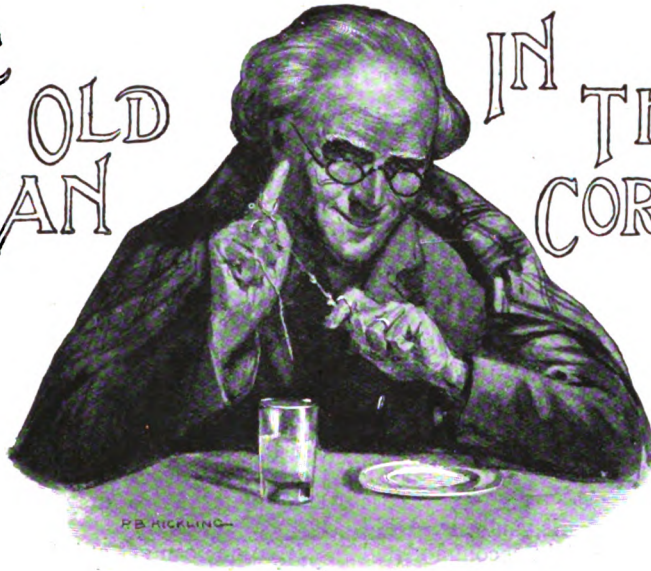


THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER



XI.—THE AFFAIR AT THE NOVELTY THEATRE.

BY BARONESS ORCZY.

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ.

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER	Who explains the mystery to—	CLARA KNIGHT Dresser to Miss Morgan.
THE LADY JOURNALIST Who re-tells it to the ROYAL readers.	MESSRS. KIDD AND CO. Bond Street jewellers.
MISS PHYLLIS MORGAN A popular actress.	MR. THOMAS KIDD One of the firm.
MR. HOWARD DENNIS Her fiancé.	JAMES RUMFORD A skilled working jeweller.
GEORGE FINCH Doorkeeper at the Novelty Theatre.	MACPHERSON A detective.

CHAPTER I.

"TALKING of mysteries," said the man in the corner, rather irrelevantly, for he had not opened his mouth since he sat down and ordered his lunch, "talking of mysteries, it is always a puzzle to me how few thefts are committed in the dressing-rooms of fashionable actresses during a performance."

"There have been one or two," I suggested, "but nothing of any value was stolen."

"Yet you remember that affair at the Novelty Theatre a year or two ago, don't you?" he added. "It created a great deal of sensation at the time. You see, Miss Phyllis Morgan was and still is a very fashionable and popular actress, and her pearls are quite amongst the wonders of the world. She herself valued them at £10,000, and several experts who remember the pearls quite concur with that valuation."

"During the period of her short tenancy of the Novelty Theatre last season, she entrusted those beautiful pearls to Mr. Kidd, the well-known Bond Street jeweller, to be restrung. There were seven rows of perfectly matched pearls, held together by a small diamond clasp of 'art-nouveau' design."

"Kidd and Co. are, as you know, a very eminent and old-established firm of jewellers. Mr. Thomas Kidd, its present sole representative, was some time president of the London Chamber of Commerce, and a man whose integrity has always been held to be above suspicion. His clerks, salesmen, and book-keeper had all been in his employ for years, and most of the work was executed on the premises."

"In the case of Miss Phyllis Morgan's valuable pearls, they were restrung and reset in the back shop by Mr. Kidd's most valued and most trusted workman, a man

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named James Rumford, who is justly considered to be one of the cleverest craftsmen here in England.

"When the pearls were ready, Mr. Kidd himself took them down to the theatre, and delivered them into Miss Morgan's own hands.

"It appears that the worthy jeweller was extremely fond of the theatre; but, like so many persons in affluent circumstances, he was also very fond of getting a free seat when he could.

"All along he had made up his mind to take the pearls down to the Novelty Theatre one night, and to see Miss Morgan for a moment before the performance; she would then, he hoped, place a stall at his disposal.

"His provisions were correct. Miss Morgan received the pearls, and Mr. Kidd was on that celebrated night accommodated with a seat in the stalls.

