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CHAPTER XX.
When Stamer came to the gable of the house next but one to the public house, and the wall of which formed one half of the northern boundary of the yard, he paused and listened. He could hear no sound of life or movement near him beyond the snort or cough of a horse now and then.
After a pause of two or three minutes, he stooped, slipped off his boots, slung them round his neck, and having hitched the crook of his heavy stick to a belt he wore under his waistcoat, he laid hold of the water-pipe that descended from the gutter of the double roof to the yard, and began ascending the gable of the house with surprising agility and speed.
In less than two minutes from the time he first seized the water-pipe he disappeared in a few yards from the edge and then reappeared against the sloping slates of the roof to rest. The ascent had taken only a couple of minutes, but the exertion had been very great, and he was tired and out of breath.
Then he unscrewed his ferrule and withdrew the tampion and unscrewed the handle of his stick, and was busy in the darkness for awhile with the weapon he carried.
He particularly wished to have a steady hand and arm that night, so he made up his mind that he would rest until five minutes to 12. Then he should get into position. He should creep down the gutter until he came to the gable wall standing up over the roofs of the houses on which he now was lying. He should then be almost opposite the dwarf window in which he last night saw the dwarf wind up his clock. He should be a little out of the direct line, but not much. The width of the street was no more from house to house than fifty feet. The distance from the wall of the house he should be on then, and the wall of Forbes' bakery could not be more than sixty feet. The weapon he carried was perfectly trustworthy at a hundred and fifty yards, or more. He had been practicing that afternoon and evening at an old hat forty yards, and he had never missed it once. Forty yards was just double the distance he should be from that window if he were on a parapet instead of being at the coping tile, lying on the inside slope of the roof. Allow another ten feet for that. This would bring the distance up to seventy feet at the very outside, and he had never missed once at a hundred and twenty feet. He had given himself now and then a good deal of practice with the gun, for he enjoyed peculiar facilities; because the factory wall by which the lane at the back of his place ran, prevented any one seeing what he was doing, and the noise of the factory drowned the whir of the gun and the whiz of the bullet.
At half-past 11 that night the private bar of the public house held about half a dozen customers, but it lacked the elevating presence of Oscar Leigh, who always gave the assembly a distinctly intellectual air.
A few minutes later, however, the spirits of those present rose, for Mr. Oscar Leigh came in, rubbing his forehead and complaining of the heat.
"I have only a minute or two, I must be off to wind up," said Leigh. "Ten minutes to 12 by your clock, Mr. Williams; that means a quarter to right time."
"It is, I have heard, the most wonderful clock in Chicago," spoke an acquaintance.
"In Chicago! In Chicago! In the world, sir. It is the most wonderful clock ever conceived by man. Well, my time is up. Good-night, gentlemen."
He scrambled off his high stool and was quickly out of the bar. It was now five minutes to 12 o'clock, right time. He crossed the street, and opening the private door of Forbes', went in, closing the door after him.
As he came out John Timmons turned into the street. He went on until he came opposite the window of the clock-room. Here he stood still, thrust his hands deep down in his trousers pockets, and leaning his back against the wall, prepared to watch with his own eyes the winding of the clock.
In less than five minutes the window of the top room, which had been dark, gradually grew illuminated until the light came full through the transparent oiled muslin curtain. Timmons could see for all practical purposes as plainly as through glass.
"There Leigh is, anyway," thought Timmons, "working away at his lever. Can it be he was doing the same thing at this hour last night? Nonsense. He was walking away from this place with me at this hour last night as sure as I am here now. I must be going mad. There, he is turning round now and nodding to the men at the bar. They said he did the same last night, and, as I live, there's the clock we were under striking the quarter past again! I must be going mad. I begin to think last night must have been all a dream with me. I don't think he's all right. I don't believe in witchcraft, but there's something wrong here; I'll watch this out anyway."
"Why, what's that over head?"
Timmons looked up, but saw nothing.
"It's some young fellows larking."
He glanced back at the window.
"What a funny way he's nodding his head now. And there's a hole in the curtain and there seems to be a noise in the room. There goes the gas out. I suppose the clock is wound up now. Strange I didn't hear the clock strike the hour, and yet Leigh's light is out."
