

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER



XII.—THE TRAGEDY OF BARNSDALE MANOR.

BY THE BARONESS ORCZY.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER	Who unravels the mystery to—	ALICE HOLT	Her amanuensis.
THE LADY JOURNALIST	... Who relates it to the ROYAL readers.	SIR GILBERT CULWORTH	A guest at Barnsdale Manor.
LORD BARNSDALE Of Barnsdale Manor.	SIR ARTHUR INGLEWOOD	A celebrated lawyer.
LADY BARNSDALE His wife.	JANE BARLOW	Lady Barnsdale's maid.
MADAME QUESNARD His aunt.			

CHAPTER I.

"We have heard so much about the evils of Bridge," said the man in the corner that afternoon, "but I doubt whether that fashionable game has ever been responsible for a more terrible tragedy than the one at Barnsdale Manor."

"You think, then," I asked, for I saw he was waiting to be drawn out, "you think that the high play at Bridge did have something to do with that awful murder?"

"Most people think that much, I fancy," he replied, "although no one has arrived any nearer to the solution of the mystery which surrounds the tragic death of Mme. Quesnard at Barnsdale Manor on September 23rd last."

"On that fateful occasion, you must remember that the house party at the Manor included a number of sporting and fashionable friends of Lord and Lady Barnsdale, among whom Sir Gilbert Culworth was the only one whose name was actually mentioned during the hearing of this extraordinary case."

"It seems to have been a very gay house party indeed. In the day time Lord Barnsdale took some of his guests to shoot and fish, whilst a few devotees remained at home in order to indulge their passion for the modern craze of Bridge. It was generally understood that Lord Barnsdale did not altogether approve of quite so much gambling. He was not by any means well off; and although he was very much in love with his beautiful wife, he could ill afford to pay her losses at cards."

"This was the reason, no doubt, that Bridge at Barnsdale Manor was only indulged in whilst the host himself was out shooting or fishing; in the evenings there was music or billiards, but never any cards."

"One of the most interesting personalities in the Barnsdale ménage was undoubtedly Madame Nathalie Quesnard, a sister of Lord Barnsdale's mother, who, if you remember, was a Mademoiselle de la Trémouille. This Mme. Quesnard was extremely wealthy, the

widow of a French West Indian planter, who had made millions in Martinique.

"She was very fond of her nephew, to whom, as she had no children or other relatives of her own, she intended to leave the bulk of her vast fortune. Pending her death, which was not likely to occur for some time, as she was not more than fifty, she took up her abode at Barnsdale Manor, together with her companion and amanuensis, a poor girl named Alice Holt.

"Mme. Quesnard was seemingly an amiable old lady; the only unpleasant trait in her character being her intense dislike of her nephew's beautiful and fashionable young wife. The old Frenchwoman, who, with all her wealth, had the unbounded and innate thriftiness peculiar to her nation, looked with perfect horror on Lady Barnsdale's extravagances, and above all on her fondness for gambling; and subsequently several of the servants at the Manor testified to the amount of mischief the old lady strove to make between her nephew and his young wife.

"Mme. Quesnard's dislike for Lady Barnsdale seems, moreover, to have been shared by her dependent and companion, the girl Alice Holt. Between them, these two ladies seem to have cordially hated the brilliant and much-admired mistress of Barnsdale Manor.

"Such were the chief inmates of the Manor last September, at the time the tragedy occurred. On that memorable night Alice Holt, who occupied a bedroom immediately above that of Mme. Quesnard, was awakened in the middle of the night by a persistent noise, which undoubtedly came from her mistress' room. The walls and floorings at the old Manor are very thick, and the sound was a very confused one, although the girl was quite sure that she could hear Mme. Quesnard's shrill voice raised as if in anger.

"She tried to listen for a time, and presently she heard a sound as if some piece of furniture had been knocked over, then nothing more. Somehow the sudden silence seemed to have frightened the girl more than the noise had done. Trembling with nervousness, she waited for some few minutes, then, unable to bear the suspense any longer, she got out of bed, slipped on her shoes and dressing-gown, and determined to run downstairs to see if anything were amiss.

