have not done justice to your reputation," said the Baronet, sarcastically.

"Is that because I wrongly suspected Mr. Kynsam and Durrant?" asked Drage, coolly; then without waiting for the affirmation, proceeded. "You then

think, Sir Lionel, that a detective should be faultless, and with unerring instinct secure the true criminal, without committing a single blunder? You will find a paragon like that, sir, in novels. In real life, detectives make many mistakes before they are successful. 'Cause why, Sir Lionel? 'Cause they haven't any author to know the end of the case, and guide them rightly to a conclusion. I have made mistakes, and no doubt I'll make others, but by these very mistakes, I hope to discover the truth."

Drage having completed his argument without interruption, waited to hear it controverted; but Sir Lionel merely raised his eyebrows, and continued to ask questions.

"Have you any further clue?"

"No. I am no further on than I was before."

"And what do you intend to do next?"

"I can't say, Sir Lionel, till I consider the matter. When I have a clue, I'll let you know what it is."

Sir Lionel pondered for a few minutes. Anxious as he was to unravel the mystery of his brother's death, he could not be blind to the discomfort of having a detective hanging round the Court. Yet Drage seemed so earnest over the matter, that he was unwilling to refuse the required permission, and, in the end, allowed him to have his way.

"You can stay here for another week or so," he said,

dismissing Drage, with a wave of his hand. "If in that time you get no further clue, it will be best for you to give up the case."

"In another week," said Drage, going to the door, "I'll have sufficient evidence to make you wish to go on with the case."

When Drage disappeared, the Baronet sat back in his chair, thinking deeply. Every now and then he glanced at a paper thickly dotted with figures which was lying on the table before him. After some hesitation, he touched the bell. In answer to his summons a servant appeared.

"Did not Mr. Durrant wish to see me just now?"

"Yes, Sir Lionel. He's waiting your permission to enter."

"Ask him to oblige me by stepping this way."

The servant went out, and Lionel, after glancing again at the figures, sighed deeply, and slipped the paper into the drawer of his desk. He might well sigh, for that paper, prepared by the family lawyer, showed him how deeply his late brother had dipped into the Lametry estates.

"There seems no help for it," said Lionel, aloud. "To save the Court I must sell the Ring."

Durrant entered, bowed politely, and, smoothing his red hair, sat down in the seat indicated by the Baronet. He was all on the alert to do business.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Durrant, I believe?"

"Yes, Sir Lionel. As all this painful business is over, I am going back to town."

"I wish you a pleasant journey. Is that all?"

"Well, no. I want to know about that Ring before leaving."

"What do you mean?"

"I wish to buy it."

"Very probably," replied Lametry, drily; "but I don't wish to sell."

"I am prepared to give you five thousand."

"No doubt; but the American is prepared to give ten thousand. Why should I not sell directly to him without the intervention of you as the middle man?"

"You can't do that, Sir Lionel, because you don't know who he is."

"I can find out. All this business about 'the Sacred Ring' will be in the newspapers in connection with the murder of my brother, and it will enhance the value of the Ring in your millionaire's eyes. He will probably come forward and give double what he arranged to pay."

"Well, supposing he does," said Durrant, sulkily, "you'll take the lot."

"No, I won't. You ask twenty thousand pounds for the Ring. If he is, as you say, a devout Catholic, he will have no hesitation in paying the sum for so unique a

relic. If he agrees to give that amount, return here, and I'll undertake to deliver the Ring."

"That will put twenty thousand pounds in your pocket. But what about me?"

"I will give you a thousand pounds."

"I refuse to be swindled in that way," said Durrant, rising indignantly to his feet.

"Very well, Mr. Durrant. You can call it what you please, but I only do business on those terms. As a matter of fact, now that I know your plans, which you have been forced to reveal in order to clear yourself from this murder, I can afford to do without you. Accept, and you gain a thousand pounds; refuse, and I can find out your millionaire, without your assistance."

"Give me time to think over the matter," said Durrant, seeing he was in a hole.

"By all means," replied the Baronet, easily. "Take till this time to-morrow. I can't afford to wait longer, as I want the money badly."

"So did your brother, and was murdered."

"Is that a prognostication of my own death?" said Sir Lionel, scornfully. "If so, it is false. I can protect myself. Good day, Mr. Durrant. You know my terms. Take them or leave them, as you please. Good day."

Thus summarily dismissed, Durrant left the library in no very good temper. He recognised that the new

Baronet was a very different character to the old one, and was determined to put the full value of the Ring into his own pockets. But for the fact that he had been forced to betray his business relations with the American at the inquest, he could have managed Sir Lionel, by keeping those facts secret. As it was, the Baronet knew too much for Durrant to have things his own way; so under these circumstances, he almost made up his mind to agree to Lametry's terms, and take the thousand pounds. Yet he determined to take till next day to consider the matter, in the hope that something might turn up in the meantime to give him the advantage over Sir Lionel.

While thus cogitating, he came across Drage, who was standing at the foot of the staircase, looking remarkably pale. Durrant stopped to make a remark thereon.

"What's the matter with you, Drage?" he said, in an astonished tone. "You look as though you had seen a ghost."

"That's just what it is. I have seen a ghost."

"Whose ghost?"

"The ghost of a woman whom I thought was dead," replied Drage, wiping the perspiration off his forehead. "I could have sworn she was dead. I saw her corpse."

"And now you see her ghost," said Durrant, flippantly. "Why didn't you speak to it?"

"I'll do that later on," said Drage, whose colour was coming back to his cheeks. "But never mind the ghost. I'm looking for Mr. Kynsam."

"You'll find him in the drawing-room. But don't interrupt him."

"Why not?"

"Because he is engaged with Miss Lametry," replied Durrant, and went away laughing.

Drage stared after him for some moments, thinking of the person whom he had seen, then turned on his heel and sought the drawing-room.

"I'll ask Mr. Kynsam what name she goes by here," he said, as he paused at the half-open door.

Just as he was about to push the door open, he heard his own name pronounced by Miss Lametry, and, wondering what she could find to say about him, listened. It was a dishonourable thing to do, but Drage was not over nice in many things, and considered eavesdropping to be a part of his profession. Perhaps he was right on that point.

Will and Eleanor were walking up and down the drawing-room arm-in-arm, earnestly conversing. As they approached the door, Eleanor made the remark, which had attracted the attention of the detective.

"Did you tell Mr. Drage?" she asked.

"No," he replied, in a tone of reproach; "how can

you think I would do such a thing. It was not safe to do so, especially when I thought it was you."

"Tell me exactly what occurred."

"When I was leaving the library at midnight, with the Ring in my pocket, I saw the skirt of a woman vanish round the corner. Thinking it was you, I went after her, and called out your name, but she was already out of sight, and thinking you did not wish to speak to me, I went upstairs to my room."

"It was not I," said Eleanor, thoughtfully. "It must have been one of the servants."

"Very likely. But what was one of the servants doing near the library at that hour?"

"I cannot say. How was she dressed?"

"I do not know. I only saw the tail of her grey silk skirt."

"That is Mrs. Westcote," said Miss Lametry, quickly. "How unobservant you are, Will! Mrs. Westcote always wears grey silk in the evening."

"Well, it might be her. What was she doing there at midnight?"

"I'll ask her."

"No," said Drage, entering the room, "don't do that, miss."

"Confound you, sir! You've been listening!" cried Will, indignantly.

"It's part of my profession," replied Drage, coolly.

"I heard what you said about Mrs. Westcote, and, with your permission, I'll speak to her myself. She is the housekeeper, is she not?"

"Yes. A tall, pale woman, with dark hair, Mrs. Westcote."

"Mrs. Westcote," repeated Drage, under his breath, "and I thought she was dead."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STORY OF MRS. WESTCOTE.

IT was strange that the lady calling herself Mrs. Westcote should have succeeded in eluding the sharp eyes of Drage. He had come into contact with the servants of Landy Court, but the housekeeper had resolutely kept out of his way. Only by the merest accident did he catch a glimpse of her face as she passed through the hall, but that glimpse was sufficient to recall her to his mind. Twenty years ago he had seen her in London under somewhat peculiar circumstances. Shortly afterwards she had disappeared, and was supposed to be living on the Continent; so he was much surprised at finding her in this retired neighbourhood. Her unexpected appearance suggested a clue to the mystery of Sir Piers' death.

Certainly he had no reason to connect her with the commission of the crime, save that her character in past years warranted him harbouring certain suspicions. Yet, after overhearing the conversation between Will and

Eleanor, he wondered whether such suspicions might not prove correct. She had been near the library shortly before the commission of the crime, at an hour when she was supposed to be in bed. Unless she could explain her presence there at that time to Drage's satisfaction, he was justified, knowing what he did of her past, in suspecting her to have something to do with the murder.

After his interview with the lovers, he went in search of Mrs. Westcote, with the intention of ascertaining, if possible, her movements on the 15th of June. He was well aware how difficult a task it would be to wring the truth out of her; as she was no country bumpkin, but a keen, clear-brained woman of the world, who had, on a certain occasion, baffled the cleverest members of the Bar. Knowing this, Drage looked forward to the contest of wits with some excitement. It would be a matter of some difficulty to force her into confession; but Drage, prided himself on his capabilities, and was determined to come off victorious. Yet he sought her with considerable trepidation; for she was a dangerous woman, and would be game to the last.

Michael took him to the housekeeper's room, and, leaving him at the door, entered the apartment to tell Mrs. Westcote that Drage desired to see her. To the detective's surprise, Mrs. Westcote consented to be interviewed without a moment's hesitation. Drage entered with some uneasiness. He did not like that ready

consent. It seemed as though Mrs. Westcote were confident of the result of their conversation.

She was seated by the window looking out on to the garden, and turned her head slightly as the detective approached. In her grey silk dress, with her dark hair smoothed under a lace cap, she looked wonderfully young, yet Drage knew she could not be less than fifty years of age. Her face was pale, but there was a determined look about her mouth, and a hard glitter in her eyes which showed that she was prepared for battle.

"Mr. Drage, I believe?" she said, interrogatively.

The detective bowed and sat down near her. He saw plainly that she intended to take up the line of absolute denial. The housekeeper of Landy Court would not be identified with the notorious personage of London Bohemianism, if Mrs. Westcote could help it.

"I am Drage, the detective," he replied, quietly looking straight at her; "but I should have thought you would have known me."

"As a detective?"

"No, I was not a detective, then."

"You talk in riddles," said Mrs. Westcote, curling her lips at the significance of the last word.

"No doubt. But I think you can guess them."

"No," she answered, resolutely. "I have forgotten everything save what has happened during the past two years."

"What a convenient memory!" sneered Drage. "You forget all save your life at Landy Court?"

"I do."

"Do you remember a villa at——"

"I remember nothing."

It was a difficult matter to converse with so obstinate a woman, but Drage was equal to the task. Crossing one leg over the other in an easy fashion, he took up a new line.

"Can I tell you a story, Mrs. Westcote?" he said, laying marked emphasis on the name.

"I don't wish to hear a story."

"In that case I won't waste your time," said Drage, rising leisurely. "I shall tell my story to Sir Lionel Lametry, to Mr. Kynsam, and to Father Ching. It will interest them very much."

Mrs. Westcote turned her glittering eyes on her tormentor, and bit her nether lip. Drage knew too much of her past life for her to trifle with him. So, satisfied that he would not hesitate to reveal all if thwarted, she yielded under compulsion.

