THE THIRD FINGER.

BY WILLIAM LE QUEUX.

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LAST Christmas Eve, just as the midnight bells of St. Mary Abbot's, Kensington, burst forth into a joyous peal, my wandering footsteps led me into Pembridge Square on my way home from the theater. The night was damp and cold, a typical December night in London, but the majority of people were still astir, for on Christmas Eve there is much late shopping in the popular thoroughfares, as the thrifty lower-class housewife always procrastinates in the hope of obtaining her Christmas joint cheaper after midnight.

Having emerged from the eternal gaslight of the Underground Railway at Notting Hill Gate station, I crossed the busy Hight street, ablaze with the naphtha lamps of hoarse-voiced costermongers, and passing along that rather select thoroughfare, Pembridge Gardens, entered the square, and was traversing it on my way to Richmond road, Bayswater, where I lived. Suddenly, as I passed along, my attention was attracted by a low, plaintive cry, and turning, I saw in the corner of a dark doorway something white huddled up. It was a child shivering with cold and sobbing bitterly, therefore I stopped, bent, and inquired what was the matter.

"I'm cold," was all the reply I received. She did not raise her head, but continued sobbing.

"Come!" I said, taking her hand and raising her to her feet. "You mustn't remain here or you'll be frozen. Who are you?"

The child, whose tiny hand was icy cold, raised a pair of wide-open, wondering eyes to mine in hesitation, then replied simply:

"I'm Cissie."

"What's your other name?"

"Matheson."

Even in that dim light of the street lamp it needed no second glace to convince me that she was not an ordinary child. Her dress was of a richness quite unusual in children's attire, a prettily made frock of soft white China silk embellished with many laces and ruffles, neat black silk stockings, and patent leather shoes with shining buckles. She was, I judged, about seven years old, or perhaps a trifle more, with a charming, refined face and clear blue eyes, while about her shoulders was a wealth of hair of that bright, lustrous gold which invariably fades before the teens. Her voice was sweet and lisping, and I knew by her pronunciation that she was no ordinary Cockney waif.

"And where do you live?" I inquired tenderly.

"I don't know," she responded shyly.

"But you haven't been out of doors long, have you? Where's your hat?"

"I've lost it," she lisped.

The fact that she had on only thin patent leather slippers and was hatless seemed proof that she had escaped from some drawing-room in the vicinity, perhaps from some children's Christmas party. But, although I questioned her closely, it was apparent that she had no idea whatever of her place of abode. She was hopelessly lost.

I took her hand and walked with her some distance, but she seemed weary, shivering from head to foot. I took out a handkerchief and tied it over her head, then contemplated handing her over to the first constable we met. Her description would be telegraphed to every police station, and any inquiry in any part of London would promptly result in her discovery.

When we gained the corner of Westbourne Grove I stood looking up and down the thoroughfare in search of a constable, but the child somehow seemed to divine my intention, and said:

"Don't let the policeman have me." Then she again burst into tears. All children, frightened by their nurses, entertain a deep-rooted horror of the police, therefore I resolved to take her home with me for the night, and next day endeavor to trace her friends. On arrival at Richmond road I handed her over to the care of my landlady, a sable-habited, hand-chafing person, who if not of "motherly" disposition, evinced a tender interest in the pretty foundling.

Nursing her before my fire Mrs. Soames questioned the mysterious Cissie, who, with a child's simplicity, told us that her nurse had taken her out to a party at the house of some person named Johnson, and that on the way there she had been left outside a shop while the nurse entered to make some purchase—from her description of the thoroughfare this must have occurred in High street, Notting Hill—and she, having wandered away from the shop, became lost in the busy, bustling crowd doing their Christmas marketing. Then she had apparently turned into the side street, and wandered on until I discovered her.

She had a mother, she told us, bursting into tears at mention of her; but no father. Evidently her mother was a lady in good circumstances, for the child's dress was, as Mrs. Soames pointed out, unusually rich, while on her tiny wrist was a beautiful little bangle set with a cipher of two "C"s" in diamonds. It is not often that children possess such a costly ornament as that.

"My uncle gave me that on my birthday, because I was a good girl," she explained, in response to my inquiry. "Isn't it pretty?" and she held it to the light, admiring the glitter of the stones.

"Yes," I said. "You ought to be very proud of it."

She laughed, and held out her hands to the warmth of the fire. She was certainly a coquettish little person, and we were both entirely charmed by her manner. With a child's quick perception she knew she had fallen among friends, and her tears had quickly given place to merriment. Indeed, before Mrs. Soames put her to bed she grew quite bright, happy, and contented.

When I came down to breakfast on Christmas morning I found Cissie already seated at table awaiting me, looking fresh and very charming, with rosy face and well-brushed hair.

"Well," I said, laughing, "do you feel better?"

"Yes," she replied. "But what a very long time you've been. I'm so hungry."

