NEEDHAM'S FAILURE

By JOSEPH HATTON.

Author of "The Queen of Bohemia," "The Three Recruits," Etc.

"At this moment (and indeed for a long time have I felt it) I am deeply sensible of the misery and wretchedness I have caused and shall cause. I could bear any punishment, but not the wretchedness of being a witness of all the trouble that is about to fall on my dupes. It is best that I should not live; for though I might escape to some foreign country I should die of remorse, go mad perhaps; I certainly could not live, my crimes being ended and discovered.

"I am alone guilty. I have had no confederate. I have cheated and swindled on my own account. Nolan and the others connected with me have no knowledge of my deceptions, my false deeds, my forgeries, all committed in the hope that I might retrieve my losses.

"Ah, my dear brother, it was a sad day for all of us when I came to London.

"You and my first political friends will now know why I threw them over and took office; it was a last desperate chance to retrieve myself, and if I dared have waited and been patient it would have succeeded. If I could have lived my embarrassments down until I had become secretary of the treasury my frauds would never have been known; I should have put all straight. Now it will be with difficulty that I can even leave sufficient information behind me to let you all know the extent of my defalcations and robberies.

"I authorize you to take possession of all my papers, and you will find written memoranda that will help the solicitors to some kind of understanding of them. When I have written this letter, I shall go round to the club and take my dinner in peace for the first time for years. I remember the pride with which I first walked into the Reform Club, the false pride; I have dined there every day these last two years when in town, and having no private engagements at home or elsewhere, and to-night I go to take leave of it and my friends—some of them already look askance at me. Afterwards I shall come back to my room to make my last notes for your guidance. I am writing to Nolan to meet me here to-morrow at twelve for a last conference with him; then if I could go to chapel and to confession, and if the penitent thief on the cross could be forgiven, surely I can; surely, surely!

"Oh, that I had never left Ireland! Oh, that I had resisted the first temptation to speculate! Oh, being in financial difficulties that I had the courage to stop and confess! Oh, the folly, the misery of the first fraud! Oh, the difficulty there is to go back! Once launched in crime the devil has the power to hurry you on and on, as he has hurried me.

"If I had had more solid firmness, less talent, less ambition, I might have been an honest, happy and prosperous man, admired and beloved of you. I might have lived to bless my father and mother in their old age, instead of bringing down their gray hairs to the grave and blasting forever the wretched name of

"JOHN NEEDHAM.

"To my brother, Henry Needham, of The Firs, County Mayo."

When the writer of this "last dying speech and confession" returned from his "last dinner at the club," he was in a different frame of mind to that in which he had designed the means and manner of his own death, fixing it to take place on the following night.

"Hope!" he said to himself, as he smoked a cigar in his writing-room prior to going to bed. "What a horrible idea to associate with Hope! And yet it leaped into my mind the moment I spoke to him; leaped into my mind ready armed, as it were; not beautiful like Venus starting up from the froth of the sea, but like a fiend springing out from the flames of hell."

He strode about the room thoughtfully, and then walked quickly to and fro, now smoking furiously, now laying down his cigar.

"Have I drunk more than usual?" he asked himself, answering in the same breath "no; and yet my cheeks are burning with excitement, my hands are hot; not with fear, for I had settled it all calmly enough, God knows, when that image of my wretched self crossed my path. What does it mean? Am I dreaming? Did I see him; talk to him; ask him to come here? Yes; and he will come."

Then he sat down at his desk, sorted papers, wrote several letters, stamped one, put the rest away, walked about again, rang the bell, told the servant he might go to bed.

"Don't fasten the door; I am going out again."

"Very well, sir."

He went out, carrying this letter with him, walked to the nearest postoffice and put it into the box, walked along Oxford street, walked quickly, walked for minutes without any other purpose but to walk—and think.

If there were such a fiend as the intriguing gentleman in the opera of "Faust" moving along with him and inspiring his thoughts, one could imagine such a Mephistopheles pausing now and then to rub his invisible hands.

It was a bright summer night, with a lofty, far-away sky, in which a few stars shone brightly. Needham walked as far as the park, sat in a seat for some time, returned along Oxford street, and back to Portland place, opened his door with his latch key, went into his room again, and flinging himself into his chair remained in an attitude of intense thought.

"Many a man comes to London," he said presently to himself, "and is heard of no more. He is on his way to a foreign land; it is thought he has gone thither, but he remains in London; sometimes he is dead and sometimes he lives. People are missing daily; they are advertised in the papers; they don't wish to return; they are dead, or wish to be thought so. A man leaves home to go to America, Australia; he is in earnest, but doesn't arrive; or if he does, it is months before he can be heard from; months must elapse if no letters come before he can be followed up. What is one life more or less, his or mine, or anybody's? Life is a battle; it has its wounded, its killed, and its missing."

He paused, and lighted another cigar; the one in his hand was only half consumed. He sipped a little brandy and water.

"Why did he tell me so much about himself? Why did everything he said seem to drive a nail into my first thought as if to fix it into my mind—a nail in his coffin? I asked myself a while ago before his existence was made known to me if I were mad, and the conclusion I arrived at was that I had begun to come to my senses. I had been mad, I thought—mad to do what I had done, mad to forge, and lie, and cheat, and now that I had resolved to end it all I was sane. And now? Is it the demon that has possession of me, or a guardian angel? I once read a German legend of a man who was two, one invisible except to himself, and that they were never separated. Is it I, alone, who have seen this other self? No, other men at the club talked to him. Why did I keep away from him until I found an opportunity to be near him—he in the light of the lamp, I in the shadow, so that they should not see the likeness? It is a mystery. I was already in the valley and shadow of death—is he one of the mysteries of the valley? We have our doubles in the spirit-world, they say—a familiar like ourselves, who, if seen, would be our very image. Is this my spirit materialized, my familiar come to my rescue?"

The clock of an adjacent church struck two. He paused on this last thought to listen.

"Two," he said, and looked at his watch. "I'll sleep on it—if I can, if I can."

He heard the same clock strike three, and four, and five, and fell asleep at last, to dream that he had taken poison; that it had paralyzed all his physical powers; that he was laid out and conscious of the preparations for his burial; saw his brother and his father and his mother stand by him; heard them say it was better thus after all—better than transportation for life; heard the voices of a great crowd outside the room bellowing for his corpse—for the scoundrel who had ruined them, for the fiend who had robbed the widow and the orphan; and their cries awoke him.

