

GEORGE CAULFIELD'S JOURNEY

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first published in 1879 in the collection *Mistletoe Bough*

CHAPTER I

BY THE NIGHT MAIL

The night-mail was to start in five minutes from the great central terminus in the busy commercial city of Grandchester, and the Rev. George Caulfield, with a travelling bag in his hand and a comfortable railway rug over his arm, was walking slowly along the platform, peering into the first-class carriages as he went by, in quest of ease and solitude. He was a man of reserved temper, bookish beyond his years, and he had a horror of finding himself imprisoned among five noisy spirits, cottony, horsey, and of that boisterous and coarsely spoken temperament which the refined and gentle parson would have characterised as rowdy. The Reverend George was a Christian gentleman, but so far as it was possible for his mild nature to hate any one, he hated fast young men. He was not fond of strangers in a general way. He endured them, but he did not love them. He had lingered on the platform till the train was within three minutes of starting, in the hope of securing for himself the luxury of privacy. As the long hand of the station clock marked the third minute before eleven, he espied an empty carriage, and was in the act of entering it, when a hand was laid very gently on his sleeve.

‘Pardon me, sir,’ said a somewhat agitated voice, ‘are you a medical man?’

Mr. Caulfield turned, and confronted a man of slight figure and middle height, some years younger than himself, a man with a pale face, delicate features, and soft black eyes—a very interesting countenance, thought the curate. The stranger looked anxious and hurried.

‘No,’ answered Mr. Caulfield, ‘I am a clergyman,’

That is almost as good. My dear sir, will you do me a great favour? My sister, an invalid, is travelling by this train, alone; but she will be met by friends at Milldale Junction. She is very ill—nothing infectious, chest complaint, poor girl. If you will

afford her the privilege of your protection, only as far as Milldale, you will oblige me immensely.'

There was no time for hesitation, the bell was ringing clamorously, people were hurrying to their seats.

'With pleasure,' said the good-natured curate, sorry to lose the delight of loneliness; embarrassed at the idea of an unknown invalid, but far too kind to shrink from doing an act of mercy,

The young man ran to the second-class waiting-room, the door of which was just opposite, and returned almost immediately, carrying a muffled figure in his arms, a small, fragile child. This slender figure, half buried in a large Rob Roy shawl, he placed with infinite care in one of the seats farthest from the door, then he ran back to the waiting-room for more wraps, a pillow, and a foot-warmer. He administered with womanly tenderness to the comfort of the invalid, who reclined motionless and silent in her corner, and then, hurried and agitated by the imminent departure of the mail, he stood at the door of the carriage talking to Mr. Caulfield, who had taken his seat in the opposite corner to that occupied by the invalid.

You are more than good,' said the stranger. 'Don't talk to her, she is low and nervous, and you will agitate her painfully if you force her to talk. I dare say she will doze all the way. It is only an hour from here to Milldale, and no stoppage till you get there. Oh, by the way, kindly take this bottle, and if she should turn faint or giddy on the way, give her a few drops of the contents. There goes the flag. Will you allow me to offer you my card? I am deeply indebted. Good night.'

All this had been said hurriedly. George Caulfield had hardly time to take the proffered card when the engine puffed itself laboriously out of the great, ghastly terminus, a wilderness of ironwork, a labyrinth of tunnels and sidings and incomprehensible platforms, very gloomy on this cold winter night. For the first few minutes Mr. Caulfield felt so confused and disturbed by the suddenness of the charge that had been forced upon him that he hardly knew what he was doing.

Then he glanced at the lady, and saw with a feeling of relief that her head was reposing comfortably against the padded division of the carriage, and that her face was hidden by a blue gauze veil, which she wore over a small brown straw hat. She was breathing somewhat heavily, he thought, but that was to be expected in a sufferer from chest complaint.

‘I hope her heart is all right,’ thought George, with a sudden sense of the awfulness of his position were his invalid charge to expire while in his care.

He looked at the stranger's card :—

Mr. Elsdon,

Briargate.

The address looked well. Briargate was one of the most respectable business streets in Grandchester. Doubtless it had once been a rustic lane, where briars and roses grew abundantly, and the bees and butterflies, and village lads and lasses, made merry amidst odours of new-mown hay. Nowadays Briargate was a narrow street of lofty warehouses, tall enough to shut out the sun, a street that reeked with odours of machine oil.

The express had cleared Grandchester by this time, tearing along a viaduct above a forest of tall chimneys, and then, with a sweeping curve, away to the windy open country, a land as wild and fresh and free as if there were no such things as factories and smoky chimneys in the world. Mr. Caulfield had for the first ten minutes or so felt relieved by his inability to see his companion's face. It had been a comfort to him to behold her placidly asleep yonder, requiring no attention, leaving him free to dip into Tennyson's last idyll, which he carried uncut in his travelling bag. But so variable is the human mind, so fanciful and altogether irrational at times, that now Mr. Caulfield began to feel vaguely curious about the face hidden under the blue gauze veil. He began to wonder about it. Was it so very pale, so deadly white, as it seemed to him under that gauze veil, in the dim light of the oil-lamp? No, it was the blue gauze, no doubt, which gave that ghastly pallor to the sharply cut features, the sunken cheeks.

The young lady's eyes were altogether hidden by the shadow of her hat, but Mr. Caulfield felt sure that she was asleep. She was breathing so quietly that he could scarcely see any indication of the faint breath that must be stirring her breast in gentle undulations. Sometimes he fancied he saw the folds of the Rob Roy shawl rise and fall in regular pulsations. Sometimes it seemed to him that nothing stirred save the shadows moved by the flickering of the wind-blown flame.

He sat and watched that quiet figure in the corner, only taking his eyes away now and then to look out at the dark land through which they were speeding, to see a cozy village, lit by half-a-dozen farthing rushlights, flit by like a phantom or a town that made a patch of angry glare on the edge of the horizon. Useless to think of

enjoying Tennyson by the sickly gleam of that wretched lamp! He curled himself up in his warm rug, he closed his eyes, and tried to sleep. In vain. He was thinking of the face under the blue veil. He was broad awake—hopelessly awake. He could do nothing but sit and contemplate the figure reposing so quietly in the opposite corner. How he longed for Milldale junction! He looked at his watch. The inexorable dial told him that it was only half-an-hour since he left Grandchester. His own sensations told him that it was a long night of agony.

Naturally a nervous man, to-night his nerves were getting the mastery over him.

‘I never took such a miserable journey,’ he said to himself, ‘If she would only throw back that veil—if she would only speak to me—if she would only stir, or make some little sign of life! It is like travelling with Death personified. Were she to lift that veil this instant I should expect to see a skull underneath.’

He had been told not to speak to her, but the inclination to disobey that injunction was every instant intensifying. Yet, if she were sleeping as placidly as she seemed to sleep, it would be cruel to disturb her; and he was a man over-flowing with the milk of human kindness.

He took out his Tennyson, and cut the leaves, puzzling out a few lines here and there by the uncertain lamplight. This helped him to while away a quarter of an hour. He looked at his watch. God be praised! fifteen minutes more and the train would be at Milldale. What bliss to deliver that poor creature into the keeping of her friends—to have done with that muffled figure and that unseen face forever!

The train was fast approaching the junction; seven minutes more alone remained of the hour, and this night mail was famed for its punctuality.

Just at the last that feeling of morbid curiosity which had been tormenting the curate for the greater part of the journey became an irresistible impulse. He changed his seat that directly opposite his silent companion. Here he could see the form of the delicate features under the blue veil. How cruelly illness had sharpened that outline? The girl’s ungloved hand hung listlessly over the morocco-covered arm which divided her seat from the next. Such a pallid hand, so nerveless in its attitude. Something, he knew not what, prompted Mr. Caulfield to touch those pale fingers. He bent over and laid his hand lightly upon them.

Great God, what an icy hand! He had felt the touch of death on many a sad occasion in the path of duty, but this was colder than death itself. A cry of horror burst from

his lips. He snatched aside the gauze veil, and saw a face purpled by the awful shadow of death.

‘Milldale Junction! Change here for Broughborough, Mudford, Middlebridge, Sloughcombe——’ Here followed a string of names that dwindled into silence far away along the platform.