"Then let's commence," I said, and we ate our breakfast together, while at the same time I continued my cross-examination in an endeavor to find out the whereabouts of her home. I felt confident that it must be in one of those superior streets or squares which lie between Bishop's Road and Kensington Gardens, and became more than ever convinced that the best course was to go round and inform the police. Probably they had already received an inquiry from Mrs. Matheson, who, without doubt, was at that moment beside herself with grief. But London is a large place in which to lose oneself, and it is astonishing how many able-bodied men and women are lost yearly in the maelstrom of life, and are never again discovered.

The child's manner was piquant and amusing. A bachelor can be very lonely in London. I possessed few friends, and had intended to spend Christmas alone, as usual; but there, at my table, was a merry, laughing little person, who seemed to bring a Christmas gladness to that dingy smoke-begrimed room which for twelve years had been my home. She ate with a keen appetite, chatting on as children will chatter, with a quaint inquisitiveness and a blunt expression of opinion. Her eyes were, I think, the finest I had ever seen, even in a child, and her hair fell about her face, like a golden sheen.

Later that morning, when I was sitting alone, Mrs. Soames, to whom the mystery of the child was intense, entered and triumphantly cried:

"I've found the young lady's address, sir. Look here!"

And she handed to me a piece of crumpled white bukram, evidently part of an address-label, which she had found sewn inside the child's gown. In ink was written in an educated feminine hand the words: "Cissie Matheson, 66 Clifton Road."

"We've found out where you live," I said, enthusiastically to the child, as she entered the room at that moment. "It's in Clifton Road."

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "Of course that's the name. What a stupid I am."

"Do you know what part of London it is?"

"Oh, a long way from here," she answered, but in response to further questions it was plain that she did not know the whereabouts of the thoroughfare.

Eagerly I took down my little red atlas of the County of London, and turning up the index, discovered to my dismay that there were no fewer than six Clifton roads, situated far away from one another; namely, at Old Kent Road, Brockley, Camden Town, Maida Vale, New Cross-road, and Wimbledon. Then another suggestion occurred to me, and I went along to the Royal Oak and looked at the London Directory; but although I carefully searched the list of householders in each thoroughfare I could discover no such name as Matheson.

I returned and took counsel with Mrs. Soames, who advised that I should set forth at once with the foundling and visit all the Clifton Roads in order to restore Miss Cissie to her mother, who was no doubt beside herself with grief. The young lady, curled in my big leather armchair before the fire, had, however, made herself thoroughly at home, and seemed disinclined to stir out into the raw, cold afternoon.

Mrs. Soames presently unearthed an old cape which had belonged many years ago to one of her own children, and smelt strongly of camphor, and attired in this, with a warm shawl tied about her head, Cissie accompanied me out in search of her home. It was nearly 3 o'clock and already the yellow light was fading when we entered a hansom in Westbourne Grove and drove through the deserted streets up to Clifton Road, Maida Vale, only to find no such name as Matheson known at No. 66. Thence, in order to visit the streets methodically, we drove up to Camden Town, where we discovered that the street in question only contained twenty houses, and was close to the Cattle Market. The street lamps were being lit, and the great thoroughfares, quiet and almost deserted, presented a most depressing spectacle, for on Christmas evening every one remains at home save the drivers of public conveyances, and even the latter cease running early in the evening so that the employes may partake in the general festivities.

Cissie, huddled at my side, seemed tired out. She spoke but little, and it was apparent that she would soon fall asleep. As we turned away toward the Caledonian Road I glanced at the paper whereon I had written the names of the roads, and saw the next was a very long way off, in Old Kent Road on the opposite side of London. I gave the cabman directions, at which he gave a grunt of ill-will, and we set off due south, while I drew the child nearer to me and rearranged the shawl upon her head. The street, however, proved like the others, not to be the one wherein my foundling lived. Yet I consoled myself by the thought that by going to work methodically I must discover my little friend's home sooner or later. Along those endless giant arteries of London beyond the Thames I caught sight here and there of Christmas trees and festivities taking place within warm rooms illuminated by blazing fires and ornamented by chains of colored paper. In an hour we rattled beneath the railway bridge in the New Cross Road, and turned into another narrow, mean street to the left, which, from its appearance, I at once also saw could not be the home of Cissie Matheson. The number of which I was in search proved to be a small public house, therefore disappointedly we again turned away.

Two others only remained: one at Brockley, and the other at Wimbledon. I gave the cabman instructions to find the former, and sat back coll, hungry, dispirited. The unusual aspect of the streets was inexpressibly depressing, and truth to tell, I would have much preferred spending Christmas evening in my own comfortable chair beside the fire than driving about in a hansom. The driver entered into consultation with the solitary policeman on point duty outside the Marquis of Granby, and afterward drove straight down the Lewisham High Road, turning suddenly into a new suburban district of rather large detached houses, each with spacious garden—a highly genteel neighborhood, which had extended beyond the confines of Brockley into what was until quite recently open fields. Suddenly, we pulled up before a large artistically gabled house of red brick, standing back behind a well-kept lawn, with several monkey-trees in front. Hidden from the vulgar gaze by a high oak fence it was one of the largest houses in the vicinity, and as I descended and lifted Cissie out she at once recognized the place, saying joyfully:

"Why, this is our house! I wonder what mother will say?"