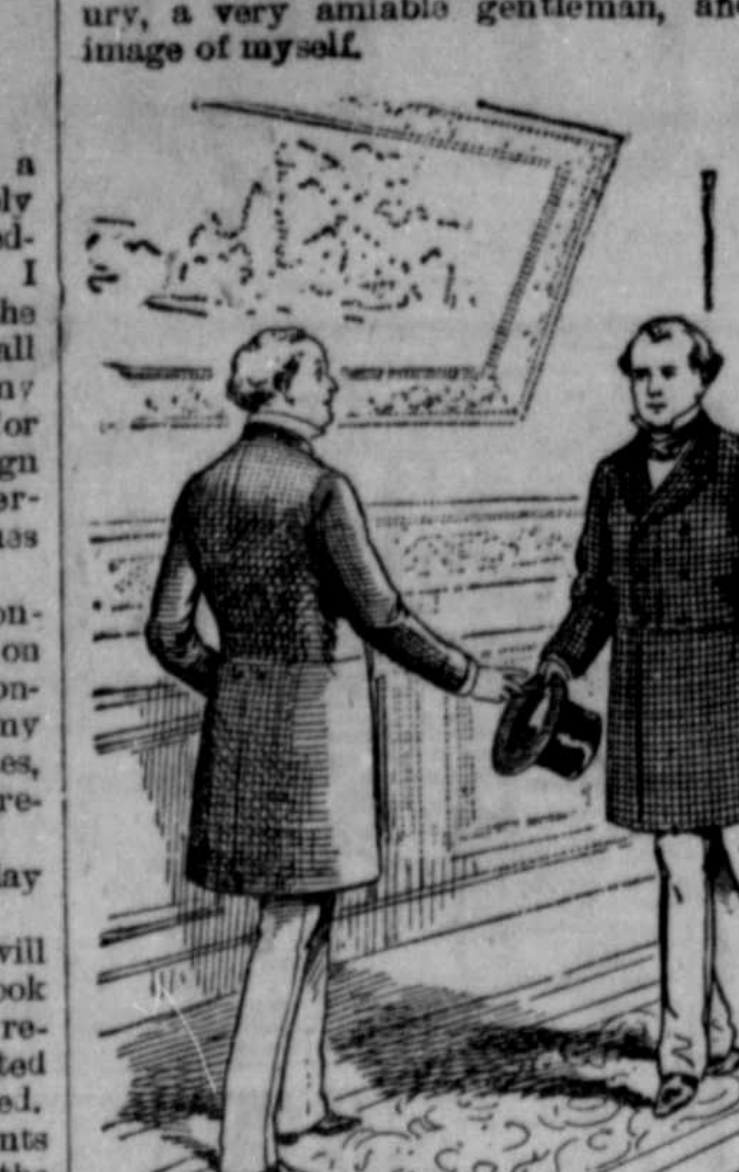
He started up in affright, leaped from the bed, stood panting in the middle of the room, went to the window and looked out. A party of ladies and gentlemen were leaving the opposite house in masquerading costume. There had been a fancy ball, and the last of the merry guests were being handed into their carriages.

CHAPTER V.

HOW THE DOUBLES MEET, AS RELATED IN A LETTER WRITTEN BY JOHN NORBURY TO HIS SISTER.

"THE NEW HUMMUMS HOTEL, LONDON.
"SATURDAY AFTERNOON.

"MY DEAR SISTER—The day of sailing of the Ocean Queen from Liverpool has been altered from to-day until Monday, owing to some slight accident that occurred to her when she was leaving dock. I am rather glad of this, as it enables me to remain in London a few hours longer, and to take some letters to a judge in New York and to a high state official, which are to be given to me by Mr. John Needham, M. P., who was recently one of the lords of the treasury, a very amiable gentleman, and the image of myself.



THE DOUBLES MEET.

"Is not that strange? You have often said there is nobody in the world like me, and there is—my height (nearly), my hair, eyes, figure, complexion and stammer (never knew I had a stammer until I heard him speak), and a bachelor. Dick must look out, for I shall assuredly have my double at Bramley House when I come home, and as you are so fond of your foolish old brother you will be sure to fall in love with Needham. You have said that I have lately had an expression in my eyes, a tired look, and that I was paler than usual. And the Hon. John Needham, M. P., etc., is like me even in this—very odd, is it not?

"I met him in this way: Charles Northfield, our North Derbyshire member, invited me to dine at the Reform. I went to keep the engagement a little early, and as I was waiting in the lobby I had a curious surprise. I thought there was a glass at the end of the corridor, and that the person approaching was myself—my reflection, you know; but it was another man! Meeting half-way we both paused and looked at each other, the person with a strange stare of surprise, I with, I suppose, an amused smile. When we had passed each other he turned and came after me.

"'I beg your pardon,' he said with slight hesitation in his speech (natural like mine), 'have we met before?'

"'No,' I said, smiling, and with a voice that sounded like an echo of his own. 'No, or we should never have forgotten it; or when first I saw you at the end of the corridor I thought you were my reflection in a glass.'

"'Really,' he said, 'and how very strange! You seemed to me so much like myself that, fearing the way in which I stared at you might seem an impertinence, I pause to apologize.'

"'It is not necessary, I assure you,' I said.

"'Then with a smile he said: 'Don't you think under the circumstances we ought to know each other?'

"'With your permission,' I said. 'Yes,' and handed him my card.

"'And our initials are the same,' he replied, rummaging in his pocket book for a card.

"'Very odd, they are,' I replied, as I read, 'Mr. John Needham, M. P.'

"'Do you dine here?' he asked.

"'Yes,' I said; 'and here is my host.'

"'Oh, Mr. Charles Northfield,' he said, as C. N. came up. 'Then we shall meet again.'

"'I hope so,' I said; and Northfield added, 'By all means.'

"'In the smoke room?' asked Needham.

"'Yes,' said Northfield.

"'An hour from now?'

"'With pleasure.'

"'Then au revoir,' said Needham.

"'A very able man,' said Northfield, 'rather embarrassed, it is thought, but only temporarily, and may yet live to be premier.'

"We met in the smoke room later, and Mr. Needham promised me some valuable introductions, two of which he has already sent me early this morning; and I am to dine with him to-night at Portland place. A mild sort of adventure, is it not? but very interesting to me, and I feel as if I had made a new and valued friend. Am much better this morning; shall leave for Liverpool first train Sunday morning, have a quiet few hours in the train to read Dickens' new book, and then write you a last few lines before I sail for New York. London is very lively just now; and what is more important in your estimation is the fact that I feel much better. My love to Aunt Dorothy, to Dick (when you see him), and a good, loving kiss for you, from your devoted brother, JOE."

Miss Norbury received this letter on Sunday morning as the bells of the village church were chiming in the valley.

The tragic events that were enacted while the welcome missive had been traveling down to Wyedale must remain for narration in a succeeding chapter.

CHAPTER VI.

A DIABOLICAL FATE PLAYS INTO DIABOLICAL HANDS.

"No, he must not come to dinner," said Needham to himself on Saturday morning; "no, that might compromise the situation. Supper? If the house sat on Saturday night, yes; but hardly without; the servants must not see him."

Needham was in his bedroom. He had had a cup of tea and dry toast sent up—a very unusual thing with him. He was walking softly to and fro in his dressing gown and slippers. There was something tigerish in his walk, and something stealthy, catlike.

"He has no position to maintain," he went on, sometimes uttering his thoughts in a whisper, sometimes pausing to bite them, as it were, into his mind and purpose, as the modern engraver bites his lines into the zinc with a burning acid; "a widower and unhappy, no future, no public life, no lost reputation to rehabilitate, no father or mother alive, a sister who is engaged to be married and he simply goes to New York for change, the excuse being a possible windfall of property; fearless of death, evidently, and possibly caring little for life. Yesterday I cared for neither; to-day, with this new possibility, I long for it; but let me be no hypocrite at this moment. The old people in Ireland—can my life, under the circumstances, be anything to them? No. Whatever happens, I shall to-morrow be dead to them, dead to the world; and if the devil at my elbow, the friend who has kept me awake all the night, have his will, I shall be a murderer—alive, safe, with money, free from debt, but with the blackest of all crimes to top the rest of my iniquities."