"Sit down, Mr. Drage," she said, sharply, pointing to his empty chair. "Sit down, and tell me your story."

"It's a very dramatic story," said Drage, resuming his seat. "I feel sure you will like it greatly. It appeals to one who has been an actress."

To this Mrs. Westcote made no answer, much to Drage's disappointment.

"An actress!" he repeated, loudly.

"I hear you, Mr. Drage. Go on with your story."

"About twenty years ago, Mrs. Westcote, there was a well-known actress in London called Clara Vaux—perhaps you remember her?"

"I don't remember her. I was not in London then."

"You do it beautifully!" said Drage, in an admiring tone. "You are as good an actress as was Clara Vaux. However, to continue my story.

"This celebrated lady was a tragic actress, and particularly fine in the part of Lady Macbeth. Unfortunately, her private life was not a happy one. Common report said that she had left her husband for the sake of another man, who was at once a gambler and a profligate. She called herself Mrs. Geoffrey Roche. Ah! I see you know that name."

For the moment, stirred by the memory of the past, Mrs. Westcote sighed faintly, and clasping her hands tightly together, looked steadily at Drage. She had betrayed herself, yet persisted in her denial.

"I never heard the name before. You are talking nonsense."

"We'll see if it is nonsense when we come to the end of the story," said Drage, in no wise ruffled by her sneer. "Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Roche lived in a pretty little villa near Regent's Park. When I knew them they had already dwelt there for ten years, and had one child, a boy of nine years of age."

"When you knew them!" said Mrs. Westcote, with deep scorn, "you never knew them."

"Apparently, you did, in spite of your previous denials," responded Drage, sharply. "But you are right, I did *not* know them at the time. I was a burglar in those days."

"You were! A criminal of the lowest class."

"Ah!" said the detective, with much satisfaction. "I see you are beginning to take an interest in my story."

"For heaven's sake tell me what you mean to do!" cried Mrs. Westcote, violently.

"Presently, presently," replied Drage, humouring her as though she was a child. "I must go on with my story."

She smote her hands sharply together with an angry frown, and controlled her rising passion with great difficulty.

"Go on. I listen."

"I was a burglar in those days," continued Drage, shamelessly. "That was before I reformed, and became a detective. In the pursuit of my house-breaking trade, I entered the Regent's Park villa of Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Roche, to pick up what I could. It was one o'clock in the morning when I succeeded in entering the house, hoping to find all the inmates in bed. To my surprise I heard voices in the direction of the smoking-room—I learned it was the smoking-room afterwards.

Unwilling to be caught, I stole forward quietly, and looked in through the open door. There was an Indian bead curtain hanging before it, so I could see without being seen. What do you think I saw, Mrs. Westcote?"

"I don't know. I don't care."

"I saw that the ground was strewn with cards, and in the centre of the room was a table, at which sat two men playing. One, whose face was towards me, was a mere lad; the other, whose countenance I could not see, I guessed to be the master of the house, Mr. Geoffrey Roche. Behind the lad stood Clara Vaux, overlooking his cards, and telegraphing the information to her husband. In short, Mrs. Westcote, what I saw was a gambling scene, in which two sharpers were cheating an inexperienced lad."

The woman was quite white. Leaning back in her chair, she placed her handkerchief to her mouth, and looked as though she were on the point of fainting.

"You look ill, Mrs. Westcote," said Drage, suavely. "Can I get you a glass of water?"

"No. Go on with your story."

"The most interesting part is yet to come," continued the detective, with a malicious grin. "The lad was flushed with drink, and lost heavily. On a table near him lay a jewelled dagger. It was one used by Clara Vaux in her tragic parts. As I looked, the lad sprang to his feet, mad with drink and despair. He had lost all

his money, and turned round to seek sympathy from Clara Vaux. She burst out laughing at his agony."

"No, no," moaned the housekeeper.

"I heard her," said Drage, pitilessly. "She burst out laughing at the poor wretch whom she had tricked and ruined. He snatched up the dagger and turned it against himself. Goaded to self-destruction by his losses, by that ironic laughter, he stabbed himself to the heart, and fell dead at the feet of his destroyers."

Mrs. Westcote hurriedly opened the window, and leaned out to get a breath of air. Unheeding her anguish, Drage went on calling up the past.

"After that all was confusion. Clara Vaux shrieked aloud—the servants rushed in, and I was caught. In the confusion, Mr. Geoffrey Roche disappeared. Basely deserting his companion, he fled. No portraits of him could be found, by which he could be traced. Faithful to the man who deserted her, the woman refused to give any information concerning him. She was placed on her trial on a charge of murdering Lord Beldon, for that was the lad's name. In vain she declared that he had committed suicide, that she was innocent. In the absence of Geoffrey Roche, she had no witness to speak for her."

"Save yourself," murmured Mrs. Westcote.

"Save myself?" repeated Drage, complacently. "Yes! I came forward and told the truth. Then Clara Vaux

was acquitted, and I was put in prison on a charge of burglary.

"I know: I remember it all only too well."

"There was gratitude for you!" continued Drage. "When I got out of prison I amended my ways, and became a detective. I tried to find Clara Vaux, but she had disappeared with the boy after the trial. I could not find her. Judge then of my astonishment, when, at Landy Court twenty years afterwards, I recognise in Mrs. Westcote the housekeeper, Clara Vaux the actress!"

Mrs. Westcote turned round and looked Drage fair in the face.

"Yes! denial is useless," she said, coldly. "I am Clara Vaux! What have you to say to me?"

"What have you been doing since I saved your life?"

"Living abroad on the Continent, chiefly in Paris. For the last two years I have been housekeeper at Landy Court."

"How did you get here?"

"I decline to tell you that."

"I thought you would decline," said Drage, significantly. "Ah! it was a pity I never saw the face of Geoffrey Roche."

"What do you mean?" asked Mrs. Westcote, turning pale.

"Geoffrey Roche fled when you were arrested for the murder of Lord Beldon. When you were set free,

through my evidence, you joined him on the Continent, and then came with him to Landy Court."

"Geoffrey Roche is not at Landy Court," replied Mrs. Westcote, vehemently.

"Not now! But he was here. I now see where Sir Piers' money went, Mrs. Westcote. I now understand how it was he died in debt."

"You are wrong—you are wrong," she said, clasping her hands nervously together.

"No, I am not wrong, Miss Clara Vaux; I am not wrong, Mrs. Geoffrey Roche; I am not wrong, Mrs. Westcote. Sir Piers Lametry, the excellent Devonshire gentleman, was Geoffrey Roche, the London scamp. He spent his money on you, and when he had no more to squander, brought you here to be the housekeeper at Landy Court. Is this not true?"

"I decline to answer you."

"I command you to answer."

"I refuse."

"Then at least tell me if you have the dagger with which Lord Beldon killed himself."

"The dagger!" she stammered, evading his eye.

"Yes! The jewelled-hilted dagger, which has already figured in one trial and may figure in another."

"I have not that dagger. I never saw it again. It is at Scotland Yard," said Mrs. Westcote.

"Is it? Yet, strange to say, the wound in Lord

Beldon's breast was triangular in shape, and the wound in Sir Piers' breast was also triangular. The dagger," added Drage, with cruel deliberation, "is of the kind that inflicts a triangular-shaped wound. You owned that dagger, and you were at the Regent's Park villa when Lord Beldon died—you were at Landy Court when Sir Piers Lametry was murdered. What do you make of that, Mrs. Westcote?"

His last words were unheard, for the housekeeper had fainted.

"Ah!" said Drage, with a grim smile, "I am afraid my evidence won't save you this time from the gallows."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DAGGER.

IT need hardly be said that Drage fully believed Mrs. Westcote to be guilty. As to her motive for committing the crime, he ascribed that to jealousy. Possibly she wanted Sir Piers to acknowledge her as his wife, and raise her from the position of housekeeper to that of the mistress of Landy Court. As he refused to do so, she may have killed him in a fit of jealous rage. This was mere conjecture, still the nature of the wound pointed to the use of that famous dagger, which Drage deemed to be still in her possession. If he could find that dagger he would have a strong proof against her that she had stabbed the Baronet. The similarity of the wound inflicted on Sir Piers to that of Lord Beldon, was too close to be the result of mere accident.

Moreover, her presence near the library on that night was suspicious. Unable by reason of her position to see Sir Piers privately during the day, she came to the

library at midnight to interview him. This, then, was the reason that Sir Piers sat up on that special night. He appointed twelve o'clock as the hour of meeting with Mrs. Westcote, in the belief that by that time, the inmates of Landy Court would be in bed. As it happened, the visit of Will to the library for the purpose of making a clean breast of it to Sir Piers, had nearly discovered the Baronet's secret. Mrs. Westcote was coming to keep the appointment when Will saw the tail of her skirt vanish round the corner. He, thinking it was Eleanor, held his tongue; but, had he spoken of the episode to Drage, the detective's suspicions would have been aroused, and he would have discovered the identity of Mrs. Westcote, much earlier than he had done. From over-caution Kynsam had retarded the progress of justice.

Full of his new discovery, Drage went to look for Will, and tell him the story. He did not care about making a confidant of Sir Lionel, as he felt sure the Baronet would laugh at the idea of Mrs. Westcote's guilt. Moreover, before seeing him, Drage wished to find the dagger, so as to place before Sir Lionel a plain proof that the woman had killed his brother. For a moment or so he did think of confiding in Father Ching, but came to the conclusion that he was not a suitable person. The priest would listen to his tale, but believe or disbelieve it as he might, would not lift one finger to help him. Indeed, he was precluded from doing so by his sacred office, and,

as Drage wished aid in his search for the weapon, he decided to apply to someone more likely to assist him.

Will Kynsam was, therefore, the best person to see, as he knew every detail of the case, and was anxious to capture the assassin of his uncle. It also seemed to Drage that he owed the young man some reparation for his unjust suspicions, and he could not better discharge his debt than by entrusting him with the newly-discovered secret. Such confidence would show Kynsam that the detective was absolutely certain of his innocence, and was anxious for his help to secure the person who had slain Sir Piers.

Leaving Mrs. Westcote to recover from her faint, Drage repaired to the smoking-room, where he anticipated Will Kynsam was to be found. The young man was smoking in a gloomy sort of fashion, and looked anything but cheerful when the detective entered the room. Seeing from Drage's face that something new had occurred, he jumped up eagerly, and advanced towards him.

"What is the matter now, Drage?" he said, anxiously. "Have you made any new discoveries?"

"Yes; I have made one of the greatest importance."

"Have you found out who killed my poor uncle?"

"Well, I won't say that as yet," replied Drage, significantly, "but I have a shrewd suspicion that I can lay my hand on the guilty person."

"Who is he?" asked Will, eagerly.

"That I decline to say at present," answered Drage.

"You may as well confide in me, Drage," said Kynsam, in an injured tone. "I may be able to assist you."

"Will you be willing to do so if I tell you what I know?"

Kynsam hesitated for a moment, and made a wry face. The idea was disagreeable to him.

"I don't like the office," he said, at length. "It seems a horrible thing to hunt down a fellow-creature."

"Not when that fellow-creature is guilty of murder. Moreover, the only assistance I want you to give is to aid me to find the weapon with which the crime was committed."