George Caulfield sprang out of the railway carriage like a man distraught. He seized upon the nearest guard.

‘For God’s sake tell me what to do!’ he cried. ‘There is a lady in that carriage dead, or dying. Indeed, I fear she is actually dead. She was placed in my charge by a stranger at Grandchester. She is to be met by friends here. It will be an awful shock for them—near relatives, perhaps. How am I to find them? How am I to break the sad news to them?’

He was pale to the lips, cold drops of sweat on his brow. All the pent-up excitement of the last hour burst from him now with uncontrollable force. The guard was as calm as a man of iron.

“Fetch the stationmaster here, will you?” he said to a passing porter. “Sad thing, sir,” he said to the agitated curate; “but you’d better keep yourself quiet. Such misfortunes will happen. We’ll get a medical man here presently. I dare say there’s one in the train. Perhaps the lady has only fainted. Hadn’t you better step inside and sit with her?”

They were standing at the door of the carriage. George Caulfield glanced with a shudder at that muffled figure in the furthest corner.

“No,” he answered, profoundly agitated, “I could do no good. I fear there is no hope. I fear she is dead.”

“No relation of yours, sir, the lady?” asked the guard, scrutinising the curate rather curiously. “I never saw her till to-night;” and then, in flurried accents, Mr. Caulfield related the circumstances of his departure from Grandchester.

“Here comes the station-master,” said the guard, without vouchsafing any comment on the curate’s story.

The station-master was a business-like man, of commanding presence, and Mr. Caulfield turned to him as for protection. “What am I to do?” he asked, when the guard had briefly stated the case.

“Nothing, I should think,” answered the station-master shortly, “but you'd better stay to see the upshot of the business. Where are the lady's friends, I wonder? They ought to have turned up by this time. Johnson, just you go along the platform and look out for anybody waiting to meet a lady from Grandchester, and send someone else along the line to inquire for a doctor.”

The guard departed on his errand; the station-master stayed. In three minutes a porter came, followed by an elderly man, bearded and spectacled.

“Medical gentleman, sir,” said the porter.

The doctor got into the carriage and looked at the lady. “Bring me a better light,” he asked, and a lamp was brought. A crowd was collecting by this time, travelers who scented some excitement and thought they could not make a better use of their remaining five minutes than in finding out all about it.

“You had better send for the police,” exclaimed the doctor, reappearing at the door of the carriage. “This is a bad case.”

“How do you mean?” inquired the station-master.

‘I mean that this poor creature has died from the effects of a narcotic poison.’

‘Great heaven!’ cried the curate; ‘I had a presentiment there was something wrong.’

The doctor and a porter lifted the muffled figure out of the carriage and conveyed it to the nearest waiting-room. Three minutes more and the train would be moving.

A police-constable appeared as if by magic, and planted himself at the curate's side.

The guard came back.

‘Nobody here to meet the lady,’ he said. ‘There must be a mistake somewhere.’

‘What am I to do?’ demanded George Caulfield, looking helplessly from the station-master to the doctor.

‘Keep yourself as quiet as you can, I should say,’ answered the station-master.

‘But, good heavens! I may be suspected of being concerned in this poor creature's death unless her friends appear to verify my statement. Ah, by-the-bye, her brother gave me his card. I can tell you her name, at any rate.’

He took the card from his breast pocket and handed it to the station-master.

‘Mr. Elsdon, Briargate,’ the man read aloud. ‘

Elsden,' said the doctor. 'I know an Elsden of Briargate—a big man with large white whiskers?' he interrogated, turning to the curate.

'No, this was a young man: pale, dark, good-looking.'

'Ah, I don't know who he can be. There'll have to be an inquest to-morrow morning, and the best thing we can do is to telegraph to Elsden, of Briargate, directly the office is open. It's strange that the lady's friends should not have appeared.'

I shall lose my train,' cried George Caulfield, seeing the last lingerers hurrying to their places. 'Here's my card,' handing one to the doctor. 'You can communicate to me at that address. Any assistance that I can give—'

'Beg your pardon, sir,' said the constable, laying an authoritative hand upon him. 'I shall be obliged to detain you till this business is settled.'

'I shall be wanted as a witness at the inquest?'

'Yes, sir; most likely, sir. It will be my duty to detain you. Better not talk too freely, sir. Any statement you now make may be used against you later on.'

The curate looked at him in surprise. 'Do you mean to say that I am your prisoner—that you want to lock me up?' 'Well, yes, sir. Very suspicious case, you see. Young lady poisoned—friends not forthcoming. No doubt you'll be able to explain matters tomorrow; but for tonight you must consider yourself in custody.'

'Yes, of course I shall be able to explain,' said George Caulfield, calm and bold now that he found himself face to face with actual peril, 'but it is a most painful position. I feel that a trap has been set for me.'

'You had better hold your tongue,' said the doctor.

So the London mail left without George Caulfield, who was conveyed in a cab to Milldale Gaol, where he was subjected to the ignominious process of having his pockets searched by a gaoler. In one of them was found the little bottle given him by the gentleman at Grandchester, and this, together with a few other trifles, was handed over to the authorities for investigation.

CHAPTER II

IN DURANCE VILE

Instead of making any vain attempt at sleep, George Caulfield asked for pens, ink, and paper, and a lamp that would last him for the best part of the night; and on these luxuries being conceded, he sat down to write a long letter to his mother, relating all the circumstances of his miserable journey, and entreating her not to take alarm at his situation, whatever she might read about him in the newspapers. This letter, which would travel by the morning post, could be preceded by a telegram, informing the old lady that her son was safe, and detained at Milldale on business. Some hours of anxiety the son could not spare that beloved mother; and it was more painful to him to think of her trouble, when five o'clock came and brought no returning traveller, than to contemplate his own position.

‘Dear old lady! I can fancy her and all her neat and careful arrangements for my comfort,’ mused Mr. Caulfield. ‘I know how distrustful she will be of the maids, and how she will insist upon getting up at four o'clock in order to see about my breakfast. And then when the time comes, and no hansom drives up to the gate, what agonies she will suffer, for I have never accustomed her to disappointments, I have never broken my word to her in my life.’

The curate fretted and fumed at the thought of his mother's anxiety. He was an only and an adoring son—at thirty-two years of age a confirmed bachelor, loving no one on earth as well as he loved the widowed mother whose cherished companion he had been from childhood upwards. Had she not removed her dearly loved goods and chattels to Eton, and lived in a small house in the High Street all the time her boy was at school there? Had she not followed him to Cambridge as faithfully as a sutler follows a camp? And now she had one of the prettiest houses in South Kensington, and her son was first curate at the most intensely Gothic church in that locality. George Caulfield's mother was the love of his life. He had been assisting at a choral festival at a small town near Grandchester, where an old college friend of his father's was vicar, and had been only three days away from the dainty little nest at South Kensington, where blue china plates had just broken out, like pimples, on the sage green wall, and where the Queen Anne mania showed itself modestly in divers inexpensive details.

‘Poor mother!’ sighed George; ‘a telegram can hardly reach her before nine o'clock at the earliest.’

He read his Tennyson; he dozed a little; he got rid of the night somehow, and at seven o'clock he had written and despatched two telegrams.

The first was to his mother, the second was to the vicar, from whom he had parted at eleven o'clock the previous morning, and to whom he was inclined to look for succour, as one of the cleverest and most energetic men he knew.

This latter message was brief :—

'From George Caulfield, Milldale Gaol, to Edward Leworthy, Freshmead Vicarage—Come to me at once, for God's sake. I am in a great difficulty.'

Mr. Caulfield's janitor brought him a comfortable breakfast by-and-by, and was inclined to sympathise. He knew a gentleman when he saw one, he told the curate, though he had to deal with a rough lot in this beastly hole. He had seen a good many murderers in his time, and the possibility of his prisoner's guilt made very little difference to his feelings. Guilty or not guilty, a man who was free-handed with half-crown pieces was entitled to respect. The difference between a half-crown and a florin was just the difference between your real gentleman and the spurious article. The actual amount was not much; but that odd sixpence marked the distinction.

This functionary informed Mr. Caulfield that the inquest was to take place at four o'clock that afternoon.