He sat now, cross-legged, on a chair opposite the looking glass on his toilet table; sat and looked at his pale face, his bloodshot eyes, his compressed lips, with now and then his left canine tooth showing.

"There is no going back in crime," he said, addressing himself. "You know there is not. When you think you have come to the finish, a new road opens up to you, a new way to hell! You would confess and hope, would you? When there was no hope—only then—when the gulf was at your feet, when the pit were there and the devil with his hand upon your throat to hurl you in. But now he brings you a substitute, and you are ready to continue your wicked march, even to wade in blood. And there are people who do not believe in the devil!"

The sun shone into the room, and darting upon a pair of razors that were lying before him, made a mocking reflection upon the wall. He got up from the chair and watched it.

"Better cut my throat and save my soul! Is that the suggestion?" he said. "No. It is murder, either way. If I kill myself it is murder; if I kill him it is murder. One sin is as black as the other. But the hint is worth taking in another direction. I will carry you in my pocket, a friend in need."

He placed one of the razors in its case, and taking up his frock coat (which was laid ready brushed with his other clothes near the table) put it into his breast pocket.

"The poison might not work," he said. "I must make no mistake. The same initials, too—J. N. It would be like flying in the face of prov—no, the devil—to refuse such an opportunity. J. N. is on my linen, J. N. on his, J. N. on his trunks——".

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Yes."

"Mr. Nolan, sir," said the servant.

"Is it so late?" Needham remarked, looking at his watch before answering his servant.

"Ask him to wait."

"Yes, sir; and a letter by hand, sir."

"Oh, leave it on the table."

"Yes, sir."

"No, bring it in."

"Yes, sir."

The servant entered and gave him the letter.

"Mr. Nolan will breakfast."

"Yes, sir."

He opened the letter and looked at the signature.

"Joseph Norbury!" he exclaimed.

Then he went in a stealthy way to the door and locked it.

"Dear Mr. Needham," he read, "please accept my best thanks for the two letters of introduction. I very much appreciate your kindness. This morning I have a letter from my lawyer in Derbyshire, stating that he will be in town to-day at six. He has invited himself to dine with me and talk over business. This is unfortunate——"

Here Needham looked up from the letter, and remarked to himself, "I don't know—perhaps it is—perhaps not. At all events I am equal to either fortune."

Then turning to the letter again he read, "but my visitor leaves for Richmond at nine or ten, and if in begging your indulgence to excuse me from withdrawing my acceptance of your kind invitation to dinner, I may be allowed to come round to you and smoke a cigar after my friend has left for Richmond, I shall be very glad to do so, and to receive your further letters and advice in respect of my journey to New York. Do not trouble to answer this. I shall take my chances of finding you, and as I shall have nothing else to do it will not inconvenience me at all if it should be inconvenient for you to remain at home.

"Yours very truly,
"JOSEPH NORBURY."

"Providence or the devil has a hand in this!" Needham exclaimed. "It cannot be providence, for providence has written it down hard and strong, and engraven it on the mountain stone, 'Thou shalt do no murder.' Satan then? Or Fate? Or Destiny? Two lives hang in the balance. Fate, or Destiny, or providence, or the devil know it. They claim the right to elect which is to be the victim. He is picked out from millions, and under marvelous circumstances, and brought to London in the nick of time. The circumstances which will attend his removal, his substitution for another, are made to fit into the occasion. Every detail of the affair is molded for me. It is as if, like the patriarch of old, I had found a ram caught in the thicket, ready to take the place of this other sacrifice; or the dagger that pointed the way to Duncan's chamber; or like the omen that encouraged Tarquin. But what is to be the end? Will not the unseen ministers claim me and damn me at last? There's the rub. But sufficient for the day is the evil thereof. I will go on—Fate continuing propitious—if I swing for it."

His face was livid now, his lips fixed and cruel, and he paced his chamber as he had done before, tigerishly, pausing now and then to mutter and talk. Presently he took the razor from his coat pocket and put it into the pocket of his dressing gown.

"I will dress later," he said; "Nolan will be tired of waiting."

Then he thrust Norbury's letter into his pocket with the razor, washed his hands, brushed his thin hair, and tightening the waist band of his dressing gown, glided catlike into the dining-room, where he found his confidential solicitor walking about impatiently, one hand in his pocket, the other swinging his eyeglasses about.

"I have kept you too long, pray excuse me," said Mr. Needham; "I did not go to bed until very late."

"I should judge so, for all the years I have known you I have never seen you in a dressing gown before," said Nolan.

"And you shall never see me again in one if my appearance so offends you. I suppose you are thinking at this moment what could have induced my constituents to call me a fop?"

"No, my friend, I was not thinking of anything so frivolous. I have received by this morning's post a very strange letter impugning the reality of the Broadwood trust and mortgage deeds. I have accepted service of writs for fifty thousand pounds, and the city this morning talks of nothing but your financial ruin. They say that you cannot last twenty-four hours. What is to be done? Can I do anything? I am only here to ask these two questions."

"Thank you, Nolan; your sympathy touches me," said Needham. "I feel as if I had lost my hold on things and on life; that is a fact."

"You look it," said Nolan.

"I am ill; but I shall pull through."

"You never lacked courage. Look at the difficulty straight in the face; your honor is intact; you have only been unfortunate."

"I hope you may always think so. Perhaps that strange letter you speak of may undeceive you, who knows? But, my dear Nolan, wait. Monday morning may do wonders for us. I think it will. You will take breakfast?"

"No, thank you, I cannot stay."

"Yes, you can, you must, dear friend. I have business of the last importance to speak about."

Mr. Nolan did stay to breakfast, and remained until late in the afternoon. He did not return to the city, but was driven home in Needham's carriage. On its return Needham said to the driver:

"John, I want you to catch the next train to Leighton Buzzard. I don't mean to drive to the station. Put your horses up and go yourself. I have a message for you to Dick and some medicine for the horses. And James——"

"Yes, sir," said the footman.

"I wish you to go with John."

"Yes, sir."

"I shall not want you here. I am going out to-morrow."

"Yes, sir."

"You will stay all night at Leighton Buzzard and meet me, both of you, with the dog cart at the Leighton station, at the first train on Monday."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Needham looked at his watch.

"You have two hours to put up your horses and go to the station. When you are ready I have a bottle for you."

"Yes, sir," said the two servants together.

They took a bottle down to Leighton, with a note from the master; but it was not the bottle which had been delivered at Portland place with so much ceremony the day before. John, however, was instructed not to open the parcel until Monday morning, when Mr. Needham would instruct him in the use of it.

When the two men servants had gone, Mr. Needham (having asked John to leave the stable key on the study table) went into the yard and smoked a cigar there—a very unusual thing for him to do. He went into the stables, and patted the cob which he used for city work in his single brougham. Then he examined the harness and the brougham, strolling in and out of the stables, the harness-room and the coach house. After a while he carried the cob's harness into the stable and put it on. He peeped out into the yard to see if he was noticed. No, all was quiet. He then examined the brougham, came back and looked at the traces; went back to the coach house, returned to the stable, unharnessed the cob, patted its neck, replaced the harness; then picked up the cigar he had laid on a window ledge, and went back to his room.

