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H. A. Stone

THE SILENT HOUSE IN PIMLICO

A LIST OF FERGUS HUME'S NOVELS.

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|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| THE MYSTERY OF A HANSON CAB. | THE DWARF'S CHAMBER. |
| MADAME MIDAS. | THE CRIME OF THE 'LIZA JANE. |
| THE GIRL FROM MALTA. | A MARRIAGE MYSTERY. |
| THE PICCADILLY PUZZLE. | THE RAINBOW FEATHER. |
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| THE MASQUERADE MYSTERY. | WHEN I LIVED IN BOHEMIA. |
| CLAUDE DUVAL OF 'NINETY-FIVE. | THE SILENT HOUSE IN PIMLICO. |

The Silent House in Pimlico

A Detective Story

By

Fergus Hume

Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab,"
"Tracked by a Tattoo," etc., etc.



SECOND EDITION

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THE SILENT HOUSE IN PIMLICO

CHAPTER I

THE TENANT OF THE SILENT HOUSE

LUCIAN DENZIL was a briefless barrister, who so far departed from the traditions of his brethren of the long robe as not to dwell within the purlieus of the Temple. For certain private reasons, not unconnected with economy, he occupied rooms in Geneva Square, Pimlico; and, for the purposes of his profession, repaired daily from ten to four to Serjeants' Inn, where he shared an office with a friend equally briefless and poor.

This state of things sounds hardly enviable, but Lucian, being young and independent to the extent of £300 a year, was not dissatisfied with his position. As his age was only twenty-five, there was ample time, he thought, to succeed in his profession; and, pending that desirable consummation, he cultivated the muses on a little oatmeal, after the fashion of his kind. There have been lives less happily circumstanced.

Geneva Square was a kind of backwater of the great river of town life which swept past its entrance with speed and clamour without disturbing the peace within.

One long, narrow street led from a roaring thoroughfare into a silent quadrangle of tall grey houses, occupied by lodging-house keepers, city clerks and two or three artists, who represented the Bohemian element of the place. In the centre there was an oasis of green lawn, surrounded by rusty iron railings the height of a man, dotted with elms of considerable age and streaked with narrow paths of yellow gravel.

The surrounding houses represented an eminently respectable appearance, with their immaculately clean steps, white curtained windows and neat boxes of flowers. The windows glittered like diamonds, the door-knobs and plates shone with a yellow lustre, and there were no sticks, or straws, or waste paper lying about to mar the tidy look of the square.

With one exception, Geneva Square was a pattern of all that was desirable in the way of cleanliness and order. One might hope to find such a haven in some somnolent cathedral town, but scarcely in the grimy, smoky, restless metropolis of London.

The exception to the notable spotlessness of the neighbourhood was No. 13, a house in the centre of the side opposite to the entrance. Its windows were dusty and without blinds or curtains, there were no flower boxes on the ledges, the steps lacked whitewash and the iron railings looked rusty for want of paint. Stray straws and scraps of paper found their way down the area, where the cracked pavement was damp with green slime. Such beggars as occasionally wandered into the square, to the scandal of its inhabitants, camped on the doorstep; and the very door itself presented a battered, dissolute appearance.

Yet, for all its ill looks and disreputable suggestions,

those who dwelt in Geneva Square would not have seen it refurbished up and occupied for any money. They spoke about it in whispers, with ostentatious tremblings and daunted looks, for No. 13 was supposed to be haunted, and had been empty for over twenty years. By reason of its legend, its loneliness and grim appearance, it was known as the Silent House, and formed quite a feature of the place. Murder had been done long ago in one of its empty, dusty rooms, and it was since then that the victim walked. Lights, said the ghost-seers, had been seen flitting from window to window, groans were sometimes heard, and the apparition of a little old woman in brocaded silk and high-heeled shoes appeared on occasions. Hence the Silent House bore an uncanny reputation.

How much truth there was in these stories it is impossible to say; but sure enough, in spite of a low rental, no tenant would take No. 13 and face its ghostly terrors. House and apparition and legend had become quite a tradition, when the whole fantasy was ended in the summer of '95 by the unexpected occupation of the mansion. Mr. Mark Berwin, a gentleman of mature age, who came from nobody knew where, rented No. 13, and established himself therein to lead a strange and lonely life.

At first the gossips, strong in ghostly tradition, declared that the new tenant would not remain a week in the house; but as the week extended into six months, and Mr. Berwin showed no signs of leaving, they left off speaking of the ghost and took to discussing the man himself. In a short space of time quite a collection of stories were told about the new-comer and his strange ways.

Lucian heard many of these tales from his landlady.

How Mr. Berwin lived all alone in the Silent House without servant or companion; how he spoke to none, and admitted no one into the mansion; how he appeared to have plenty of money, and was frequently seen coming home more or less intoxicated; and how Mrs. Kebby, the deaf charwoman who cleaned out Mr. Berwin's rooms, declined to sleep in the house because she considered that there was something wrong about her employer.

To such gossip Denzil paid little attention, until his skein of life became unexpectedly entangled with that of the strange gentleman. The manner of their meeting was unforeseen and peculiar.

One foggy November night, Lucian, returning from the theatre shortly after eleven o'clock, dismissed his hansom at the entrance to the square, and walked there-into through the thick mist, trusting to find his way home by reason of two years' familiarity with the precincts. As it was impossible to see even the glare of the near gas-lamp in the murky air, Lucian felt his way cautiously along the railings. The square was filled with fog, dense to the eye and cold to the feel, so that Lucian shivered with the chill, in spite of the fur coat over his evening clothes.