"To her horror she found on trying her door that it had been locked on the outside. Quite convinced now that something must indeed be very wrong, she started screaming and banging against the door, determined to

arouse the household, which she, of course, quickly succeeded in doing.

"The first to emerge from his room was Lord Barnsdale. He at once realised that the shrieks proceeded from Alice Holt's room. He ran upstairs helter-skelter, and as the key had been left in the door, he soon released the unfortunate girl, who by now was quite hysterical with anxiety for her mistress.

"Altogether, I take it, some six or seven minutes must have elapsed from the time when Alice Holt was first alarmed by the sudden silence following the noise in Mme. Quesnard's room, until she was released by Lord Barnsdale.

"As quickly and as coherently as she could she blurted forth all her fears about her mistress. I can imagine how picturesque the old Manor House must have looked then, with everybody, ladies and gentlemen, and servants, crowding into the hall, arrayed in various *négligé* attire, asking hurried questions, getting in each other's way, and all only dimly to be seen by the light of candles, carried by some of the more sensible ones in this motley crowd.

"However, in the meanwhile, Lord Barnsdale had managed to understand Alice Holt. He ran downstairs again and knocked at his aunt's door—he received no reply—he tried the handle—but the door was locked from the inside.

"Genuinely frightened now, he forced open the door, and then recoiled in horror.

"The window was wide open and a brilliant moonlight streamed into the room, weirdly illumining Mme. Quesnard's inanimate body, which lay full length upon the ground. Hastily begging the ladies not to follow him, Lord Barnsdale quickly went forward and bent over his aunt's body.

"There was no doubt that she was dead. An ugly wound at the back of her head, some red marks round her throat, all testified to the fact that the poor old lady had been assaulted and murdered. Lord Barnsdale at once sent for the nearest doctor, whilst he and Miss Holt lifted the unfortunate lady back to bed.

"The messenger who had gone for the doctor was at the same time instructed to deliver a note, hastily scribbled by Lord Barnsdale, at the local police station.

"That a hideous crime had been committed, with burglary for its object, no one could be in doubt for a moment. Lord Barnsdale and two or three of his guests had already thrown a glance into the next room, a little boudoir, which Mme. Quesnard used as a sitting-room.

There the heavy oak bureau bore silent testimony to the motive of this dastardly outrage. Mme. Quesnard, with the unfortunate and foolhardy habit peculiar to all French people, kept a very large quantity of loose and ready money by her. That habit, mind you, is the chief reason why burglary is so rife and so profitable all over France.

"In this case the old lady's national characteristic was evidently the chief cause of her tragic fate; the drawer of the bureau had been forced open, and no one could doubt for a moment that a large sum of money had been abstracted from it.

"The burglar had then obviously made good his escape through the window, which he could do quite easily, as Mme. Quesnard's apartments were on the ground floor. She suffered from shortness of breath, it appears, and had a horror of stairs; she was, moreover, not the least bit nervous, and her windows were usually barred and shuttered.

"One very curious fact, however, at once struck all those present, even before the arrival of the detectives, and that was, that the old lady was partially dressed when she was found lying on the ground. She had slipped on an elaborate dressing-gown, had smoothed her hair, and put on her slippers. In fact, it was evident that she had in some measure prepared herself for the reception of the burglar.

"Throughout these hasty and amateurish observations conducted by Lord Barnsdale and two of his male guests, Alice Holt had remained seated beside her late employer's bedside, sobbing bitterly. In spite of Lord Barnsdale's intreaties she refused to move; and wildly waved aside any attempt at consolation offered to her by one or two of the older female servants who were present.

"It was only when everybody, at last, made up their minds to return to their rooms, that someone mentioned Lady Barnsdale's name. She had been taken ill and faint the evening before, and had not been well all night. Jane Barlow, her maid, expressed the hope that her ladyship was none the worse for this awful commotion, and must be wondering what it all meant.



"There was no doubt that she was dead."