"I might do it some other way," he said to himself, "did not fate and circumstance point to the one way—my way—the way I was going myself. My own plans are laid—they are simple and natural, and I see them in detail from first to last. On the eve of their fulfilment there comes to me this substitute, this second self, to take my place. If I accept him, I should put him into my place, detail for detail, and the only way is to drive him to the spot where the body of John Needham is to be discovered. There is no other way; but the doing of it, the successful carrying out of such a substitution of me for another—what an undertaking! It must be done quickly and with a firm hand. What if I bungle as I have done so often of late? What if I bungle and am detected in the midst of my work? Well, there will be poison enough for both of us. I feel as if I had already taken some noxious stuff into my veins. Men who commit murder must first be mad. It is insanity. My will is moved by some other power than my own. It is as if I were creeping and crouching for my prey; and I grow hot and cold."

He paced the room in that catlike, tigerish way which had previously characterized his movements, and he paused to catch sight of his pale face in a mirror—pale face and bloodless lips. Presently he sat down again—sat at his desk and sorted papers. Then he made some memoranda in his diary, took a bundle of bank notes from the safe, and placed them in a pocketbook. Presently he rang the bell.

"Send the cook to me," he said to the parlor maid who answered the bell.

"Yes, sir."

"And, Mary?"

"Yes, sir."

"Were you ever at the opera?"

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir."

"It is a great night at the opera to-night. Would you like to go to-night?"

"Thank you, sir."

"You shall, then, and Jane as well; there is only Jane besides the cook, eh?"

"And Sarah, sir."

"Well, I shall not be home until very late to-night, and you can all go. I will get seats for you in the upper circle; I shall be there, so shall expect to see you in your places."

"Thank you, sir."

"And let me see, I suppose Rogers would not mind taking charge of you, eh?"

"Don't know. I'm sure, sir."

"Ah, well, I will speak to him—that will do."

"Thank you, sir," she said, and bowed herself out of the room.

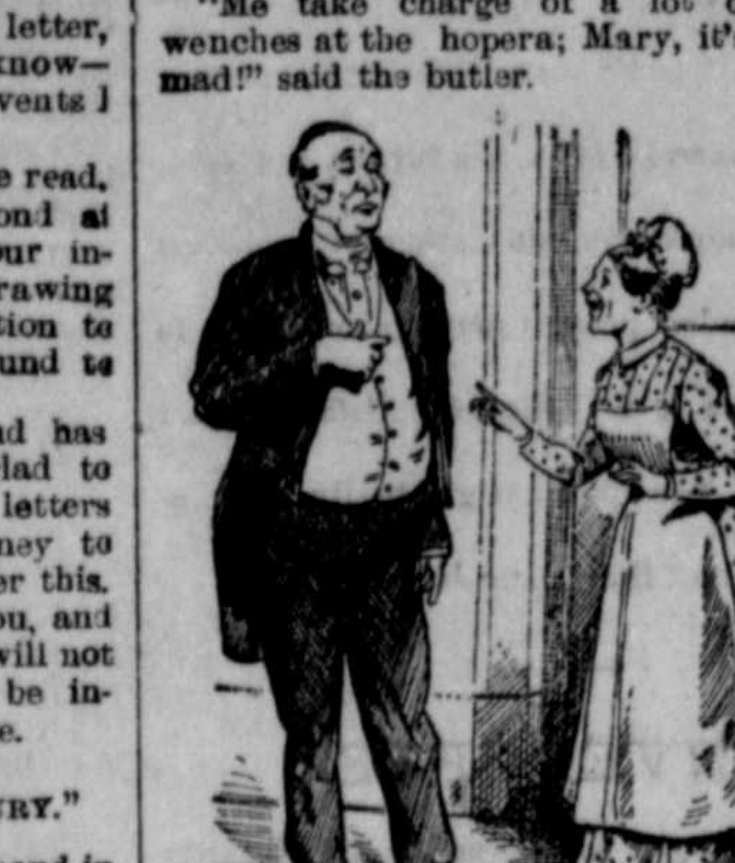
"Master's gone mad!" she exclaimed. "Clean mad—mad as a hatter! Where's Rogers?"

"In the butler's pantry."

"I want to speak to him; if ever there was a hatter as was mad, master's him!"

Mary flew to the butler, who received her request with some incredulity and considerable loss of dignity.

"Me take charge of a lot of kitchen wenches at the hopera; Mary, it's you as is mad!" said the butler.



"Mary, it's you as is mad!"

His bell rang out as he spoke.

"Ow, now, we'll see about it now; there's the governor's bell;" and Mr. Rogers went pompously forth to the study.

After speaking with the master he visited the housekeeper's room, and not finding Mrs. Short went back into the kitchen.

"Where's Mrs. Short?" he asked.

"Gone to Leighton Buzzard; master expects company there on Monday," said the cook.

"Well!" exclaimed Mary, "is it true?"

"Not as he's mad, no; but peculiar; it's his birthday, and he says that he feels that he'd like us to keep it—that is, you and me and Mary and Jane and Sarah; and he has ordered a supper for us after the opera, and, he says, as it's the fust treat as he's given us, he'd like it to be special you see, and he's asked me as a favor to take charge of it; and cook is not to go to the opera, but she's to go to the Crown, where he's ordered the supper at ten o'clock, and help the Crown to do the thing proper, and he prefers it to having it here, and thinks it will be more jolly like; and he won't want nobody at home, as him and Lawyer Nolan is agoing to do some work together, because master's going to Leighton Buzzard on Monday and then to Ireland for a week."

Mary, nevertheless, contended that the master was "mad and looked it," and she was "dead sure of it," when the butler being recalled by Mr. Needham returned to say they could each invite a friend to the supper at the Crown. On the other hand, the cook contended that he was getting to be a lonely man, and consequently beginning to "think of others a little," and for her part she always felt he was "a good sort," and now he was "a beginning to show it."

In the meantime, Mr. Needham called at the Opera booking office, and paid a visit to the Crown tavern (a coachman's resort near Brunswick place), at which latter place he arranged for the supper, and was voted a "regular brick" by the landlord and his wife. Then he strolled into Oxford street and purchased a strong narcotic. He walked and felt (and he thought so, communing with himself in his strange way) as if he were in a dream, but knew he was awake—as if he was led on—as if he was destined to do a cruel thing, and could not resist it. Some of his forgeries, his desperate attempts to keep his head above the eddies of financial trouble, had been done under the influence of a similar instinct—a kind of impulse—as if his evil nature was altogether beyond the control of his moral faculties.

"Is a man responsible for what he does when he is fighting for life in a whirlpool?" Needham was muttering to himself as he walked back to Portland place. "A drowning man snatches at straws; and if another man comes along he clutches at him, even though they both sink together. In his blind despair he will catch at the swimmer who comes to his rescue, and cling to him madly without reasoning, until the rescuer is smothered, and perhaps the drowning man floats safely to the shore clinging to the dead. It must be that it is intended I should live; but London asks a sacrifice, the banks ask a sacrifice; financial honor calls for a victim; the widows and the orphans cry aloud for vengeance; and lo and behold! Fate sends the sacrifice in lieu of the one that was prepared. Who knows that I may not be destined to atone to all these people, to repay them, to re-endow their institutions and their homes?"

It was a ghastly smile that flickered on his lips at this latter thought, as if the fiend within him rejoiced at his hypocrisy.

As the solemn clock on his library mantelpiece pointed to a quarter to eight he stood within the shadow of the silk curtains and saw the last of his little crowd of attendants trooping out into Portland place towards Oxford Circus on their way to the opera.