As he edged gingerly along, and thought longingly of the fire and supper awaiting him in his comfortable rooms, he was startled by hearing a deep rich voice boom out almost at his feet. To make the phenomenon still more remarkable, the voice shaped itself into certain well-known words of Shakespeare:—

"Oh!" boomed this *vox et præterea nihil* in rather husky tones, "Oh! that a man should put an enemy in his mouth to steal away his brains." And then through the mist and darkness came the unmistakable sound of sobs.

"God bless me!" cried Lucian, leaping back with shaken nerves. "What is this? Who are you?"

"A lost soul!" wailed the deep voice, "which God will not bless!" and then came the sobbing again.

It made Denzil's blood run cold to hear this unseen creature weeping in the gloom. Moving cautiously in the direction of the sound, he stumbled against a man with his folded arms resting on the railings, and his face bent down on his arms. He made no attempt to turn when Lucian touched him, but, with downcast head, continued to weep and moan in a very frenzy of self-pity.

"Here!" said the young barrister, shaking the stranger by the shoulder, "what is the matter with you?"

"Drink," stuttered the man, suddenly turning with a dramatic gesture. "I am an object lesson to teetotalers; a warning to toppers; a modern helot made shameful to disgust youth with vice."

"You had better go home, sir," said Lucian sharply.

"I can't find home. It is somewhere hereabout, but where I don't know."

"You are in Geneva Square," said Denzil, trying to sharpen the dulled wits of the man.

"I wish I was in No. 13 of it," sighed the stranger. "Where the deuce is No. 13? Not in this Clondcuckoo-land anyhow."

"Oh!" cried Lucian, taking the man's arm. "Come with me. I'll lead you home, Mr. Berwin."

Scarcely had the name passed his lips than the stranger drew back suddenly, with a hasty exclamation. Some suspicion seemed to engender a mixture of terror and defiance which placed him on his guard against undue intimacy, even when some undefined fear was knocking

at his heart. "Who are you?" he demanded in a steadier tone. "How do you know my name?"

"My name is Denzil, Mr. Berwin, and I live in one of the houses of this square. As you mention No. 13 I know you can be none other than Mr. Mark Berwin, the tenant of the Silent House."

"The dweller in the haunted house," sneered Berwin, evidently relieved, "who stays there with ghosts and worse than ghosts."

"Worse than ghosts?"

"The phantoms of my own sins, young man. I have sowed folly, and now I am reaping the crop. I am ——" here his further speech was interrupted by a fit of coughing, which shook his lean figure severely. At its conclusion he was so exhausted that he was forced to support himself against the railings—"A portion of the crop," he murmured.

Lucian was sorry for the man, who seemed scarcely capable of looking after himself; and he thought it unwise to leave him in such a plight. At the same time he was impatient of lingering in the heart of the clammy fog at such a late hour; so, as his companion seemed indisposed to move, he caught him again by the arm without ceremony. The abrupt action seemed to waken again the fears of Berwin.

"Where would you take me?" he asked, resisting the gentle force used by Lucian.

"To your own house; you will be ill if you stay here."

"You are not one of them?" asked the man suddenly.

"One of whom?"

"One of those who wish to harm me?"

Denzil began to think he had to do with a madman, and to gain his ends he spoke to him in a soothing

manner, as he would to a child. "I wish to do you good, Mr. Berwin," said he gently. "Come to your home."

"Home! home! Ah, God, I have no home."

Nevertheless he gathered himself together, and with his arm in that of his guide, stumbled along in the thick chill mist. Lucian knew the position of No. 13 well, as it almost faced the lodgings occupied by himself, and by skirting the railings with due caution, he managed to half lead, half drag his companion to the house. When they stood before the door, and Berwin had assured himself that he was actually home by use of his latchkey, Denzil wished him a curt good-night. "And I should advise you to go to bed at once," he concluded, turning to descend the steps.

"Don't go! don't go!" cried Berwin, seizing the young man by the arm. "I am afraid to go in by myself; all is so dark and cold. Wait until I get a light."

As the creature's nerves seemed to be unhinged by over-indulgence in alcohol, and he stood gasping and shivering on the threshold like some beaten animal, Lucian took compassion on his wretchedness.

"I'll see you indoors," said he, and, striking a match, stepped into the darkness after the man. The hall of No. 13 seemed to be almost as cold as the world without, and the trifling glimmer of the lucifer served rather to reveal than dispel the surrounding darkness. The light, as it were, hollowed a gulf out of the tremendous gloom, and made the house tenfold more ghostly than before. The footsteps of Denzil and Berwin sounding on the bare boards—for the hall was uncarpeted—waked hollow echoes, and when they paused, the silence which ensued seemed almost menacing. The grim reputation of the mansion, its gloom and silence, appealed power-

fully to the latent superstition of Lucian. How much more nearly, then, would it touch the shaken and excited nerves of the tragic drunkard who dwelt continually amid its terrors.

Berwin opened a door on the right-hand side of the hall and turned up the light of a handsome oil lamp, which had been screwed down pending his arrival. This lamp was placed on a small square table covered with a white cloth and a dainty cold supper. The young barrister noted that the napery, cutlery and crystal were all of the finest; that the viands were choice; that champagne and claret were the beverages. Evidently Berwin was a luxurious gentleman and indulgent to his appetites.

Lucian tried to gain a long look at him in the mellow light, but Berwin kept his face turned away, and seemed as anxious now for his visitor to go as he had been for him to enter. Denzil, quick in comprehension, took the hint at once.

"I'll go now, as you have the light burning," said he. "Good-night."

"Good-night," replied Berwin shortly, and added to his discourtesy by letting Lucian find his way out alone.

And so ended the barrister's first meeting with the strange tenant of the Silent House.