"At this, suddenly, Alice Holt jumped up, like a madwoman.

"What it all means?' she shrieked, whilst everyone looked at her in speechless horror, 'it means that that woman has murdered my mistress, and robbed her. I know it—I know it—I know it.'

"And once more sinking beside the bed she covered her dead mistress' hand with kisses, and sobbed and wailed as if her heart would break."

CHAPTER II.

"You may well imagine the awful commotion the girl's wild outburst had created in the old Manor House. Lady Barnsdale had been taken ill the previous evening, and, of course, no one had breathed a word of it to her, but equally of course it was freely talked



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about at Barnsdale Manor, in the neighbourhood, and even so far as in the London clubs.

"Lord and Lady Barnsdale were very well known in London society, and Lord Barnsdale's adoration for his beautiful wife was quite notorious.

"Alice Holt, after her frantic outburst, had not breathed another word. Silent and sullen she went up to her room, packed her things, and left the house, where, of course, it became impossible that she should stay another day. She refused Lord Barnsdale's generous offer of money and help, and only stayed long enough to see the detectives and reply to the questions they thought fit to put to her.

"The whole neighbourhood was in a fever of excitement; many gossips would have it that the evidence against Lady Barnsdale was conclusive, and that a warrant for her arrest had already been applied for.

"What had transpired was this:—

"It appears that the day preceding the tragedy, Bridge was, as usual, being played for, I believe, guinea points. Lord Barnsdale was out shooting all day, and though the guests at the Manor were very loyal to their hostess, and refused to make any positive statements, there seems to be no doubt that Lady Barnsdale lost a very large sum of money to Sir Gilbert Culworth.

"Be that as it may, nothing further could be gleaned by enterprising reporters fresh from town; the police were more than usually reticent, and everyone eagerly awaited the opening of the inquest, when sensational developments were expected in this mysterious case.

"It was held on September the 25th, in the servants' hall of Barnsdale Manor, and you may be sure that the large room was crowded to its utmost capacity. Lord Barnsdale was, of course, present, so was Sir Gilbert Culworth, but it was understood that Lady Barnsdale was still suffering from nervous prostration, and was unable to be present.

"When I arrived there, and gradually made my way to the front rank, the doctor who had been originally summoned to the murdered lady's bedside was giving his evidence.

"He gave it as his opinion that the fractured skull from which Mme. Quesnard died was caused through her hitting the back of her head against the corner of the marble-topped washstand, in the immediate proximity of which she lay outstretched, when Lord Barnsdale first forced open the door. The stains on the marble had confirmed him in that opinion. Mme. Quesnard, he thought, must have fallen, owing to an onslaught made upon her by the burglar; the marks round the old lady's throat testified to this, although these were not the cause of death.

"After this there was a good deal of police evidence, with regard to the subsequent movements of the unknown miscreant. He had undoubtedly broken open the drawer of the bureau in the adjoining boudoir, the door of communication between this and Mme. Quesnard's bedroom being always kept open, and it was presumed that he had made a considerable haul both in gold and notes. He had then locked the bedroom door on the inside and made good his escape through the window.

"Immediately beneath this window, the flower-bed, muddy with the recent rain, bore the imprint of having been hastily trampled upon; but all actual footmarks had been carefully obliterated. Beyond this, all round the house, the garden paths are asphalted, and the burglar had evidently taken the precaution to keep to these asphalted paths, or else to cross the garden by the lawns.

"You must understand," continued the man in the corner, after a slight pause, "that throughout all this preliminary evidence, everything went to prove that the crime had been committed by an inmate of the house, or at any rate by someone well acquainted with its usages and its ménage. Alice Holt, whose room was immediately above that of Mme. Quesnard, and who was, therefore, most likely to hear the noise of the conflict and to run to her mistress' assistance, had been first of all locked up in her room. It had, therefore, become quite evident that the miscreant had commenced operations from inside the house, and had entered Mme. Quesnard's room by the door, and not by the window as had been at first supposed.