The sun had set in lowering clouds, and there was promise in the changing wind of a wet, dark night. He noted these signs, and said to himself:

"Everything in earth and heaven, if I may use that word, favors my escape, and points the road to freedom."

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH A SILENT PASSENGER IS DRIVEN INTO THE DARKNESS.

Oddly enough, at 9:30, just as Mr. Joseph Norbury was walking up to the door of Mr. Needham's house, the door was open, and the owner himself was taking off his coat in the hall.

"Ah!" he said, "this is lucky. I left word if you came in my absence that there was coffee, and cigars, and wine, and soda, and brandy, in the library, and that I hoped you would make yourself at home. I felt sure I should be back in time, there or thereabouts. I have been walking as far as the Bath hotel with an old friend from Dublin, who is so eccentric that he will never trust himself in a cab or carriage in London, and I had just let myself in with my latch key—bachelor fashion. Come in; I am very glad to see you."

He shook Norbury's hand warmly and then, speaking as if addressing a servant whom he professed to hear approaching, he said, "It is only I, Rogers, and Mr. Norbury; we can find our way to the library, and don't let us be disturbed."

The truth was he and Norbury were alone in the house.

"I live very simply," he said, leading the way to the library; "an old bachelor, and I dislike giving trouble."

"I hope your servants appreciate your consideration," said Norbury.

"Oh, yes, I think they do," he answered. "Now sit in this chair; pray believe I am sorry not to have had the pleasure of your company at dinner. As you could not come, I simply had a chop, and cleared up a little business with my secretary. I hope you will like these cigars."

"Thank you," said the guest, taking a Habana from the box which his host pushed toward him. "You are very kind. The disappointment is mine. My lawyer is an old friend, and I could not well, on the eve of leaving the country, obstruct his arrangements, seeing that they were chiefly in my interest."

"Will you take coffee? I have it here, you see. No trouble."

He pointed to a silver coffee urn, under which was curling a thin blue flame.

"My butler had just placed it ready as we came in—a little cafe noir."

"Thank you," said Norbury.

The host assisted his guest and himself to coffee, but Needham took no brandy.

"And what is your hotel in New York?"

"'The New York,' it is called."

"You have written them advising them of your coming, of course?"

"Yes, I wrote about ten days since."

"Always so much pleasanter to be expected," said Needham. "I have written the letters I mentioned; I think they will be of service to you. You spoke of your sister last evening; is she likely to join you?"

"Oh, no, I do not expect to stay long; moreover, she is engaged to be married, and I am rather a selfish fellow, I fear. She has been my housekeeper ever since the death of my wife, and I hate parting with her."

Just as a conjurer "forces" a card upon you, so Needham by example seemed to force the cafe noir on Norbury by himself drinking in a somewhat ostentatious way.

Then he led his guest into talking of his illness, and the reasons why his doctor advised change, professing to sympathize with him, and at the same time telling him of the sudden death of a friend who had developed similar symptoms. Norbury was thus brought into a frame of mind that might possibly prepare him to experience without surprise a sudden symptom of illness.

"As for death," he said, "there was a time when I had a horror of it, but all that passed away when I lost my wife. I am no longer afraid of death—I have often wished for it. Don't you think our education upon this matter is altogether wrong?"

"In respect to the preparation for death?" asked Needham in reply, weighing his words and pressing his feet upon the floor as if to steady his nerves.

"Yes. Many of the Oriental races have no fear of death. The Chinese regard it as nothing; the Japanese will commit 'the happy dispatch' smilingly. A Chinaman doomed to the headsman finds a substitute on payment of a sum of money to his family. Death being the only certain thing in life, the penalty of life, we ought to accept it as a matter of course and not make a horror of it. Children should be brought up with these views."

"Indeed I think you are right," said Needham; "but I have never reflected much upon death, and I can hardly realize the condition of a man who could voluntarily take the place of a condemned criminal."

"Some poor devil whose life was a failure, and who really loved his family and saw in his death their release from poverty and persecution, and particularly an Oriental—could you not realize the idea of a man courting death under such conditions?"

"Oh, yes, I think I could," said Needham, "but I could better understand his fighting to the last and then committing suicide."

"There I am not with you. Suicide is a coward's act. We are here for weal or woe to run our course——"

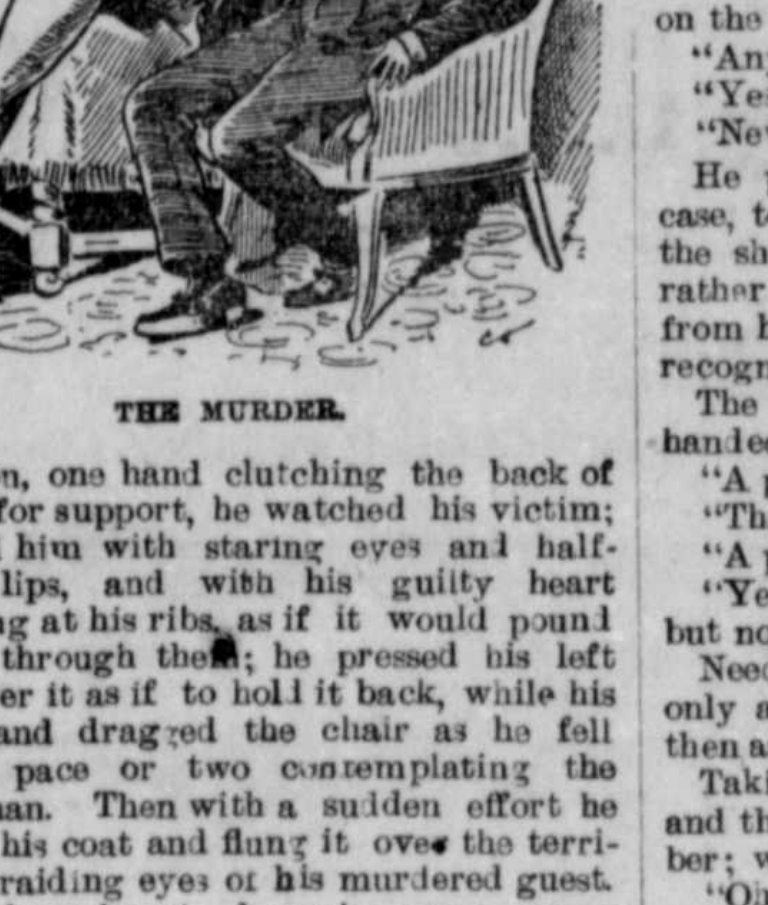
"But would not your Oriental friend who gives himself up as a substitute for another be practically guilty of his own death?"

"Ah, to discuss that," replied Norbury, "would be to chop logic after the manner of the grave diggers in Hamlet. After all, Mr. Needham, the one great thing is to be prepared. As Hamlet himself said, on his way to that fatal fencing bout, 'The readiness is all.'"

As he spoke Norbury sank slowly back in his chair.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Needham; "you are ill—a little brandy, the room is close, there is thunder in the air."

Taking from the mantelshelf a silver cup (which contained a carefully-measured and deadly dose of oil of almonds) he poured a little brandy into it, shook it together, and pressing the cup to the lips of his stupefied guest, forced the contents down his throat.



THE MURDER.