And John Timmons walked out of Chetwynd street and took his way eastward.
CHAPTER XXI.
On Saturday morning about 9 o'clock

Timmons was resting on the high stool at his doorway. He had bought a morning paper on his way to business, and he now glanced over it casually. Finally he came upon the place where local news was given. His eye caught a large heading, "Fire and Loss of Life in Chetwynd Street." The paragraph was, owing to the late hour at which the event took place, brief. It ran as follows:
"Last night, between half-past 12 and 1 o'clock, a disastrous and fatal fire broke out in the bakery establishment of Mr. Forbes in Chetwynd street. The top floor, where the fire originated, was occupied by Mr. Oscar Leigh, who has lost his life in the burning. Mr. Leigh was engaged in the manufacture of a very wonderful clock, which occupied fully half the room, and which Mr. Leigh invariably wound up every night between 12 and half-past 12.
"It is generally supposed that the eccentric movements of Mr. Leigh were the result of a fit or sudden seizure of some other kind, and that in his struggles some inflammable substance was brought in contact with the gas before it was turned out."
Timmons flung down the paper with a shout, crying, "Dead! Dead! Leigh is dead!"
At that moment the figure of a man appeared at the threshold of the store, and Stamer, with a scowl and a stare, stepped in hastily and looked furtively, fearfully around.
"What are you shoutin' about?" cried Stamer, in a tone of dangerous menace.
"Leigh is dead!" cried Timmons in excitement.
"I know all about that, I suppose," said Stamer, and you shut up, if you don't want to follow him. I'm in no humor for your noise and antics. Do you want to leave the coppers down on us?—do you, you idiot!"
"Who are you calling an idiot?" cried Timmons, catching up an iron bar and taking a few steps towards the burglar.
"You, if you want to know. Put that down. Put that bar down, I say. Can you tell me who killed him? If you can't I can." He pointed to himself.
"What?" cried Timmons, starting back, and not quite understanding the other's gesture.
"Now are you satisfied? I thought you guessed. I wouldn't have told you if I didn't think you knew or guessed. I thought you knew, and that, instead of saying a good word to me, you were going to down me and give me up."
Timmons stepped slowly back in horror.
"You!" he whispered, bending his head forward and beginning to tremble in every limb. "You! You did it! You did this! You, Stamer!"
Stamer merely nodded, and looked like a hunted wild beast. He wore the clothes of last night, but was without the whiskers or beard. All the time he covered in the shelter of the shutters, he kept his right hand behind his back. He looked towards the opening and then his round, bloodshot eyes went back to the rigid figure of Timmons. "I don't mind what you say, if you'll only speak to me, only not too loud. No one can hear us. I know that, and no one can listen at the door, without our seeing him. You don't know what I have gone through. I have not been home. I am afraid to go home. I am afraid of everything."
"You murderous villain!"
"It's enough to drive any man mad. I've been wondering about all night. I am more afraid of my wife than of any one else. I don't know why, but I tremble when I think of her, more than of the police, or—
"The hangman?"
"Yes, you don't know all. When you do, you'll pity me."
"The poor, foolish dwarf!"
"Yes, I was afraid he would betray us."
"Oh, villain!"
"And I got on a roof opposite the window, and when he was working at the lever, I fired, and his head went so—and then so—and then so."
"Stop it, you murderer!"
"Yes, and I know it was done. The clock! Yes, I know the neck was broken, and it was all right."
"If you don't stop it, I'll brain you!"
"Yes, and I got down off the roof and ran. I couldn't help running, and all the time I was running I heard him running after me. I heard him running after me, and I saw his head wagging so—so—so, as he ran. Every step he took, his head wagged, so—and so—and so."
"If you don't stop that—"
"Yes, I will. I'll stop it. But I could not stop him last night. All the time I ran I couldn't stop him. His head kept wagging, and his lame feet kept running after me, and I couldn't stop the feet or the head. I don't know how long I ran, or where I ran, but I could run no more, and I fell up against a wall, and then it overtook me! I saw it as plainly as I see you—plainer, I saw it—"
The man paused a moment to wipe his forehead.