CHAPTER II

SHADOWS ON THE BLIND

THE landlady of Denzil was a rather uncommon specimen of the class. She inclined to plumpness, was lively in the extreme, wore very fashionable garments of the brightest colours, and—although somewhat elderly—still cherished a hope that some young man would elevate her to the rank of a matron.

At present Miss Julia Greeb was an unwedded damsel of forty summers, who, with the aid of art, was making desperate but ineffectual efforts to detain the youth which was slipping from her. She pinched her waist, dyed her hair, powdered her face, and affected juvenile dress of the white frock and blue sash kind. In the distance she looked a girlish twenty; close at hand various artifices aided her to pass for thirty; and it was only in the solitude of her own room that her real age was apparent. Never did woman wage a more resolute fight with Time than did Miss Greeb.

But this was the worst and most frivolous side of her character; for she was really a good-hearted, cheery little woman, with a brisk manner, and a flow of talk unequalled in Geneva Square. She had been born in the house she occupied, after the death of her father, and had grown up

to assist her mother in ministering to the exactions of a continuous procession of lodgers. These came and went, married and died; but not one of the desirable young men had borne Miss Greeb to the altar, so that when her mother died, the fair Julia almost despaired of attaining to the dignity of wifehood. Nevertheless she continued to keep boarders, and to make attempts to captivate the hearts of such bachelors as she judged weak in character.

Hitherto all her efforts had been more or less of a mercantile character, with an eye to money; but when Lucian Denzil appeared on the scene, the poor little woman really fell in love with his handsome face. But, in strange contrast to her other efforts, Miss Greeb never for a moment deemed that Lucian would marry her. He was her god, her ideal of manhood, and to him she offered worship and burnt incense after the manner of her kind.

Denzil occupied a bedroom and sitting-room, both pleasant, airy apartments looking out on to the square. Miss Greeb attended to his needs herself, and brought up his breakfast with her own fair hands; happy for the day if her admired lodger conversed with her for a few moments before reading the morning paper. Then Miss Greeb would retire to her own sitting-room and indulge in day dreams which she well knew would never be realised. The romances she wove herself were even more marvellous than those she read in her favourite penny novelettes; but, unlike the printed tales, her romance never culminated in marriage. Poor brainless, silly, pitiful Miss Greeb; she would have made a good wife and a fond mother, but by some irony of fate she was destined to be neither; and the comedy of her husband-

hunting youth was now changing into the lonely tragedy of disappointed spinsterhood. She was one of the world's unknown martyrs, and her fate merits tears rather than laughter.

On the morning after his meeting with Berwin, the young barrister sat at breakfast, with Miss Greeb in anxious attendance. Having poured out his tea and handed him his paper, and ascertained that his breakfast was to his liking, Miss Greeb lingered about the room, putting this straight and that crooked, in the hope that Lucian would converse with her. In this she was gratified, as Denzil wished to learn details about the strange man he had assisted on the previous night; and he knew that no one could afford him more precise information than his brisk landlady, to whom was known all the gossip of the neighbourhood. His first word made Miss Greeb flutter back to the table like a dove to its nest.

"Do you know anything about No. 13?" asked Lucian, stirring his tea.

"Do I know anything about No. 13?" repeated Miss Greeb in shrill amazement. "Of course I do, Mr. Denzil; there ain't a thing I don't know about that house. Ghosts and vampires and crawling spectres live in it—that they do."

"Do you call Mr. Berwin a ghost?"

"No; nor nothing half so respectable. He is a mystery, sir, that's what Mr. Berwin is, and I don't care if he hears me commit myself so far."

"In what way is he a mystery?" demanded Denzil, approaching the matter with more particularity.

"Why," said Miss Greeb, evidently puzzled how to answer this leading question, "no one can find out any-

thing about him. He's full of secrets and underhand goings on. It ain't respectable not to be fair and above board—that it ain't."

"I see no reason why a quiet-living old gentleman should tell his private affairs to the whole square," remarked Lucian drily.

"Those who have nothing bad to conceal needn't be afraid of speaking out," retorted Miss Greeb tartly. "And the way in which Mr. Berwin lives is enough to make one think him a coiner, or a thief, or even a murderer—that it is."

"But what grounds have you to believe him any one of the three?"

This question also puzzled the landlady, as she had no reasonable grounds for her wild statements; nevertheless she made a determined attempt to substantiate them by hearsay evidence. "Mr. Berwin," said she in significant tones, "lives all alone in that haunted house."

"Why not? Every man has the right to be a misanthrope if he chooses."

"He has no right to behave so, in a respectable square," replied Miss Greeb, shaking her head. "There's only two rooms of that large house furnished, and all the rest is given up to dust and ghosts. Mr. Berwin won't have a servant to live under his roof, and Mrs. Kebby, who does his charing, says he drinks awful. Then he has his meals sent in from the Nelson Hotel round the corner, and eats them all alone. He don't receive no letters, he don't read no newspapers, and stays in all day, only coming out at night like an owl. If he ain't a criminal, Mr. Denzil, why does he carry on so?"

"He may dislike his fellow-men, and desire to live a secluded life."

Miss Greeb still shook her head. "He may dislike his fellow-men," she said with emphasis, "but that don't keep him from seeing them—ah, that it don't."

"Is there anything wrong in that?" said Lucian, contemptuous of these cobweb objections.

"Perhaps not, Mr. Denzil; but where do those he sees come from?"

"How do you mean, Miss Greeb?"

"They don't go in by the front door, that's certain," continued the little woman darkly. "There's only one entrance to this square, sir, and Blinders the policeman is frequently on duty there. Two or three nights he's met Mr. Berwin coming in after dark and exchanged friendly greetings with him, and each time Mr. Berwin has been alone."