And she left me, and bounded up the well-rolled graveled path to the door, where she rang the bell violently.

A neat maid with long-stringed cap answered, but next instant a rather handsome well-preserved womin in widow's mourning rushed out into the hall and with a loud cry of joy snatched up her child, kissing her again and again.

"I thought you were lost, my darling," she cried through her tears of joy. "The police have been in search of you all day."

Then, in the same breath she thanked me, inquired how and where I had found the little wanderer, and invited me inside.

"Won't you take off your coat and join us at dinner?" she gaied. "We have only this moment commenced, and we cannot allow you to return without thanking you."

I was ravenously hungry, therefore the savory smell of roast turkey decided me, and divesting myself of hat and coat, I followed my hostess into the warm dining-room. It was a well and substantially furnished apartment, tastefully decorated, the table shining with silver and pretty with floral decorations. At the head sat a smart, well-groomed man about forty-five, in evening dress, who rose and greeted me, being introduced by Mrs. Matheson as Mr. Paull, her brother, and quickly a place was laid for me, and I sat down to a plate of very excellent soup.

Cissie sat next her mother, little worse for her adventure, and we were quickly a very merry quartet.

Briefly I explained how I had found her crying in Pembridge Square, and of my visit to all the Clifton Roads in London, whereupon Mrs. Matheson, with tears of joy still in her eyes, said:

"I really don't know how to sufficiently thank you, sir. To-day has been a most anxious and terrible day for us. It is the first anniversary of my dear husband's death, and I had lost my only child. You have, indeed, made my Christmas a happy one, for I have recovered my darling Cissie," and she stroked the child's soft golden hair with a mother's tender hand.

"This unexpected meeting this evening is," I said, "sufficient reward for any little trouble I've taken. It was perhaps fortunate that I found her, or some thief or other might have stolen her diamond bangle."

"Oh! my sister has been imagining the most dreadful things all day," her brother laughed. "I felt certain, however, that the precocious Cissie must turn up again before very long."

"Strange though it may seem," I said, "many people lost in London are never heard of again."

Mrs. Matheson exchanged a quick glance with her brother, and the latter, in a rather curious voice, answered:

"Yes, that's so. Hundreds yearly, I've heard it said."

Cissie's account of her straying seemed quite correct, for the nursery governess was called and explained how she entered the shop in High street, Notting Hill, and when she came out failed to discover her charge.

Dinner was half way through, when suddenly I heard the sound of wheels outside. I remarked upon it, when Mrs. Matheson, with another glance at her brother, said:

"Oh, I've sent your cabman away. It is unnecessary to keep him here all the evening. You won't go for an hour or so yet."

"But I hope you haven't paid him?" I said, recollecting that his fare would be at least a sovereign.

"Of course," she said, politely. "I couldn't think of allowing you to pay the expenses of finding out where I live."

I protested, but she only laughed, assuring me that she was more indebted to me than the matter of a few shillings. The dinner went off most merrily.

I was spending a very cheerful Christmas after all.

Cissie and her mother at last left the table, and I sat with Paull over an excellent cigar. I found him a very pleasant man.

"We're greatly indebted to you," he said. "My sister has been hysterical with grief all day. Servants are such unmitigated idiots."

"Yes," I observed. "It certainly was foolish to leave the child alone in a crowded street."

"Cissie is her mother's idol. My sister was devoted to her husband, and his untimely death was a terrible blow to her. He was on his way to London from Scotland to spend last Christmas with his wife, and was killed in the accident to the Scotch express at Retford."

"Terribly sad," I said, recollecting the appalling disaster on the previous Christmas Eve, when a train was wrecked outside Retford station.

"Yes," he sighed. "Jack Matheson was such a thoroughly good fellow, too."

And so we chatted on until, having finished our coffee, we rejoined mother and daughter in the pretty drawing-room where the logs were brightly burning, the high lamp with its great shade of crimson silk giving the place a cozy appearance. The room was extremely well furnished, and ensconced in a cozy corner beside the fire I chatted on, now and then laughing with Cissie over our adventure. Soon, however, she curled herself up in a chair and dropped off to sleep, while the warmth of the fire after the intense cold outside made me also rather drowsy.

At last, after a long and exceedingly pleasant gossip, I thanked them for their hospitality, and rose to go.

"But it's late," Paull said, concernedly, glancing at the clock. "I question whether you'll get a cab at this hour and in this out-of-the-way place. It's Christmas night, remember, and the last train has gone."

"Why not remain the night?" suggested Mrs. Matheson. "Do. We have a spare bed always aired, and you are quite welcome."

"Yes, stay," urged her brother. "You'll never get up to Bayswater to-night. A cab will charge at least a sovereign, even if you find one, which I very much doubt."