"Do you hear?" he yelled, suddenly flinging his arms up in the air. "Do you hear? Will you believe me now? The steps again! The lame steps again. Do you hear them?"
"Mad!"
"Mad! I told you. Look!"
The figure of a low-sized, deformed dwarf came into the opening and crossed the threshold of the store.
With a groan Stamer fell forward insensible.
CHAPTER XXII.
Timmons uttered a wild yell, and springing away from the wall fled to the

extreme end of the store, and then faced round panting and livid.
"Hah!" said the shrill voice of the man on the threshold. "Private theatricals, I see. I did not know, Mr. Timmons, that you went in for such entertainments. Don't you think, Mr. Timmons, that you ought to ring down the curtain, and that this gentleman, who no doubt represents the villain of the piece confronted with his intended victim, had better get up and look after his breakfast?" He pointed to the prostrate Stamer, who lay motionless upon the sandy floor.
Timmons did not move or speak. The shock had, for the moment, completely bereft him of his senses.
"I have just come back from the country," said the dwarf, "and I thought I'd call on you at once. I should like to have a few moments' conversation with you, if your friend and very able supporter would have the kindness to consider himself alive and fully pardoned by his intended victim."
The prostrate man did not move. Timmons shuddered. He made a prodigious effort and tried to move forward, but had to put his hand against the wall to steady himself. Leigh approached Stamer and touched him with his stick. Stamer did not stir.
"Is there anything the matter with the man? I think there must be, Timmons. What do you mean by running away to the other end of the place? Why, this man is unconscious. I seem to be fated to meet fainting men!"
Stamer did not speak, but struggled slowly to his feet, and, assisted by Timmons, walked to the opening and was followed a few yards down the street. There the two parted without a word. By the time Timmons got back he was comparatively composed.
"Are we alone?" asked Leigh impatiently, on Timmons' return.
"We are."
"Hah! I am glad we are. If your friend were connected with racing I should call him a stayer. I came to tell you that I have just got back from Milwaukee. I thought it best to go there and see again the man I had been in treaty with. I not only saw him, but heard a great deal about him, and I am sorry to say I heard nothing good. He is, it appears, a very poor man, and he deliberately misled me as to his position and his ability to pay. I am now quite certain that if I had opened business with him I should have lost anything I intrusted to him, or if not all, a good part."
"Then I am not to meet you at the same place next Thursday night?" asked Timmons. He had not at this moment any interest in the mere business about which they had been negotiating. He was curious about other matters. His mind was now tolerably clear, but flabby and inactive still.
"No. There is no use in your giving me the alloy until I see my way to doing something with it, and I feel bound to say that after this great disappointment I feel greatly discouraged altogether."
"Then, Mr. Leigh, I suppose we are at a standstill?"
"Precisely."
"What you mean, I suppose, Mr. Leigh, is that you do not see your way to going any further?"
"Well, yes. At present I do not see my way to going any further."
"You went to Milwaukee yesterday. May I ask you by what train you went down?"
"Two-thirty in the afternoon."
"And you came back this morning?"
"Yes. Just arrived. I drove straight here, as I told you."
"And you were away from half-past two yesterday until now. You were out of Chicago yesterday from 2:30 until early this morning?"
"Yes; until six this morning. Why are you so curious? You do not, I hope, suspect me of saying anything that is not strictly true?" said Leigh, throwing his head back and striking the sandy floor fiercely with his stick.
"Not mean, sir," said Timmons, shaking his military finger at him and frowning heavily, "not that I suspect you of lying, but that I am sure you are lying. I was at the public house last night; you were there, too."
Leigh started and drew back. He looked down and said nothing. He could not tell how much this man knew. Timmons went on:
"I was in the public bar when you came in. You called for rum hot, and you went away at close to twelve o'clock to wind up your clock. I was out then and saw you at the window winding up the clock. I was there when the light went out just at half-past twelve. Now, sir, are you lying or am I?"
Leigh burst into a loud, long, harsh roar of laughter that made Timmons start, it was so weird and unexpected.
(To be continued.)

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