"Well! well! What of that?" said Denzil impatiently.

"This much, Mr. Denzil, that Blinders has gone round the square after seeing Mr. Berwin, and has seen shadows—two or three of them—on the sitting-room blind. Now, sir," cried Miss Greeb, clinching her argument, "if Mr. Berwin came into the square alone, how did his visitors get in?"

"Perhaps by the back," conjectured Lucian.

Again Miss Greeb shook her head. "I know the back of No. 13 as well as I know my own face," she declared. "There's a yard and a fence, but no entrance. To get in there you have to go in by the front door or down the airy steps; and you can't do neither without coming past Blinders at the square's entrance, and that," finished Miss Greeb triumphantly, "these visitors don't do."

"They may have come into the square during the day, when Blinders was not on duty."

"No, sir," said Miss Greeb, ready for this objection. "I thought of that myself, and as my duty to the square, I have inquired—that I have. On two occasions I've asked the day policeman, and he says no one passed."

"Then," said Lucian, rather puzzled, "Mr. Berwin cannot live alone in the house."

"Begging your pardon, I'm sure," cried the pertinacious woman, "but he does. Mrs. Kebby has been all over the house, and there isn't another soul in it. No, Mr. Denzil, take it what way you will, there's something that ain't right about Mr. Berwin—if that's his real name, which I don't believe it is."

"Why, Miss Greeb?"

"Just because I don't," replied the landlady with feminine logic. "And if you think of having anything to do with this mystery, Mr. Denzil, I beg of you not to, else you may come to something as is too terrible to consider—that you may."

"Such as —?"

"Oh, I don't know," cried Miss Greeb, tossing her head and gliding towards the door. "It ain't for me to say what I think. I am the last person in the world to meddle with what don't concern me—that I am;" and thus ending the conversation, Miss Greeb vanished, with significant looks and pursed-up lips.

The reason of this last speech and rapid retreat lay in the fact that Miss Greeb could bring no tangible charge against her opposite neighbour; and therefore hinted at his complicity in all kinds of horrors, which she was quite unable to define save in terms more or less vague.

Lucian dismissed such hints of criminality from his

mind as the outcome of Miss Greeb's very lively imagination; yet, even though he reduced her communications to bare facts, he could not but acknowledge that there was something queer about Mr. Berwin and his mode of life. The man's self-pity and self-condemnation; his hints that certain people wished to do him harm; the curious episode of the shadows on the blind—these things engaged the curiosity of Denzil in no ordinary degree; and he could not but admit to himself that it would greatly ease his mind to arrive at some reasonable explanation of Berwin's eccentricities.

Nevertheless, he held that he had no right to pry into the secrets of the stranger; and honourably strove to dismiss the tenant of No. 13 and his tantalising environments from his mind. But such dismissal of unworthy curiosity was more difficult to effect than he expected.

For the next week Lucian resolutely banished the subject from his thoughts, and declined to discuss the matter further with Miss Greeb. That little woman, all on fire with curiosity, made various inquiries of her gossips regarding the doings of Mr. Berwin; and in default of reporting the same to her lodger, occupied herself in discussing them with her neighbours. The consequence of this incessant gossip was that the eyes of the whole square fixed themselves on No. 13 in expectation of some catastrophe, although no one knew exactly what was going to happen.

This undefinable feeling of impending disaster communicating itself to Lucian, stimulated his curiosity to such a pitch that, with some feeling of shame for his weakness, he walked round the square on two several evenings in the hope of meeting Berwin. But on both occasions he was unsuccessful.

On the third evening he was more fortunate, for having worked at his law books until late at night, he went out for a brisk walk before retiring to rest. The night was cold and there had been a slight fall of snow, so Lucian wrapped himself up well, lighted his pipe, and proceeded to take the air by tramping twice or thrice round the square. Overhead the sky was clear and frosty, with chill glittering stars and a wintry moon. A thin covering of snow lay on the pavement, and there was a white rime on the bare branches of the central trees.

On coming to the house of Berwin, the barrister saw that the sitting-room was lighted up and the curtains undrawn, so that the window presented a square of illuminated blind. Even as he looked, two shadows darkened the white surface—the shadows of a man and a woman. Evidently they had come between the lamp and the window, and so, quite unknowingly, revealed their actions to the watcher. Curious to see the end of this shadow pantomime, Lucian stood still and looked intently at the window.

The two figures seemed to be arguing, for their heads nodded violently and their arms waved constantly. They retreated out of the sphere of light, and again came into it, still continuing their furious gestures. Unexpectedly the male shadow seized the female by the throat and swung her like a feather to and fro. The struggling figures reeled out of the radiance, and Lucian heard a faint cry.

Thinking that something was wrong, he rushed up the steps and rang the bell violently. Almost before the sound died away, the light in the room was extinguished and he could see nothing more. Again and again he rang,

but without attracting attention; so Lucian finally left the house and went in search of Blinders, the policeman, to narrate his experience. At the entrance to Geneva Square he ran against a man whom he recognised in the the clear moonlight.

To his surprise he beheld Mark Berwin.

CHAPTER III

AN UNSATISFACTORY EXPLANATION

"MR. BERWIN!" cried Lucian, recognising the man. "Is it you?"

"Who else should it be?" replied Berwin, bending forward to see who had jostled him. "Who else should it be, Mr. Denzil?"

"But I thought—I thought," said the barrister, unable to conceal his surprise, "that is, I fancied you were indoors."

"Your fancy was wrong, you see. I am not indoors."

"Then who is in your house?"

Berwin shrugged his shoulders. "No one, so far as I know."