"But," added the funny creature excitedly, "as the old lady had, according to evidence, locked her door that night, it became more and more clear, as the case progressed, that

she must of her own accord have admitted the person who subsequently caused her tragic death. This was, of course, confirmed by the fact that she was partially dressed when she was subsequently found dead.

"Strangely enough, with the exception of Alice Holt, no one else had heard any noise during the night. But, as I remarked before, the walls of these old houses are very thick, and no one else slept on the ground floor.

"Another fact which in the early part of the inquest went to prove that the outrage was committed by someone familiar with the house, was that Ben, the watch-dog, had not raised any alarm. His kennel was quite close to Mme. Quesnard's windows, and he had not even barked.

"I doubt if the law would take official cognisance of the dumb testimony of a dog; nevertheless, Ben's evidence was in this case quite worthy of consideration.

"You may imagine how gradually, as these facts were unfolded, excitement grew to fever pitch, and when at last Alice Holt was called, everyone literally held their breath, eagerly waiting to hear what was coming.

"She is a tall, handsome-looking girl, with fine eyes and a rich voice. Dressed in deep black she certainly looked an imposing figure as she stood there, repeating the story of how she was awakened in the night, by the sound of her mistress' angry voice, of the noise and sudden silence, and also of her terror, when she found that she had been locked up in her room.

"But obviously the girl had more to tell, and was only waiting for the coroner's direct question.

"Will you tell the jury the reason why you made such an extraordinary and unwarrantable accusation against Lady Barnsdale?" he asked her at last, amid breathless silence in the crowded room.

"Everyone instinctively looked across the room to where Lord Barnsdale sat between his friend Sir Gilbert Culworth and his lawyer, Sir Arthur Inglewood, who had evidently come down from London in order to watch the case on his client's behalf. Alice Holt, too, looked across at Lord Barnsdale for a moment. He seemed attentive and interested, but otherwise quite calm and impassive.

"I, who watched the girl, saw a look of pity cross her face as she gazed at him, and I think, when we bear in mind that the distinguished English gentleman and the poor paid companion had known each other years ago, when they were girl and boy together in

old Mme. Quesnard's French home, we may make a pretty shrewd guess why Alice Holt hated the beautiful Lady Barnsdale.

"'It was about six o'clock in the afternoon,' she began at last in the same quiet tone of voice, 'I was sitting sewing in Madame's boudoir, when Lady Barnsdale came into the bedroom. She did not see me, I know, for she began at once talking volubly to Madame about a serious loss she had just sustained at Bridge; several hundred pounds, she said.'

"'Well?' queried the coroner, for the girl had paused, almost as if she regretted what she had already said. She certainly threw an appealing look at Lord Barnsdale, who, however, seemed to take no notice of her.

"'Well,' she continued with sudden resolution, 'Madame was very angry at this; she declared that Lady Barnsdale deserved a severe lesson; her extravagances were a positive scandal. "Not a penny will I give you to pay your gambling debts," said Madame, "and, moreover, I shall make it my business to inform my nephew of your goings on whilst he is absent."

"'Lady Barnsdale was in a wild state of excitement. She begged and implored Madame to say nothing to Lord Barnsdale about it, and did her very best to try to induce her to help her out of her difficulties, just this once more. But Madame was obdurate. Thereupon Lady Barnsdale turned on her like a fury, called her every opprobrious name under the sun, and finally flounced out of the room, banging the door behind her.

"'Madame was very much upset after this,' continued Alice Holt, 'and I was not a bit astonished when directly after dinner she rang for me, and asked to be put to bed. It was then nine o'clock.

"'That is the last I saw of poor Madame alive.

"'She was very excited then, and told me that she was quite frightened of Lady Barnsdale—a gambler, she said, was as likely as not to become a thief, if opportunity arose. I offered to sleep on the sofa in the next room, for the old lady seemed quite nervous, a thing I have never known her to be. But she was too proud to own to nervousness, and she dismissed me finally, saying that she would lock her door, for once; a thing she scarcely ever did.'