"Oh, I don't mind doing that. Tell me of your discovery, and I will help you to the best of my ability."

So saying, Will held out his hand to Drage. To his surprise, the pale face of the detective flushed crimson, and he refused to acknowledge the courtesy.

"No, Mr. Kynsam, I am not fit to shake hands with you. Let me tell you my story, and you will see what I mean."

Much puzzled by the agitation of Drage, and anxious to know its meaning, Will resumed his seat.

"Tell me whatever you choose. I shall not betray your confidence."

"I had hoped my past was buried," said Drage, in a vexed tone. "But I can't tell you of my discovery unless I reveal what I was."

"Well, what were you?" asked Will, in a careless tone, anticipating no terrible revelation.

"I was a thief, a rogue, and a scoundrel."

"You are joking."

"I speak in earnest, Mr. Kynsam. I was born and bred among thieves, and for the earlier part of my life was well known to the police as a burglar."

"What made you turn honest?"

"Self-interest," replied Drage, cynically. "I found that honesty paid best, and that I could thrive better as a detective than as a thief."

This shameless speech rather repelled Will, who was about to congratulate Drage on his noble resolve to lead a better life. He eyed the man before him coldly.

"I don't know why you should make this confession to me, Mr. Drage."

"It is necessary that you should know it, as I can't tell you of my discovery without revealing my early history."

"What is your discovery?"

"I'll come to that in good time. But, to revert to my confession that I was a burglar——"

"I don't want to know the details," said Will, holding up his hand.

"You must. Besides, I will only tell you of one episode in my life—of my last act of rascality before I turned honest."

"Let me hear it, then."

"I broke into a house twenty years ago at midnight. The house was near Regent's Park, and belonged to a Mr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Roche."

"I never heard of them."

"Perhaps you have heard of an actress called Clara Vaux?"

"Yes. But that was before my time. Well, was she Mrs. Geoffrey Roche?"

"She was supposed to be, but——"

"Stop a moment," interrupted Will, a sudden recollection flashing across his brain. "Was she the woman who was supposed to have killed Lord Beldon?"

"Yes. You know the story?"

"It was told to me by a friend. She was acquitted on the evidence of a man who swore that Beldon killed himself."

"That is true! I was the man who gave the evidence. I saw the whole thing happen, when I broke into the house."

"Good heavens! How strange! What did they do to you?"

"Gave me three years for burglary," replied Drage, calmly. "When I was released I turned over a new leaf and became a detective."

"It's a queer story," said Will, looking at Drage with fresh interest. "But what has that old story to do with my uncle's death?"

"Simply this. The wound in the breast of Lord Beldon was triangular in shape—the wound in Sir Piers' breast was also triangular. It is my opinion that the wounds were caused by the same weapon."

"But how could such a weapon come here?"

"It belonged to Clara Vaux."

"But Clara Vaux is not at Landy Court."

"Yes she is, Mr. Kynsam," said Drage, slowly. "Clara Vaux now calls herself Mrs. Westcote."

"The housekeeper?" cried Kynsam, rising quickly, with an incredulous look.

"Yes, the housekeeper."

"It was she whom I saw at midnight near the library."

"It was she."

"And the dagger belonged to her! Why, man, you don't mean to say that Mrs. Westcote killed my uncle?"

"Yes I do! She stabbed him with that very dagger with which Lord Beldon killed himself twenty years ago."

"But her reason for committing such a crime?"

"Can you bear a shock?" said Drage, seriously.

"Yes, yes. What do you mean?"

"Your uncle, Sir Piers, was Mr. Geoffrey Roche."

Kynsam looked at the detective aghast, and could not speak for some moments.

"You must be joking. My uncle was one of the best of men."

"No doubt," said Drage, coolly. "Nevertheless, I firmly believe that he was the man who disappeared from London at the time of Lord Beldon's suicide. Now you can guess where his money went."

"No; I can't guess."

"How blind you are, Mr. Kynsam," said the detective, impatiently. "It went to feed the extravagance of Clara Vaux. When the money was done, Sir Piers brought her here as his housekeeper."

"But this is infamous," cried Will, angrily. "You must be mistaken. No man would bring such a woman under the same roof as that which covered his own child."

"I tell you it is true. Mrs. Westcote is Clara Vaux. I taxed her with it, and she could not deny it."

Will looked confusedly at the ground, then, suddenly raising his eyes, glanced at Drage.

"Don't tell Miss Lametry of this frightful discovery," he said, in a pained voice.

"I shall not tell anyone. We must keep this discovery to ourselves till we find the proof that Clara Vaux, who calls herself Mrs. Westcote, killed Sir Piers."

"What proof do you require?"

"The dagger. It is my opinion that, after killing Sir Piers, she opened the window to throw the dagger into the garden."

"Impossible! It would have been picked up."

"Then she concealed it outside. There was no other reason why she should open the window."

"Unless to favour the idea that Sir Piers had been killed by some stranger."

"That might be so," said Drage, walking towards the door. "However, we'll soon settle that point. Come with me to the library, and we will look for the dagger."

As in a dream, Kynsam followed the detective to the library. Fortunately it was deserted, as Sir Lionel had gone out for a ride with Eleanor. Will had elected to stay at home, as he wished to see Drage, whom he believed at that time was about to return to London.

"Let us act a little drama," said Drage, pausing by the table. "Sir Piers is sitting here, waiting to see Mrs. Westcote. He chooses midnight, so as to avoid suspicion. At midnight, after narrowly escaping being caught by you, she enters. She talks with Sir Piers; demands that he will marry her, and make her mistress of the Court. Sir Piers, mindful of his daughter, refuses, whereupon, in a fit of mad anger, she kills him with the dagger she has brought with her."

"Do you mean to say that she intended to kill him when she entered the library?"

"I do—if he refused to marry her. Clara Vaux is a perfect demon when roused. At least she was in London, twenty years ago. I don't suppose she has altered much since. Well, let us assume that she kills him, and then, seeing her danger, looks about for some place to hide the dagger. She dare not take it back to her room, lest the

house should be searched when the crime is discovered; nor in the library for the same reason. She wants to hide it in a place whence she can remove it secretly when the storm has passed over. Therefore, she walks to the window, opens it, and stands on the terrace in the tempest. Now, then, Mr. Kynsam, where does she hide that dagger?"

During this speech Drage had acted his drama, and, with Will, now stood on the terrace. It was a broad expanse, flagged with stone, and bordered by a balustrade, on which stood huge flower-pots at regular intervals. These were filled with gaudy blossoms, and Drage was looking at them. Will followed the direction of his eyes.

"Do you think she hid it in one of those pots?" he cried.

"That I can't say," said Drage, judiciously. "It seems worth trying. You take the pots on that side, I on this, and we will see if the dagger is hidden among these flowers."

This course was adopted, and for ten minutes they diligently examined the pots in which the flowers profusely bloomed. Drage finished his side first, but found nothing, and was turning away in a disconsolate fashion, when he heard an exclamation from Will. On looking up he saw the young man coming towards him, holding a slender stiletto, with a rusty blade and jewelled handle.

"I found this in the last pot," he said, breathlessly. "Is this the dagger?"

"Yes," said Drage, taking it gravely. "See, the blade is triangular. On the hilt is a monogram, 'C. V.', for Clara Vaux. This is the dagger I saw twenty years ago, when Lord Beldon killed himself; and this is the dagger used by Clara Vaux, otherwise Mrs. Westcote, to murder Sir Piers Lametry, otherwise Mr. Geoffrey Roche."

CHAPTER XV.

A STRANGE DISCOVERY.

THE rapid development of this affair startled Will. A few hours since and Drage had been disposed to abandon the case in sheer despair; but now, thanks to his excellent memory, it seemed as though he had really discovered the person responsible for the tragic death of Sir Piers. Kynsam had doubted the story told to him by this very disreputable detective, who calmly confessed to having been a thief; but, with the dagger before his eyes, he could no longer doubt the guilt of Mrs. Westcote. She had crowned her career by secret murder.

"What are we to do now?" asked Will, staring blankly at the detective.

Drage, who was rejoicing over his success, looked up briskly, and slipped the dagger into the breast-pocket of his coat. Then he rubbed his hands reflectively, but did not answer the question of his companion.

"Shall we tell Sir Lionel?" pursued Kynsam, anxiously.

"No. I don't think we'll mention this matter yet to Sir Lionel," said Drage, scratching his chin. "Let us return to the smoking-room, and talk it over. I wish to ask you a few questions, if you please."

"I will answer them with pleasure—if I can."

"Oh, there's no difficulty about that," replied Drage, easily, as they re-entered the library, and took their way to the smoking-room. "I merely wish to know the attitude assumed by Mrs. Westcote at Landy Court."

Will threw himself into his former seat with a groan. It seemed so horrible that this wretched woman, who called herself Mrs. Westcote, should be under the same roof as Eleanor. Yet he could not tell all, and have her turned out, without the permission of Drage. Bound by his promise of silence, he was entirely in the detective's hands.

"How does Mrs. Westcote conduct herself here?" asked Drage, again.

"To tell you the truth, I do not take much notice of her," replied Will, carelessly. "She is very quiet and unobtrusive; but no one likes her. She is not even a favourite with the servants."

"Did Sir Piers show her any favour?"

"No. He disliked her heartily, and was several times on the point of getting rid of her, but that Father Ching favoured her stay."

"That was a mere blind on the part of Sir Piers," said

Drage, nodding his head wisely. "He could not really have disliked her, else he would scarcely have given her a meeting in the library at midnight."

"For all we know, he might have given her that meeting for the purpose of getting rid of her, Drage. My uncle was too fond of Eleanor to expose her to the infamy of coming in contact with this woman. Depend upon it, she thrust herself upon him uninvited, and he dared not refuse lest she should expose his connection with her, and his identity with Geoffrey Roche."

"That might be so, certainly," replied Drage, reflectively. "How did she first come here?"

"Sir Piers wanted a housekeeper, and this woman applied, so, as her references were excellent, he gave her the post."

"I have no doubt her references were excellent—for Sir Piers."

"What do you mean, Drage?"

"I agree with your idea. Sir Piers gave her the post of housekeeper, under a threat of betrayal. She could have exposed his former follies, and ruined his position in the county. Naturally he shrank from such an exposure, and for the sake of peace yielded to her demands."

"I cannot believe that my uncle was ever such a scamp," said Will, in a puzzled tone. "He did not seem to be a man of that sort."

"I daresay you thought him perfection," answered Drage, drily; "but Sir Piers is not the first man who has led a double life. There are plenty of that sort, Mr. Kynsam. You read about them every day in the papers. Outwardly saints, inwardly sinners, and none are so surprised as their most intimate friends, when the truth becomes known."

"But I tell you it is impossible, Drage," urged Will, earnestly. "This affair with Clara Vaux took place twenty years ago. Sir Piers married nineteen years ago, and his wife died shortly after the birth of my cousin Eleanor, who is now eighteen years of age. It is incredible that a widower with a young child would see this woman again, after the death of his wife."

"Perhaps he was infatuated with Clara Vaux," suggested Drage, shrewdly. "If so, nothing would stand in the way of his passion. Remember, he knew this woman for ten years, and, of course, the child."

"A child!"

"Yes; a boy. I don't know what became of him. I quite intended to ask Mrs. Westcote, but she fainted, so I was forced to leave her."