"You are mistaken, sir. There was a light in your room, and I saw the shadows of a man and a woman struggling together thrown on the blind."

"People in my house!" said Berwin, laying a shaking hand on the arm of Lucian. "Impossible."

"I tell you it is so."

"Come, then, and we will look for them," said Berwin in a tremulous voice.

"But they have gone by this time."

"Gone!"

"Yes," said Denzil rapidly. "I rang the bell, as I fancied there was some fatal quarrel going on within. At once the light was put out, and, as I could attract no one to the door, I suppose the man and woman must have fled."

For a moment or so Berwin said nothing, but his grip on Lucian's arm relaxed, and he moved forward a few steps. "You must be mistaken, Mr. Denzil," said he in altered tones, "there can be no person in my house. I locked the door before I went out, and I have been absent at least two hours."

"Then I must be mad or dreaming!" retorted Lucian with heat.

"We can soon prove if you are either of the two, sir. Come with me and examine the house for yourself."

"Pardon me," said Denzil, drawing back, "it is none of my business. But I warn you, Mr. Berwin, that others are more curious than I am. Several times people have been known to be in your house while you were absent; and your mode of life, secretive and strange, does not commend itself to the householders in this neighbourhood. If you persist in giving rise to gossip and scandal, some busybody may bring the police on the scene."

"The police," echoed the old man, now greatly alarmed, as would appear from his shaking voice. "No! no! that will never do. My house is my castle; the police dare not break into it. I am a peaceful and very unfortunate gentleman, who wishes to live quietly. All this talk of people being in my house is nonsense."

"Yet you seemed afraid when I told you of the shadows," said Lucian pointedly.

"Afraid! I am afraid of nothing."

"Not even of those who are after you," hinted Denzil, recalling the conversation of the previous occasion.

Berwin gave a kind of eldritch shriek and stepped back a pace, as though to place himself on his guard. "What—what do you know about such—such things?" he panted.

"Only so much as you hinted at when I last saw you."

"Yes! yes! I was not myself on that night. The wine was in and the wit was out."

"The truth also, it would seem," said Lucian drily, "judging by your agitation then and now."

"I am an unfortunate gentleman," whimpered Berwin tremulously.

"If you will excuse me, sir, I shall leave you," said Lucian ceremoniously. "It seems to be my fate to hold midnight conversations with you in the cold; but I think this one had better be cut short."

"One moment," Mr. Berwin exclaimed. "You have been good enough to place me on my guard as to the talk my quiet course of life is causing. Pray add to your kindness by coming with me to my house and exploring it from attic to basement. You will then see that there are no grounds for scandal, and that the shadows you fancy you saw on the blind are not those of real people."

"They can't be those of ghosts, at all events," replied Lucian, "as I never heard, to my knowledge, that spirits could cast shadows."

"Well, come and see for yourself that the house is empty."

Warmly as this invitation was given, Lucian had some scruples about accepting it. To explore an almost unfurnished mansion with a complete stranger—and one with an ill-reputation—at the midnight hour, is not an enterprise to be coveted by any man, however bold he may

be. Still, Lucian had ample courage and more curiosity, for the adventure, as the chance of it stirred up that desire for romance which belongs peculiarly to youth. Also he was anxious to satisfy himself concerning the blind shadows, and curious to learn why Berwin inhabited so dismal and mysterious a mansion. Add to these reasons a keen pleasure in profiting by the occurrence of the unexpected, and you will guess that Denzil ended by accepting the strange invitation of Berwin.

Being now fully committed to the adventure, he went forward with cool courage and an observant eye, to spy out, if possible, the secret upon which hinged these mysteries.

As on the former occasion, Berwin inducted his guest into the sitting-room, and here, as previously, a dainty supper was spread. Berwin turned up the lamp-light and waved his hand round the luxuriously furnished room, pointing particularly to the space between table and window.

"The figures whose shadows you saw," said he, "must have struggled together in this space, so as to be between the lamp and the blind for the performance of their pantomime. But I would have you observe, Mr. Denzil, that there is no disturbance of the furniture to show that such a struggle as you describe took place; also that the curtains are drawn across the window, and no light could have been thrown on the blind".

"The curtains were no doubt drawn after I rang the bell," said Lucian, glancing towards the heavy folds of crimson velvet which veiled the window.

"The curtains," retorted Berwin, stripping off his coat, "were drawn by me before I went out."

Lucian said nothing, but shook his head doubtfully.

Evidently Berwin was trying, for his own ends, to talk him into a belief that his eyes had deceived him ; but Denzil was too clear-headed a young man to be so gulled. Berwin's explanations and excuses only confirmed the idea that there was something in the man's life which cut him off from humanity, and which would not bear the light of day. Hitherto Lucian had heard rather than seen Berwin ; but now, in the clear light of the lamp, he had an excellent opportunity of observing both the man and his quarters.

Berwin was of medium height and lean, with a clean-shaven face, hollow cheeks, and black sunken eyes. His hair was grey and thin, his look wild and wandering, and the hectic colouring of his face and narrow chest showed that he was far gone in consumption. Even as Lucian looked at him he was shaken by a hollow cough, and when he withdrew his handkerchief from his lips, the white linen was spotted with blood.

He was in evening dress, and looked eminently refined, although worn and haggard in appearance. Denzil noted two peculiar marks about him : the first a serpentine cicatrice extending on the right cheek from lip almost to ear ; the second a loss of the little finger of the left hand, which was cut off at the first joint. As he examined the man, a second and more violent fit of coughing shook him from head to foot.

"You seem to be very ill," said Lucian, pitying the feebleness of the poor creature.

"Dying of consumption—one lung gone," gasped Berwin. "It will soon be over—the sooner the better."