But I was resolved on getting home, therefore declined. Their invitation, however, was so pressing, and they convinced me of the almost impossibility of getting to the other side of London that night, therefore I at last accepted.

I had a final whisky and seltzer with Paull, and it was almost 1 o'clock before Mrs. Matheson showed me to my room, a large, well-furnished chamber with a small dressing-room leading off, very comfortable, with a bright fire burning. The upholstery and hangings were of pale blue, the bed being an extremely fine one of ebony, with the head and foot inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Having warmed my hands for a minute or two, I turned in, and in the fitful firelight lay watching the grotesque shadows, and thinking of the curious incidents of the past twenty-four hours.

I fancy I must have dozed, when I suddenly heard a curious, indistinct whispering, and lay to listen. The fire had died down to a few glowing embers, which threw scarcely any light, and so uneasy I became that I descended from the bed and groped about for matches. Unfortunately I could find none! and moreover, when I tried the gas with my hand upon the burner, I found it had been turned off at the meter.

Calmly I reasoned with myself. My hostess was an eminently respectable lady, and even though we had only been acquainted such a short time, yet there was every reason why she should show me this hospitality. Nevertheless, there had crept upon me a strange, indefinite feeling of insecurity, and I stood in the darkness hesitating how to act. There were two windows, evidently overlooking the quiet suburban road. I went to them, and felt behind the blue curtains that they were strongly shuttered and fastened. Then I stirred the embers and succeeded by blowing upon them in creating a feeble flame which gave me greater freedom of action.

I cast myself into an armchair and reflected. The darkness had somehow unnerved me, and the more I thought the stranger the whole affair seemed. That my cab had been sent away without consulting me was curious; and stranger still were the looks exchanged between Paull and his sister as we had sat at dinner. Now that I was alone every detail of that evening recurred to me, and many of the incidents seemed very strange and unaccountable.

I laughed at my misgivings. Nevertheless I was bound to admit that the whole affair was mysterious—extremely mysterious. By the fickle light of the flame my watch showed that it was 2 o'clock; therefore, having locked the door communicating with the dressing-room—after searching in vain there for matches or candle—I half dressed, resolved to spend the remainder of the night in the comfortable armchair of the "grandfather" type with its high back and sides to keep off the draughts.

I am not naturally a nervous man, for I have spent many a night alone in an African forest, yet by some indescribable intuition I felt confident of impending danger; of some curious and entirely unaccountable premonition of evil.

Sitting there I noted every detail of the furniture. All was artistic; all was handsome. The carpet was, however, of black felt; very unusual, like a funeral pall. Lying upon it I suddenly noticed, revealed by a quick burst of flame, something which attracted my attention. It was close by the dressing table, before the window, and rising, I stooped and picked it up.

It was cold and curious to the touch, and as I bent to the fire to examine it I let it fall from my grasp with a cry of horror. It was a dead finger—the third finger of a woman's hand.

This discovery appalled me. There was evidently more mystery in that house than I had imagined.

Again I picked up the finger and carefully examined it. It was slim, well-formed, with a carefully kept nail, white and delicate, but had been amputated at the base by an unpracticed hand. I gazed upon the ghastly object in horror and amazement.

The fire had almost died out, and as I sat in the darkness I contemplated the advisability of dressing and escaping from the house. However, on reflection, I resolved first to thoroughly search the room, and then remain until morning and investigate the house of mystery.

I found at last a piece of wood, the handle of a small broom used to sweep up the grate; and after some difficulty lit it, obtaining light thereby. Then I searched everywhere—in the wardrobes, cupboards, beneath the bed and everywhere else, until I came to the dressing-table, prettily draped with muslin over pale blue satin. I lifted those drapings, and what I saw held me horror-stricken.

Beneath that table, hidden behind a small chest, was the body of a young, fair-haired woman. One stiff hand was raised above her head, and I saw that the third finger was missing. It had been severed in order to obtain her rings!

The girl was not more than twenty, pale and beautiful in death, attired handsomely in a decollete dinner dress of rose silk and chiffon. But on examining her I saw that she had been hastily despoiled of her jewelry, her ear-rings having been torn through the lobes of the ears, and both hands had been mutilated to obtain her rings. This ghastly discovery appalled me. In an instant I saw that I had been entrapped. I had a valuable watch and chain, a diamond scarfpin which was worth at least fifty pounds, and about three pounds ten in my pocket. These people were, no doubt, connoisseurs of jewels, and my pin had attracted them.

In the remaining flicker shed by the brush handle I dressed completely and made my way to the door, only, however, to find it secured on the outside.

I was a prisoner.

Who, I wondered, was the beautiful girl who had been the previous victim in that room? Had she, like myself, been a guest at diner, and been induced to spend the night in that fatal chamber? My knowledge of surgery was sufficient to tell me that the finger I had found had been cut off before death. The reflection caused me to shudder.