"I don't know if you remember all the circumstances connected with that case, but, to make my point clear, I must remind you of one or two of the most salient details.

"In the drama in which Miss Phyllis Morgan was acting at the time, there is a brilliant masked ball scene which is the crux of the whole play; it occurs in the second act, and Miss Phyllis Morgan, as the hapless heroine dressed in the shabbiest of clothes, appears in the midst of a gay and giddy throng; she apostrophises all and sundry there, including the villain, and has a magnificent scene which always brings down the house, and nightly adds to her histrionic laurels.

"For this scene a large number of supers are engaged, and in order to further swell the crowd, practically all the available stage hands have to 'walk on' dressed in various coloured dominos, and all wearing masks.

"You have, of course, heard the name of Mr. Howard Dennis in connection with this extraordinary mystery. He is what is usually called 'a young man about town,' and was one of Miss Phyllis Morgan's most favoured admirers. As a matter of fact, he was generally understood to be the popular actress' *fiancé*, and as such, had of course the *entrée* of the Novelty Theatre.

"Like many another idle young man about town, Mr. Howard Dennis was stage-mad, and one of his greatest delights was to don nightly a mask and a blue domino, and to 'walk on' in the second act, not so much in order to gratify his love for the stage, as to watch Miss Phyllis Morgan in her great scene, and to be present, close by her, when

she received her usual salvo of enthusiastic applause from a delighted public.

"On this eventful night, it was on July 20th last, the second act was in full swing, the supers, the stage hands, and all the principals were on the scene, the back of the stage was practically deserted. The beautiful pearls, fresh from the hands of Mr. Kidd, were in Miss Morgan's dressing-room, as she meant to wear them in the last act.

"Of course, since that memorable affair, many people have talked of the foolhardiness of leaving such valuable jewellery in the sole charge of a young girl—Miss Morgan's dresser—who acted with unpardonable folly and carelessness, but you must remember that this part of the theatre is only accessible through the stage-door, where sits enthroned that uncorruptible dragon, the stage door-keeper.

"No one can get at it from the front, and the dressing-rooms for the supers and lesser members of the company are on the opposite side of the stage to that reserved for Miss Morgan and one or two of the principals.

"It was just a quarter-to-ten, and the curtain was about to be rung down, when George Finch, the stage doorkeeper, rushed excitedly into the wings; he was terribly upset and was wildly clutching his coat, beneath which he evidently held something concealed.

"In response to the rapidly whispered queries of the one or two stage hands that stood about, Finch only shook his head excitedly. He seemed scarcely able to control his impatience, during the close of the act, and the subsequent prolonged applause.

"When at last Miss Morgan, flushed with her triumph, came off the stage, Finch made a sudden rush for her.

"'Oh, Madam!' he gasped excitedly, 'it might have been such an awful misfortune! The rascal! I nearly got him though! but he escaped—fortunately it is safe—I have got it——!'

"It was some time before Miss Morgan understood what in the world the otherwise sober stage doorkeeper was driving at. Everyone who heard him certainly thought that he had been drinking. But the next moment from under his coat he pulled out, with another ejaculation of excitement, the magnificent pearl necklace which Miss Morgan had thought safely put away in her dressing-room.

"'What in the world does all this mean?' asked Mr. Howard Dennis, who, as usual, was escorting his *fiancée*. 'Finch, what are you doing with Madam's necklace?'

"Miss Phyllis Morgan herself was too bewildered to question Finch; she gazed at him, then at her necklace, in speechless astonishment.

"'Well, you see, Madam, it was this way,' Finch managed to explain at last, as with awe-struck reverence he finally deposited the precious necklace in the actress' hands. 'As you know, Madam, it is a very hot night. I had seen everyone into the theatre and counted in the supers; there was nothing much for me to do, and I got rather tired and very thirsty. I seed a man loafing close to the door and I ask him to fetch me a pint of beer from round the corner, and I give him some coppers; I had noticed him loafing round before, and it was so hot I didn't think I was doin' no harm.'