"'It was a curious story, to say the least of it, which Alice Holt thus told to an excited public. Cross-examined by the coroner, she never departed from a single point of it, her calm and presence of mind being only

equalled throughout this trying ordeal by that of Lord Barnsdale, who sat seemingly unmoved whilst these terrible insinuations were made against his wife.

"'But there was more to come. Sir Gilbert Culworth had been called; in the interests of justice, and in accordance with his duty as a citizen, he was forced to stand up and, all unwillingly, to add another tiny link to the chain of evidence that implicated his friend's wife in this most terrible crime.

"'Right loyally he tried to shield her in every possible way, but cross-questioned by the coroner, harassed nearly out of his senses, he was forced to admit two facts, namely, that Lady Barnsdale had lost nearly £800 at Bridge the day before the murder, and that she had paid her debt to himself in full, on the following morning, in gold and notes.

"'He had been forced, much against his will, to show the notes to the police; unfortunately for the justice of the case, however, the numbers of these could not be directly traceable as having been in Mme. Quesnard's possession at the time of her death. No diaries or books of accounts of any kind were found. Like most French people, she arranged all her money affairs herself, receiving her vast dividends in foreign money, and converting this into English notes and gold, as occasion demanded, at the nearest money-changer's that happened to be handy.

"'She had, like a great many foreigners, a holy horror of banks. She would have mistrusted the Bank of England itself; as for solicitors, she held them in perfect abhorrence. She only went once to one in her life, and that was in order to make a will leaving everything she possessed unconditionally to her beloved nephew, Lord Barnsdale.

"'But in spite of this difficulty about the notes, you see for yourself, do you not? how terribly strong was the circumstantial evidence against Lady Barnsdale. Her losses at cards, her appeal to Mme. Quesnard, the latter's refusal to help her, and finally the payment in full of the debt to Sir Gilbert Culworth on the following morning.

"'There was only one thing that spoke for her, and that was, the very horror of the crime itself. It was practically impossible to conceive that a woman of Lady Barnsdale's refinement and education should have sprung upon an elderly woman, like some navy's wife by the docks, and then that she should have had the presence of mind to jump out of the window, to obliterate her footmarks in the

flower-bed, and, in fact, to have given the crime the look of a clever burglary.

"Still, we all know that money difficulties will debase the noblest of us, that greed will madden the sanest and most refined. When the inquest was adjourned I can assure you that no one had any doubt whatever that within twenty-four hours Lady Barnsdale would be arrested on the capital charge."

CHAPTER III.

"But the detectives in charge of the case had reckoned without Sir Arthur Inglewood, the great lawyer, who was watching the proceedings on behalf of his aristocratic clients," said the man in the corner, when he had assured himself of my undivided attention.

"The adjourned inquest brought with it, I assure you, its full quota of sensation. Again Lord Barnsdale was present, calm, haughty, and impassive, whilst Lady Barnsdale was still too ill to attend. But she had made a statement upon oath, in which, whilst flatly denying that her interview with the deceased at 6 p.m. had been of an acrimonious character as alleged by Alice Holt, she swore most positively that all through the night she had been ill, and had not left her room after 11.30 p.m.

"The first witness called after this affidavit had been read was Jane Barlow, Lady Barnsdale's maid.

"The girl deposed that on that memorable evening preceding the murder, she went up to her mistress' room at about 11.30 in order to get everything ready for the night. As a rule, of course, there was nobody about in the bedroom at that hour, but on this occasion when Jane Barlow entered the room, which she did without knocking, she saw her mistress sitting by her desk.

"Her ladyship looked up when I came in,' continued Jane Barlow, 'and seemed very cross with me for not knocking at the door. I apologised, then began to get the room tidy: as I did so I could see that my lady was busy counting a lot of money. There were

lots of sovereigns and banknotes. My lady put some together in an envelope and addressed it, then she got up from her desk and went to lock up the remainder of the money in her jewel safe.'

"And this was at what time?' asked the coroner.

"At about half-past eleven, I think, sir,' repeated the girl.

