

"THE CRIME OF THE CENTURY," A THRILLING DETECTIVE STORY. BY RODRIGUES OTTOLENGUI.

amazed, for he recognized the speaker as Mr. Mitchel.

"Mr. Mitchel!" he cried. "By all that's wonderful, what brought you here?"

"I came by the elevated as far as possible. You see, I was afraid that I should be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"Too late to see what I have seen."

"And what have you seen?"

"All that has occurred. I have been here ever since I left you this morning."

"Do you mean that you came directly here from your house?"

"I do not think that I wasted as much as a minute. You see, I recognized at a glance the importance of being here."

"And I did not!" groaned Mr. Barnes.

"Oh, yes, you did," said Mr. Mitchel, "only you took the wrong way of reaching here. Instead of using your brains, you utilized the old fashioned spy system. Force of habit, I suppose."

"Mr. Mitchel, I have made a blunder. I admit it, and I feel sore enough without your chiding. But never mind. Thank heaven, you foresaw that the next move would be made here, and so you came direct to the scene of action and awaited developments. Was that it?"

"Yes. That was the way in which I argued it out. But you would have been here on time if you had not made the mistake of following the wrong man."

"What do you mean?"

"Mora dressed his servant up in his clothes. You probably detected the trick and concluded that he was merely using the man as a decoy."

"Yes. I did not believe that he would trust his servant in an important matter."

"Ah, but he did not need to make a confidant of him! What his man had to do was very simple."

"How do you mean? What has occurred?"

"I came here early and have loitered in the saloon opposite ever since. After a time a carriage drove up, and a man dressed in the clothing which Mora wore at my house alighted. I saw at once, however, that it was not Mora. He went into the house, remained only a few minutes and when he came out went off on foot, leaving the carriage standing. Evidently he was entrusted merely with the delivery of a letter."

"To Mrs. Morton. Yes; you are right. Go on."

"Nearly an hour passed, and I was hoping that you might arrive. Then a woman came out and entered the carriage. Next a man brought out a trunk, which was placed on the carriage seat, and then the vehicle was driven away."

"And you did not follow that carriage?"

"How could I do so?" was Mr. Mitchel's unsatisfactory reply.

"You are right again. There are no cabs at hand in this neighborhood. Well, it's too bad. They've beaten us for the time. But I'll find that woman again, or my name's not Barnes. Come. We will go into the house."

"I have already been in," said Mr. Mitchel quietly. "There is nothing to be gained. The woman has gone, and she has taken her personal effects with her. She left a letter for Mora in the baker shop, which you saw him receive. Curiously enough, the room occupied by Mora when he calls himself Morton remains untouched. I have seen the landlady, and she tells me that Mrs. Morton has left for good. I asked about Mr. Morton, and she replied: 'Bless your heart, he's my best lodger, he is. He takes his room by the quarter.'"

"Did you ask whether he was Mrs. Morton's husband?"

"I thought it a useless question myself, but I also imagined that you might expect me to ask it, so I did so. She declared, as I felt assured that she would, that there was nothing between the two but friendship. In short, she told the same story which Mora told us. She had thoroughly learned her lesson, you may be sure."

"You mean that he sent a letter to Mrs. Morton instructing her how to arrange matters? Of course. What a fool I've been to waste such valuable time following that devil about! But did you not find anything that might serve as a clue?"

"Nothing whatever in the woman's room, but I took the liberty of removing this from the mantel in Morton's apartment."

He handed Mr. Barnes a cabinet photograph, which that gentleman looked at carefully. It was the picture of a young girl, and printed on the card were the words, "The Lily of the Valley."

"What does this amount to?" asked Mr. Barnes. "This is a photograph of a little actress who sings in the concert halls on the Bowery."

"Then you see no significance in the fact that I found it in Mora's room?"

"None whatever," said Mr. Barnes. "The picture is pretty and can be bought for 25 cents. I'll wager that every Johnny in town has one on his mantel."

