

CHAPTER XXX. - THE MURDER IN THE INN.

Sometimes I think it is all a dream, and that I did not really murder the waits. Perhaps they are living still. Yet the scene is very vivid before me, though the affair took place--if it ever did take place--so long ago that I cannot be expected to remember the details. The time when I must give up smoking was drawing near, so that I may have been unusually irritable, and determined, whatever the cost, to smoke my last pound-tin of the Arcadia in peace. I think my brier was in my mouth when I did it, but after the lapse of months I cannot say whether there were three of them or only two. So far as I can remember, I took the man with the beard first.

The incident would have made more impression on me had there been any talk about it. So far as I could discover, it never got into the papers. The porters did not seem to think it any affair of theirs, though one of them must have guessed why I invited the waits upstairs. He saw me open the door to them; he was aware that this was their third visit in a week; and only the night before he had heard me shout a warning to them from my inn window. But of course the porters must allow themselves a certain discretion in the performance of their duties. Then there was the pleasant gentleman of the next door but two, who ran against me just as I was toppling the second body over the railing. We were not acquainted, but I knew him as the man who had flung a water-jug at the waits the night before. He stopped short when he saw the body (it had rolled out of the sofa-rug), and looked at me suspiciously. "He is one of the waits," I said. "I beg your pardon," he replied, "I did not understand." When he had passed a few yards he turned round. "Better cover him up," he said; "our people will talk." Then he strolled away, an air from "The Grand Duchess" lightly trolling from his lips. We still meet occasionally, and nod if no one is looking.

I am going too fast, however. What I meant to say was that the murder was premeditated. In the case of a reprehensible murder I know this would be considered an aggravation of the offence. Of course, it is an open question whether all the murders are not reprehensible; but let that pass. To my own mind I should have been indeed deserving of punishment had I rushed out and slain the waits in a moment of fury. If one were to give way to his passion every time he is interrupted in his

work or his sleep by bawlers our thoroughfares would soon be choked with the dead. No one values human life or understands its sacredness more than I do. I merely say that there may be times when a man, having stood a great deal and thought it over calmly, is justified in taking the law into his own hands--always supposing he can do it decently, quietly, and without scandal. The epidemic of waits broke out early in December, and every other night or so these torments came in the still hours and burst into song beneath my windows. They made me nervous. I was more wretched on the nights they did not come than on the nights they came; for I had begun to listen for them, and was never sure they had gone into another locality before four o'clock in the morning. As for their songs, they were more like music-hall ditties than Christmas carols. So one morning--it was, I think, the 23d of December--I warned them fairly, fully, and with particulars, of what would happen if they disturbed me again. Having given them this warning, can it be said that I was to blame--at least, to any considerable extent?

Christmas eve had worn into Christmas morning before the waits arrived on that fateful occasion. I opened the window--if my memory does not deceive me--at once, and looked down at them. I could not swear to their being the persons whom I had warned the night before. Perhaps I should have made sure of this. But in any case these were practised waits. Their whine rushed in at my open window with a vigor that proved them no tyros. Besides, the night was a cold one, and I could not linger at an open casement. I nodded pleasantly to the waits and pointed to my door. Then I ran downstairs and let them in. They came up to my chambers with me. As I have said, the lapse of time prevents my remembering how many of them there were; three, I fancy. At all events, I took them into my bedroom and strangled them one by one. They went off quite peaceably; the only difficulty was in the disposal of the bodies. I thought of laying them on the curb-stone in different passages; but I was afraid the police might not see that they were waits, in which case I might be put to inconvenience. So I took a spade and dug two (or three) large holes in the quadrangle of the inn. Then I carried the bodies to the place in my rug, one at a time, shoved them in, and covered them up. A close observer might have noticed in that part of the quadrangle, for some time after, a small mound, such as might be made by an elbow under the bed-clothes. Nobody, however, seems to have descried it, and yet I see it often even now in my dreams.