"I cannot believe such a thing of my uncle. After all, you have no proof of his identity with Geoffrey Roche."

"If he was not Geoffrey Roche, what did he do with all the money drawn from these estates? How is it that Mrs. Westcote is here? How was it that she was near

the library on that fatal night; and how is it that Sir Piers was killed by this dagger which belonged to Clara Vaux? All these things prove, that I am right."

"Well, I will grant, for the sake of argument, that you are right," said Will, unable to find an answer to the detective's speech. "What are you going to do now?"

"See Mrs. Westcote, and show her the dagger."

"She will deny that it is her property."

"She can't do so. The monogram on the handle is 'C. V.', and I know her to be Clara Vaux. Besides," added Drage, shrugging his shoulders, "there can be no question about this dagger. I saw it at the trial twenty years ago, and can swear to its being the same weapon."

"What does she say became of it?"

"Oh, she declares it is at Scotland Yard. Of course, that is not true. I'll show her the weapon, and force her to own the truth. She will never think it has been found."

"Do you believe her to be guilty?"

"I don't see what doubt there can be. I believe your dead uncle to be Geoffrey Roche—I know Mrs. Westcote to be Clara Vaux. She was near the library at the time of the murder, as you can prove—the weapon with which Sir Piers was killed is her property. I don't think Judge or jury require stronger evidence than that."

"Is it your intention to arrest her?"

"Yes. First I am going to question her about the dagger. Then I shall see Sir Lionel, and tell him all. She must be arrested. You should be glad, Mr. Kynsam, that I have been so successful; it was by the merest chance that I recognised her."

"Still, I am sorry for the wretched creature."

"You can spare your sorrow," replied Drage, coolly. "Mrs. Westcote is a thoroughly bad woman. She ought to have been hanged long ago."

"Well, do what you think best, Drage. But I shall have no hand in this affair."

"You must swear that you found the dagger in one of those flower-pots."

"Yes," said Kynsam, with a shudder. "I will do that."

"Very good! I shall now see Mrs. Westcote, and confront her with the evidence of her crime. If she can prove her innocence, she is a cleverer woman than I take her to be."

He walked towards the door, but so deep in thought was he about the case that he left the dagger on the table. Will had risen to his feet, and was looking out of the window, so he did not notice Drage's omission to take the weapon. As the detective opened the door, Eleanor, in her riding habit, entered.

"Mr. Drage," she said, shrinking slightly back, for the detective was no favourite with her, "I beg your pardon. I thought Mr. Kynsam was here."

"So he is, Miss Lametry," replied Drage, bowing, and pointing towards Will, left the room.

"What is the matter, Eleanor?" asked Will, hearing her voice, and coming forward. "You look tired."

"I have just come back from riding with Uncle Lionel," said Eleanor, sitting down. "It is the first time I have been out since my poor father's death. It did me good, I think. But you look ill and worried. What is the matter?"

"Nothing more than usual. I have been discussing the case with Mr. Drage."

"And what does he say?"

"Oh! many things," replied Will, evasively. "He is still in the dark."

He could not bear to tell Eleanor the frightful truth. She loved her father, and reverenced his memory. To undeceive her was a task beyond his powers. Looking at her sad face, with its air of virginal repose, Will could not bring himself to believe that her father was a profligate, whose death had been the meet reward of his conduct. Yet it was the truth. No one could doubt that in the face of the evidence brought forward by Drage. Looking up she caught his eyes fixed on hers.

"Why do you look at me so strangely?" she asked, inquiringly.

"For no particular reason," he answered, hastily. "I was thinking how sad you looked."

"And is it to be wondered at? I have lost the best and kindest of fathers."

Will, somewhat embarrassed by this direct reference to a man of whom he had heard such bad accounts, opened his mouth to reply, when he was spared the necessity of doing so by the sudden entry of Drage into the room.

"Excuse me, Miss Lametry," he said, advancing swiftly towards the table, "but I left something behind me."

"This dagger," said Will, and regretted saying it the moment afterwards, when he saw Eleanor's eyes fastened on the weapon.

Drage was about to pick it up when Eleanor anticipated him. Taking it in her hand she looked at it admiringly, and then glanced at the two men. Evidently she had no suspicion that the weapon in her hand was the one with which her father had been slain. Kynsam met her gaze with a confused look on his face.

"It is a pretty dagger, is it not?" said Eleanor, in a conventional tone. "It came from Florence, and is as old as the Renaissance."

The two men looked at one another. Were they on the verge of a new discovery? It seemed so.

"I did not know you were so learned, Eleanor," observed Will, trying to steady his voice. "How did you learn the age of this stiletto?"

"Why, Father Ching told me."

"Father Ching!"

"Yes, it is his dagger. He showed it to me some weeks ago, and told me its history."

"Father Ching," muttered Drage, with a warning glance at Will to be silent. "Yes, of course. I was just about to take it back to him."

"He is in the chapel, I think," said Eleanor, rising to her feet, quite unconscious of the effect of her words on her auditors. "He can tell you more about it than I can."

"Where did Father Ching get this dagger, Eleanor?"

"Oh, he has had it for many years. It was given to him by his mother when he was at college in France. Well, I must go. Will, come down to the drawing-room when you are ready. I wish to see you."

When she left the room, Kynsam and the detective looked at one another. The same thought was in the minds of both.

"How old is Father Ching?" asked Drage, pointedly.

"Under thirty years of age."

"And when Beldon died Clara Vaux had a boy nine years of age. It is twenty years since then. I think that makes Father Ching twenty-nine years of age."

"Do you believe he is her son?"

"I think so. If not, how did he become possessed of this dagger?"

"Do you think he killed Sir Piers?" asked Will, who was now quite pale.

"I must see Mrs. Westcote before I answer that question," replied Drage, putting the dagger into his pocket. "I hope he is innocent, and not guilty of parricide."

"Parricide!"

"Yes! If he is the son of Mrs. Westcote, Sir Piers must be his father."

CHAPTER XVI.

AT BAY.

THE effect of Eleanor's careless words was startling in the extreme. Drage was once more at fault. His belief in the guilt of Mrs. Westcote was rudely shaken. If the dagger had passed out of her possession, then there was a possibility that she was innocent of the crime laid to her charge. Father Ching admitted that the weapon was his property. It had been given to him by his mother, who could be none other than the housekeeper. The question now arose whether the priest was innocent or guilty.

It was doubtful whether mother and son were aware of the relationship between them. If Father Ching knew that Mrs. Westcote was his mother, he certainly gave no sign of such knowledge. Doubtless Mrs. Westcote was better informed, but she kept out of his way, and neither by word or deed hinted at the tie between them. She could not be ignorant of the presence of her own son in the house, but had evidently

kept the knowledge to herself, for if Father Ching learned one thing he would have to learn all.

Drage wondered whether this might not have had something to do with the murder of Sir Piers. If Father Ching unexpectedly learned the truth, he must have despised, and hated, his father for his treatment of his mother. Of course, if Mrs. Westcote revealed herself to her son, she would magnify her own virtues at the expense of the Baronet. Ching would, therefore, be prejudiced in her favour, and look on her as a woman wronged by the man whom he had lately discovered to be his father. It might be that he sought Sir Piers in the library for the purpose of forcing him to do justice to Mrs. Westcote, and in the quarrel which ensued inadvertently killed the Baronet. This was merely supposition. Still it was within the bounds of probability.

Only one person could reveal the true facts of the case, and that was Mrs. Westcote. If she had not killed Sir Piers herself, she might have, at least, instigated the priest to do so, and thus in either case would be responsible for the tragedy. This was the view, perhaps an erroneous one, which Drage took of the matter; and after parting with Will in the smoking-room, he went off to seek a second interview with Mrs. Westcote.

The housekeeper was still in her room, and looked pinched and haggard. All her placid beauty had gone in that fearful moment when Drage lay bare the evil of

her past, and there was a hunted look in her eyes like that of a wild animal. With a shawl over her shoulders, she lay shivering on the sofa, and looked up fiercely as Drage unceremoniously entered the room.

"Do you wish to see me again?" she demanded, sitting up, and brushing the tangled hair out of her eyes.

"Yes, I do," replied Drage, leisurely taking a seat. "In fact, I had not concluded our last conversation when you fainted. Now I have come to renew it. I trust you are better?"

"Better," she echoed, bitterly. "How can I feel better when I know the wretch you are!"

"Come, come! Mrs. Westcote, you may as well be civil!"

The woman rose with a look of wrath on her face, and pointed one lean finger at the shabby little man who held her destiny in his hands.

"Civil to you!" she said, hoarsely. "It was an ill day for me, that I set eyes on you."

"That is a nice return to make to one who saved you from hanging," grumbled Drage.

"I had better have hanged, than have led the life of these past years. I have been wandering hither and thither like an unquiet spirit. Now I have found a quiet haven of rest, and you come to hunt me out of it. Cannot you leave me alone? What have I done that you should torture me like this?"

"If you tell the truth I shall leave you alone."

Mrs. Westcote's passion subsided, and sitting down she wrapped her shawl round her with a sullen air. If a glance could have slain Drage, he would have died at that moment.

"I have nothing to tell you," she declared, with an assumption of supreme indifference.

"Not about this dagger," replied Drage, drawing the stiletto from his pocket.

For a moment or so she was transfixed with astonishment. Drage was disappointed in the expression of her face. The unexpected production of the weapon was evidently a complete surprise to her.

"That dagger," she muttered, in a low tone. "That dagger, where did you find it?"

"In the same place as you concealed it."

"I did not conceal it. I did not know that dagger was in this house."

"You thought, perhaps, it was at Scotland Yard," sneered Drage, significantly.

"It might have been for all I know. I have not seen that dagger for years."

"Not since your trial for murder?"

"No! Not since then."

"Why do you take the trouble to tell these useless lies, Mrs. Westcote? You know perfectly well that after the trial, when you were acquitted, this stiletto came again into your possession!"

"Well, and supposing it did," she said, insolently.

"In that case, Mrs. Westcote, I am afraid you will be arrested."

"Arrested! I? And for what crime?"

"For the murder of Sir Piers Lametry."

"It's a lie," said the woman, hoarsely. "I never laid a finger on the man."

"Yet you were in the library after midnight on the 15th. Oh, you needn't deny it, Mrs. Westcote. You were seen entering the library."

"Who saw me?"

"Mr. Kynsam."

"He is making a mistake. I was not out of my room on that night."

Drage was beginning to weary of this farce. Her persistent denials made him lose his temper, and he sprang to his feet with an oath. Standing over Mrs. Westcote he spoke rapidly in a low voice.

"I am tired of these evasions, of these lies. Listen to me, Clara Vaux, Mrs. Westcote, Mrs. Geoffrey Roche, or whatever you like to call yourself. Sir Piers Lametry knew you twenty years back in London. He disappeared at the time of the trial, and you refused to betray him. When acquitted, you joined him abroad, and there for many years he squandered his property in gratifying your extravagances. When the money was done he came back to the Court. You insisted on coming also,

but because you could not show yourself in your true colours came as Mrs. Westcote, the housekeeper. All the time you stayed here, you insisted upon Sir Piers making you his wife. He refused because he loved his child too well to give her such a stepmother. Do you hear me? Is it not so?"