"With your health, Mr. Berwin, it is sheer madness to dwell in this rigorous English climate."

"No doubt," replied the man, pouring himself out a

tumbler of claret, "but I can't leave England, I can't leave this house even; but on the whole," he added, with a satisfied glance round, "I am not badly lodged."

Lucian agreed with this speech. The room was furnished in the most luxurious manner. The prevailing hue was a deep warm red—carpet, walls, hangings and furniture were all of this cheerful tint. The chairs were deep and softly cushioned; on the walls were several oil-paintings by celebrated modern artists; there were dwarf bookcases filled with well-chosen books; and on a small bamboo table near the fire, lay magazines and papers.

The mantelpiece, reaching nearly to the ceiling, was of oak, framing mirrors of bevelled glass; and on the numerous shelves cups, saucers and vases of old and valuable china were placed. There was also a gilt clock, a handsome sideboard, and a neat smoking-table, on which stood a cut-glass spirit stand and a box of cigars. The whole apartment was furnished with taste and refinement; and Lucian saw that the man who owned such luxurious quarters must be possessed of money, as well as the capability of using it in the most civilised way.

"You have certainly all that the heart of man can desire in the way of material comforts," said he, looking at the supper table, which, with its silver and crystal and spotless covering, glittered like a jewel under the brilliant lamplight. "My only wonder is that you should furnish one room so finely and leave the others bare."

"My bedroom and bath-room are yonder," replied Berwin, pointing towards large folding doors draped with velvet curtains, and placed opposite to the window. "They are as well furnished as this. But how do you know the rest of this house is bare?"

"I can hardly help knowing it, Mr. Berwin. Your contrast of poverty and riches is an open secret in this neighbourhood."

"No one has been in my house save yourself, Mr. Denzil."

"Oh, I have said nothing. You turned me out so quickly the other night that I had no time for observation. Besides, I am not in the habit of remarking on matters which do not concern me."

"I beg your pardon," said Berwin weakly. "I had no intention of offending you. I suppose Mrs. Kebby has been talking?"

"I should think it probable."

"The skirling Jezebel!" cried Berwin. "I'll pack her off right away."

"Are you a Scotchman?" asked Denzil suddenly.

"Why do you ask?" demanded Berwin without replying.

"You used an essentially Scotch word—'skirling'."

"And I used an essentially American phrase—'right away,'"—retorted the man. "I may be a Scot, I may be a Yankee; but I would remind you that my nationality is my own secret."

"I have no wish to pry into your secrets," said Denzil, rising from the chair in which he had seated himself, "and in my turn I would remind you that I am here at your invitation."

"Don't take offence at a hasty word," said Berwin nervously. "I am glad of your company although I seem rather brusque. You must go over the house with me."

"I see no necessity to do so."

"It will set your mind at rest regarding the shadows on the blind."

"I can trust my eyes," said Lucian drily, "and I am certain that before I met you a man and a woman were in this room."

"Well," said Berwin, lighting a small lamp, "come with me and I'll prove that you are mistaken."

CHAPTER IV

MRS. KEBBY'S DISCOVERY

THE pertinacity which Berwin displayed in insisting that Lucian should explore the silent house was truly remarkable. He appeared to be bent upon banishing the idea which Denzil entertained, that strangers were hiding in the mansion.

From attic to basement, from front to back premises, he led the way, and made Lucian examine every corner of the empty rooms. He showed him even the unused kitchen, and bade him remark that the door leading into the yard was locked and bolted, and, from the rusty condition of the ironwork, could not have been opened for years. Also he made him look out of the window into the yard itself, with its tall black fence dividing it from the other properties.

This exploration finished, and Lucian being convinced that himself and his host were the only two living beings in the house, Berwin conducted his half-frozen guest back to the warm sitting-room and poured out a glass of wine.

"Here, Mr. Denzil," said he in good-natured tones, "drink this and draw near the fire; you must be chilled to the bone after our Arctic expedition."

Lucian willingly accepted both these attentions, and sipped his wine—it was particularly fine claret—before the fire, while Berwin coughed and shivered and muttered to himself about the cold of the season. When Lucian stood up to take his departure, he addressed him, directly.

“Well, sir,” said he with a sardonic smile, “are you convinced that the struggling shadows on yonder blind were children of your heated fancy?”

“No,” said Denzil stoutly, “I am not!”

“Yet you have seen that there is no one in the house!”

“Mr. Berwin,” said Lucian, after a moment’s thought, “you propose a riddle which I cannot answer and which I do not wish to answer. I cannot explain what I saw to-night; but as surely as you were out of this house, some people were in it. How this affects you, or what reason you have for denying it, I do not ask. Keep your own secrets, and go your own way. I wish you good-night, sir,” and Lucian moved towards the door.

Berwin, who was holding a full tumbler of rich strong port, drank the whole of it in one gulp. The strong liquor reddened his pallid face and brightened his sunken eyes; it even strengthened his already sonorous voice.

“At least you can inform my good neighbours that I am a peaceful man, desirous of being left to lead my own life,” he said urgently.

“No, sir! I will have nothing to do with your business. You are a stranger to me, and our acquaintance is too slight to warrant my discussing your affairs. Besides,” added Lucian with a shrug, “they do not interest me.”

“Yet they may interest the three kingdoms one day,” said Berwin softly.

“Oh, if they deal with danger to society,” said Denzil,

thinking his strange neighbour spoke of anarchistic schemes, "I would ——"

"They deal with danger to myself," interrupted Berwin. "I am a hunted man, and I hide here from those who wish me ill. I am dying, as you see," he cried, striking his hollow chest, "but I may not die quickly enough for those who desire my death."