"Well,' said the coroner, 'did you notice anything else?'

"Yes,' replied Jane, 'whilst my lady was at her safe, I saw the envelope in which she had put the money lying on the desk. I couldn't help looking at it, for I knew it was ever so full of banknotes, and I saw that my lady had addressed it to Sir Gilbert Culworth.'

"At this point Sir Arthur Inglewood jumped to

"Not a penny will I give you to pay your gambling debts,' said Madame."

his feet and handed something over to the coroner; it was evidently an envelope which had been torn open. The coroner looked at it very intently, then suddenly asked Jane Barlow if she had happened to notice anything about the envelope which was lying on her ladyship's desk that evening.

"Oh yes, sir!' she replied unhesitatingly, 'I noticed my lady had made a splotch, right on top of the C in Sir Gilbert Culworth's name.'

"This, then, is the envelope,' was the



coroner's quiet comment, as he handed the paper across to the girl.

"'Yes, there's the splotch,' she replied, 'I'd know it anywhere.'

"So you see," continued the man in the corner, with a chuckle, "that the chain of circumstantial evidence against Lady Barnsdale was getting somewhat entangled. It was indeed fortunate for her that Sir Gilbert Culworth had not destroyed the envelope in which she had handed him over the money on the following day.

"Alice Holt, as you know, heard the conflict and raised the alarm much later in the night, when everybody was already in bed, whilst long before that Lady Barnsdale was apparently in possession of the money with which she could pay back her debt.

"Thus the motive for the crime so far as she was concerned was entirely done away with. Directly after the episode witnessed by Jane Barlow, Lady Barnsdale had a sort of nervous collapse, and went to bed feeling very ill. Lord Barnsdale was terribly concerned about her, he and the maid remained alternately by her bedside for an hour or two; finally Lord Barnsdale went to sleep in his dressing-room, whilst Jane also finally retired to rest.

"Ill as Lady Barnsdale undoubtedly was then, it was absolutely preposterous to conceive that she could after that have planned and carried out so monstrous a crime, without any motive whatever. To have locked Alice Holt's door, then gone downstairs, forced her way into the old lady's room, struggled with her, to have jumped out of the window, and run back into the house by the garden, might have been the work of a determined woman, driven mad by the desire for money, but became absolutely out of the question in the case of a woman suffering from nervous collapse, and having apparently no motive for the crime.

"Of course Sir Arthur Inglewood made the most of the fact that no mud was found on any shoes or dress belonging to Lady Barnsdale. The flower-bed was very soft with the heavy rain of the day before, and Lady Barnsdale could not possibly have jumped even from a ground-floor window and trampled on the flower-bed, without staining her skirts.

"Then there was another point which the clever lawyer brought to the coroner's notice. As Alice Holt had stated in her sworn evidence that Mme. Quesnard had owned to being frightened of Lady Barnsdale that night, was it likely that she would of *her own accord*

have opened the door to her in the middle of the night, without at least calling for assistance?

"Thus the matter has remained a strange and unaccountable puzzle. It has always been called the 'Barnsdale Mystery' for that very reason. Everyone, somehow, has always felt that Lady Barnsdale did have something to do with that terrible tragedy. Her husband has taken her abroad, and they have let Barnsdale Manor; it almost seems as if the ghost of the old French woman had driven them forth from their own country.

"As for Alice Holt, she maintains to this day that Lady Barnsdale was the culprit, and I understand that she has not yet given up all hope of collecting a sufficiency of evidence to have the beautiful and fashionable woman of society arraigned for this hideous murder."

(At this point you might try to think out the solution for yourself.—ED. ROYAL.)

CHAPTER IV.

"Will she succeed, do you think?" I asked at last.

"Succeed? Of course she won't," he retorted excitedly. "Lady Barnsdale never committed that murder; no woman, except, perhaps, an East-end factory hand, could have done it at all."

"But then? —" I urged.

"Why then," he replied with a chuckle, "the only logical conclusion is that the robbery and the murder were not committed by the same person, nor at the same hour of the night; moreover, I contend that there was no premeditated murder, but that the old lady died from the result of a pure accident."