A faint moan was Mrs. Westcote's only response. Huddled up in a corner of the sofa, she covered her face with her hands, and refused to look at the stern face of her accuser. Paying no attention to her anguish, Drage continued his story, emphasising every point with his forefinger.

"Weary of these evasions, you determined to end the matter, in one way, or the other. On the night of the 15th you armed yourself with the stiletto, and stole downstairs to the library, where Sir Piers was waiting you by appointment. There you insisted upon his making you his wife. He refused, whereupon, mad with jealous rage, you killed him with this dagger. When the paroxysm of fury passed, you saw in what a dangerous position you had placed yourself. You looked about for a place to conceal the evidence of your crime. The casket of 'the Sacred Ring' was open on the table, and it was empty. You then saw a chance of passing off the murder as done by the robber who had stolen the Ring. You opened the middle window to favour the idea, and when outside, afraid of taking the dagger to

your room lest it should be discovered, and used in evidence against you, hid it in one of those flower-pots standing on the terrace. I have no doubt you intended to remove it, when you got the chance, but you delayed doing so until it was too late. Mr. Kynsam found it, and I am prepared to swear that it belongs to you. It was you who killed Sir Piers Lametry, *alias* Mr. Geoffrey Roche."

Mrs. Westcote still continued sobbing, whereupon Drage shook her by the shoulder.

"Answer! Confess your crime."

As though endowed with new energy—"You are wrong. I did not kill Sir Piers. I was at the library door on the night, but . . ."

"Why were you at the library door?"

"I refuse to tell you."

"There is no need for me to ask you," said Drage, triumphantly. "Oh, I know well who committed the murder, Mrs. Westcote."

"You say it was I?"

"I said so to hear what you would say. I guessed you would deny it. You are quite innocent of the crime."

"What do you mean, man?" she said, clutching at a chair for support.

"I mean that you were at the library door, to hear if Sir Piers would acknowledge his son and yours."

"My—my son!"

"Yes! He who calls himself Father Ching."

The housekeeper looked at the man who was dragging forth her secrets with menaces. She saw he knew all; but, determined to fight to the last, drew herself up with a scornful laugh, meant to discourage Drage. It did not have the least effect on him.

"You are talking nonsense. How can a man of Father Ching's age be my son?"

"Father Ching is twenty-nine years of age."

"He is more than that."

"He is not," insisted Drage. "No one knows his age better than you do. Have you forgotten that you had a son of which Sir Piers, then Geoffrey Roche, was the father? Rightly wishing to atone for your sins, you gave him to the Church, and sent him to a Jesuit college, to be trained as a priest. You never saw him again till you met him here, and he did not know you were his mother. Yet, lest he should forget that he had a mother, you sent him this dagger many years ago."

"It is a lie! I did not."

"You did. Father Ching admitted to Miss Lametry that his mother sent him this stiletto."

"He is lost," muttered Mrs. Westcote, growing pale.

"Yes, he is lost," triumphantly overhearing these words; "it was he who committed this crime at your instigation."

"No, no! Have pity. He is innocent."

"He is not innocent. He is guilty. You revealed to him that you were his mother, and told him how Sir Piers had wronged you. The confession made him a parricide."

"No, no!" she moaned. "No, no!"

"Yes! He went to the library to see his newly-discovered father. You followed, and watched the pair. You heard them quarrel! You saw the blow struck. You know that your son, Father Ching, is a murderer."

"He is not. He was not near the library on that night."

"Yes, he was! It was you who saved him. You hid the dagger, and acted as I have said, thinking the crime would be set down as the result of the robbery of 'the Sacred Ring.' You saw an innocent man accused of the crime, yet held your peace, so did he. But I have him now, and by his own confession."

"He has not confessed."

"He has admitted that the dagger is his. He who had that dagger killed Sir Piers."

"Have mercy."

Drage tore himself away as she clutched him by the arm, and addressed her sternly as he left the room.

"I am now going to arrest your son for the murder of his father."

CHAPTER XVII.

GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY.

AFTER that fatiguing day Drage would gladly have taken a rest. Unfortunately he was unable to do so, lest in the meantime Mrs. Westcote should see Father Ching, and put him on his guard. Drage therefore decided to speak to the priest that night, and afford him the opportunity of defending himself before telling the whole miserable story to Sir Lionel. The Baronet, quite unaware of the important events which were transpiring, was remarkably merry at dinner, and strove to cheer the young couple who were rather doleful over the position of affairs.

Durrant, after another interview with Sir Lionel, left for London by the afternoon train. What took place at that second meeting did not transpire till later; but when it *did* become public, created profound astonishment in the breasts of all connected with the household of Landy Court. Previously, Lionel had been irritable and uneasy, but after the departure of the money-lender,

he quite recovered his normal cheerfulness. Will, who knew something of his uncle's newly-assumed responsibilities as head of the family, ascribed this change to the concluding of a satisfactory arrangement with Durrant, whereby the sale of the Ring would realise sufficient money to discharge the mortgages. But this was pure conjecture on his part, as neither Durrant nor Lionel made any remark about their conversation, but both, in their several ways, appeared to be satisfied with the position of affairs. It was with the air of a man who has done well for himself, that the money-lender left the Court; presumably, as Will supposed, to see his American client regarding the sale of "the Sacred Ring."

The detective had his dinner with Michael, and occupied the moments when he was not eating, in making enquiries about Father Ching. The unsophisticated butler, seeing nothing in these questions but mere curiosity, had no hesitation in replying, therefore, Drage found himself well supplied with information, regarding the position and popularity of the priest at Landy Court. He intended to see Father Ching during the evening, and was, therefore, particularly careful to make himself acquainted with all matters likely to forward his interests during the anticipated interview.

"How long has Father Ching been here, Michael?" he asked, carelessly.

Michael reflected for a few moments, and carefully counted the fingers of one hand.

"Only three years, sir. He came the year before Mrs. Westcote."

"He is very much liked?"

"Yes. He is a favourite far and wide. Poor Sir Piers was very fond of him."

Drage thought this was very natural on the part of Sir Piers, but did not say so.

"I don't know what's come over him lately," answered Michael, half to himself, "he used to be so bright and merry, but now he is quite melancholy."

"Indeed. Since when?"

"Since the murder of Sir Piers. Ah, sir, Father Ching is full of sorrow for the death of our old master."

"That is very probable," replied Drage, drily; "by the way, is Mrs. Westcote a favourite with Father Ching?"

"Father Ching holds the same opinion of all the servants," said Michael, declining to answer this question directly; "and that reminds me, Mr. Drage, that Mrs. Westcote asked me to give you this note. I quite forgot about it."

The detective took the letter in some wonderment, as he could not conceive what Mrs. Westcote could find to say to him, after the interview of the afternoon. The note was undated and unsigned. The contents as follows:—

"Pause and consider before you do anything rash. Your suspicions are entirely wrong. I am not guilty, nor is Father Ching guilty. He knows nothing about me, nor that he is my son. So far as he is aware, we are complete strangers to one another. Should you persist in your determination, and arrest him for the murder, the whole affair will end in a terrible calamity. Be warned in time, and let sleeping dogs lie."

On reading this note, Drage whistled thoughtfully, and slipped it in his pocket. Then he took his leave of Michael, and strolled forth to smoke a pipe, and consider what course he should adopt in regard to Father Ching. If it were true that the priest was ignorant of his parentage, there would be no motive for his killing Sir Piers, or for his seeing him at midnight. But Drage did not believe this part of the letter. He simply deemed that Mrs. Westcote was lying as usual, in order to extricate her son from his perilous situation. All the same, Drage did not intend to tell Father Ching what he had discovered, but resolved to find out from the priest's speech and demeanour whether he was really ignorant of this relationship, or whether Mrs. Westcote had revealed her sad story to him within the last few weeks. At all events, whatever course he took, he was quite decided not to take the advice of the last portion of the letter.

"No, Mrs. Westcote," he murmured, as he walked on the terrace, "I shall not let sleeping dogs lie. As soon

as I finish this pipe, I'll see your son, and find out the truth. Not all your lies can save him if he is guilty."

While thus turning matters over in his own mind, Will Kynsam came out of the house and walked up to him. The young man looked pale and worried, for, owing to the strain of the last week or so, his nerves were scarcely under control.

"Have you seen Mrs. Westcote?" he anxiously asked.

"I have seen Mrs. Westcote," replied Drage, slowly.

"What did she say?"

"Told lies, till I forced the truth from her."

"Is Father Ching her son?"

Drage nodded.

"And the son of—— of—— Sir Piers?"

Drage nodded again.

"Great heavens! What a horrible thing," muttered Kynsam, under his breath, "the priest is Eleanor's half-brother."

Then struck with a sudden thought, he turned round sharply to the detective.

"Are you sure that my uncle was Geoffrey Roche?"

"Perfectly sure. I taxed Mrs. Westcote with it, and she did not deny it."

"But did she admit it?"

"Well, no," replied Drage, with some hesitation, "I can't say she admitted it in any direct fashion."

"In that case you may be wrong."

Drage smiled contemptuously, and shrugged his shoulders. The point was not worth discussing in his opinion.

"No! I am not wrong. It is impossible that I can be mistaken. If it were not so, Mrs. Westcote would have denied it."

"She might and she might not," answered Will, dubiously. "What is your next move?"

"I am going to see Father Ching."

"He is in the chapel at the organ, as usual. Do you want me to come with you?"

"No. It is better for me to see him alone. Mrs. Westcote says that he is ignorant that she is his mother."

"Do you think that is true?"

"I'll tell you that after my conversation with Father Ching," replied Drage, moving away.

Will looked after him in silence, and when he was out of sight, turned away with a sigh.

"After all he may be mistaken," said Will, hopefully. "If I know anything of my poor uncle's nature, he was not the man to act in so infamous a fashion."

As usual, Father Ching was at the organ. His passionate love of music stood him in good stead when worried or perplexed. It was the panacea for all his troubles, and never had he needed its solace more than

at the present time. The melancholy which pervaded the house, since the death of Sir Piers, weighed on his spirits, and he strove by means of harmony to lighten the mental burden. When Drage entered the chapel, the lordly music of a "Magnificat" rolled melodiously from the golden pipes, and vibrated in waves of sound under the arched roof. In the dim light of the summer evening the vessels on the altar glittered faintly, and the red light of the lamp before the shrine shone like a star. The painted figures on the windows were blended of light and shadow, and a faint odour of incense permeated the sacred building. The severe majesty of the music fitted the character of the place.

When Drage appeared by his side, Father Ching stopped playing, and turned with some surprise towards the detective. He did not like the man, and could not conceive why he should thus intrude himself. At the same time he received him courteously, and waited to hear his explanation for the intrusion.

"I must apologize for disturbing you, sir," said Drage, in his smoothest voice, "but I have come to ask you a few questions about this unhappy affair on which I am employed."

Father Ching's pale face flushed crimson, and he looked confused. Interpreting this as a sign of guilt, Drage pursued his advantage.

"You will not object to answer my questions, I hope?"

"Certainly not; why should I object?" replied the priest, quietly. "Anything I can do to aid you, will be done by me. It is my duty to assist you in every way."

"Thank you. Did you notice the character of the wound in Sir Piers' breast?"

"No! I did not."

"It was inflicted by a triangular bladed dagger," continued Drage, watching the priest's face. "Dr. Sinclair gave evidence to that effect."