And then, one hand clutching the back of a chair for support, he watched his victim; watched him with staring eyes and half-parted lips, and with his guilty heart thumping at his ribs, as if it would pound its way through them; he pressed his left hand over it as if to hold it back, while his right hand dragged the chair as he fell back a pace or two contemplating the dying man. Then with a sudden effort he tore off his coat and flung it over the terribly upbraiding eyes of his murdered guest.

This done he stood again apart, away from the dread thing now half covered up in the chair—stood and waited and trembled, waited and waited, it seemed hours, though the time in which so much evil had been accomplished was very short. Presently he thought he heard a footstep in the house; then he thought there was a listener at the door. It required a tremendous effort to move; but at last he crept to the door, opened it, and listened. The hall clock was beating out the time in its usual way, but to Needham the sound was ominous; it had a deathly sound, a warning sound, and it seemed to threaten him.

He went into the hall. It was dark. He had purposely allowed the gas to remain unlighted. A flicker of the street lamp came in over the glass above the door. There was a lantern on the hall table. He crept to it and took it up, and returned to the library. All still, deadly still. He heard for the first time the ticking of the clock on the mantelshelf. He lowered the gas in the chandelier, as if he feared to see too much when he should remove the coat from the silent figure in the chair. He went behind it and lifted the cover gently, bit by bit, until the face was exposed. Then he recoiled from it, then approached it afresh; touched it, listened to it, raised one of its hands, felt its pulse, listened at its heart. All still; no sound, only the two clocks and a distant roll of thunder.

"Pull yourself together!" hissed between his teeth the living man, who now almost envied the dead. "Everything works for you—heaven and hell, even the night, darkness and storm."

The hall clock struck ten. He listened and counted every stroke as the hammer fell.

"No more!" he said, taking out his watch, looking at it, and then placing it to his ear. "No more! The Fates are with me. Now to business! What is there to fear? A dead man is nothing—dust, clay, a clod, nothing. Come, John Needham, to business!"

He reached over to the spirit decanters and pouring into a glass a large quantity of whisky drunk it off. Then stretching himself up to his full height, he turned up his sleeves, apostrophizing the corpse as he did so.

"You are John Needham—poor Needham, member of parliament, banker, the ruined financier, and you must not be found dressed in Joseph Norbury's clothes—come! It will not matter to you how *you* are dressed; it will to *me*. Joseph Norbury must not go about in John Needham's coat, nor wear Joseph Norbury's watch, nor carry Joseph Norbury's purse, nor anything else that is his! Come!"

It seemed as if the situation, the whisky, and the gift of life with a new name, made physically a new man of the villain. He worked at his ghastly business with the energy of a giant and the vigor of a looter on a battlefield. Once or twice he refreshed himself from the spirit decanter, and wiped the perspiration from his face.

When the changes had been made between the living and the dead, which the living considered sufficient, then came the no less difficult work of removing the body; but the murderer was equal to the occasion. He carried it out into the yard and thrust it into the brougham, which he had already dragged out of the carriage house for the purpose. There was not a single detail that he had not thought out on the lines of his own proposed suicide. He had not permitted himself, so far, to change a single item of his original plan except this incident of driving to Hampstead; for he had argued that if his scheme was simple and had no hitch in it, all he had to do was to fit his substitute into the plan. The only change was the brougham. His own idea had been to walk to the scene of his own death, a favorite resort in life, and there take his fatal dose. The introduction of the brougham had necessitated the absence of the servants. These supplementary incidents had worked out so far to his satisfaction, the most tremendous of all of them, the discovery of the substitute, having been in Needham's opinion little less than miraculous.

Having deposited his ghastly load in the brougham, he leaned, gasping, against the coach house; for though he had carried his load with something like the grip of an expert at such work, balancing the weight of the difficult and awkward burden so as to make it bearable, he could hardly stand erect for some minutes. Presently, however, he went back into the house, straightened his room, washed and laid aside the extra coffee cup, placed in his pocket the phial of poison, carefully removed all traces of his visitor; then going into the hall and putting on Norbury's light overcoat, taking his own on his arm, and his crush hat in his hand, he returned to the stables and harnessed the cob to the brougham. Opening the gates stealthily he looked out. No one stirring, the night dark, a steady rain falling; everything still favored the criminal and his work. He led the horse through the gateway, put out the lantern, placed it inside the doors, which he carefully closed; and then, mounting the box seat, drove quietly through the Mews and out into Marylebone road.

The rain fell in a steady downpour. The perfume of roses and stocks from adjacent gardens filled the dripping atmosphere; but in the imagination of the solitary driver of the silent passenger the gas lamps pointed their short arms at him. The long, glaring reflections of the lights on the wet pavements seemed to follow him. He drove on, nevertheless, and to his troubled fancy the wheels of the brougham made an awful noise. His horse clattered over the stones as if with the design of calling attention to the awful thing he was dragging. "That is why they walk the horses in a hearse, and the mourning coaches that follow creep along," the driver thought, "the noise is so great!" He pulled the cob into a walk.

"Yes," he thought, "that must be it; there is more noise attending the removal of the dead than the living—a kind of sympathy, as if the stones spoke, as somebody has, I think, suggested. But now that his horse only walked through the rain, he noticed that as cabmen rattled by they turned to look at him. He had not lighted the lamps of his brougham, so that the light of passing vehicles seemed to flash upon him and try to unnerve him. He therefore urged the horse once more into a trot, and rattled over the stones with the rest of the traffic. He turned into the Allsopp Mews, and would have gone through Clarence gate into the park, but he dared not risk having to pull up for gates to be opened and shut; so he kept to the road, turning into Upper Gloucester place, now at a walking pace, now at a trot, the gas lamps pointing at him as before, and the blood-red glare of a druggist's lamp that fell sheer across his path making him shudder. But on he went, round Park road, past Primrose hill, and now skirting its western side, and so into Haverstock hill, finally climbing the steep ascent to Hampstead. Passing the last lights of house and lamp, the driver plunged with his silent passenger into the darkness, made visible at intervals by sharp flashes of lightning, the impressive stillness of the night being heightened by thunder that rolled over the hill and into the distant valleys, leaving behind it long listening pauses of silence.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

"No, sir, not very late," said the night porter at the Old Hummums hotel, as John Needham, having rung the door-bell, entered the hall.

"The trains alter their times on Sunday," said Needham, "and I had to walk several miles before I could get a cab."

"Yes, sir, that's the worst of Sunday traveling."

"Bar closed?" asked Needham, sitting in the porter's chair.

"Yes, sir; but they leaves me out some whisky and brandy and soda; which will you take, sir?"

"Soda and brandy."

"Yes, sir."

The porter foraged about in a mysterious corner and produced the liquor. Needham drank it off at a draught.

"I was very thirsty," he said; "can you give me another?"

"Yes, sir."

"And a pair of slippers?"

"There they are, sir," said the porter, placing a bootjack and a pair of slippers at the guest's feet, and then proceeding to open another bottle of soda.

Needham dragged off his boot with some difficulty, and the porter assisted him to put on the slippers.

"Any cigars?"

"Yes, sir."

"Never mind; I think I have one."

He pulled out Joseph Norbury's cigar-case, took out a cigar and laid the case on the shelf of the bar window. It was a rather showily embroidered case—a present from his sister. He hoped the porter would recognize it.

The porter gave him a light and then handed him the case.

"A pretty thing, is it not?" said Needham.

"That's just what I was a-thinking, sir."

"A present from my sister."

"Yes, sir, and it's very becoming, showy, but not gaudy, as they says."