"Who are they?" cried Lucian, rather startled by this outburst.

"People with whom you have no concern," replied the man sullenly.

"That is true enough, Mr. Berwin, so I'll say good-night."

"Berwin! Berwin! ha! ha! a very good name, Berwin, but not for me. Oh, was there ever so unhappy a creature as I. False name, false friend, in disgrace, in hiding. Curse everybody. Go! go, Mr. Denzil, and leave me to die here like a rat in its hole."

"You are ill," said Lucian, amazed by the man's fury. "Shall I send a doctor to see you?"

"Send no one," cried Berwin, commanding himself by a visible effort. "Only go away and leave me to myself. 'Thou can'st not minister to a mind diseased.' Go! go!"

"Good-night, then," said Denzil, seeing that nothing could be done. "I hope you will be better in the morning."

Berwin shook his head, and with a silent tongue, which contrasted strangely with his late outcry, ushered Denzil out of the house.

As the heavy door closed behind him Lucian descended the steps and looked thoughtfully at the grim mansion, which was tenanted by so mysterious a person. He

could make nothing of Berwin,—as he chose to call himself,—he could see no meaning in his wild words and mad behaviour; but as he walked briskly back to his lodgings he came to the conclusion that the man was nothing worse than a tragic drunkard, haunted by terrors engendered by over-indulgence in stimulants. The episode of the shadows on the blind he did not attempt to explain, for the simple reason that he was unable to find any plausible explanation to account therefor.

“And why should I trouble my head to do so?” mused Lucian as he went to bed. “The man and his mysteries are nothing to me. Pah! I have been infected by the vulgar curiosity of the Square. Henceforth I’ll neither see nor think of this drunken lunatic,” and with such resolve he dismissed all thoughts of his strange acquaintance from his mind, which, under the circumstances, was perhaps the wisest thing he could do.

But later on certain events took place which forced him to alter his determination. Fate, with her own ends to bring about, is not to be denied by her puppets; and of these Lucian was one, designed for an important part in the drama which was to be played.

Mrs. Margery Kebby, who attended to the domestic economy of Berwin’s house, was a deaf old crone with a constant thirst, only to be assuaged by strong drink; and a filching hand which was usually in every pocket save her own. She had neither kith nor kin, nor friends, nor even acquaintances; but, being something of a miser, scraped and screwed to amass money she had no need for, and dwelt in a wretched little apartment in a back slum, whence she daily issued to work little and pilfer much.

Usually at nine o’clock she brought in her employer’s

breakfast from the Nelson Hotel, which was outside the Square, and while he was enjoying it in bed, after his fashion, she cleaned out and made tidy the sitting-room. Berwin then dressed and went out for a walk, despite Miss Greeb's contention that he took the air only at night like an owl, and during his absence Mrs. Kebby attended to the bedroom. She then went about her own business, which was connected with the cleaning of various other apartments, and only returned at mid-day and at night to lay the table for Berwin's luncheon and dinner, or rather dinner and supper, which were also sent in from the hotel.

For these services Berwin paid her well, and only enjoined her to keep a quiet tongue about his private affairs, which Mrs. Kebby usually did, until excited by too copious drams of gin, when she talked freely and unwisely to all the servants in the Square. It was to her observation and invention that Berwin owned his bad reputation.

Well known in every kitchen, Mrs. Kebby hobbled from one to the other gossiping about the various affairs of her various employers; and when absolute knowledge failed, she took to inventing details which did no small credit to her imagination. Also, she could tell fortunes by reading tea-leaves and shuffling cards, and was not above aiding the maid-servants in their small love affairs.

In short, Mrs. Kebby was a dangerous old witch, who a century back would have been burnt at the stake; and the worst possible person for Berwin to have in his house. Had he known of her lying and prating she would not have remained an hour under his roof; but Mrs. Kebby was cunning enough to steer clear of such a danger in the most dexterous manner. She had a firm idea that

Berwin had, in her own emphatic phrase, "done something" for which he was wanted by the police, and was always on the look out to learn the secret of his isolated life, in order to betray him, or blackmail him, or get him in some way under her thumb. As yet she had been unsuccessful.

Deeming her a weak, quiet old creature, Berwin, in spite of his suspicious nature, entrusted Mrs. Kebby with the key of the front door, so that she could enter for her morning's work without disturbing him. The sitting-room door itself was not always locked, but Berwin usually bolted the portal of his bedroom, and had invariably to rise and admit Mrs. Kebby with his breakfast.

The same routine was observed each morning, and everything went smoothly. Mrs. Kebby had heard of the blind-shadows from several people, and had poked and pryed about all over the house in the hope of arriving at some knowledge of the substantial flesh and blood figures which cast them. But in this quest, which was intended to put money into her own pocket, she failed entirely; and during the whole six months of Berwin's tenancy she never saw a living soul in No. 13 save her employer; nor could she ever find any evidence to show that Berwin had received visitors during her absence. The man was as great a mystery to Mrs. Kebby as he was to the Square, in spite of her superior opportunities of learning the truth.

On Christmas Eve the old woman brought in a cold supper for Berwin as usual, making several journeys to and fro between hotel and house for that purpose. She laid the table, made up the fire, and before taking her leave asked Mr. Berwin if he wanted anything else.

"No, I think not," replied the man, who looked wretchedly ill. "You can bring my breakfast to-morrow."

"At nine, sir?"

"At the usual time," answered Berwin impatiently. "Go away!"