"I did not know that, Mr. Drage. Have you any idea of the nature of the dagger?"

"Of the Italian stiletto kind. With a triangular blade, and, I should think, a handle of Renaissance workmanship."

"Why should you think so?" asked Ching, unable to repress a start.

"Because I am a bit of an antiquarian, sir. I know that Renaissance daggers were usually triangular in shape as to the blade, and inflicted such wounds as Sir Piers died of."

"Then you think he was stabbed by such a weapon?"

"I do. Did you ever see one of that kind in Landy Court?"

"I have seen several," said Father Ching, coolly; "one of the Lametrys went to Italy at the time of Elizabeth, and brought back Italian daggers. There are a few still in the house."

"I have examined those," said Drage, meaningly; "but in no case is the blade triangular in shape."

Father Ching made no reply, but even through the gathering darkness Drage noted how stern, and set, was the expression on his countenance. Evidently he declined to commit himself, so the detective made up his mind to force his hand.

"Curiously enough, Miss Lametry saw a dagger of the kind I mention."

"Indeed, Mr. Drage, and where did she see it?"

"In your possession."

Steeled as he was by training, Father Ching betrayed the effect this answer had on him. He put his hand up to his throat, as though to aid speech. His voice was hoarse and low as he spoke.

"It is true. I had a dagger of the kind you mention. It was given to me many years ago, by one I loved."

"So you told Miss Lametry. It was given to you by your mother."

"Yes. I was at a Jesuit college in France, and it was sent to me twenty years ago, on my ninth birthday."

"You are now twenty-nine years of age?"

"I am."

"Did you ever see your mother?"

"I do not know by what right you ask that question," said Father Ching in a low voice, "still I will answer it. I have not seen my mother since I was three years of

age. I do not recollect her at all. All my life has been passed in the service of the Church."

"And your father?"

"I never knew my father. I am what you would call a waif and a stray. My parent has been our Holy Church. In her bosom have I been nurtured. All I received from my unknown mother, was the present of that dagger."

"Where is it now?"

"I don't know. I was showing it to Miss Lametry in the library, and inadvertently left it there. Next day I searched, but could not find it. No one knew what had become of it, and I have not seen it since. That was over a month ago."

"Is this the dagger?" asked Drage, producing it from his pocket.

Father Ching looked at the rusty blade, at the jewelled handle, then turned his eyes on Drage.

"Yes, that is my dagger. Where did you find it?"

"Concealed in one of the flower-pots on the terrace."

"Who can have hidden it there?" asked Ching, with some difficulty.

"The man who killed Sir Piers."

"What do you mean?"

"It is the weapon with which Sir Piers Lametry was murdered."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE LAW OF ROME.

THE circumstantial evidence implicating Father Ching was sufficiently strong to justify Drage's belief, that he had at last secured the true criminal; but, notwithstanding the most cunning questions, he found it impossible to extort a confession from the priest. Ching not only disclaimed all connection with the crime, but, alleging that the accusation was too monstrous for serious consideration, treated it with absolute disdain. He adhered to his statement that the lost dagger, had not been seen by him until it was so unexpectedly produced by Drage: he declared that he had immediately retired to rest, after leaving the bedside of Caffin, and consequently could not have been near the library; and finally asserted that no one was more astonished than he at the matutinal news of the tragedy.

Baffled by these persistent denials, Drage was, for the moment, at a loss how to proceed. In trying to trick Father Ching into confesssion, he had overstepped his

prerogative; for no detective is justified in trapping a suspect, into making admissions prejudicial to his safety. However, his illegal acts, resulted in his own discomfiture, for Ching met threat, and question, alike with contempt and denial. Years of training had armed the Jesuit against such an adversary; and, confronted by an intelligence more subtle than his own, Drage was obliged to acknowledge defeat, and forthwith retired to rally his courage, and consider his plans.

The result of his meditation was a decisive move on his part the next morning; as he determined to confront Father Ching with Sir Lionel Lametry, and accuse him of the crime. Driven to bay, the priest might be induced to confess; but even if he still denied his guilt, Drage made up his mind to insist upon Sir Lionel signing a warrant for his arrest on suspicion of having murdered Sir Piers. The present Baronet was a magistrate, and could easily grant the necessary warrant. When Father Ching was lodged in gaol, Drage had no doubt that he would be amenable to reason, and confess his complicity in the crime.

After receiving that note from Mrs. Westcote, the detective did not see her again. She shut herself up in her room, delegated her duties to Michael, and refused to see anyone. Wisely taking the advice of the letter, Drage did not tell the priest about his parentage, but reserved that piece of evidence for the trial. Perhaps

Mrs. Westcote guessed he would keep silent, for she wrote no more on the subject. Yet Drage was astonished at her apathy, and wondered that she did not attempt to prove her son guiltless. It might be that Drage was right after all; that Father Ching had been told that Sir Piers was his father, and had killed him at the instigation of the housekeeper. But on this point he was unable to make up his mind.

Next morning, after breakfast, he went to the library in search of the Baronet, but only found Will Kynsam. The young man looked anxiously at Drage as he entered the room. He had not seen him since his interview with Father Ching, and was curious to know the details of the interview.

"Did you see Father Ching last night, Drage?"

"Yes. I saw him in the chapel."

"What did he say?"

"He admitted that the dagger was his property, but persisted in saying he lost it on the day he showed it to Miss Lametry."

"Where did he lose it?"

"According to his own account, in this very room. He left it on yonder table, and when he looked for it next day it was gone."

"Does he suspect anyone of having taken it?"

"No," replied Drage, shrugging his shoulders, "he does not, and in my opinion for the very reason that he did not lose it at all."

"Do you think he killed Sir Piers?"

"I am so certain of it that it is my intention to ask Sir Lionel to grant a warrant for his arrest this morning."

"Oh no, don't do that," cried Will, involuntarily, "it would be too cruel. Remember, if he is the son of my dead uncle, Sir Lionel is his uncle. It would be horrible in the face of such relationship to commit him to gaol."

"I will give Father Ching every opportunity of defending himself," said Drage, calmly; "he will be confronted with Sir Lionel, and I will tell my story, then he can tell his. We will see which of us Sir Lionel believes."

"He may believe Father Ching."

"In that case I'll apply to another magistrate for a warrant. After all my mistakes in this case I am not going to let the man whom I believe to be the true murderer slip through my fingers."

"I hope he will escape for all that," muttered Will, as the door opened, and his uncle entered the library. "Here is Sir Lionel, Mr. Drage," he added, aloud; "now you can speak to him yourself."

"What is the matter, Drage?" asked the Baronet, sitting at his table, and leaning his head wearily on his hand.

"It's about this case of the death——"

"Oh, that case—the case," said Sir Lionel, fretfully, "I am weary of it. The incessant suspicions and

repetition of evidence, are making me quite ill. The sooner you end it the better I shall be pleased."

Indeed Sir Lionel looked sadly in need of rest. His face was pale, there were dark circles under his eyes, and his shoulders were much bent. Formerly a hale hearty man, he now looked more than his age, and quite broken down. Drage rather pitied his bad health, and spoke as delicately as he could on the subject.

"Will you kindly ask Father Ching to come here, Sir Lionel?"

The Baronet started, and looked suspiciously at the detective. He was about to make a remark, but restrained himself by a violent effort, and touched the bell. When Michael appeared,

"Ask Father Ching to oblige me by coming here," he said, sharply. Then when the man withdrew, he turned again towards Drage, and again eyed him keenly. Will, taking no part in the discussion, withdrew to the window, and sat down in a chair. After a time Sir Lionel, seeing that Drage kept silent, spoke sharply.

"You surely don't suspect Father Ching?"

"I decline to commit myself to an opinion—as yet," replied Drage, emphasising the last words.

Sir Lionel, much agitated, left his chair, and began to walk to and fro. He could not mistake the significance of the remark.

"It is absurd—preposterous," he declared, emphati-

cally; "a man holding the position Father Ching does, is above suspicion. Besides, what possible motive could he have for killing my poor brother?"

"Wait till you hear my story."

"What is your story?"

"I decline to tell it unless in the presence of Father Ching."

"Here is Father Ching," cried Will, at this moment, "and I'm hanged if he looks like a murderer," he added, *sotto voce*.

The priest entered the library in a slow and dignified manner. Judging from the worn expression of his countenance he had suffered greatly during the last four-and-twenty hours. Yet he faced his accuser calmly, and took his seat near Sir Lionel, without uttering a word. Instinctively he guessed why he was summoned to the library.

"Father Ching," said the Baronet, hurriedly, "you must forgive me for what I am about to say, but this man makes an accusation against you."

"I know that, Sir Lionel. He accuses me of murdering Sir Piers."

"And what do you say?"

"I deny it," replied Father Ching, with great dignity, "I denied the accusation last night. I do so now."

"How do you account for your possession of the dagger?" asked Drage, irritated by this obstinacy.

"I have already told you. It was left on this table when I showed it to Miss Lametry, and I did not see it again, till last night, when you showed it to me."

"You see, Mr. Drage," interposed Sir Lionel, anxious to shield the priest, "Father Ching can prove his innocence."

"Can he prove where he was on the night of the fifteenth?"

"I was with Cuthbert Caffin up till midnight. The man can say at what hour I left him. From his room I went directly to my own room, and retired to bed."

"Did you not come down to the library?"

"No! I did not even come downstairs. I have certainly no witness to prove that I was in bed after midnight, nevertheless I speak the truth."

"Of course you speak the truth, Father," said Sir Lionel, rapidly, "I never doubted that for a moment. Mr. Drage," he added, turning to the detective, "you must be satisfied with this explanation."

"I am not," replied Drage, doggedly.

"There is no necessity for this obstinacy," returned the Baronet, angrily; "if a crime is committed, the criminal is generally credited with a motive. What motive could Father Ching possibly have to murder Sir Piers?"

"Ah! there is a tale attached to that," said Drage, significantly; "Father Ching says he never knew his parents. I am wiser than he, and know them."

"You know who are my parents?" said the priest, in an agitated voice.

"Yes. And notwithstanding your denial you also know them."

Father Ching made no answer, but covered his face with his hand. Will Kynsam arose to his feet, and came hastily forward.

"Drage! Drage! This is cruel."

"I don't wish to be cruel," said Drage, sullenly; "let him confess, and I hold my tongue. I wish to know the truth."

"I have told you the truth," muttered Father Ching his face still hidden.

"In heaven's name what does this mean?" asked Sir Lionel, much bewildered by this conversation.

"It means that this man is the natural son of Sir Piers Lametry, and killed his father at the instigation of his mother."

"You are raving," cried the Baronet.

"I speak the truth."

"It is not the truth," said Father Ching, rising to his feet, "I did not see Sir Piers on that night. I did not kill him. Did I know he was my father, as you say, would I have become a parricide? Rather I would have forgiven him. I swear that I am innocent."

He crossed himself with fervour, and looked defiantly at Drage. His earnestness was not without an effect on

the detective, who, disconcerted by this direct reply, changed his tactics.

"Father Ching, you hear the confessions of all who are in this house."

"What is that to you? Leave my sacred office out of the question."

"You deny that you are guilty," pursued Drage, taking no notice of this remark, "and for the sake of argument I grant your innocence. Yet, as the crime was committed by some one in this house, you know who did it."