Needham drank his second brandy with only a very small quantity of soda, and then asked for a candle.

Taking it from the porter he hesitated, and then said: "I always forget my number; will you not show me the way?"

"Oh yes, sir, with pleasure; let me see now, what *is* the number; sitting and bedroom, ain't it?"

Needham did not answer; he was busy relighting his cigar.

"You come in Thursday night's Midland, of course; I remember the overcoat, of course, Mr. Norbury, No. 13, seeing you in evening dress didn't strike me, and you speaks a little different; got cold, that's what you've got, sir; a walkin' in the wet, stupid of me to forget, and I prides myself in my memory for customers, you goes to Liverpool to-morrow morning, of course, henroot for America, beg your pardon, sir, I'm sure."

"Don't mention it," said Needham, following the porter, who led the way up two flights of stairs and along a winding passage, to what seemed to be the back part of the house.

Then pausing, the porter turned the handle of the door.

"Locked, sir."

"There's the key," said Needham; "is it unusual to lock one's door?"

"Yes, sir; if gentlemen have any valuables they generally leaves 'em at the bar."

The porter unlocked the door; Needham followed him into the room.

"Have you no more candles?"

"Oh yes, sir; there's two on the dressing-table."

"Light them."

"Yes, sir."

"Any more?"

"Candles, sir?"

"Yes."

"There's two on the sitting room mantel."

He opened another door, and went into the sitting room.

"Light them."

"Yes, sir."

"I have some writing to do before going to bed."

"Yes, sir, what time will you be called, sir?"

"My train goes at ten, I think?"

"Euston for Liverpool? Yes, sir."

"Call me at seven."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you get The Observer here?"

"The what, sir?"

"The Observer newspaper."

"The Sunday paper? Yes, sir."

"I shall want something to read in the train. There's five shillings; get me all the different papers you can that come out on Sundays. Let me have them when I am called. Shall you call me?"

"Yes, sir. I goes off at eight."

"That's all right."

"Thankee, sir. Good night, sir."

"At last!" Needham exclaimed, flinging himself upon a couch, "at last!"

He spoke no more, nor spoke for a long time, but fell into a profound sleep—slept as quietly as an innocent, good man is supposed to sleep. He was physically fagged and worn out, and nature would no longer be denied.

The candles were nearly burned out when he awoke. He rubbed his eyes and looked around him. Then he got up and shivered. The sunlight was struggling through the whity brown blinds. He walked across the room, drew the blind aside, and peered out.

"Yes, I have been to sleep," he said; "it is no dream, I have done it all—all! What energy! And I thought I could only lie down and die. What crime! I thought I had waded in it already to my very lips!"

He looked at his watch.

"Four o'clock—morning. They used to talk of Covent Garden as a sight to see at four o'clock, the country folk—Covent Garden and Billingsgate!"

He drew up the blind, and, standing back from the window, contemplated the scene. "But it is Sunday," he said, "and all is quiet—awfully quiet, as if everybody had gone to Hampstead Heath to see the work of Cain!"

Then, turning his back upon the window, he said: "I must go to work; first reconnoiter, then action."

He put out the candles and made a careful survey of the two rooms and the luggage.

"Have I any trunks that are not here, I wonder—one perhaps too large to drag upstairs? Have I placed any valuables in the bar safe? If I have, why did I lock the door and put the key in my pocket?"

He opened a large leather portmanteau; the key was in the lock.

"Ready packed—need not disturb that."

"A dispatch box," he remarked, turning to a traveling case upon a chest of drawers; "very like my own, and with my initials on the lid! Strange! Have I really some work to do in the world yet that the other couldn't do? Or is this only smoothing my way to perdition? But a truce to philosophizing! No more theorizing, John—I mean Joseph—we must be practical now—and cunning, devilish cunning."

He turned over the papers.

"Ah! Mr. John Needham's letters of introduction! Wonder if I should keep them? Yes. He may have shown them to his solicitor, the family lawyer who arrived so opportunely on Saturday. Saturday! Last night? Why, it seems an age! Ah! letters of credit, £3,000—good! Portraits! My wife? Yes, no doubt. My sister? O, course. And her lover? Certainly. A check book! What's this—a memorandum on the cover. '£300 banknotes, in charge of landlord,' and the date—yesterday! Good. Shall I have to sign my name? Let me see."

He took up the letters of credit, went to a writing table, upon which there were pens, ink and paper, and an ornamental pad with J. N. worked upon the corner.

"An easy signature," he said, sitting down. "I have found much more difficult ones easy before now—J-o-s-e-p-h N-o-r-b-u-r-y."

He wrote each letter carefully and slowly.

"My hand trembles, eh? No—it is the position of the elbow."

Then he rested the whole of his arm upon the table and began afresh.

"Yes, that is better."

He tried again and again, writing the name more quickly each time, and at last dashing it off easily.

"That will do."

Then he tore up his failures, and leaving his last effort upon the table, went to the fireplace, removed the paper ornament, tried the damper to see if it was down, found it up, and lighting the bits of paper watched them blaze. Next he took off his coat and washed and shaved himself.

"My traveling clothes are laid out ready." Then he repeated "laid out," and paused to say "a grim phrase."

He changed his dress clothes, packed them away, examined the dispatch box thoroughly, investigated the dressing case, which contained several rings, a few sovereigns, some silver, and a miniature portrait of a lady in a locket, and a letter bearing yesterday's London postmark.

"Who is this from? My sister? Yes—Kate Norbury." He read as follows:

"MY DEAR JOE: Good-by again, my dear. It is already very, very lonely without you, but I can bear it for your sake, and as the days go on there will be the looking forward to your coming back, and that will make the time fly. And you will take great care of yourself, won't you? If ever you are tempted to run any risks, think of me, and Aunt Dorothy, and Dick, and always remember that we are thinking of you. Aunt Dorothy arrived two hours ago, and is full of good spirits, and she insists that Dick is to come and spend Saturday and Sunday as usual, whereby I am writing to him now to say that Aunt Dorothy insists, and that he can come if he likes. Do you know, Joe, my dear, I think Dick is as fond of you as he is of me, only that I am a woman you know and you are not, and if you were I should be jealous of you, for, if I don't tell Dick that I love him very much there is no harm in my telling you, is there? Because you know what love is, and you know how much I love you; so much, that I will never marry Dick without your consent, though Aunt Dorothy says that is nonsense, but she is very much prejudiced in my favor. The greyhounds missed you yesterday, and the old cob seemed to ask for you when I gave him some oats, and in the village they are all talking of you and wishing you a good voyage and a safe return. I shall expect to hear from you in the morning, and you will send me a telegraphic message from Liverpool, won't you? Take care of yourself, and write to me the moment you arrive, and always feel that you are in all our thoughts, and especially in mine. Your most loving and affectionate sister, KATE."

"Ah," he said, pondering the character of the writing, "she is a woman of more determination than her brother; she writes a firmer hand, makes no flourishes; it is a pretty style, too, jaunty; wonder what he said in reply? Wonder what he wrote in the letter that probably crossed this? Did he mention me? And if so, how? Did he say I was like him in appearance or he like me?"

He waited to be called, pretended he was in bed when the porter knocked, told him to leave the hot water and his boots at the door.

"And the noospapers," said the porter, "two, sir."