I sank again in the armchair, and was puzzling to devise a way out of the horrible situation, when, of a sudden, without warning and swift as lightning, a frightful crushing blow was dealt me right on top of the skull. For a single instant I saw sparks of light dancing before my eyes, and felt myself falling like a log to the ground. Then the blackness of unconsciousness fell upon me, and I knew no more.

How long I remained in that condition, it is impossible to tell. When, however, I struggled back to consciousness I found myself lying in a pool of blood, and suffering from a frightful wound in the head. I staggered with difficulty to my feet, dazed and weak, and saw, to my delight, some faint rays of daylight showing through cracks in the shutters. In an instant I recollected my scarf pin, watch, and money, and discovered that they were gone.

I went to the dressing table and raised the drapings to make sure that my grewsome discovery was a reality. But the body was no longer there, although there still lay upon the floor the hideous evidence, the severed finger.

I carefully examined the chair in which I had sat, and found that by a cunningly contrived device, worked by an electric wire somewhere outside the room, a small steel ax with spiked head emerged from the high back of the chair and descended with crushing force full upon the head of any unfortunate person sitting there—a truly devilish contrivance.

First arming myself with a heavy iron bar, which I wrenched from the shutters, I went to the door. It had been relocked, but, using the bar as a lever, I soon wrenched it open. The hour, I afterward found was 3 o'clock in the afternoon. The house was in silence.

The interesting widow and her brother had flown.

On gaining the street, I wandered about the new, eminently respectable roads until, in the Lewisham high road, I found a policeman, who directed me to the station, where I detailed my experiences to the inspector on duty. At first he seemed incredulous and inclined to believe my wound attributable to Christmas festivities; but when he accompanied me to the house and I showed him the dead finger and the mechanical device for the committal of murder—which we found was worked from an adjoining room, where there was a small hole for observation, the electric current releasing a very strong spring in the head of the chair—he quickly became interested and took down my story in detail. Half an hour later, with a couple of detectives, I assisted to search the place from garret to cellar, and in the latter place we discovered undoubted traces of more than one terrible crime. Beneath the flagstones, buried in quicklime we found a quantity of bones, as well as the body of the fair-haired girl which I had discovered on the previous night. The further result of our search made it evident that a number of persons had been enticed there, ingeniously done to death, their clothes being burned in the furnace of the kitchen copper, and their remains buried in a most methodical manner.

How I escaped being killed outright by the pair is accounted for by the fact that early on the morning of Boxing Day they called a four-wheeler cab and placed a number of trunks upon it preparatory to escaping, something having alarmed them. A constable chanced to be in the road at the time, and his attention being attracted by the unusual amount of luggage, he spoke to the cabman. This seemed to have caused them uneasiness, and they escaped hurriedly, without completing their preparations for departure, which, of course, would have included my premature interment in the cellar.

My scarf pin was found next day pawned at Hackney and recovered by the police, while a week later it was discovered that the fair-haired girl who had fallen a victim was the daughter of a wealthy city man living in Granville Park, Blackheath. It was known that while on her way to a neighbor's to dine a couple of evenings before Christmas she had discovered a child—having been seen with her on Elliott Hill by a laboring man—and it was now apparent that she had taken Cissie home, afterward being done to death, having her jewelry torn from her and her fingers hacked off to obtain her rings.

Thus far has Scotland Yard been successful. They have not yet, however, succeeded in tracing Mrs. Matheson, Mr. Paull, or the precocious golden-haired Cissie, whose lisping ingenuousness and personal charm rendered her such an interesting and successful decoy. No effort is now being spared, and their descriptions have been circulated throughout Europe, for it is only plain that during the three years the trio lived in Clifton road a good many people shared a similar fate to the unfortunate girl whose dead finger gave me a clew to the terrible truth.

(THE END.)

ROMANCE IN A BOTTLE.

Message on the River Brought Two Hearts Together.

From the St. Louis Globe-Democrat.

Pope County, one of the southernmost counties of Illinois, furnishes one of the most romantic marriages in the annals of "Egypt." Fully one year ago Miss Nettie Clark, a winsome girl of sixteen, was receiving the regular attention of the son of a farmer close at hand. Objections to the courtship were raised and the pair had to resort to many ingenious ways in order to communicate with each other. Both lived near the Ohio River bank, and on the part of the girl it was convenient to place the letter in a bottle at a certain hour and have it float down to her lover below. The system was found inadequate to the desires of the pair, and was at last abandoned. Weeks after Miss Clark, in company with a school companion about her same age, prepared each a note asking that the finder answer it upon receipt. The missive was placed in a bottle and securely sealed and thrown into the Ohio River. Weeks passed and apparently the bottled missives had been lost.

Near his Louisiana home, a short distance from New Orleans, Mr. C. T. Anderson, a prominent planter, in passing along the river bank spied a bottle and noticed a note inclosed. His curiosity was aroused, and upon examination he concluded to make answer. The correspondence thus begun proved exceedingly interesting, and soon the mutual friendship became close and photos were exchanged. This seems to have intensified the affections which had been aroused by seven months of correspondence. The parents of Miss Clark objected strongly to the turn matters had taken. They felt that a marriage under such conditions, without even a personal acquaintance, was far from possessing elements of happiness for their daughter, and therefore a visit from Mr. Anderson was demanded. Last October the promised visit was made, and the objections of parents were removed, and on November 8 the couple were married. They left at once for their Louisiana home, where they are settled on the plantation, the property of Mr. Anderson.