"'No, no,' said Miss Morgan impatiently. 'Well!'

"'Well,' continued Finch, 'the man, he brought me the beer, and I had some of it—and—and—afterwards, I don't quite know how it happened—it was the heat, perhaps—but—I was sitting in my box, and I suppose I must have dropped asleep. I just remember hearing the ring up for the second act, and the call-boy calling you, Madam, then there's a sort of a blank in my mind. All of a sudden I seemed to wake with the feeling that there was something wrong somehow. In a moment I jumped up, and I tell you I was wide awake then, and I saw a man sneaking down the passage, past my box, towards the door. I challenged him, and he tried to dart past me, but I was too quick for him, and got him by the tails of his coat, for I saw at once that he was carrying something, and I had recognised the loafer who brought me the beer. I shouted for help, but there's never anybody about in this back street, and the loafer, he struggled like old Harry, and sure enough he managed to get free from me and away before I could stop him, but in his fright the rascal dropped his booty, for which Heaven be praised! and it was your pearls, Madam. Oh, my! but I did have a tussle,'

concluded the worthy doorkeeper, mopping his forehead, 'and I do hope, Madam, the scoundrel didn't take nothing else.'

"That was the story," continued the man in the corner, "which George Finch had to tell and which he subsequently repeated without the slightest deviation. Miss Phyllis Morgan, with the light-heartedness peculiar to ladies of her profession, took the matter very quietly; all she said at the time was that she had nothing else of value in her dressing-room, but that Miss Knight—the dresser—deserved a scolding for leaving the room unprotected.

"'All's well that ends well,' she said gaily,



"'Finch, what are you doing with Madam's necklace?'

as she finally went into her dressing-room, carrying the pearls in her hand.

"It appears that the moment she opened the door, she found Miss Knight sitting in the room, in a deluge of tears. The girl had overheard George Finch telling his story, and was terribly upset at her own carelessness.

"In answer to Miss Morgan's questions, she admitted that she had gone into the wings, and lingered there to watch the great actress' beautiful performance. She thought no one could possibly get to the dressing-room, as nearly all hands were on the stage at the time, and of course George Finch was guarding the door.

"However, as there really had been no harm done, beyond a wholesome fright to everybody concerned, Miss Morgan readily forgave the girl and proceeded with her change of attire for the next act. Incidentally she noticed a bunch of roses, which were placed on her dressing-table, and asked Knight who had put them there.

"'Mr. Dennis brought them,' replied the girl.

"Miss Morgan looked pleased, blushed, and dismissing the whole matter from her mind, she proceeded with her toilette for the next act, in which, the hapless heroine having come into her own again, she was able to wear her beautiful pearls around her neck.

"George Finch, however, took some time to recover himself; his indignation was only equalled by his volubility. When his excitement had somewhat subsided, he took the precaution of saving the few drops of beer which had remained at the bottom of the mug, brought to him by the loafer. This was subsequently shown to a chemist in the neighbourhood, who, without a moment's hesitation, pronounced the beer to contain an appreciable quantity of chloral."

CHAPTER II.

"The whole matter, as you may imagine, did not affect Miss Morgan's spirits that night," continued the man in the corner after a slight pause.

"'All's well that ends well,' she had said gaily, since almost by a miracle, her pearls were once more safely round her neck.

"But the next day brought the rude awakening. Something had indeed happened which made the affair at the Novelty Theatre, what it has ever since remained, a curious and unexplainable mystery.

"The following morning Miss Phyllis Morgan decided that it was foolhardy to leave valuable property about in her dressing-room, when, for stage purposes, imitation jewellery did just as well. She therefore determined to place her pearls in the bank until the termination of her London season.

"The moment, however, that, in broad daylight, she once more handled the necklace, she instinctively felt that there was something wrong with it. She examined it eagerly and closely, and, hardly daring to face her sudden terrible suspicions, she rushed round to the nearest jeweller, and begged him to examine the pearls.