"All right," said Needham; and as he quietly unlocked the door when the porter had gone away, he said to himself, "Noosepapers, indeed! Not if I know it. If discovery is possible they will never get *my* head into a noose!"

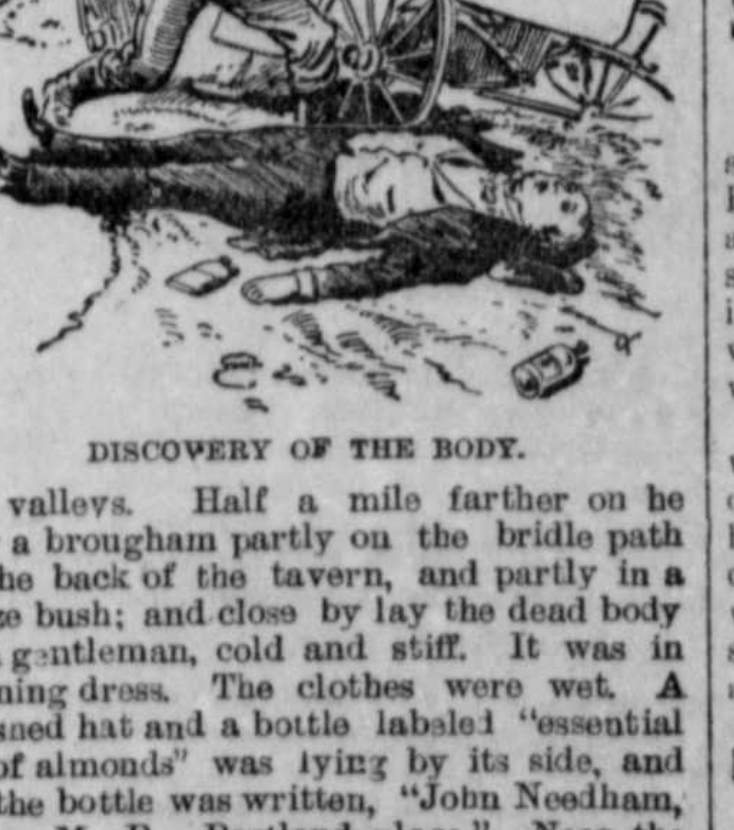
He locked the door and eagerly scanned the two papers. They contained no reference to last night's dark work. One of them had an on dit respecting his coming financial fall; but that did not disturb him.

By half-past nine o'clock he had breakfasted, paid his bill, received the parcel of money that had been deposited at the bar, and was being driven to Euston, the sun shining on him as freely as if he were not the least saint-like of the thousands of worshippers for whose behoof many church-bells were already beginning to chime for Sabbath rites and sermons.

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

On Sunday morning a bird catcher on the hunt for "feather-headed" warblers who could detect no difference in the song of the decoy from the fresh wild notes of liberty, came upon the dead body of a gentleman not far from the well-known hostelry called Jack Straw's Castle. First he saw a horse browsing in one of the little adjoining valleys. Half a mile farther on he saw a brougham partly on the bridle path at the back of the tavern, and partly in a furze bush; and close by lay the dead body of a gentleman, cold and stiff. It was in evening dress. The clothes were wet. A crushed hat and a bottle labeled "essential oil of almonds" was lying by its side, and on the bottle was written, "John Needham, Esq., M. P., Portland place." Near the brougham was a silver spirit flask with "John Needham" engraved upon it, together with a crest. It contained essential oil of almonds, and there was still left in the other bottle a considerable quantity of the deadly drug. The bird catcher, relinquishing business for the day, went to the inn and roused the landlord. It was a glorious summer morning. The thunderstorm of the preceding night had freshened the earth and cleared the atmosphere; Hampstead heath was a picture of beauty, the air full of sweet perfumes, and the sun was flooding the landscape with a soft and tender light.



DISCOVERY OF THE BODY.

Assistance being procured, and the police duly introduced into the affair, the body was removed to Hampstead workhouse, where it awaited the coroner's inquest. It lay there in the deadhouse while the murderer was traveling comfortably enough to Liverpool. The train stopped too frequently, however, for his perfect satisfaction. It made him feel lonely and strange to see people greeting each other, coming and going, exchanging Sunday visits. He was almost the only first-class passenger. He had brought the dispatch box into his carriage, and for the first two hours of his journey he read many of the papers and letters and memoranda which it contained. Then he turned to the newspapers again and read over the on dit relating to himself, and for the publication of which he was glad, seeing that it would help to prepare the public for the discovery on Hampstead heath. Had it been discovered? he asked himself, and answering it at the same time. Of course it had. How? By whom? What had they done with it? Taken it to Portland place? Would the affair be in to-morrow's papers? When would he see to-morrow's papers? Had he left any detail of the business unconsidered? Did anybody know that Norbury had called on him? Had anybody noticed the likeness between them. Had Norbury told his lawyer that he was to call on Mr. Needham? What would it matter if he had? Supposing they made inquiries about Norbury? They would only learn that he came in late, had been in the country, and had gone to Liverpool. Was there anything odd in Norbury's conduct? No. He paid his bill, gave a receipt for the money they had taken care of for him; did not forget his unpacked trunk in the hall. But they might want him as a witness; they might send to Liverpool after him. Could they do it in time to stop his sailing? Yes, that troubled him; and as he alighted from the train towards evening he received a rude shock.

"How do you do, Needham?" said a gentleman on the platform. "I thought I was the only man who felt obliged to travel on Sundays."

"I beg your pardon," said Needham, with a real stammer, an exaggeration of his customary slight hesitation of manner, "you have the advantage of me."

"Mr. Needham, is it not?" said the other. "Mr. John Needham, surely I cannot be mistaken."

"You are, sir; my name is Norbury."

"I beg your pardon," said the other; "my name is Green—Wilfred Green. I am the member for Barwood, and I could have sworn you were a colleague of mine."

"You honor me," said Needham; "I have never aspired to a seat in parliament."

"I beg your pardon," said the stranger again.

Needham smiled, took off his hat and moved away.

"Curse him!" he muttered between his teeth; "I always hated him—the jabbering idiot. What will he say when he reads the papers to-morrow?"

What did he say? When he read of the discovery of the body he rubbed his hands with pleasure. Not that he disliked Needham, but because he was a spiritualist, an active, talking, and writing spiritualist; and he believed he had seen Needham's materialized spirit on its travels. He suddenly remembered that he and Needham had not many weeks previously had a long conversation of a psychological and Biblical character, in which Needham had expressed his entire belief in the Biblical visions and in ghosts, and had confessed that he saw no reason why the Nineteenth century should be deprived of spiritual intercourse with those who had gone before them to the spirit land. Mr. Wilfred Green, M. P., wrote a letter to The Times stating that it might be more than a coincidence, the appearance unto him at Liverpool, on Sunday, of John Needham; and he suggested several curious psychological explanations of the same. It might have been an optical effort of the mind or a communication from the spirit world; John Needham's personality might for the moment have been unconsciously assumed by another, for spirit purposes; but he left the facts to the learned and scientific, contenting himself with setting them forth. And for several days the learned and scientific "gave him fits," to quote a popular, if vulgar phrase, while one very imaginative and sensational journalist hinted that if Green had seen anybody it was really John Needham, and that the body upon which the inquest had sat was a "spurious corpse."

These and other strange circumstances set up in the sensitive mind of Kate Norbury a great and dreadful fear.

This Story to be continued.]

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