"You do not think that it is the photograph of this Mrs. Morton?"

"Why, no! Of course not. Do you not see how youthful this girl is? That is not all artifice, though she poses as a child actress on the stage. I happen to know that 'The Lily of the Valley' is scarcely more than 16, and she's more of a child in her manner than even her years indicate."

"She's a very pretty child," said Mr. Mitchel, taking the photograph back and looking at it. While thus engaged he was startled to hear Mr. Barnes say in an undertone:

"Look! Look quickly at the window on the top floor of that house!" Mr. Mitchel did so, but merely caught a glimpse of a man withdrawing his head. It disappeared before he could recognize it.



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"Do you know who it was?" asked Mr. Mitchel.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Barnes. "I wonder what he is doing in that house. It seems strange."

"Who is it?" asked Mr. Mitchel again. "You have not told me."

"Why, unless I am greatly mistaken, I should say it was your crazy lecturer, Preacher Jim."

CHAPTER IX. AN EXPERT OPINION.

Mr. Barnes' words astonished Mr. Mitchel and aroused a train of thought which made him more than ever interested in the complicated problem which they were endeavoring to solve. He could not immediately arrive at any definite conclusions, but these were the points to which he attached the greatest importance.

First, young Mora suggested to the police that the murderer had worn his plaid suit over his own blood stained garments when leaving the house; second, Preacher Jim had contended that this could not be, because if the watchman was to be believed when claiming that he had seen the wearer of the suit come out of the house he should be credited with being equally correct in his statement that he had seen it on the man going in; third, Mora advanced exactly the same argument and then claimed that the suit had been appropriated by the murderer, who had stolen it from the Essex street house; fourth, if Mr. Barnes was correct, here was Preacher Jim peeping from a window of this very house.

What logical deduction should be accepted? Why did Mora first advance one theory and then adopt another? In his excitement, in the first place, had he forgotten that the watchman must be believed wholly or not at all? And was the second theory invented to meet the occasion?

Since Preacher Jim apparently had access to this house, had he shown Mora the mistake that he had made? As a professional crook was he coaching this young man through the difficulties of his first crime? Or, if they were intimate, as they must be according to that view, were they accomplices? Had Mora committed the deed himself, or had he secured the services of Preacher Jim for the bloody deed? Or, since Preacher Jim had suggested a sufficient motive for the murder by a professional crook, had he conducted the enterprise himself in order to obtain the will and subsequently blackmail Mora? Had he stolen the clothes in which he might enter the Mora mansion, deceiving the watchman as to his identity, and had he then artfully returned them?

Mr. Mitchel had just formulated this question mentally when Preacher Jim himself emerged from the house and approached. This action showed that he was not afraid to have it known that he had been in the house. Mr. Mitchel admired his boldness and was curious to hear what he would say.

"Well, gentlemen," said Preacher Jim, nodding to Mr. Barnes, who acknowledged the salutation, and extending his hand to Mr. Mitchel, who took it, "it has been an entertaining drama, has it not? Though, pardon me, Mr. Barnes, I am forgetting. You missed a part of it, eh?"

"Missed a part of what?" asked the detective coldly. "I do not understand you."

"Oh, you are not so stupid as you would have me believe, Mr. Detective! If you were, certain friends of mine would be at liberty instead of serving the government. I allude to the hasty departure which you arrived too late to witness."

"How do you know that?" asked Mr. Mitchel sharply.

"I have eyes in my head and brains in my skull. I have been looking on from the gallery, as it were, while you, Mr. Mitchel, occupied a private box and Mr. Barnes, here, standing room only and at the very end of the play too."

"What do you mean by the gallery?" asked Mr. Mitchel persistently.

"Four flights up; top floor, front window; place empty; last tenant moved out on account of rats and a leaky roof; next tenant not yet in prospect, so my friend, Slippery Sam, who boasts the pleasure of your acquaintance and who is not very particular about where he sleeps or how, so long as no rent is collected, has pre-empted the place and taken up his temporary lodging therein during the last few days."