'Which gives you time to communicate with your solicitor,' he added, grandly.

'But I haven't any solicitor,' answered the prisoner. 'I never have had any law business in my life.'

'So much the better for you, sir,' responded the gaoler, sententiously; 'but you must have a lawyer to watch this here case for you.'

'I'll wait till my friend the vicar of Freshmead comes, and take his advice about it,' said George. 'I know he'll come as soon as the rail can bring him.'

His confidence was not ill-placed. Soon after noon Mr. Leworthy was ushered into his room. He was between and sixty—a man with a countenance full of vivid intelligence, bright brown eyes, and grey hair, worn longer than the fashion. It was altogether a poetic head; but the man's temperament fitted him for action and effort as thoroughly as his intellect gave him mastery in brain-work.

Such a friend as this was verily a friend in need. The two men clasped hands, and for the first minute George Caulfield was speechless.

‘Tell me all about it,’ said the vicar, sitting down by his friend’s side with as cheerful an air as if it were a common thing for him to find a high-church curate in prison on suspicion of murder.

George Caulfield related his dreadful adventure of the previous night, the vicar listening intently, with knitted brows.

‘It looks very like murder,’ he said at last. ‘The poor creature was carried to the station in a dying state, and that stertorous breathing you noticed when the train started was the last struggle. Don’t be afraid, my dear boy; there’s not the slightest reason for uneasiness. Our business is to find out all about this poor lady, and the man who placed her in the train. She must have been brought to the station in some kind of vehicle—cab, bath chair—something. The first thing to be done is to have inquiries made among the cabmen and cab proprietors. The police will do all that; but I shall have to watch your interests in the matter. You must have a clever lawyer, too, to watch the case. Brockbank, of Grandchester, will be the man—always about the criminal court there, up to every move. I’ll telegraph for him instantly. The inquest is to be at four, you say. I must get it put off till five.’

‘How good you are!’ exclaimed George, ‘and how clever!’

‘I’m a man of the world, that’s all. Some pious people think that a parson has no right to be a man of the world, forgetting who it was that told us to be wise as serpents. I’m not the popular idea of a parson, you know, by any means; but I can serve a friend as well as your strait-laced specimen of the breed.’

He was a man of abounding cheerfulness and infinite capacity for work, as prone to embellish his conversation with occasional flowers of modern slang now as he had been forty years ago at Eton. He was just the man George Caulfield wanted in this crisis of his life.

He telegraphed to the Grandchester attorney; and he got the inquest postponed from four till five. He saw the medical man; he talked to the police. A police officer had started for Grandchester by an early train to hunt up the owner of the card, and to obtain as much information as could be got in a few hours.

The inquest was held at the chief hotel in Milldale, in a large dining-room, which was only used on civic and particular occasions. Here, under a blaze of gas, the curate of St. Philemon’s, South Kensington, found himself for the first time in his life face to face with a British jury and a British coroner.

Mr. Hargrave, M.R.C.S., general practitioner at Milldale, declared that the deceased, name unknown, had died from the effects of a large dose of laudanum. There had been no post-mortem, and he saw no necessity for one. The colour of the face, the odour of the lips, the abnormal coldness of the corpse, were sufficient evidence as to the nature of the poison. The bottle found in the prisoner's possession contained laudanum.

Sensation!

The railway guard and station-master stated all they knew about the arrival of the deceased at Milldale Junction. Both described the prisoner as violently agitated.

The constable who had been sent to Grandchester was next examined.

He had found Mr. Elsdon, of Briargate—a man of sixty, stout, grey, bald, in every attribute unlike the man described so graphically by Mr. Caulfield. Mr. Elsdon had been able to offer no suggestion as to the stranger who had made such a shameful use of his card.

The constable had afterwards gone to no less than four cab-yards, where he had made all inquiries possible in a limited time. He had been unable to find any cabman who had driven an invalid lady to the station on the previous evening. He had next hunted out the only bath chair proprietor to be found in Grandchester, with the same result. Time had not allowed him to visit the numerous chemists' shops in that thriving city, and that remained to be done.

There was no evidence on Mr. Caulfield's behalf, except the vicar of Freshmead's evidence as to his character and antecedents, and to the fact that he only parted with him at eleven o'clock on the previous morning at the Freshmead Road Station. Freshmead was seven miles from Grandchester.

'What was Mr. Caulfield going to do when he left you?' asked the coroner.

'He was going to spend the day in Grandchester.'

'Has he friends or acquaintances in that city?'

'No. He was going to look at the cathedral and law-courts, and to spend an hour or two in the Oldbury Library.'

'He was to dine somewhere, I suppose?'

‘He meant to dine at a restaurant. There are a good many dining-places in Grandchester; he could take his choice among them.’

After this witness had been examined, the inquiry was adjourned for a week.

At the close of the proceedings Mr. Brockbank, the lawyer, asked if his client might be released on bail, the vicar of Freshmead being prepared to offer himself as security to any amount, but the coroner replied that the case was of too serious a nature to admit of bail.

So Mr. Caulfield went back to the stony place whence he had come, where the utmost privilege that could be accorded him was the liberty to see his friends at stated hours, and to have his meals supplied from an adjacent hotel.

His spirits would have assuredly gone down to the point of utter despondency on that gloomy winter evening, when the mouldy fly that had conveyed him to the George Hotel carried him back to the gaol, had he not been supported and sustained by the indomitable cheerfulness of his friend the vicar.

‘What do you think of the case now?’ he asked.

‘Think!’ cried Mr. Leworthy. ‘Why, that I shall have so much to do in Grandchester, ferretting out this mystery of yours, during the next six days that I don’t know how the deuce my parish work is to get done.’

‘Won’t you employ the police?’

‘Of course I shall; but I shall employ myself too. Don’t you be down-hearted, George. I mean to see you safely through this business, and I shall do it right away, as they say on the other side of the Atlantic.’

George Caulfield’s confidence in his father’s old friend was unbounded. He had seen in the past how the vicar of Freshmead could conquer difficulties which the ruck of men would have found insurmountable. Mr. Leworthy dined with him as cheerfully as if they had been eating whitebait at Greenwich or turtle in Aldersgate Street under the most exhilarating circumstances; and stimulated by the force of example, George Caulfield, who had scarcely broken his fast since he left Grandchester, found himself enjoying the tavern steak and the tavern claret.

His friend left him soon after dinner to go back to Grandchester by the nine o’clock train; and then came a dreary interval until ten, when the prisoner lay down on his pallet bed and slept soundly, exhausted by the bewildering emotions of the last

twenty-four hours. He was very downhearted now. That he had before him the prospect of a week's solitude in that miserable cell, for Mr. Leworthy had told him that he should not return to Milldale until the day fixed for the adjourned inquiry, by which time he hoped to have unearthed the man who had used Mr. Elsdon's card.

An agitating surprise awaited Mr. Caulfield next morning. While he was breakfasting dismally upon tea and dry toast, the guardian of his solitude came in to tell him that a lady wished to see him.

'A lady!' cried the curate. 'There must be some mistake. I don't know a creature in the town. Pray don't let me be made a show of, to gratify any one's morbid curiosity.'

'Lord, love you, sir, as if we should do such a thing! Yes, all right; the lady's got an order. She's a relative, no doubt.'

The man withdrew into the stony passage outside; then came a rustling sound George Caulfield knew well—a sweeping, stately step, and an elderly lady, grey and tall and slim, came quickly in and threw her arms round his neck.

'Mother!' cried the curate, 'how could you do such a thing?'

'How could I do anything else?' said his mother, striving heroically to be cheerful. 'Do you suppose I was going to stay in London after I received your letter? The postman brought the letter at seven, Sophia had my trunk packed by half-past, and Jane had a cab at the door—such good girls, and so anxious about you! I was at Euston by ten minutes to eight, and caught the train that leaves at eight-fifteen. I was at Milldale half-an-hour after midnight—too late to come here, of course, so I went to the nearest hotel. The chambermaid told me they were sending you your meals. I felt quite interested in them, and at home with them directly.'