"If I know," said Father Ching, in a firm tone, "it is under the seal of the confessional. Let that be your answer, sir. What is told to the priest, is not told to the world."

"I know that well, but in this instance, for your own sake, it will be as well to reveal what you know."

"Not to save my life would I divulge the secrets of the confessional," said the priest, vehemently.

"It may come to a question of your neck, or the confession, yet."

"Let it come. I tell you, sir, that my office as a priest is above all human law. Whatever has been told to me at the confessional remains locked up in my own breast. Arrest me for this crime, if you so choose, but dare not to ask me to betray my trust as a priest."

And with that he left the room, while Drage looked

after him with some admiration. Sir Lionel had sunk back in his chair with a look of horror in his eyes, and Will Kynsam was standing by the table, eyeing Drage in a wrathful manner.

"You are acting infamously," he said, with a gesture of repugnance.

"I am acting according to my profession," replied Drage, coolly, "the priest can say what he pleases. I believe him to be guilty, and I ask you, Sir Lionel, to grant a warrant for his arrest."

"You ask that of me," cried the Baronet, starting up furiously. "Do you think I should do such a thing? Arrest a priest of our Holy Faith on a trumped-up charge. Go! leave the room, sir, and never let me set eyes on you again. Father Ching is innocent, and you are a scoundrel; go, sir."

"I go," answered Drage, walking to the door, "I go to the nearest magistrate, and before nightfall Father Ching will be in prison."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TRUTH.

IT was late at night when Drage got back to Landy Court. In pursuance of his resolve, he had gone in search of the nearest magistrate, to procure a warrant for the arrest of Father Ching on a charge of murder, but had some difficulty in obtaining one. All those magistrates of the county who could have given him the authorisation were away, and finally, he had to repair to Barnstaple for the warrant. When thus successful, he returned to the Court with the intention of arresting Father Ching either on that night or next morning.

When he arrived there was no one visible. He asked Michael what had become of the inmates, and was informed that Sir Lionel was in the library, Mr. Kynsam and Miss Lametry in the drawing-room, while Father Ching was shut up in his own apartment. Not wishing to disturb any one of them for the present, and deciding to put off the arrest till next morning, Drage went to his own room to change his clothes. Here he made a discovery. The famous dagger was gone.

On leaving the Court to obtain the warrant, he had not thought it necessary to take the dagger with him, and left it in his room. For safety he placed it in the inner pocket of the coat he usually wore, and the coat he placed in the wardrobe. Never, for a moment, did he think it would be discovered or taken away. Yet he saw plainly that during his absence, some one had been in his room and stolen the dagger. His first idea was to seek Father Ching, and tax him with the theft; but on consideration, he decided not to do so. He had the warrant, and instead of postponing the arrest till the next morning, decided to execute the warrant without unnecessary delay. When the priest was arrested, he could be searched, and on him the dagger would doubtless be found; whereas, if the loss were known before Ching was in custody, he might get rid of the weapon which was such strong evidence against him. With this idea Drage left his room to see Sir Lionel in the library, and tell him of his intentions. Afterwards, he would carry out his plans. As he reached the top of the stairs leading down to the entrance hall, the clock below struck ten.

At the corner of the corridor, his keen ears caught the sound of footfalls, and with the instinctive caution of a detective, he drew back into the shadow. To his surprise, Mrs. Westcote, looking neither to right or left, glided rapidly past him, and descended the stairs.

Wondering what she could be doing at such an hour, Drage hastily removed his shoes and followed her, carrying them in his hand. She turned to the right, and disappeared in the direction of the library. The detective followed in a stealthy manner, and found the library door half open. There was a sound of voices within. They were those of Sir Lionel and Mrs. Westcote.

"What do you want?" he heard the Baronet inquire.

"I wish to see you, Sir Lionel," replied Mrs. Westcote, in a mocking tone.

"It is most imprudent of you to come here. However, shut the door, and say what you wish."

On hearing this, Drage looked for some means of concealment. He was outside the library, but desired to get inside in order to overhear the conversation. There was a dim suspicion in his mind that he was wrong in his surmise of Father Ching's guilt, and that the mystery would be solved by this very interview, at which he was so desirous of being present. There was not a moment to be lost, and spying a screen inside which masked the door, he slipped quickly in, and hid himself in a fold of the same. The next moment, Mrs. Westcote had closed the door, and ignorant that she had a witness in the room, returned to the table at which the Baronet was seated.

Drage, concealed in the fold of the screen, could hear

but could not see; therefore, anxious to be spectator, as well as auditor, took measures accordingly. The screen was made of richly embroidered Indian silk, and with his pen-knife he slit a hole therein. The sound of the rip was unheeded by the two at the table, and by applying his eye to the aperture thus made, Drage saw plainly all their actions. Sir Lionel, seated at the table, looked white with fury; but Mrs. Westcote, standing before him, had a scornful expression on her face, which showed that she considered herself the stronger of the two. There was an insane glitter in her eyes, which Drage thought dangerous. Already he half guessed what the conversation would be about, but listened to make certain.

"You are imprudent to come here," repeated the Baronet, angrily. "With things as they are, it is madness to run such a risk. How do I know but what that infernal detective may not be about?"

"You are afraid of getting into trouble," sneered the woman.

"I have been afraid of getting into trouble ever since you came here. It would have been much better had you stayed abroad."

"Very likely. For your comfort! But I wished to come here so as to be near our child."

"Ah! that reminds me," said Sir Lionel, sharply. "I wish to speak to you about him. This infernal Drage knows that Ching is your son."

"He did not learn it from me."

"Then how did he find out?"

"Through that dagger. Father Ching—I can't bring myself to speak of him as our son—acknowledged that it was his, and that he had received it from his mother."

"From you?"

"From his mother," repeated Mrs. Westcote, calmly. "He did not then know I was his mother, or that you were his father."

"You should not have told him. Now he is in a nice fix. Drage thinks he is the son of Piers, and killed his supposed father at your request."

"I swear that is not true."

"It may be for all I know."

"You liar," said Mrs. Westcote, bending forward. "I have kept silent long enough, but I shall do so no longer."

"What do you mean?" asked Sir Lionel, turning pale, and looking at her with a terrified expression on his face.

"I mean that I was in the library on the night of the fifteenth. I saw you leave your room—I followed you—I heard you quarrel with Piers, and I saw you kill him."

"Hush! for God's sake! If this were known I should be hanged."

"It must be known. I do not intend that my son should suffer for your crime."

"Clara! What do you mean to do? Would you denounce me?"

Mrs. Westcote flung herself into a chair with a weary gesture.

"I don't want to harm you, Lionel. For thirty years we have been all in all to one another. But I can't stand quietly by and see your son and mine go to the gallows."

"Perhaps you would rather I went there?" sneered Lionel, with white lips.

"Yes," she replied, indifferently. "I would much rather you suffered than he did. He at least is free from sin."

"All the more reason he should take the place of a sinner like his father." As he said this with a sneer, the woman's hand went to her bosom, and her eyes flashed with an ominous light.

"Do you dare to talk like that of your son?" she said, hoarsely. "Me you can revile till your last breath, but say not a word against my saint."

"Your saint!"

"My saint, you murderer," said Mrs. Westcote, fiercely. "Have I not need of his intercession—have you not need of his pleading? I was a good woman, Lionel, till you took me from my husband. He was not a good man, but he was better than you."

"Yet you loved me best?"

"I loved you to my perdition. But when our son was born, I hoped to expiate my life of sin by dedicating the boy to the service of the Church. I sacrificed myself for that reason. I sent him to the Jesuit college, and never saw him again till I found him under this roof. Why did you bring him here?"

"Because I choose to do so," retorted Lionel, with an ugly look. "I love my son also!"

"If you do, save him from the peril in which he is now placed."

"At the cost of my own neck. I am not such a fool!"

"Why did you let your temper get the better of you, and kill your brother?"

"Because he exasperated me, as you are now doing, so take a lesson."

"I'm not afraid of you," said Mrs. Westcote, with a sneer. "Lay one finger on me, and you shall repent it."

"You always were a tiger cat."

"At least I loved you."

"Loved me! loved me! That is always your cry. You loved my money."

"Say rather the money of Piers," she answered, tauntingly. "All the money came from him."

"It is true! He fought with me over it on that fatal night. If it had not been for the question of money, I should not have killed him. If it had not been for your

extravagance on the Continent, we would never have drained the estates as we have done. Piers was a good brother to me, and fearing lest our name should be disgraced, gave me large sums—which you squandered."

"He never knew that."

"He never knew anything. He did not know Mrs. Westcote was Clara Vaux, else you would not have remained a moment under this roof!"

"Would I not," jeered Mrs. Westcote. "Think again, Lionel. If Piers paid you large sums to keep his name clear, he would have let me stay had I so chosen. I could have denounced you as Geoffrey Roche to all the world."

"Leave that name out of the question."

"I shall do nothing of the sort," she replied, becoming violent. "I shall talk as I choose—You are Geoffrey Roche, the creature who deserted a woman in her hour of need. I could have betrayed you then, but kept silent; I could betray you now to Drage, who thinks Piers is Geoffrey Roche, but I keep silent. You are a liar and a scoundrel, Lionel Lametry, but you shall save our son."

"You had better be quiet, Clara," said Lionel, in a dangerously quiet voice, "or I shall do you an injury."

"Will you confess, and save our son?"

"No!"

"Then I shall denounce you."

As she spoke, Mrs. Westcote ran across the room. The next moment, Lionel was after her, and seized her by the arm, as she opened the door.

"Keep quiet, or I'll break your neck."

"Let me go! let me go!" she cried, striking him. "I shall denounce you as the murderer of your brother."

"I'll kill you first."

He seized her by her arms, and carried her back to the centre of the room. Mrs. Westcote shrieked aloud and struggled violently. Drage rushed from his hiding place to save her, for Lionel already had his hands on her throat. But, as he bounded forward, he saw the gleam of steel, and the next moment Lionel was lying on the ground, while over him stood Mrs. Westcote brandishing the dagger. That same dagger which had already killed two men.

"You've killed me," gasped Lionel, putting his hand to his breast, from whence the blood was streaming.

"I have saved my son," she said; then turning to Drage, added, "he killed Piers, my son is innocent."

"And you are a murderess."

She laughed scornfully, tossed the dagger at his feet; and, shaking her fist at the unconscious man, ran to the window. Before Drage could guess her intention, she opened it, and disappeared into the darkness.

CHAPTER XX.

A LAST CONFESSION.

BY this time the household, startled by the wild shrieks of Mrs. Westcote, plainly heard through the open door, crowded into the room. The first to appear were Will Kynsam and Eleanor. Behind them came the frightened servants.

"What is the matter?" asked Will, hurrying forward.

For answer, Drage pointed to the figure lying on the ground. So great was his excitement that he could not speak, but waved his hand towards the window. In a curious way it was a repetition of the scene when Sir Piers' murder was discovered—the body by the table, and the window open.

"Uncle Lionel!" cried Eleanor, in horror. "The window open, the . . . . . ."

"Mrs. Westcote—Mrs. Westcote," stammered Drage, violently. "Follow her some of you—she ran out of the window, look for her in the grounds."

Several of the men servants ran out on to the terrace,

and down the steps in pursuit. Kneeling beside the Baronet, Will raised his head on his knee, and issued directions that Dr. Sinclair should be sent for. In vain they tried to staunch the wound, from which the life blood slowly ebbed. Nothing could be done till the doctor arrived. Lionel's face was of that greyish tint, which is the sure forerunner of death.