"But how?" I gasped.

"This is my version of the story," he said, excitedly, as his long bony fingers started fidgeting, fidgeting with that eternal bit of string. "Lady Barnsdale, pressed for money, made an appeal to Mme. Quesnard, which the latter refused, as we know. Then there was an acrimonious dispute between the two ladies, after which came the dinner hour, then Madame, feeling ill and upset, went up to bed at nine o'clock.

"Now, my contention is that undoubtedly the robbery had been committed before that, between the dispute and Madame's bed time.

"By whom?"

"By Lady Barnsdale, of course, who, as the mistress of the house, could come and go from room to room without exciting any comment, who, moreover, at 6 p.m. was hard-pressed for money, and who but a few

hours later was handling a mass of gold and banknotes.

"But the strain of committing even an ordinary theft is very great upon a refined woman's organisation. Lady Barnsdale has a nervous break-down. Well! what is the most likely thing to happen? Why! that she should confess everything to her husband who worships her, and no doubt express her repentance at what she had done.

"Then imagine Lord Barnsdale's horror! The old lady had not discovered the theft before going to bed. That was only natural, since she was feeling unwell, and was not likely to sit up at night counting her money; the lock of the bureau drawer having been tampered with, would perhaps not attract her attention at night.

"But in the morning, the very first thing, she would discover everything, at once suspect the worst, and who knows, make a scandal, talk of it before Alice Holt, Lady Barnsdale's arch enemy, and all before restitution could be made.

"No, no, that restitution must be made at once; not a minute must be lost, since any moment might bring forth discovery, and perhaps an awful catastrophe.

"I take it that Mme. Quesnard and her nephew were on very intimate terms. He hoped to arouse no one by going to his aunt's room, but in order to make quite sure that Alice Holt, hearing a noise in her mistress' room, should not surreptitiously come down, and perhaps play eaves-dropper at the momentous interview, he turned the key of the girl's door as he went past, and locked her in.

"Then he knocked at his aunt's door (gently, of course, for old people are light sleepers), and called her by name. Mme. Quesnard, recognising her nephew's voice, slipped on her dressing-gown, smoothed her hair, and let him in.

"Exactly what took place at the interview it is, of course, impossible for any human being to say. Here even I can but conjecture," he added with inimitable conceit, "but we can easily imagine that, having heard

Lord Barnsdale's confession of his wife's folly, the old lady, who as a Frenchwoman was of quick temper and unbridled tongue, would indulge in not very elegant rhetoric on the subject of the woman she had always disliked.

"Lord Barnsdale would, of course, defend his wife, and the old lady, with feminine obstinacy, would continue the attack. Then some insulting epithet, a word only perhaps, roused the devoted husband's towering indignation—the meekest man on earth becomes a mad bull when he really loves, and the woman he loves is insulted.

"I maintain that the old lady's death was really due to a pure accident; that Lord Barnsdale gripped her by the throat, in a moment of mad anger, at some hideous insult hurled at his wife; of that I am as convinced as if I had witnessed the whole scene. Then the old lady fell, hit her head against the marble, and Lord Barnsdale realised that he was alone at night in his aunt's room, and that he had killed her.

"What would anyone do under the circumstances?" he added excitedly. "Why, of course, collect his senses and try to save himself from what might prove to be consequences of the most awful kind. This Lord Barnsdale thought he could best do by giving the accident, which looked so like murder, the appearance of a burglary.

"The lock of the desk in the next room had already been forced open; he now locked the door on the inside, threw open the shutter and the window, jumped out as any burglar would have done; and, being careful to obliterate his own footmarks, he crept back into the house and thence into his own room, without alarming the watch-dog, who naturally knew his own master. He was, of course, just in time before Alice Holt succeeded in rousing the household with her screams.

"And thus you see," he added, "there are no such things as mysteries. The police call them so, so do the public, but every crime has its perpetrator, and every puzzle its solution. My experience is that the simplest solution is invariably the right one."