She was a wonderful old lady, carried herself so bravely, spoke so brightly, looked at her son with eyes so full of confidence and hope. He would have been unworthy of such a mother had he not faced his position unfalteringly. They sat down side by side on the prison bench, and he told her all that had happened since he wrote his letter to her, and spoke as if nothing were more certain than his speedy justification.

CHAPTER III

STAGE THE FIRST

While George Caulfield was talking to his mother the vicar of Freshmead was plodding up and down the streets of Grandchester, eager, hopeful, determined to unravel the tangled skein of the nameless woman's fate. Who was she, what was she? Had she actually been murdered, and if so, for what reason? Who was the gainer by her death, and in what way?

Mr. Leworthy started at an advantage. Everybody in Grandchester knew him, and he knew everybody. The police were ready to confide in him freely; the local magistrates would be glad to help him. But on this occasion he was inclined to rely on his own wits. The police were at work for Mr. Brockbank's client. If they succeeded, well and good. But the vicar was not going to work with them.

His first visit was to the office of a daily paper, where he handed in the following advertisement: "Missing, since November 30, a young lady; when last seen she wore a Rob Roy tartan shawl, a brown straw hat, and blue gauze veil. Anyone affording information will be handsomely rewarded on applying to E. L., care of Mr. Brockbank, solicitor, Deansgate."

This advertisement Mr. Leworthy took to the three local dailies.

His next visit was to Mr. Elsdon, of Briargate.

"A man would hardly make use of another man's card unless he had some business or social relations with that other man," reflected the vicar, as he tramped along, sturdy in bearing, determined in step. "A man does not pick up a visiting-card in the street."

He found Mr. Elsdon elderly and plethoric, a man who rarely got through a business letter without stopping in the middle to mop his highly polished cranium with a crimson silk handkerchief. This gentleman was amiable, but not brilliant. He had read the report of yesterday's inquest, and was therefore posted in the facts, but he had no ideas to offer.

"How did that young man get hold of your card?" asked the vicar. "He must have picked it up in some illegitimate way, unless he is among the number of your

personal acquaintance.” Mr. Elsdon gave a supercilious laugh. “I hope my friendships do not lie among secret murderers,” he said.

“Of course, we all hope that, naturally; but one can never tell. My friend describes this young man as of gentlemanly appearance and good manners. Good-looking, too, quite an interesting countenance—pale, with dark eyes, silky brown moustache—what is generally called a poetic style of face.”

The Grandchester merchant seemed to retire within himself, and to be absorbed in profound thought. Presently he gave a sigh, and began to mop his polished brow and the barren arch above it, whereon no hair had grown for the last decade.

“I don’t want to mix myself up in this business,” he said at last. “It is sure to entail trouble.”

“As a Christian, as an honest man, you are bound not to withhold any information that can tend to exculpate the innocent,” urged the vicar, with some warmth.

‘But how do I know that I can give any such information?’ demanded Mr. Elsdon, testily. ‘If I give utterance to my ideas I may be only putting you on a false scent.’

‘Better hazard that than withhold anything.’

‘I know absolutely nothing. But your description might apply to a young man called Foy, who was in my employment three years ago.’

‘What character did he bear when you knew him?’

‘Excellent. He left me of his own accord, in order to improve his position. He was a talented young man—first-rate accountant, good linguist—and I had no situation to give him worthy of his talents. He left me to go to Kibble and Umpleby’s, packers, in Deansgate, as corresponding clerk. I was only able to give him seventy-five pounds a year. He was to have two hundred at Kibble’s. They do a great deal of business with Spanish America, and the French colonies, and they wanted a clerk who could write good French and Spanish.’

‘I see. Do you suppose that he is still at Kibble and Umpleby’s?’

‘I have not heard the contrary.’

‘Was this Mr. Foy a native of Grandchester? Had he family or friends here?’

‘No. He was quite alone. I believe he was of French extraction. He used to boast that he was descended from some famous family called De Foix.’ ‘I should be very

grateful to you if you could give me any further information about this young man.'

'What kind of information? My acquaintance with him never extended beyond my office. I know that he was clever. He was regular in his business habits, and I had every reason to suppose he was well-behaved. He brought me a letter of recommendation from a firm at Lyons with which I do business. I engaged him on the strength of that letter.'

'I see. Then he was a stranger in Grandchester. Something you can tell me, however—the house in which he lodged while he was in your employment. You must have known his address then.'

'Certainly,' replied Mr. Elsdon; and then he put his lips to an ivory mouth-piece, and murmured some order down a gutta-percha tube.

Five minutes afterwards a clerk appeared with a slip of paper, which he laid before his employer.

'That is the address, sir.' Mr. Elsdon handed the paper to the vicar. 'There it is, sir. You see there is only one address, and the young man was with me nearly two years—an indication of steady habits, I think.'

'No doubt. I dare say Mr. Foy is a most estimable person. But I must find the dark-eyed, pale-faced young man who gave your card to my friend, and whether I find him in Mr. Foy's shoes or in anybody else's I'll make it rather hot for him.'

And with this unchristian speech the vicar took leave of Mr. Elsdon.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF ROSE COTTAGE

Mr. Leworthy's next call was at Kibble and Umpleby's. Here he acted with greater subtlety. He asked to see the head clerk, and informed that gentleman that he had been recommended to apply there for a small service which he had been unable to get done anywhere else. He wanted a letter written to a correspondent at Cadiz, and he had not found anybody in Grandchester who knew enough Spanish to write such a letter for him. He had particular reasons for not writing in French or English, as

his communication was of a strictly private character, and the gentleman to whom he had occasion to write understood no language but his own.

‘I am told you have a clerk who is a first-rate Spanish scholar,’ Mr. Leworthy said in conclusion.

‘Quite true, sir. Our foreign clerk, Mr. Foy, knows Spanish as well as he knows French, and can write you as good a letter in Italian or Portuguese as in either. It’s rather lucky you looked in this morning, though. Tomorrow would have been too late.’

‘Why? Is he leaving you?’

The clerk grinned. ‘Only for a fortnight’s holiday—rather an important event in his life. He’s going to be married tomorrow morning—to the daughter of our junior partner, the youngest Miss Umpleby.’

‘Oh, he is going to be married tomorrow morning! I congratulate him—and the young lady. Has it been a long engagement?’

‘A year and a half. The old gentleman was very much against it at the first—thought his daughter might have looked higher—as of course she might, though she’s one of a large family. But the firm had been pleased with the young man, and the young man had got a footing in the firm’s houses, which is more than the common ruck of us do—unless it’s a bit of a kick-up at Christmas-time, in a condescending way, which we may appreciate or may not, according to the bent of our minds. But this young Foy is musical, and he’s half a foreigner, and those two things have stood him in good stead with the firm’s families; and the upshot of it all is that he’s going to be married to the youngest Miss Umpleby the day after tomorrow.’

‘Could I see him for a few minutes? I shan’t detain him long.’

‘Certainly, sir, I’m sure he’ll be happy to oblige you,’ said the clerk, who knew all about the vicar of Freshmead, one of the most popular men within twenty miles of Grandchester.

The clerk went to fetch Mr. Foy, and returned presently with that accomplished young man. The vicar was a student of character. He had not spent all his days amidst the green pastures of Freshmead. Seven years of his life had been devoted to preaching and teaching, and doing all manner of good works, in one of the vilest and most populous districts of East London. He had had plenty to do with scoundrelism in his time; he knew a scoundrel when he saw one, and his first glance

at Gaston Foy convinced him that this young favourite of fortune was as dark a villain as ever wore a smooth face to gull the world.

Yes, despite his polished manners, his gentle and insinuating smile, and the oily blandness of his legato tones, the vicar made up his mind that this was the villain he wanted. This was the man who had brought his dying victim to the railway station and transferred the burden of his crime to a stranger.

George Caulfield had minutely described the man's appearance, and this man, in every feature, corresponded with that description. That he seemed perfectly happy and at ease did not surprise Mr. Leworthy. To a creature of this kind dissimulation is second nature.

The vicar stated his business, and sat down at the clerk's desk to write a rough draft of the letter to be translated, but after writing a sentence he stopped abruptly.

'It's a business that requires some thought,' he said. 'If you'll look in at my hotel this evening and let me dictate the letter quietly there I shall esteem it a favour, I won't keep you half-an-hour, and you'll be doing me an inestimable service.'