"How did it happen?" asked Eleanor, in an awe-struck whisper.

"Mrs. Westcote stabbed him with this dagger," said Drage, picking it off the floor.

"Father Ching's dagger!" said Miss Lametry, in amazement.

Will raised his head and looked warningly at her. The servants were in the room, and it was wrong that they should know too much. At this moment Father Ching arrived, and took in the situation at a glance. He did not lose his head, but in a calm even voice, induced the excited crowd of on-lookers to leave the room. Drage went to the window.

"I must see if they have caught Mrs. Westcote," he said, rapidly. "Do all you can to revive him. I'll bring her back." Then he also vanished into the darkness.

Everything possible was done to revive Lionel, but for a time it seemed to be all in vain. They forced brandy down his throat, and at length he came to

himself with a faint sigh. Will, taking him in his arms, lifted him on to the sofa. When his eyes opened he looked round wildly, and his glance fell on Eleanor.

"You here," he said, faintly.

"Yes, dear uncle; do you feel better?"

"I feel that I am dying. There is not a moment to be lost. Have you sent for a doctor?"

"Yes, uncle," said Will, in a low voice.

"He will arrive to find me dead. I have much to do Eleanor, my dear, leave me alone with Will."

"And with Father Ching?"

"Ignatius," murmured Lionel, with a look of dread.

The priest knelt beside him and held the crucifix before his eyes. There was infinite pity on his countenance. He knew that this man was his father, and so forgave him all. At that moment the son was lost in the priest.

"You must make your peace with heaven."

"Time enough for that," said Lionel, with a bitter smile. "I must first clear my soul from guilt. Is Eleanor there?"

"Yes, uncle."

She was standing a little to one side, with a strange look on her face. The last words of the dying man had set her thinking, and it was with visible repugnance that she approached him again. In some instinctive way she guessed, that this man had slain her father. Lionel noted the look, and waved her away.

"Go, go, my dear! I wish to be alone with Will and Father Ching."

With a sudden impulse she placed her hand on his forehead.

"I go, and I forgive you," she said, in a low voice, and glided out of the room.

When she was gone, Lionel asked for some more brandy. The ardent spirit put new life into him, and he spoke in a stronger voice.

"Get pen, ink, and paper, Will. Write down what I say. I have much to confess."

"The rites of the Church," began Father Ching, but Lionel cut him short.

"Never mind the Church now, Ignatius. I have to make a written confession, witnessed by you both so as to exonerate all others from accusation of murder."

"You killed Sir Piers?" said Will, in a tone of horror.

"Yes, I killed him, but not intentionally. I was mad with rage. Write! Write! I feel my strength failing, and soon it may be too late."

The priest knelt beside his dying father, and Will established himself at the near table to write the confession. Without further explanation Lionel began. He felt himself dying, and wished to sign the confession before doing so.

"I need not tell you all of my life," he said, speaking

with some difficulty. "Thirty years ago I knew Clara Vaux. We had one son who . . . . ."

"I know all that. I need not put it down," said Will, glancing at Father Ching, for whom he felt sorry.

"Who told you about it?" asked Lionel, with faint surprise.

"Drage!"

"Ah, he was a witness at the time. Did he tell you about that?"

"Yes! All that is necessary to put down is an account of the murder."

Father Ching gave Will a glance of reproach, but for the life of him, Kynsam could not speak in a kinder tone. Lionel took no notice, but went on speaking.

"Piers had given me money for many years. It was his generosity which impoverished the estates. I spent the money abroad in gambling and in supplying the extravagance of Clara Vaux."

"Your son is present," hinted Will. The priest's head was bowed on his breast.

"Well! Well! I shall not speak ill of his mother, though I have met with my death blow at her hands. When Piers refused to give me more money I came down here. Clara insisted upon coming also, so I persuaded my brother to engage her as housekeeper. He did not know the relations which existed between us. Here I lived for some time, but every now and then

I went up to London to indulge in my passion for gambling. I lost large sums of money, which I could not pay, and afterwards borrowed off Durrant, under the name of Geoffrey Roche. That was why I was so afraid of being recognised when he unexpectedly appeared at the Court, and why I kept out of his way."

"Yet he must have recognised you in the end," interpolated Will, recollecting the interview.

"He did, and blackmailed me," replied Lionel, bitterly. "Had the Ring been sold, he would have got the greater part of the purchase-money. But he did not think I was guilty of the murder, else his terms would have been higher. But to go back to the time of his visit. Piers refused to supply me with more money; and then Durrant came with his offer to buy 'the Sacred Ring.' I saw a chance of getting money if I could sell it to Durrant. When my brother refused to part with it, I was glad. After a time, thinking he had retired to bed, I stole down to the library with the intention of taking 'the Sacred Ring' out of its casket and selling it to Durrant."

"Why did you take the dagger?"

"I wanted to open the casket with it. You know it was locked, and Piers kept the key on his watch chain. The dagger I knew well. It was a gift from me to Clara many years ago, and she wore it on the stage—a genuine Florentine fourteenth-century weapon, brought

by an ancestor from Italy. Clara sent it to her son, and you, Ignatius, when showing it to Eleanor, left it on the table. I took it to my room."

"Go on," said Will, who was busily writing.

"On arriving in the library, I found Piers was still up. He had just parted with Will, to whom he had given the Ring. I was furious at thus losing a chance of paying my gambling debts. He said he had to sell it to settle the mortgages on the estates, which were caused by my extravagances. He reproached me with them. I have a violent temper, as you know, and throwing all prudence to the wind, I boasted of my follies and told him who Mrs. Westcote was. When he heard that she was the woman who had ruined me, he raved like a mad man, and finally struck me. Infuriated at the blow, and forgetting that I had the dagger in my hand, I struck back and killed him."

"Great God!" groaned Will. The priest crossed himself and muttered a prayer.

"Then when my fit of passion was over, I saw in what danger I had placed myself, and looked round for some place wherein to hide the weapon. Afraid to hide it in the house, lest it should be discovered, I concealed it in one of the flower-pots on the terrace."

"I found it there," said Kynsam, looking up.

"At the instigation of Drage, I suppose?" replied Lionel. "That man has been my evil genius. I was a

fool to ask him down to investigate the case, but I never dreamt he would find out anything, and thought if he got dangerous I could keep his mouth shut by my knowledge of his past. Well, to continue: I left the window open, so as to favour the idea of burglary, and then stole back to my room. Although I did not know it, Clara had watched me the whole time. But she said nothing to me, and I thought my secret was safe. Only one man knew I was guilty."

"That man was Father Ching," said Will, breathlessly.

"Yes! I told him under the seal of confession. How did you guess?"

"From the way he talked this morning. But I did not think that you were the murderer."

"Spare him," said Father Ching, rising slowly. "Do you not see he is dying?"

In truth Lionel looked as though he would die then, but revived sufficiently to sign the confession, which was witnessed by Will and the priest. Hardly was this executed when the doctor entered. He had been fetched from Botsleigh by a groom, but his first glance told him that Sir Lionel was past all earthly aid. He did what he could for him, but his task was over, and the priest's began. Will left the library, and Father Ching hurried to the chapel to assume his sacred vestments, and administer absolution to his dying father.

In the hall Will met Drage, who appeared at the front door, with a face full of horror.

"Is he dead?"

"No, but dying. Father Ching is with him."

"Then he won't confess?"

"The confession is here," said Will, showing the sheets of paper. "He signed it, and I witnessed it with Father Ching. But what about Mrs. Westcote?"

"She is dead."

"Dead!" exclaimed Will, scarcely able to believe his ears.

"Yes! She jumped over the cliffs. When we picked her up she was quite dead. She was insane at the time, I believe, and stole that dagger from my coat-pocket to kill Sir Lionel. Had she lived she would have been a maniac."

Will sat down on a chair and rested his head on his hands. The horrors of the last few days culminated in this double tragedy. Drage stood beside him in silence. Then Michael entered the hall from the library. His face was wet with tears.

"Father Ching wants you, Sir William."

Sir William! The young man looked up in amazement, and saw the truth on the old servant's face. His uncle was dead, and he was now Sir William Lametry.

* * * * * *

Needless to say, Drage was considerably crestfallen when the guilty person proved to be Sir Lionel Lametry, the more so, as the discovery was due rather to accident, than to his acumen. Indeed, the conduct of the whole case, reflected but little credit on the so-called Vidocq of London; and he acknowledged that he had much to learn in the matters of induction, and observation, before he could hope to approach, even within a measureable distance of his French prototype. He had suspected Kynsam, Durrant, Mrs. Westcote, and Father Ching, each in turn, of being the guilty person, and the only good which had resulted from this series of blunders, was, that they had indirectly led to the discovery of the truth. Drage admitted his mistakes, and was unwilling to take his fee from Will, but ultimately did so with many apologies, and returned to London with a considerably lower opinion of himself, than when he left it.

The true facts of the case were never known, as Will, jealous of the family name, managed to hush up the matter. Everyone scouted the idea that Lionel had killed his brother; and the attack on him by Mrs. Westcote, which resulted in death, was ascribed to a homicidal mania on the part of the housekeeper, who was declared to have been insane. The underlying tragedy of Clara Vaux and Geoffrey Roche never came to light, which was all the better for Father Ching's peace of mind.

According to arrangement, Kynsam took the arms and name of the Lametry family, and continued the direct line, by marrying his cousin Eleanor. But neither of them cared to live at Landy Court, as, apart from the terrible associations of the triple tragedy, the estate was so heavily mortgaged, that it was necessary to retrench. The Court was, therefore, let to a rich Australian merchant, and the rent used to discharge the debts, while Will and his wife went abroad for a few years.

There was some difficulty in dealing with Durrant, who, presuming on his recognition of Lionel as Geoffrey Roche, insisted upon buying the Ring at his own price. Will refused to be intimidated, and pointed out to Durrant that as Lionel was dead, the knowledge of his evil deeds as Geoffrey Roche was worthless; and, moreover, threatened to prosecute the money-lender for blackmailing, should he create a scandal. As Durrant's character was too shady to admit of his throwing stones at other people; and he had no desire to come into contact with the law, he judged it wisest to hold his tongue, and was content to receive the amount of Saxon's bill. By that payment Will finally released himself from the entanglements of his early life.

Father Ching performed the marriage ceremony between Eleanor and Will; it was his last act in connection with the Lametry family, as he shortly afterwards retired to France, and later on went out to

South America as a missionary. Eleanor never learned that he was the son of her dead uncle, as Will thought it best to relegate the whole terrible story to oblivion.

In a few years Sir William and Lady Lametry hope to return to Landy Court, when the mortgages will be paid off, and they will once more be able to take up their rightful position in the county. "The Sacred Ring," more jealously guarded than ever, is still in the chapel of Landy Court, much to the regret of Durrant. He has not yet given up all hope of securing it for the pious millionaire, but hitherto has been unsuccessful, and is likely to remain so.

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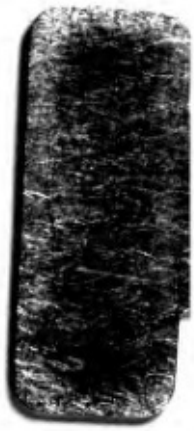

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