Miss Clark is seventeen years of age, and is one of three children—one boy and two girls. Her parents formerly lived in Massac County, and removed to Pope only two years ago. Miss Clark is a blonde, 4 feet 10 inches high, eyes blue, and her hair light. While attending the Metropolis School she was a general favorite. Mr. Anderson, the groom, is ten years his wife's senior. The wedding created no end of comment, and was for days the talk of the community in which it occurred.

MINISTER A MURDERER

Cut Short a Sermon on Death to Kill His Wife.

WANTED TO WED A FORMER LOVE

Girl for Whom He Committed the Crime Turned Against Him at the Trial, and Gave Evidence Which Convicted Him o Murder—Singular Circumspection Enabled Him to Almost Conceal His Crime—Paid the Penalty He Preached.

From the St. Louis Republic.

The remarkable crime for which the Rev. George Edgar Morrison suffered the extreme penalty of the law at Vernon, Tex., supplies absorbing food for study for the detective and the criminal lawyer, but in the vista for reflection which it opens to the scientist who dissects human abnormalities as they are exhibited in criminals the case is seldom equaled.

Cesare Lombroso, the great Italian criminologist, would find in the case of the Rev. Mr. Morrison a tidbit that he would roll under his tongue with supreme enjoyment. Could a criminologist of Lombroso's caliber have easy access to the materials in the case of the Rev. Mr. Morrison, he would in complete absorption lay back the scalp which covered the cranium of the body from which the deputy sheriffs in attendance at the hanging had just cut the fatal rope. His careful saw would circle lovingly around the skull, just above the eyes, and when the cup-shaped piece of bone, in which the brain throbbed and planned and plotted the horrible crime for which its throbbing was forcibly checked forever, dropped in his hand he would search out with a scientist's minute, loving care the protuberances, the swells and hollows—the stigmata of degeneracy which made the planning and the calm execution of such a crime possible. He would search the ancestry of the criminal for an ancestral heritage, and his record for previous crimes, that would make such a crime as the last possible, and then he would write a book embodying the results of his work under the title "Stigmata of Degeneracy in the Skull Formation of a Remarkable Occasional Criminal."

A Cold-blooded Murder.

It was a remarkable crime for which Morrison forfeited his life to the State of Texas. It was cold-blooded, deliberate, planned for months in advance and executed with a circumspection, a perspicacity, and a success rarely equaled in annals that are replete with such episodes.

The bare statement of the crime—the poisoning of his wife with strychnine that he might marry the sweetheart of his boyhood days, Miss Anna Whittlesey, who had grown wealthy since their separation—does not tell the story. The crime itself is not the interesting point. It is the strange, unwavering, unflagging determination with which the criminal arranged, weeks ahead, for the climax. How, sitting opposite to his wife at table, looking into her unsuspecting eye day after day, he arranged for her death with an unrelenting pertinacity that would be degenerate if it existed in the metaphorical sleuthhound.

The crime is not interesting to the student of criminology alone. The practicing criminal lawyer finds in it material for study. Morrison was hanged on purely circumstantial evidence. No one had observed him fill the fatal capsule with strychnine or administer it to his wife. Even his wife, who took the deadly gelatine receptacle, supposed it was filled with bitter but health-restoring quinine, which her kind husband had obtained for her. Not until the murderer attempted to garner the gain for which he had committed the crime did his fellow-townsmen put this suspicious circumstance beside that one, to investigate and examine, and, when they did, the whole remarkable crime was laid open.

The Rev. George Edgar Morrison was pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church of Panhandle, Tex., and, in addition, he occasionally filled the pulpit of a Methodist church at Higgins, Tex., a hamlet about 100 miles south of Panhandle on the railroad.

He had married Miss Minnie Brady, a maiden of Carbondale, Ill., in 1880, and had taken her to Texas to live. He established a nice home at Panhandle and eked out his pastoral salary by raising and selling cattle. So far as the residents of Panhandle knew, his previous career was untarnished, and even after his crime was discovered no former blot could be traced to his scutcheon. Morrison preached regularly in the church at Panhandle, and occasionally at Higgins, and his congregation found his sermons inspiring and elevating. He was a good speaker and had a remarkable knowledge of Scripture, which enabled him to brighten his discourse with apt citations.

His wife sang in the choir, and both mingled freely in the society of the town with whose spiritual welfare he was charged. Their relations were loving and not of a character to attract attention.

Met His Old Sweetheart.