Mr. Foy looked at him rather suspiciously.

'My time is not my own just now,' he said. 'If you'll send me your letter I'll put it into Spanish for you, but I have no time to call at your hotel.'

This was said with a decided tone that settled the question.

'I see,' thought the vicar. 'He is not the man to walk into any little trap that I may set for him.'

He offered to send the letter to Mr. Foy's private address that evening.

'You had better send it here. I live a little way out of Grandchester.'

The vicar assented, wished Mr. Foy 'Good morning,' and went away. Ten minutes afterwards he went back to Kibble and Umpleby's, saw the clerk he had seen first, and said:

'I may as well have Mr. Foy's address, in case I shouldn't be able to get my letter written before he leaves business.'

'Certainly, sir. Mr. Foy lives at Parminter—Rose Cottage, Lawson Lane.'

‘Thanks, I may not want to send to him there, but it’s as well to be on the safe side. Good morning.’

‘Good morning, sir,’ said the clerk aloud. ‘Fidgetty old gentleman,’ he ejaculated inwardly.

Parminter was a rustic village five miles from Grandchester. It did not lie in the direction affected by Grandchester merchants or Grandchester tradespeople. Here were no Gothic mansions, no fair Italian villas, springing like mushrooms from the soil—one year a confusion of lime and mortar tubs, stacked flooring-boards, and rough-hewn stone, and the next all smiling amongst geranium beds and ribbon bordering, velvet lawns and newly-planted shrubberies. None of the commercial wealth of Grandchester had found its way to Parminter. The village was still a village—a mere cluster of labourers’ cottages, two or three old homesteads, and half-a-dozen small dwellings of a shabby-genteel type.

Among these last was Rose Cottage, a small, square house with plaster walls, bright with greenery and scarlet berries, even in this wintry season. A bow window below, rustic lattices above. Just such a house as a man with considerable taste and an inconsiderable income would choose for himself. The small garden in front of the bow window was in admirable order, yet the place had a deserted look somehow, Mr. Leworthy thought, as he rang the bell.

He rang once, twice, three times, with no more effect than if Rose Cottage had been a toy house inhabited by Dutch dolls. This was aggravating. There was a meadow on one side of the cottage, where half-a-dozen sheep were browsing contentedly. The vicar climbed the hurdle which divided this pasture from Lawson Lane, and went round to the back of the Cottage. Here there was a small garden, neatly and tastefully laid out, but there was no more appearance of human life at the back of the house than in the front.

‘I suppose my gentleman comes home at night and lets himself in with a latch-key,’ the vicar said to himself, much provoked at having travelled five miles without result.

He was climbing the hurdle on his return to the lane when a small girl, in a very short skirt, a girl of timid aspect, carrying a beer-jug, dropped him a curtsy, and said:

‘Please, sir, was it you a-ringing of that bell just now?’

‘Was it I?’ ejaculated the vicar, impatiently. ‘Yes, it was.’

And then, smiling on the small girl, for he had a heart large enough for ever so many parishes of children, he said:

‘I am not vexed with you, my dear; I am angry with Fate. Tell me all you know about that cottage, and I’ll give you half-a-crown.’

The girl gasped. She had never possessed a half-crown, but she had an idea it meant abundance. Her father counted his wages by half-crowns, and there were not many in a week’s wage.

‘Please, sir, Mr. Foy lived there with his sister, but they’ve left.’

‘Oh, they’ve left, have they? When did they leave?’

‘Last Monday, sir, and the lady she was very ill, sir, and he took her away in a cab.’

‘And Mr. Foy has not been back since?’

‘No, sir. He left for good, and he gave the key of the cottage to my mother, and the agent is to put up a board next week, and the house is to be let. It was took furnished, and it’s to be let furnished again.’

‘Did they live quite alone? Had they no servant?’

‘No, sir, never no regular servant. Mother used to do the cleaning twice a week. Mother’s very sorry they be gone, they was good to mother.’

‘How long had they lived there?’

‘Nigh upon a year.’

‘And the lady was Mr. Foy’s sister?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And now take me to your mother.’

The girl looked wistfully at the jug.

‘If you please I was to fetch father’s beer, sir.’

‘I see, and if you don’t father will be angry?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Then you shall go—but first tell me where your mother lives.’

The child pointed down Lawson Lane. 'It's the last cottage, sir.'

'All right.'

Just where the lane straggled off into ploughed fields and open country, there was a row of labourers' cottages, and in the last of these Mr. Leworthy found a plaintive woman with a child in her arms, who owned to being the mother of the small girl with the jug.

The vicar wasted no time in preliminaries. He seated himself on an almost bottomless chair, and, with his stout umbrella planted between his knees, interrogated the matron thus:

'You used to work for Mr. Foy and his sister. What do you know about them?'

'Only that they paid me honourable for what I did, sir. I'm bound to up and say that whoever asks me.'

'Did they live happily together as—brother and sister?'

Here the matron began to hesitate. She shifted her baby from one arm to the other. She gave a deprecating cough.

'I see,' said the vicar, 'they quarrelled sometimes.'

'I never see 'em, sir, for I scarce ever see Mr. Foy. He was off to Grandchester before I went of a morning, and he didn't come back till after I left. I used to go for the half-day, you see, sir, not the whole day. But I don't think the young the lady was not quite happy in her mind. I've seen her fretting, and people will talk, you see, sir—neighbors next door to Rose Cottage have heard them at high words, in summertime, when the windows were all open, or when they were in the garden.

'I see. Had the sister been long ill?'

'No, sir. Not above a month.'

'What was the matter with her?'

'Well, sir, I can't say exactly. It was a sort of wasting sickness, like. She couldn't keep anything on her stomach of late, poor dear; and she had pains that racked her, and used to complain of a burning feel in her throat; out of sorts altogether, as you may say. I believe it all came from fretting.'

'Why did she fret so much? Was her brother very unkind to her?'

‘No, sir. I don’t think it was his unkindness that worried her. But he used to keep very late hours—hardly ever coming home till the last train, and that worried her. Not that he was ever the worse for drink. He was the soberest young man as ever was, but she was of a jealous disposition, and the thought that he was out enjoying himself with other people used to prey on her mind.’

‘That was hardly fair, if he treated her kindly when he was at home. A sister has no right to be jealous of a brother.’

‘Perhaps not, sir, but jealous she was, and fret she did.

“I’ve nobody but him in the world, Mrs. Moff,” she said—my name being Moff—“and I can’t bear him to be always away. There was a time when he spent all his evenings at home.” And then the tears would roll down her poor hollow cheeks, and it went to my heart to see her so miserable. I had a fellow-feeling, you see, sir, for I know how it worries me when my master stops late at the “Coach and Horses,” on a Saturday night.’

‘Ah, but it’s different with a husband. A wife has a right to be exacting—not a sister. Now, tell me how they left the place, and all about it. I’m interested in this poor girl, and perhaps I may be able to befriend her. Where did they go?’

‘He was going to take her to some place near the sea, on the other side of Grandchester, and a good way off. The name has gone clean out of my head. He was very kind to her from the time she fell ill. She told me so with her own lips. “Gaston was never so kind to me in his life,” she says. He fancied it was the air here that didn’t agree with her, she told me, and it is rather a relaxing air, sir. I feel it so sometimes myself. There’s times when I feel that low that if It wasn’t for my drop of beer I should go off in a dead faint.’

What kind of a young woman was Miss Foy? Was she like her brother?

No, sir, she were not. I never laid eyes on a brother and sister more unsimilar. She had been very pretty, there’s no denying that, but her nervous worriting ways had that worn and preyed upon her that she was old and haggard before her time. She had light brown hair, and a fair skin and blue eyes, and I dessay she had been a pretty figure before she wasted away like, but her health were never good from the time I knew her.

Did you see her the day she went away? asked the vicar.

It wasn't a day, sir. She went late at night, by the last train to Grandchester. She was to sleep in Grandchester, and go on to the seaside next morning; and I do say that it wasn't the right thing for a young person in her state of health to travel late on a winter's night. But there, poor young feller, it wasn't his fault, for he had to be at the office all day.