"How many days, to be exact?"

"Ah, I see! You wish to work up our friend's history. Well, to be exact, eight days. At least, that is according to his statement, and I rely on it because—well, because I do not think that Sam has the courage to lie to Preacher Jim."

and why I was in the place I have no reason to conceal the facts from you."

"I do not deny that I would like to know," said Mr. Mitchel.

"Well, then, in connection with certain matters I came down into this neighborhood to watch Sam personally for a few hours. Therefore you may be sure I did not call on him, as you suggest. Reaching here, I saw you playing the spy, and I decided that it would be quite as profitable perhaps to watch you. I might learn just what you are up to, you see. I felt repaid for my trouble when I saw Sam join you, for then I knew!"

Here he paused for a moment, because, observing Mr. Mitchel closely while speaking, at this point he saw that gentleman dart a swift glance in his direction, which he rightly interpreted to mean that he did not wish Mr. Barnes to know more of his interview with Slippery Sam. Preacher Jim therefore concluded his sentence in different words from those which he had at first contemplated using. He went on:

"—that I could kill two birds with one stone and keep an eye on both of you. I saw that Sam did not intend to return to the house, and while he was talking with you I concluded that I could do better than to run up to the room which he had just left. I might make some discoveries there, and the window offered a good place from which to observe you."

"So you were playing the spy, then," said Mr. Barnes, with a sneer. "Mr. Mitchel told me that you had boasted that if you were a detective you would not adopt such methods."

"Quite true," replied Preacher Jim promptly. "If I were a detective, a large if, Mr. Barnes, eh? But as I am only a common criminal, why, the rule does not apply, does it?"

"You were playing detective if we believe your own story. Therefore you should have used your brains, if you have any. That was your brag."

"As to my brains, you should not expect me to be as clever as yourself. As to my spying, that is another affair. You detectives have an axiom. 'Set a thief to catch a thief.' We crooks have another, 'Spy on a spy and he won't spy you.' We must live up to axioms, or the literature of the language would lose its luster."

"Spy on me as much as you like," said Mr. Barnes testily. "Much good may it do you."

"This is idle talk," interrupted Mr. Mitchel, "and mere waste of time. Preacher Jim, you prophesied that the plaid suit of clothes supposed to have been worn by the murderer of Mr. Mora would be found."

"I did, and I still believe so."

Mr. Barnes made signs to Mr. Mitchel protesting against what he foresaw was about to occur, but that gentleman did not heed him.

"You are right. The suit has been found."

"Indeed! Where? How?"

"Young Mora was seen to throw it into the river, and it was fished out again."

"Young Mora? Threw the things into the river? That looks suspicious, very suspicious. It almost upsets my own theory."

"I would like to hear exactly what your theory is," said Mr. Barnes.

"I have no doubt," replied Preacher Jim, with a scornful laugh, "but aiding detectives is out of my line. I'm a crook, but not so low down as that."

"Tell me why you think Mora's action suspicious?" asked Mr. Mitchel, with a signal to Mr. Barnes to allow him to continue the conversation.

"Why, you ought to see that yourself," said the criminal. "Mora's proposition is that the murderer wore these togs over his own. Having found them, he ought to have carried them to the police station, that their condition might corroborate his theory, if possible. That he did not do this tempts one to think that he has little faith in his own theory."

"Again you are right," said Mr. Mitchel, admiring the logical manner in which the man reached his deductions. "Mora now says that he offered that explanation to the police because he thought of nothing better at the time. Now he argues that the murderer stole his clothes here in Essex street, wore them to the house, committed the crime and returned them to the closet from which he had taken them."

"So that is the new edition of his theory, is it? Quite a pretty story. The criminal must have had a fairly godmother to throw dust in people's eyes, lest they see her protégé in all this coming and going. Pah! Mora is a coward."

"Why so?"

"He hit the nail on the head the first time and then is afraid of the consequences of telling the truth."

"Speak more plainly."