"The examination did not take many moments; the jeweller at once pronounced the pearls to be false. There could be no

doubt about it; the necklace was a perfect imitation of the original, even the clasp was an exact copy. Half-hysterical with rage and anxiety, Miss Morgan at once drove to Bond Street, and asked to see Mr. Kidd.

"Well, you may easily imagine the stormy interview that took place. Miss Phyllis Morgan, in no measured language, boldly accused Mr. Thomas Kidd, late president of the London Chamber of Commerce, of having substituted false pearls for her own priceless ones.

"The worthy jeweller, at first completely taken by surprise, examined the necklace, and was horrified to see that Miss Morgan's statements were, alas! too true. Mr. Kidd was indeed in a terribly awkward position.

"The evening before, after business hours, he had taken the necklace home with him. Before starting for the theatre, he had examined it to see that it was quite in order. He had then, with his own hands, and in the presence of his wife, placed it in its case, and driven straight to the Novelty, where he finally gave it over to Miss Morgan herself.

"To all this he swore most positively; moreover, all his *employés* and workmen could swear that they had last seen the necklace just after closing time at the shop, when Mr. Kidd walked off towards Piccadilly, with the precious article in the inner pocket of his coat.

"One point certainly was curious, and undoubtedly helped to deepen the mystery which to this day clings to the affair at the Novelty Theatre

"When Mr. Kidd handed the packet containing the necklace to Miss Morgan, she was too busy to open it at once. She only spoke to Mr. Kidd through her dressing-room door, and never opened the packet till nearly an hour later, after she was dressed ready for the second act; the packet at that time had been untouched, and was wrapped up just as she had had it from Mr. Kidd's own hands. She undid the packet, and handled the pearls; certainly, by the artificial light she could see nothing wrong with the necklace.

"Poor Mr. Kidd was nearly distracted with the horror of his position. Thirty years of an honest reputation suddenly tarnished with this awful suspicion—for he realised at once that Miss Morgan refused to believe his statements; in fact, she openly said that she would—unless immediate compensation was made to her—place the matter at once in the hands of the police.

"From the stormy interview in Bond Street, the irate actress drove at once to

Scotland Yard; but the old-established firm of Kidd and Co. was not destined to remain under any cloud that threatened its integrity.

"Mr. Kidd at once called upon his solicitor, with the result that an offer was made to Miss Morgan, whereby the jeweller would deposit the full value of the original necklace, *i.e.*, £10,000, in the hands of Messrs. Bentley and Co., bankers, that sum to be held by them for a whole year, at the end of which time, if the perpetrator of the fraud had not been discovered, the money was to be handed over to Miss Morgan in its entirety.

"Nothing could have been more fair, more equitable, or more just, but at the same time nothing could have been more mysterious.