She was wrapped up warmly, I suppose?

Yes, she wore a thick Scotch plaid shawl that he bought her the winter before.

Black and red? said the vicar.

Black and red, assented the woman, with some astonishment. One would think you'd seen it, sir.

I told you I was interested in the young lady, answered the vicar, vaguely.

He took out his memorandum book, and wrote down the date and hour of the young woman's removal from Rose Cottage. She had left in the one cab that plied between Parminter village and the Parminter Road Station. The cabman could be forthcoming if he were wanted, Mrs. Moff protested.

Mr. Leworthy rewarded this worthy woman with a crown piece, half of which he stipulated was to be given to the little girl when she came home from her errand; and then he walked briskly back to the station, which was a good half-mile from Lawson Lane. He was lucky enough to get a train in less than half-an-hour; and he was back in Grandchester at three o'clock in the afternoon.

Here he took a cab and drove straight to Mr. Brockbank's office, to whom he imparted all he had done.

Upon my soul, you're a clever fellow, vicar! cried the lawyer; you ought to have been something better than a parson.

You mean I ought to have been something that pays better. Now, look here, Brockbank, you must start off to Milldale by the first train, and get the coroner to order a post-mortem. No post-mortem necessary, forsooth, said that fool of a local surgeon, because the immediate cause of death was obviously laudanum. Why, it's clear to my mind, from what I've heard to-day, that this poor creature was slowly done to death by arsenic, and that the dose of laudanum was only given at the last to accelerate the end.

Mr. Brockbank saw the force of this argument, and looked at once to his railway time-table.

There's a train at 4.30, he said; I can go by that. And now what are you going to do?

I shall call on Mr. Umpleby and try and stop to-morrow's wedding.

What motive can this Foy have had for getting rid of his sister? speculated the lawyer.

Very little motive, I should imagine, for getting rid of a sister. But what if the young woman was something more difficult to dispose of than a sister? What if she was his wife? These two young people lived quite alone in a country lane, It was easy for them to live as man and wife, yet pass for brother and sister. The charwoman's account shows that the poor girl was jealous and unhappy. She fretted on account of Foy's late hours. They were overheard quarrelling. Take my word for it, Brockbank, that unfortunate young woman was a wife—a wife of whom Mr. Foy grew mortally tired when he found that it was on the cards for him to marry Miss Umpleby, with a handsome dowry, and the prospect of rapid advancement in the firm. Now I want you to set one of your clerks at work, without an hour's delay, to hunt up the evidence of such a marriage, either in a church or at a registry office.

"It shall be done," said Brockbank. "Anything more?"

"Only this much. I have written an advertisement which will appear to-morrow in the three local dailies."

He read the draft of his advertisement. "This may bring us information as to the next stage in that poor young woman's journey after she left Parminter," he said.

"Possibly. You really are a genius in the art of hunting a criminal."

"No, sir, I am only thorough. I would do a good deal more than this to help anyone I love. Now I'm off. I dare say you've some business to get through before you start for Milldale."

"Only half-a-dozen letters to dictate," answered the lawyer lightly, and then he put his lips to a speaking-tube and gave an order.

"Send up the shorthand clerk, and have a cab at the door at a quarter past four."

CHAPTER V.
‘DELAY THIS MARRIAGE!’

Mr. Leworthy went back to Kibble and Umpleby’s, and asked if Mr. Umpleby was on the premises. No, Mr. Umpleby had left half-an-hour ago, to return to the bosom of his family in Tolkington Park.

Happily for the eager vicar, Tolkington Park was an adjoining suburb, where those well-to-do citizens of Grandchester who did not like the labour of daily railroad journeys contented themselves with a semi-urban retirement in villas of their own building, amidst shrubberies of their own planting, overlooking the towniest and most formal of public parks. It had long been a grief to the feminine Umplebys that, whereas other merchants’ families of wealth and standing had Gothic mansions or Italian palaces set in richly wooded landscapes, remote from the smoke of the city, they had only the stereotyped surroundings of a thickly populated suburb, and were in no wise better off than their next door neighbours.

A cab with a horse of his own choosing drove Mr. Leworthy to the utmost limit of Tolkington Park in less than half an hour. He found the Umpleby mansion, which was called Mount Lebanon, although the ground on which it stood was as flat as a pancake, and there was not a cedar within a mile. It was a substantial, square house, with bay windows, a broad flight of steps, grandiose iron railings, painted dark blue, and surmounted with gilded pine-apples, and an all-pervading glare of plate-glass windows.

The hall was tessellated; the drawing-room was brilliant in colour, and painfully new. Here Mr. Leworthy sat waiting for the master of the house, while a young lady in an adjacent chamber favoured him with a solfeggio exercise, which strained to the uttermost a somewhat acid voice.

‘I wonder whether that is the bride singing,’ speculated the vicar, ‘and I wonder if she is very much attached to my gentleman. Rather hard lines for her if she is fond of him, poor child!’

At last Mr. Umpleby appeared, plethoric, rubicund, pompous.

‘Happy to have the honour of making your acquaintance, vicar,’ he said. ‘I have long known you by repute.’

‘Every one in Grandchester does that,’ answered Leworthy pleasantly; ‘I have been too often in hot water not to be pretty well known.’

‘Impossible to please every one,’ murmured Mr. Umpleby.

‘Precisely, and the man who tries it ends by pleasing no one. I have taken my own course; and though I’ve made a good many enemies, thank God I’ve made twice as many friends. Now, Mr. Umpleby, I must ask you to receive me with all good nature, and to believe that I mean well by you and yours, although I have come on a most unpleasant business.’

The merchant looked uneasy. Another great firm gone wrong, perhaps; a question of a big bad debt.

‘Is it a business matter?’ he faltered.

‘No, it is a family matter.’

‘Oh!’ he said, with an air of relief, as if this were of minor importance.

‘You are going to marry your daughter to-morrow?’ said the vicar.

‘I am,’

‘To your clerk, Mr. Foy?’

‘Yes, sir. It is not the first time that a merchant’s daughter has married her father’s clerk, I believe, though it is out of the common course of things.’

‘I am here to beg you to postpone the marriage.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘Before I tell you that, you must give me your promise to communicate nothing I tell you to Mr. Foy.’

Mr. Umpleby hesitated.

‘Mind, it is vital to you, as a father, to know what I have.’

Mr. Umpleby gave the required promise.

The vicar told his story, beginning with the scene at the railway station, ending with the story he had heard at Parminter.

‘Were you aware that Foy had a sister?’

‘I never heard him speak of one.’

‘Curious that, in your future son-in-law.’

Mr. Umpleby sat and stared into space like a man bewildered. He wiped his large, bald forehead with the biggest and most expensive thing in bandannas.

‘This is a most frightful suspicion,’ he said; ‘a young woman poisoned, for you seem to think this young woman was poisoned. It is an awful position. Every arrangement has been made for the wedding, as you may suppose—guests invited—some of the best people in Grandchester. My wife and daughters have the highest opinion of young Foy. I may say they are infatuated about him. His conduct in business has been irreproachable. There must be some mistake—some ridiculous misunderstanding.’

‘I got Foy’s address at your own office, and at that address I heard of a sister of whose existence you are absolutely unaware. Do you think that speaks well for your intended son-in-law?’

‘He may have had some powerful reason for concealing her existence. She may be weak in her intellect. She may have gone wrong. As for your idea of slow poisoning, that is too absurd.’

‘And you mean this young man to marry your daughter to-morrow morning?’

‘What am I to do? I never cared about the match. I have been persuaded into giving my consent. My girl had a right to look higher. But to stop the marriage now would be—’

‘Simply prudent. Investigate the case as I have put it before you. If I am deceived—if Foy is not the man who took that dying girl to the railway station—if Foy’s sister, or a woman who passed as his sister, is not lying dead at Milldale, I will make the humblest apology to you and Mr. Foy for my baseless suspicions. You must take your own course. I want to save your daughter from sorrow and disgrace. Remember, you have been warned. If Foy is the man I take him to be, the police will be dogging his heels to-morrow morning when he goes into the church to marry your daughter. Good afternoon. I have given you plain facts, and I have no time to spare for discussion.’