"I will do so, though I ought not to be teaching this detective his trade. But this time I'll show him that I can use brains. Listen! Let us imagine the circumstances. Mora told the police that the murderer wore the plaid suit over his own clothing, the presumption of course being that there was blood upon him. When released from the lockup he hurries down here and looks over the clothes. He finds upon them something that corroborates his theory. Then he grows alarmed. He does not object to having the police think he has told the truth, but he fears to have them know that he did. They might wonder how he managed to make so good a guess."

"And for that reason you think he finally decided to destroy the things? If you may be right, but we could test it if Mr. Barnes would permit us to see the clothes. Will you?"

Mr. Barnes had serious objections to this, but did not like to refuse a request which he saw that Mr. Mitchel made with great earnestness. Therefore, with much reluctance, he led the way to his office in lower Broadway

and produced the bundle of clothing. The garments had been opened and dried and were now in a wrinkled and slightly shrunken condition.

"Now, then," said Mr. Mitchel, addressing Preacher Jim, "you think there might have been something about these which would corroborate Mora's first theory. You must have had some definite thought in your mind, and I half suspect that I could guess what you mean, but I would be glad to have you tell me."

"It is very simple. These garments must have blood stains upon them, or Mora would not have thrown them into the river. The stains must have reached the clothes either during the commission of the murder or afterward. In the first instance, the blood would primarily show upon the outside. In the second, it would be upon the inside, from contact with the other clothes."

"Very good as far as it goes. But as fresh blood would readily soak through the cloth it would appear on either side, would it not?"

"You overlook the lining in the vest and upper part of the trousers. If the blood was spattered on the outside during the killing, there would be but little if any stain upon the linings. If, on the contrary, these clothes were slipped over the blood stained garments of the murderer, there would be much blood upon the linings, and very little comparatively would soak through to the outside opposite to these places. In the unlined portions it would, of course, be difficult to decide, but a man would be lucky indeed to have the blood spatter so fortunately."

As Mr. Mitchel listened he thought of Mr. Barnes' statements that this man was mad. Could it be? If so, he had some very rational moments. He now carefully examined the clothing himself. First he took up the coat, upon which he found nothing.

"No blood upon that, I believe," said he, passing it to Preacher Jim, who took it calmly and also looked it over. "So far there is no clew one way or the other."

"I beg your pardon," said Preacher Jim. "You are mistaken."

"How? Do you find any stains?"

"No; but that does not prove that this coat may not furnish an important clew. I will explain after you have examined the other things."

"I find something here," said Mr. Barnes, who had been examining the trousers, which seems to show that you have reasoned cleverly. There are a few blood stains near the knee, but there is only a slight one higher up, whereas the pocket is quite badly stained."

"Let me see," said Mr. Mitchel, taking the garment. "By heaven, you are right, Preacher Jim! The stain is on the side of the pocket which must have rested next to the garment which it covered; yet, although the cloth is thin, there is actually no stain on the other half of the pocket."

"That is strange," said Preacher Jim, coming and looking on. "How do you account for it?"

"I think that there was something in the pocket which protected the other half. Who knows? It may have been the stolen will."

"In which case the will would be bloody on one side," suggested Mr. Barnes.

"If it were found and showed such a stain, what beautiful corroborative details we would have!" said Preacher Jim.

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Preacher Jim credit," said Mr. Barnes, "for capital reasoning, at least in this case. Still, I do not see that it adds us much. We are still no nearer to the identity of the murderer. We are forced to believe that no one went in or out of that house that night, except the man in the plaid suit. If the murderer was not so dressed, then he must have been in hiding on the premises and must have committed the crime after young Mora came home, or he would not have been able to take the clothes as a disguise when going out."

"You are carrying us in too deep and to no purpose," said Mr. Mitchel. "That theory is untenable, for you must remember that if Mora came home in the suit it must have been he who went out again. Otherwise he could not have returned at 5 in the morning. But, if he it was who wore the suit in and then out of the house, how about the tale which these stains seem to tell?