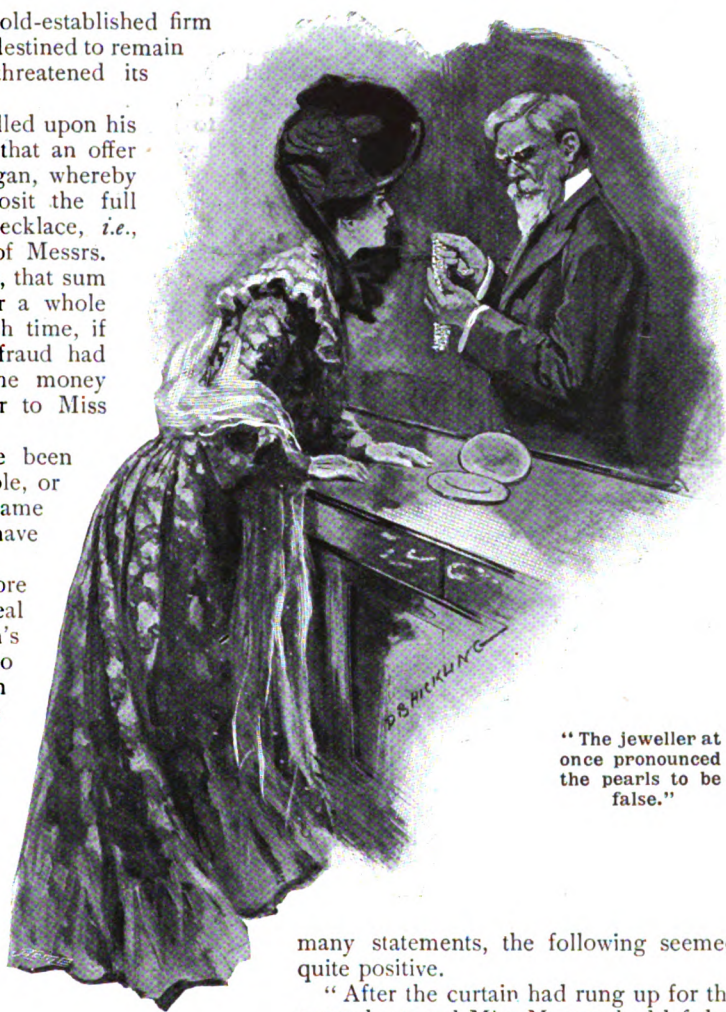
"As Mr. Kidd swore that he had placed the real pearls in Miss Morgan's hands, and was ready to back his oath by the sum of £10,000, no more suspicion could possibly attach to him. When the announcement of his generous offer appeared in the papers, the entire public approved and exonerated him, and then turned to wonder who the perpetrator of the daring fraud had been.

"How came a valueless necklace in exact imitation of the original one to be in Miss Morgan's dressing-room? Where were the real pearls? Clearly the loafer who had drugged the stage door-keeper, and sneaked into the theatre to steal a necklace, was not aware that he was risking several years' hard labour for the sake of a worthless trifle. He had been one of the many dupes of this extraordinary adventure.

"Macpherson, one of the most able men on the detective staff, had, indeed, his work cut out. The police were extremely reticent, but, in spite of this, one or two facts gradually found their way into the papers, and aroused public interest and curiosity to its highest pitch.

"What had transpired was this:

"Clara Knight, the dresser, had been very rigorously cross-questioned, and, from her



"The jeweller at once pronounced the pearls to be false."

many statements, the following seemed quite positive.

"After the curtain had rung up for the second act, and Miss Morgan had left her dressing-room, Knight had waited about for some time, and had even, it appears, handled and admired the necklace. Then, unfortunately, she was seized with the burning desire of seeing the famous scene from the wings. She thought that the place was quite safe, and that George Finch was as usual at his post.

"I was going along the short passage that leads to the wings," she explained to the detectives, "when I became aware of someone moving some distance behind me. I turned and saw a blue domino about to enter Miss Morgan's dressing-room.

"I thought nothing of that," continued the girl, "as we all know that Mr. Dennis is engaged to Miss Morgan. He is very fond of 'walking on' in the ball-room scene, and he always wears a blue domino when he does; so I was not at all alarmed. He had

his mask on as usual, and he was carrying a bunch of roses. When he saw me at the other end of the passage, he waved his hand to me and pointed to the flowers. I nodded to him, and then he went into the room.'

"These statements, as you may imagine, created a great deal of sensation; so much so, in fact, that Mr. Kidd, with his £10,000 and his reputation in mind, moved heaven and earth to bring about the prosecution of Mr. Dennis for theft and fraud.

"The papers were full of it, for Mr. Howard Dennis was well known in fashionable London society. His answer to these curious statements was looked forward to eagerly; when it came it satisfied no one and puzzled everybody.

"'Miss Knight was mistaken,' he said most emphatically, 'I did not bring any roses for Miss Morgan that night. It was not I that she saw in a blue domino by the door, as I was on the stage before the curtain was rung up for the second act, and never left it until the close.'

"This part of Howard Dennis' statement was a little difficult to substantiate. No one on the stage could swear positively whether he was 'on' early in the act or not, although, mind you, Macpherson had ascertained that in the whole crowd of supers on the stage, he was the only one who wore a blue domino.