Mr. Umpleby would fain have detained him, but the vicar was in a hurry. He drove back to Grandchester, and to the headquarters of the police, to whom he repeated his story. They had been at work all day, and had done very little. They had discovered a porter at the station who remembered the arrival of a gentleman with a sick lady in a plaid shawl. They had seen the woman who took charge of the ladies' waiting-room, second class—always more crowded than the first class—and from her they had heard again of a sick lady in a plaid shawl, accompanied by a very attentive gentleman, but she could give no account of the personal appearance of either. The lady's face was hidden by a veil, and there had been so many people rushing in and out just at the last that there had been no time for her to observe these two, who came in late. This much she knew, that the lady seemed in a kind of faint or stupor, and the gentleman had to carry her in his arms.

Once furnished with a clue, professional intelligence was quite equal to taking it up.

'This woman at Parminter must be taken to Milldale to identify the body,' said the chief official in the detective line, 'and we must watch this fellow Foy, so that he may not give us the slip.'

'He is to be married to his employer's daughter tomorrow morning,' said the vicar. 'To leave Grandchester before tomorrow would be tantamount to a confession of his guilt. It would be throwing up the cards altogether.'

'The symptoms you describe sound like arsenical poisoning,' said the officer, and then he and his colleague whispered together for a minute or so.

'I don't think there is anything more I can do tonight,' said the vicar.

'Precisely. But remember, if you don't want this young scoundrel to be married to a respectable young woman at eleven o'clock tomorrow morning you'll have to look sharp.'

The vicar went back to the bosom of his family at Freshmead, thinking that he had done a pretty good day's work.

Before ten o'clock that night two facts had been discovered in the biography of Mr. Foy—first, that exactly three years before he had been married at a registrar's office to Jane Dawson, spinster, daughter of John Dawson, master mariner; and secondly, that he, or a man exactly answering to his description, had bought small quantities of tartar emetic, and small portions of laudanum, at divers times within the last two months, and at several chemists' shops in the obscurer streets of the great busy town.

These two discoveries the police communicated to Mr. Umpleby late on the vigil of his daughter's wedding.

The evidence of the marriage was indisputable. Much as Mr. Umpleby was inclined to discredit the charge brought against his intended son-in-law, he could not disbelieve the legal proof of the marriage before the registrar; and, convicted of having concealed a prior marriage, Mr. Foy's character appeared in a new and doubtful light.

'I'll put off the wedding,' cried Umpleby, who had spent the evening marching about his house and garden in a state of suppressed agitation. 'I won't have my daughter married to a liar and a trickster. There must be something wrong. There is no smoke without fire.'

He sat down directly the detective had left him, and wrote with his own hand to those Grandchester magnates who had been bidden to the wedding.

'Let these letters be delivered by special messenger before eight o'clock tomorrow morning,' he said to the respectable man-of-all-work, who had been yawning dismally in a pantry at the back of the hall; 'and let that letter be taken to Mr. Foy at the Crown Hotel.'

Foy was to stop at a hotel in Grandchester on the eve of his wedding, in order to be on the ground early.

Mr. Umpleby felt a happier man after he had done this deed. He went up to bed more at ease with himself, but he did not awaken his slumbering wife to tell her the unpleasant news. There would be a scene in the morning, of course, with all these women—hysterics, fainting-fits, recrimination, in which he, the husband and father, would get the worst of it.

Mrs. Umpleby's plum-coloured velvet gown, her brand new Honiton shawl, her white chip bonnet and ostrich feather, were lying in state upon the sofa. Would any woman forgive a husband for upsetting the festival at which those splendours were to be worn? There had been fuss enough about the gown, about the breakfast, about every one of the wedding arrangements; and now, lo and behold, the fuss had been all for nothing!

'I never liked him,' mused Mr. Umpleby. 'It was the women who talked me over. To begin with, the man's half a foreigner, and I want no *parlez-vous* in my family.'

His letter to Foy had been of the briefest.

“Look round the first thing to-morrow morning; I want to talk to you.”

The father was up early, too agitated to eat his breakfast. He carried his cup of tea to the study at the back of the dining-room and paced that snug apartment, waiting for Mr. Foy. Upstairs, there was wild excitement among the women of the household—rushing from room to room, spectral figures in long white raiment and flowing hair, crimping, plaiting, hooking, and eyeing. On the ground floor, there was an awful quiet.

Presently, Gaston Foy came in. Usually pale, he had a hectic spot on each cheek this morning. He, too, shared in the general excitement. Looking at him closely, Mr. Umpleby saw that his lips were dry and white.

“Nothing wrong with Bella, I hope?” he asked nervously.

Bella was the bride.

“No, there is nothing the matter with Bella at present. It is about yourself I want to talk. I think—when we first knew you—you told me that you stood quite alone in the world, that you were an orphan, had fought your own way in life, had not a living soul belonging to you?”

“All that is quite true,” answered Gaston Foy, looking straight at the questioner, with a face that showed no trace of emotion or surprise. “Why discuss the matter this morning? It is not a cheerful subject.”

“You have deceived me,” said Mr. Umpleby. “I am told you have a sister.”

This time the young man was palpably moved. Strong as he was in dissimulation, his self-control failed him. For the moment he stood staring blankly at his accuser—speechless. Then he suddenly recovered himself and looked at Mr. Umpleby pleadingly, with a deprecating smile.

“You have found out my secret,” he said mournfully. “It is a sorrowful one. Yes, I have a sister; yes, I have kept her existence a secret from you and from all I love in this house. Poor girl! Her life has been—is—a burden to herself and others. An invalid, almost an imbecile, my afflicted sister shrank from the world as the world would have shrunk from her. Had you seen her, you might have been prejudiced, you might have regarded her as an obstacle to my marriage.”

“You ought to have told me the truth,” answered Umpleby sternly. “I learn that a few days ago this girl was living with you at Parminter. You removed her from that place in a weak state of health. Where is she now?”

“At the seaside.”

“Where?”

“At Howcomb.” He named a place at least fifty miles from Grandchester.

“Alone?”

“No; with friends of mine.”

Mr. Umpleby took a telegraph form from one of the drawers in his desk and laid it on the blotting-pad.

“Write a telegram to your Howcomb friends at my dictation, to inquire about your sister’s present condition. A few words will do. Thus: I am anxious about my sister—please let me know how she is this morning. Answer paid.’ The reply can come here. Why do you hesitate?”

“Because your request implies suspicion. I shall send no such telegram. Why should you drag my poor suffering sister into this day’s business? I have told you the truth about her. I have told you why I have hitherto concealed her existence from you and yours. Can you not allow me to forget her, at least for today?”

“No, Mr. Foy. I want to have positive proof that your account of this young woman is a true one. I want to know that she is alive and in safe hands. When we have settled that question, I shall have to ask you another.”

The hectic spots had intensified on the young man’s cheeks, leaving the rest of his face livid. He wiped his ashy lips with his handkerchief.

“What question?”

“I shall have to ask you about your wife; and when and how you became a widower. What have you done with the young woman, Jane Dawson, whom you married three years ago at the registry office in St. Swithin Street? Was she an imbecile too? Were you compelled to conceal her existence?”

There is some mistake,’ said Foy, recovering his resolute tone, but not his natural colour. “I was never married in my life.”

“I have been shown a copy of the registry of your marriage, or the marriage of a man calling himself Gaston Foy, clerk, of Grandchester. The name is not a common one. Come, Mr. Foy, we need not prolong this argument. I never liked the notion of your marrying my daughter, though I submitted to it, to please my women-kind; but last night I made up my mind you should not marry her; and now, my young friend, there’s the door. I wish you a very good morning!”

“This is strange treatment, Mr. Umpleby.”

“Not so strange as your own conduct.”

Gaston Foy took up his hat from the table, and left the room without a word. He was meditating what he should do with himself in the next hour. He was speculating whether he should have one hour free in which to extricate himself from a desperate predicament—whether he was not so hemmed round and beset with danger as to make all movement on his part full of peril.

He walked slowly out of the house, down the broad flight of steps. Just outside the iron gate of the garden a hand was laid upon his shoulder.