In August, 1897, Morrison told his wife and others he was going to Wichita, Kan., to have his throat, which was troubling him, treated. Instead, he stopped off at Topeka, Kan., where a carnival was in progress. There, on August 29, he met Miss Anna Whittlesey, a young lady who had been a student with him at McKendree College, in Lebanon, Ill. At that time Morrison was eighteen years old and Miss Whittlesey was fifteen. They had been sweethearts at college and had not seen each other since leaving the institution.

Miss Whittlesey had made her own way since leaving college and had accumulated considerable wealth by operating with others a general merchandise store in Topeka, Kan., under the style of the Whittlesey Mercantile Company. Morrison called at her home and introduced himself and Miss Whittlesey remembered him with pleasure. He told her he had been married soon after leaving college, but that his wife had been dead for eleven years; that he was raising and selling cattle at Higgins, Tex., and that he had a cousin, a married man, named Guy E. Morrison, living at Panhandle, Tex.

The next day he wrote her a note asking her to go buggy riding with him, and she accepted. During the drive he proposed marriage and she accepted. He told her that he would not be able to arrange his affairs so he could marry for at least two years, and she consented to wait for him. He called on her again next day, making burning protestations of love, and then returned to his wife in Panhandle.

Everything indicates that at this time Morrison, observing that Miss Whittlesey was a pleasant companion and well-to-do, decided to be rid of his wife, and that for the sixty days following he prepared to kill her. His falsehood, that a cousin with the same name and initials as his, was living at Panhandle, bears signs of having been told so that Miss Whittlesey, should she hear of a G. E. Morrison at Panhandle losing his wife suddenly, would suppose it was his cousin.

On August 31 Morrison wrote a letter to Miss Whittlesey, dated at Higgins, Tex., in which he called her "darling," "dearest," and "baby girlie;" said he was lonely without her and would return to her as soon as possible. To deceive her as to the place where the letter was mailed Morrison did not post it at Panhandle, but mailed it on the train which passed through Panhandle from Higgins. This plan he pursued in his entire correspondence with her.

Miss Whittlesey's sister and brother had not taken a fancy to Morrison when he paid court to her at Lebanon, and when he reappeared at Topeka with a long line of years in his life unaccounted for they suggested to her that he might have a wife living in Texas. To combat this influence Morrison wrote to Miss Whittlesey on September 9, again using many terms of endearment.

September 19 Morrison again visited Topeka and remained there till the latter part of September. He told his wife that he had gone to Wichita to have his throat treated. Miss Whittlesey and Morrison took frequent buggy rides during this visit.

Morrison returned to Panhandle October 1, and on October 5 he wrote Miss Whittlesey another letter, calling her his "darling baby wife" and his "darling baby girlie."

Immediately after returning from Topeka on his second visit he committed the first overt act in his preparations for killing his wife. He bought at the drug store in Panhandle 10 cents' worth of quinine. The druggist asked him whether he should put it up into capsules.

"No," answered Morrison, "give me the capsules. I will fill them myself."

On this visit to the drug store Morrison told the druggist that his chickens were being bothered by polecats and coyotes, and asked the druggist to loan him a gun with which to exterminate them. Druggist Cahart offered him a double-barreled hammerless shotgun—the ideal firearm for the purpose designated. Morrison said he preferred a gun with the hammer exposed. The druggist offered him a shotgun of that description.

"No," said Morrison, "I think a small rifle would be best for my purpose. A shotgun scatters too much."

The druggist produced a Marlin rifle.

"No," said Morrison, "that carries too heavy a load. I might hurt some one with it in shooting at the varmints. Haven't you a pistol?"

"Yes, I've got one back here you can have," said the druggist, starting for the rear of the store.

"Well, never mind," said Morrison. "I'll call again."

Morrison had not expected to find so well-stocked an arsenal in the drug store and had intended, when the druggist ran out of firearms, to ask for strychnine. He was foiled in this, but he laid the foundation for another visit to the drug store three days later.

"I want some strychnine to poison those polecats and coyotes," said Morrison to the druggist on October 8.

"Here's a bottle of it," said the druggist. "Use what you want of it and bring the bottle back."

"No," answered Morrison, "you pour me out what you think will be a bait."

The druggist poured out about eight grains, tied it up in a newspaper, and Morrison left with it.

Morrison now had all the materials for his purpose. He proposed to fill some of the capsules he had obtained on his former visit to the drug store with the strychnine, to substitute for the strychnine he had used the quinine he had bought, and then to return the package to the druggist as though it had not been opened, with a statement that he had decided not to use it.

That same evening Morrison found favorable occasion to perform unobserved the pharmaceutical operation he had planned. A company of Swiss bell-ringers had made a one-night stand in the town and complimentary tickets had been sent to the minister and his wife.

"It would not be seemly for a minister to be seen at the entertainment," he told his wife. "It is perfectly proper for you to go, however."

That night Morrison filled the capsules. The next morning he brought back to the druggist a package. "I thought I had better not use the strychnine," he said. "I might poison some of the neighbors' dogs."

The package looked as though it had not been opened since it left the store, and the druggist put it back into the bottle without examining it.