"Mr. Kidd was very active in the matter, but Miss Morgan flatly refused to believe in her *fiancé's* guilt. The worthy jeweller maintained that Mr. Howard Dennis was the only person who knew the celebrated pearls and their quaint clasp well enough to have a fac-simile made of them, and that when Miss Knight saw him enter the dressing-room, he actually substituted the false necklace for the real one; whilst the loafer who drugged George Finch's beer was—as every-one supposed—only a dupe.

"Things had reached a very acute and painful stage, when one more detail found its way into the papers, which, whilst entirely clearing Mr. Howard Dennis' character, has helped to make the whole affair a hopeless mystery.

"Whilst questioning George Finch, Macpherson had ascertained that the stage door-keeper had seen Mr. Dennis enter the theatre some time before the beginning of the celebrated second act. He stopped to speak to George Finch for a moment or two, and the latter could swear positively that Mr. Dennis was not carrying any roses then.

"On the other hand a flower-girl, who was selling roses in the neighbourhood of the

Novelty Theatre late that memorable night, remembers selling some roses to a shabbily dressed man, who looked like a labourer out of work. When Mr. Dennis was pointed out to her she swore positively that it was not he.

"'The man looked like a labourer,' she explained. 'I took particular note of him, as I remember thinking that he didn't look much as if he could afford to buy roses.'

"Now you see," concluded the man in the corner excitedly, "where the hitch lies. There is absolutely no doubt, judging from the evidence of George Finch and of the flower-girl, that the loafer had provided himself with the roses, and had somehow or other managed to get hold of a blue domino, for the purpose of committing the theft. His giving drugged beer to Finch, moreover, proved his guilt beyond a doubt.

"But here the mystery becomes hopeless," he added with a chuckle, "for the loafer dropped the booty which he had stolen—that booty was the false necklace, and it has remained an impenetrable mystery to this day as to who made the substitution and when.

"A whole year has elapsed since then, but the real necklace has never been traced or found; so Mr. Kidd has paid, with absolute quixotic chivalry, the sum of £10,000 to Miss Morgan, and thus he has completely cleared the firm of Kidd and Co. of any suspicion as to its integrity."

(At this point you might try to solve the mystery for yourself.—ED. ROYAL.)

CHAPTER III.

"But then, what in the world is the explanation of it all?" I asked bewildered, as the funny creature paused in his narrative and seemed absorbed in the contemplation of a beautiful knot he had just completed in his bit of string.

"The explanation is so simple," he replied, "for it is obvious, is it not? that only four people could possibly have committed the fraud."

"Who are they?" I asked.

"Well," he said, whilst his bony fingers began to fidget with that eternal piece of string, "there is, of course, old Mr. Kidd; but as the worthy jeweller has paid £10,000 to prove that he did not steal the real necklace and substitute a false one in its stead, we must assume that he was guiltless. Then, secondly, there is Mr. Howard Dennis."

"Well, yes," I said. "what about him?"

"There were several points in his favour,"

he rejoined, marking each point with a fresh and most complicated knot; "it was not he who bought the roses, therefore it was not he who, clad in a blue domino, entered Miss Morgan's dressing-room directly after Knight left it.

"And mark the force of this point," he added excitedly. "Just before the curtain rang up for the second act, Miss Morgan had been in her room, and had then undone the packet, which, in her own words, was just as she had received it from Mr. Kidd's hands.

"After that Miss Knight remained in charge, and a mere ten seconds after she left the room she saw the blue domino carrying the roses at the door.

"The flower-girl's story and that of George Finch have proved that the blue domino could not have been Mr. Dennis, but it was the loafer who eventually stole the false necklace.

"If you bear all this in mind you will realise that there was no time in those ten seconds for Mr. Dennis to have made the substitution *before* the theft was committed. It stands to reason that he could not have done it afterwards.

"Then, again, many people suspected Miss Knight, the dresser; but this supposition we may easily dismiss. An uneducated,

THE ROYAL MAGAZINE.