Mrs. Kebby gave a final glance round to see that all was in order, and shuffled out of the room as fast as her rheumatism would let her. As she left the house eight o'clock chimed from the steeple of a near church, and Mrs. Kebby, clinking her newly received wages in her pocket, hurried out of the square to do her Christmas marketing. As she went down the street which led to it, Blinders, a burly, ruddy-faced policeman, who knew her well, stopped to make an observation.

"Is that good gentleman of yours home, Mrs. Kebby?" he asked, in the loud tones used to deaf people.

"Oh, he's home," grumbled Mrs. Kebby ungraciously, "sittin' afore the fire like Solomon in all his glory. What d'ye want to know for?"

"I saw him an hour ago," explained Blinders, "and I thought he looked ill."

"So he do, like a corpse. What of that? We've all got to come to it some day. 'Ow d'ye know but what he won't be dead afore morning. Well, I don't care, he's paid me up till to-night. I'm going to enj'y myself, I am."

"Don't you get drunk, Mrs. Kebby, or I'll lock you up."

"Garn!" grunted the old beldame. "Wot's Christmas Eve for, if it ain't for folk to enj'y theirselves. Y' are on duty early."

"I'm takin' the place of a sick comrade, and I'll be on duty all night. That's my Christmas."

"Well! well! let every one enj'y hisself as he likes," muttered Mrs. Kebby, and shuffled off to the nearest public-house.

Here she began to celebrate the season, and afterwards went shopping; then she celebrated the season again, and later carried home her purchases to the miserable garret she occupied. In this den Mrs. Kebby, with the aid of gin and water, celebrated the season until she drank herself to sleep.

Next morning she woke in anything but an amiable mood, and had to fortify herself with an early drink before she was fit to go about her business.

It was almost nine when she reached the Nelson Hotel, and found the covered tray with Mr. Berwin's breakfast waiting for her, so she hurried with it to Geneva Square as speedily as possible, fearful of a scolding. Having admitted herself into the house, Mrs. Kebby took up the tray with both hands, and pushed open the sitting-room door with her foot. Here, at the sight which met her eyes, she dropped the tray with a crash, and let off a shrill yell.

The room was in disorder, the table was overturned, and amid the wreckage of glass and china lay Mark Berwin with outspread hands—stone dead—stabbed to the heart.

CHAPTER V

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

NOW-A-DAYS events, political, social and criminal, crowd so closely on one another's heels, that what was formerly a nine days' wonder is scarcely marvelled at the same number of minutes. Yet in certain cases episodes of a mysterious or unexpected nature engage the attention of a careless world for a somewhat longer period, and provoke an immense amount of discussion and surmise. In this category may be placed the crime committed in Geneva Square; for when the extraordinary circumstances of the case became known, much curiosity was manifested regarding the possible criminal and his motive for committing so apparently useless a crime.

To add to the wonderment of the public, it came out in the evidence of Lucian Denzil at the inquest that Berwin was not the real name of the victim; so here the authorities were confronted with a threefold problem. They had first to discover the name of the dead man; second, to learn who it was had so foully murdered him; and third, to find out the reason why the unknown assassin should have slain an apparently harmless man.

But these hidden things were not easily brought to light; and the meagre evidence collected by the police

failed to do away with any one of the three obstacles—at all events until after the inquest. When the jury brought in a verdict that the deceased had been violently done to death by some person or persons unknown, the twelve good men and true stated the full extent of knowledge gained by Justice in her futile scramble after clues. Berwin—so called—was dead, his assassin had melted into thin air, and the Silent House had added a second legend to its already uncanny reputation. Formerly it had been simply haunted, now it was also blood-stained, and its last condition was worse than its first.

The dead man had been found stabbed to the heart by some long, thin, sharp-pointed instrument which the murderer had taken away with him—or perhaps her, as the sex of the assassin, for obvious reasons, could not be decided. Mrs. Kebby swore that she had left the deceased sitting over the fire at eight o'clock on Christmas Eve, and that he had then been fairly well, though far from enjoying the best of health. When she returned shortly after nine on Christmas morning the man was dead and cold. Medical aid was called in at the same time as the police were summoned; and the evidence of the doctor who examined the body went to prove that Berwin had been dead at least ten hours, therefore he must have been assassinated between the hours of eleven and twelve of the previous night.

Search was immediately made for the murderer, but no trace could be found of him, nor could it be ascertained how he had entered the house. The doors were all locked, the windows were all barred, and neither at the back nor in the front was there any outlet left open whereby the man—if it was a man who had done the deed—could have escaped.

Blinders, the policeman on duty at the entrance of the square, gave evidence that he had been on duty there all night, and that although many servants and owners of houses belonging to the square had passed in from their Christmas marketings, yet no stranger had entered. The policeman knew every one, even to the errand-boys of the neighbourhood who brought parcels of Christmas goods, and in many cases had exchanged greetings with the passers by; but he was prepared to swear, and in fact did swear at the inquest, that no stranger either came into, or went out of, Geneva Square.

Also he deposed that when the traffic died away after midnight he had walked round the square, and had looked at every window, including that of No. 13, and had tried every door, also including that of No. 13, only to find that all was safe. Blinders declared on oath that he had not on Christmas Eve the slightest suspicion of the horrid tragedy which had taken place in the Silent House during the time he was on duty.

When the police took possession of the body and mansion, search was made in bedroom and sitting-room for papers likely to throw light on the identity of the victim, but in vain. No letters or telegrams, or even writing of any kind, could be discovered; there was no name in the dead man's books, no mark on his clothes, no initials on his linen.

The landlord of the house declared that the deceased had hired the mansion six months before, but had given no references, and as the landlord was glad to let the haunted No. 13 on any terms he had not insisted upon having them. The deceased, said the landlord, had paid a month's rent in advance in ready money, and at the end of every month he had discharged his liability in the same