Morrison now wrote a letter to Miss Whittlesey, telling her that the wife of his cousin, Guy E. Morrison, was very sick.

After the Doctor Left.

One other precaution Morrison took. He knew that if help came to his wife promptly enough after the fatal dose had been administered her life could be saved. He had had a conversation with Dr. Carter, the only physician in Panhandle, some time before, in which the latter had told him that he would start on a short trip out of town on the evening of Sunday, October 10. This knowledge completed Morrison's arrangements.

On the fatal day, Sunday, October 10, Morrison preached two sermons to his congregation. The one at night was on the text, "The wages of sin is death."

Had his congregation known then what it found out later it would have been intensely interested in that sermon. That sermon Morrison cut short in order that he might take his wife home and kill her.

The sermon forms one of the interesting psychological features of the case. There are two interpretations of it. Some claim that Morrison in that sermon weighed the consequences of his proposed crime; that he preached it more to himself than to his congregation. Others claim that Morrison preached it in order to remove any suspicion as to his guilt in the death of his wife by the picture he himself painted of the inevitable doom that lay in wait for the transgressor of law, human and divine.

Which ever interpretation is accepted, the picture Morrison drew that evening as he looked his crime in the face was verified last Friday, when Morrison shot through the scaffold trap at Vernon, Texas.

Morrison cut his sermon short and dismissed his congregation at 8:30, pleading that his throat troubled him. He and his wife, together with several neighbors, walked home. Mr. and Mrs. Morrison entered. Morrison came out again about 9 o'clock, went to the station, asked the night operator there whether Dr. Carter had left Panhandle, received an affirmative reply, and went back home.

On what plea Morrison induced his wife to take the deadly capsule will never be known. About 10 o'clock Morrison knocked at the door of the home of Prof. Pollard, his next neighbor, and asked him to go for Dr. Carter; that Mrs. Morrison was very sick. He also called in Mrs. Hill and other neighbors.

When they arrived Mrs. Morrison was in convulsions. They lasted for a few minutes, and then Mrs. Morrison regained consciousness.

"What is the matter, Minnie?" Mrs. Hill asked her. "Did you take something?"

"Don't talk to her, Mrs. Hill; it disturbs her," Morrison interposed.

"Have you given her anything?" Mrs. Hill asked Morrison.

"Given her anything? No," answered Morrison.

"Has she taken anything?"

"Nothing except a quinine capsule. I saw her filling it when I went out to the barn to look after my horses."

Mrs. Morrison went into another convulsion while they were talking and Prof. Pollard returned with the information that Dr. Carter was not in town.

"My God, what shall we do!" exclaimed Morrison, wringing his hands.

Death of Mrs. Morrison.

Finally a boy was put on a horse by Morrison and sent to Claude, fifteen miles distant, to bring a doctor.

Mrs. Morrison, who was suffering intensely, regained consciousness occasionally, as is the way in strychnine poisoning. Rubbing or exciting a strychnine victim brings back convulsions. Whenever Mrs. Morrison regained consciousness, witnesses testified at the trial, Morrison would rub his face on hers, kiss her, and chafe her hands, apparently in great distress. Mrs. Morrison kept telling him to leave her alone, and persons present also protested, but he persisted until a convulsion recurred.

At midnight Mrs. Morrison died. About 3 o'clock Dr. Warner, of Claude, arrived at the house. Dr. Warner inquired carefully the symptoms which accompanied Mrs. Morrison's ailment.

"Did her muscles contract? Did she clinch her fists and throw her head back?" he asked.

"Nothing of the kind," answered Morrison.

"Was she conscious at intervals during her affliction?"

"No, not at all," answered Morrison. "About four years ago she had a kidney trouble, and since that time doctors have frequently warned me that she would die of uraemic poisoning."

Morrison's answers to the physician's questions were bold misstatements and were made in the face of the persons who had witnessed the death.

"Well," said the doctor, "to make a snap-shot diagnosis, I should say she died of uraemic poisoning."

Next day the coroner attempted to hold an inquest.

"You can hold an inquest, but I shall object to an autopsy," Morrison said. "I am not going to have my wife's body mutilated. Leave me alone with my sorrow."

No inquest was held, the doctor's diagnosis of uraemic poisoning was accepted and Mrs. Morrison's body was buried.

Persons who attended the funeral testified at the trial that Morrison appeared to be very light-hearted after the body had been placed in the grave, and spoke to the mourners of an old sweetheart of his he had met in Topeka.

Immediately after the funeral Morrison made arrangements to marry Miss Whittlesey. He wrote to her the day after the funeral that the wife of his cousin Guy had just died. He wrote a letter to her every day until on October 24 he went to Topeka to meet her.

Forged Many Names.

He showed to her a testimonial, purporting to have been signed by seven residents of Higgins, Tex., declaring: "We, the undersigned, know George Edgar Morrison to be an honest man and good for any contracts he may make. He is engaged in the stock business, and is a man of no family."

At the trial, the persons whose signatures were appended to the testimonial declared they had never seen or signed such