"I turned and saw a blue domino about to enter Miss Morgan's dressing-room."

stupid girl, not three and twenty, could not possibly have planned so clever a substitution. An imitation necklace of that particular calibre and made to order would cost far more money than a poor theatrical dresser could ever afford; let alone the

Vol. XIII, -22.

risks of ordering such an ornament to be made.

"No," said the funny creature with comic emphasis, "there is but one theory possible, which is my own."

"And that is?" I asked eagerly.

"The workman, Rumford, of course," he responded triumphantly. "Why! it jumps to the eyes, as our French friends would tell us. Who, other than he, could have the opportunity of making an exact copy of the necklace which had been intrusted to his firm?"

"Being in the trade he could easily obtain the false stones without exciting any undue suspicion; being a skilled craftsman, he could easily make the clasp, and string the pearls in exact imitation of the original, he could do this secretly in his own home and without the slightest risk.

"Then the plan, though extremely simple, was very cleverly thought out. Disguised as the loafer——"

"The loafer!" I exclaimed.

"Why, yes! the loafer," he replied quietly, "disguised as the loafer, he hung round the stage-door of the Novelty after business hours, until he had collected the bits of gossip and information he wanted; thus he learnt that Mr. Howard Dennis was Miss Morgan's accredited *fiancé*; that he, like everybody else who was available, "walked on" in the second act; and that during that time the back of the stage was practically deserted.

"No doubt he knew all along that Mr. Kidd meant to take the pearls down to the theatre himself that night, and it was quite easy to ascertain that Miss Morgan—as the hapless heroine—wore no jewellery in the second act, and that Mr. Howard Dennis invariably wore a blue domino.

"Some people might incline to the belief that Miss Knight was a paid accomplice, that she left the dressing-room unprotected on purpose, and that her story of the blue domino and the roses was prearranged between herself and Rumford, but that is not my opinion.

"I think that the scoundrel was far too clever to need any accomplice, and too shrewd to put himself thereby at the mercy of a girl like Knight.

"Rumford, I find, is a married man, this to me explains the blue domino, which the police were never able to trace to any business place, where it might have been bought or hired. Like the necklace itself, it was 'home-made.'

"Having got his properties and his plans ready, Rumford then set to work. You must remember that a stage doorkeeper is never above accepting a glass of beer from a friendly acquaintance; and, no doubt, if George Finch had not asked the loafer to bring him a glass, the latter would have offered him one. To drug the beer was simple enough; then Rumford went to buy the roses, and, I should say, met his wife somewhere round the corner, who handed him the blue domino and the mask; all this was done in order to completely puzzle the police subsequently, and also in order to throw suspicion if possible upon young Dennis.

"As soon as the drug took effect upon George Finch, Rumford slipped into the theatre. To slip a mask and domino on and off is, as you know, a matter of a few seconds. Probably his intention had been—if he found Knight in the room—to knock her down if she attempted to raise an alarm; but here fortune favoured him. Knight saw him from a distance and mistook him easily for Mr. Dennis.

"After the theft of the real necklace, Rumford sneaked out of the theatre. And here you see how clever was the scoundrel's plan: if he had merely substituted one necklace for another there would have been no doubt whatever that the loafer—whoever he was—was the culprit—the drugged beer would have been quite sufficient proof for that. The hue and cry would have been after the loafer, and, who knows? there might have been someone or something which might have identified that loafer with himself.

"He must have bought the shabby clothes somewhere, he certainly bought the roses from a flower-girl; anyhow, there were a hundred and one little risks and contingencies which might have brought the theft home to him.

"But mark what happens: he steals the real necklace, and keeps the false one in his hand, intending to drop it sooner or later, and thus send the police entirely on the wrong scent. As the loafer, he was supposed to have stolen the false necklace, then dropped it whilst struggling with George Finch. The result is that no one has troubled about the loafer; no one thought that he had anything to do with the substitution, which was the main point at issue, and no very great effort has ever been made to find that mysterious loafer.

"It never occurred to anyone that the fraud and the theft were committed by one and the same person, and that that person could be none other than James Rumford."