“I arrest you on suspicion of murder,” said a voice, and Gaston Foy knew that his course was run.

CHAPTER VI

BROUGHT TO A FOCUS

The day had seemed long to the prisoner in Milldale gaol, although he was cheered by the society of his mother, who spent all the time the authorities allowed in her son’s gloomy apartment. It was a sight to see the brave-hearted old lady sitting opposite her son knitting a Berlin wool couvre-pied and pretending to be as comfortable and as much at her ease as if she were in her pretty drawing-room at South Kensington. Not by so much as a quiver of her lip would she allow herself to betray her anxiety. Her heart was as heavy as lead, yet she contrived to smile, and kept up a cheerful flow of small talk about the past and the future—church affairs, the schools, the choir.

But even with this consoling company the dark winter day had seemed long to George Caulfield. He was feverishly expectant of news from Grandchester, and

when none came he fancied that his friend, his lawyer, and the police, had alike failed in their efforts to let in light upon the mystery of that nameless girl's death.

And if the day seemed long, what of the dreary winter night, when imagination, excited by strange circumstances and strange surroundings, conjured up the horrors of a criminal trial—the crowded court, every creature in it believing him, George Caulfield, the murderer of a helpless girl. He saw the chain of circumstantial evidence lengthening out link by link, and he, the accused, would have no power to sunder those links. His lips would be sealed.

And then involuntarily there broke from his lips a cry of anguish:

“He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.”

He had spent a feverish night, given half to wakefulness, half to appalling dreams. He had risen and dressed himself as soon as it was light, and now he sat waiting wearily for some sign from the outer world, some cheering message, some word of hope. It was only two days since the vicar of Freshmead had left him, yet it seemed ages.

Hark! Was not that the cheery voice he knew so well, the full vibration of tones that came from powerful lungs, the clear utterance of a man accustomed to address multitudes? Yes, it was Leworthy's voice, assuredly, and that cheerful tone should belong to the bringer of good tidings. He sat with his hands clutching the edge of his pallet, profoundly agitated, while the grating key turned in the lock, and the heavy cell door moved slowly back. Then the big hand upon his forehead in loving benediction.

God bless you, my dear boy! You will not have long to stay in this hole. The man who brought that poor creature to the station is arrested; he came here by the train I travelled in. He is now in this gaol. There will be a post-mortem today, the inquest re-opened on Monday instead of on Wednesday next, and the evidence then produced will prove his guilt and your innocence.

“Thank you!” ejaculated George Caulfield, and then he fell on his knees beside the prison bed, and poured out the prayer of his soul in thanksgiving.

When he had finished that voiceless prayer he sat down quietly beside his friend to hear how the vicar had done his work, and how completely he had succeeded.

Up to last night the evidence against my gentleman was only speculative, he said, when he had described all that had happened in Briargate and at Parminter, but last night the police contrived to arrest him. They got hold of half-a-dozen photographs of this Mr. Foy who had been vain enough to have himself photographed at different times by all the leading photographers of Grandchester. Provided with these, they went the round of the chemists' shops and found where my gentleman had bought poison. They traced him from lodging to lodging till they found him two years ago living in the outskirts of Grandchester with a weakly, nervous wife, whose description corresponded exactly with that of the weakly, nervous sister at Parminter. They obtained a photograph of this young woman, which had been given by her as a parting souvenir to the landlady, and this portrait Mrs. Moff, the Parminter charwoman, identified as a likeness of the so-called sister. This was bringing things to a focus, wasn't it? inquired the vicar, giving his young friend a ferocious dig in the ribs.

‘Decidedly.’

‘They were brought still closer this morning, thanks to my advertisement for a missing young woman in a Rob Roy shawl. This morning an elderly female appeared at Messrs. Brockbank's, solicitors—your solicitors, you know—and told them that she keeps a small public-house in Water Lane, a narrow street leading to the river, and within five hundred yards of the railway station, and to her house came a young man with an ailing young woman in a plaid shawl—Rob Roy pattern. They stayed there two days and two nights, and while they were there the young woman got worse, and was so ill that she had to be carried to the station, when the young man, who owned to being her husband, took her away. He was taking her to the seaside, he told his landlady—the doctor having said sea air would bring her round. The landlady's son, who was in the iron trade, helped to carry the poor young woman to the station. It was quite dark, and no one took much notice of them. This is why the police could get no information from cabmen or cabmasters, you see. Now, this good woman, the landlady, has been brought to Milldale this morning. She will see the corpse, and she will see Mr. Foy, and I hope she may be able to identify both. She has seen Foy's photograph, and recognised it, already. So the long and the short of it is, my dear fellow, that I think you're pretty comfortably out of this mess, and I hope you'll never do such a thing again.’

The vicar affected facetiousness, perhaps to hide the depth of his feeling. He loved his friend almost as well as he loved his own sons, and that is much, for the man's heart overflowed with love.

The inquest was re-opened on Monday, and the evidence against Gaston Foy was so complete in all its details that the jury had not a moment's hesitation in ordering the immediate release of George Caulfield, who left Milldale by an afternoon train and officiated at an evening service at St. Philemon's that night. How happy he and his mother were as they sat side by side in the railway carriage on the journey back to London!

"I think it will be a long time before I shall care to travel at night and alone," said the curate. "The memory of that awful hour between Grandchester and Milldale would be too vivid."

The complete history of Gaston Foy, how he married a poor girl of humble station, and grew tired of her, soon after the birth of a child, whose death left the mother weakened in body and mind—how, when he found himself getting on in the world, received and made much of in the Umpleby household, he determined to get rid of his wife and marry Miss Umpleby, is all to be read in the criminal records of Grandchester, in which city the young man was tried for wilful murder, found guilty, and hanged within the prison walls a fortnight afterwards.

Story Notes:

M.E. Braddon's 1879 story exemplifies Victorian sensation fiction at its most mechanically efficient, delivering a gripping murder mystery that showcases both the strengths and limitations of the genre.

The story's structure is masterfully paced. Braddon creates immediate tension through the confined railway carriage setting, exploiting the curate's growing unease with surgical precision. The atmospheric opening—with its oil-lamp shadows and "blue gauze veil"—builds genuine Gothic dread. However, the investigation that follows trades psychological complexity for procedural efficiency. The vicar's detective work, while energetic, proceeds with almost algorithmic certainty, diminishing suspense.

George Caulfield emerges as a sympathetic if passive protagonist—a "bookish" clergyman whose Christian gentleness makes him the perfect dupe. His relationship with his devoted mother adds warmth, though it verges on excessive sentimentality. The vicar Edward Leworthy, by contrast, is the story's true engine: worldly, shrewd, and refreshingly pragmatic for a man of the cloth. His declaration that parsons should be "wise as serpents" suggests Braddon's interest in reconciling religious duty with worldly action.

Gaston Foy, the villain, remains frustratingly thin—a stock figure of mercenary duplicity. We learn his motive (social advancement through bigamy) but never penetrate his psychology. Jane Foy exists only as a corpse and a collection of symptoms.

Beneath the melodrama lies sharp social observation. The story exposes Victorian anxieties about class mobility, foreignness (Foy's "half-French" origins marking him as suspect), and the vulnerability of women in marriage. Jane Foy's slow poisoning—conducted under the guise of domestic care—darkly inverts the ideal of the nurturing husband. The ease with which Foy nearly erases his working-class wife to claim a merchant's daughter speaks to rigid class boundaries and feminine powerlessness.

Braddon writes with professional competence rather than distinction. Her prose is clear and swift-moving but rarely memorable. Dialogue serves primarily functional purposes. The story's real achievement lies in its plotting—the satisfying click of evidence falling into place, the strategic deployment of railway timetables and chemist's records.

The resolution feels overly tidy. Every thread is gathered, every witness conveniently forthcoming. The complete absence of ambiguity or moral complication ultimately weakens the story's impact. Braddon seems more interested in the puzzle's solution than in exploring the human wreckage of Foy's crime.

Verdict: An accomplished specimen of popular Victorian fiction—entertaining, morally reassuring, and immediately forgettable. It demonstrates Braddon's considerable skill at narrative mechanics while confirming why sensation fiction, for all its period popularity, rarely achieved lasting literary distinction.