

PART THE SECOND.

THE DISCOVERY.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON the day after Isabel's departure, diligent Mr. Troy set forth for the Head Office in Whitehall to consult the police on the question of the missing money. He had previously sent information of the robbery to the Bank of England, and had also advertised the loss in the daily newspapers.

The air was so pleasant, and the sun was so bright, that he determined on proceeding to his destination on foot. He was hardly out of sight of his own offices when he was overtaken by a friend, who was also walking in the direction of Whitehall. This gentleman was a person of considerable worldly wisdom and experience; he had been officially associated with cases of striking and notorious crime, in which Government had lent its assistance to discover and punish the criminals. The opinion of a person in this position might be of the greatest value to Mr. Troy, whose practice as a solicitor had thus far never brought him into collision with thieves and mysteries. He accordingly decided, in Isabel's interests, on confiding to his friend the nature of his errand to the police. Concealing the name, but concealing nothing else, he described what had happened on the previous day at Lady Lydiard's house, and then put the question plainly to his companion.

"What would you do in my place?"

"In your place," his friend answered quietly, "I should not waste time and money in consulting the police."

"Not consult the police!" exclaimed Mr. Troy in amazement. "Surely, I have not made myself understood? I am going to the Head Office; and I have got a letter of introduction to the chief inspector in the detective department. I am afraid I omitted to mention that?"

"It doesn't make any difference," proceeded the other, as coolly as ever. "You have asked for my advice, and I give you my advice. Tear up your letter of introduction, and don't stir a step further in the direction of Whitehall."

Mr. Troy began to understand. "You don't believe in the detective police?" he said.

"Who can believe in them, who reads his newspaper and remembers what he reads?" his friend rejoined. "Fortunately for the detective department, the public in general forgets what it reads. Go to your club, and look at the criminal history of our own time, recorded in the newspapers. Every crime is more or less a mystery. You will see that the mysteries which the police discover are, almost without exception, mysteries made penetrable by the commonest capacity, through the

extraordinary stupidity exhibited in the means taken to hide the crime. On the other hand, let the guilty man or woman be a resolute and intelligent person, capable of setting his (or her) wits fairly against the wits of the police--in other words, let the mystery really be a mystery--and cite me a case if you can (a really difficult and perplexing case) in which the criminal has not escaped. Mind! I don't charge the police with neglecting their work. No doubt they do their best, and take the greatest pains in following the routine to which they have been trained. It is their misfortune, not their fault, that there is no man of superior intelligence among them--I mean no man who is capable, in great emergencies, of placing himself above conventional methods, and following a new way of his own. There have been such men in the police--men naturally endowed with that faculty of mental analysis which can decompose a mystery, resolve it into its component parts, and find the clue at the bottom, no matter how remote from ordinary observation it may be. But those men have died, or have retired. One of them would have been invaluable to you in the case you have just mentioned to me. As things are, unless you are wrong in believing in the young lady's innocence, the person who has stolen that bank-note will be no easy person to find. In my opinion, there is only one man now in London who is likely to be of the slightest assistance to you--and he is not in the police."

"Who is he?" asked Mr. Troy.

"An old rogue, who was once in your branch of the legal profession,"

the friend answered. "You may, perhaps, remember the name: they call him 'Old Sharon.'"

"What! The scoundrel who was struck off the Roll of Attorneys, years since? Is he still alive?"

"Alive and prospering. He lives in a court or lane running out of Long Acre, and he offers advice to persons interested in recovering missing objects of any sort. Whether you have lost your wife, or lost your cigar-case, Old Sharon is equally useful to you. He has an inbred capacity for reading the riddle the right way in cases of mystery, great or small. In short, he possesses exactly that analytical faculty to which I alluded just now. I have his address at my office, if you think it worth while to try him."

"Who can trust such a man?" Mr. Troy objected. "He would be sure to deceive me."

"You are entirely mistaken. Since he was struck off the Rolls Old Sharon has discovered that the straight way is, on the whole, the best way, even in a man's own interests. His consultation fee is a guinea; and he gives a signed estimate beforehand for any supplementary expenses that may follow. I can tell you (this is, of course, strictly between ourselves) that the authorities at my office took his advice in a Government case that puzzled the police. We approached him, of course, through persons who were to be trusted to represent us, without

betraying the source from which their instructions were derived; and we found the old rascal's advice well worth paying for. It is quite likely that he may not succeed so well in your case. Try the police, by all means; and, if they fail, why, there is Sharon as a last resort."

This arrangement commended itself to Mr. Troy's professional caution. He went on to Whitehall, and he tried the detective police.

They at once adopted the obvious conclusion to persons of ordinary capacity--the conclusion that Isabel was the thief.

Acting on this conviction, the authorities sent an experienced woman from the office to Lady Lydiard's house, to examine the poor girl's clothes and ornaments before they were packed up and sent after her to her aunt's. The search led to nothing. The only objects of any value that were discovered had been presents from Lady Lydiard. No jewelers' or milliners' bills were among the papers found in her desk. Not a sign of secret extravagance in dress was to be seen anywhere. Defeated so far, the police proposed next to have Isabel privately watched. There might be a prodigal lover somewhere in the background, with ruin staring him in the face unless he could raise five hundred pounds. Lady Lydiard (who had only consented to the search under stress of persuasive argument from Mr. Troy) resented this ingenious idea as an insult. She declared that if Isabel was watched the girl should know of it instantly from her own lips. The police listened with perfect resignation and decorum, and politely shifted their ground. A certain suspicion (they

remarked) always rested in cases of this sort on the servants. Would her Ladyship object to private inquiries into the characters and proceedings of the servants? Her Ladyship instantly objected, in the most positive terms. Thereupon the "Inspector" asked for a minute's private conversation with Mr. Troy. "The thief is certainly a member of Lady Lydiard's household," this functionary remarked, in his politely-positive way. "If her Ladyship persists in refusing to let us make the necessary inquiries, our hands are tied, and the case comes to an end through no fault of ours. If her Ladyship changes her mind, perhaps you will drop me a line, sir, to that effect. Good-morning."

So the experiment of consulting the police came to an untimely end. The one result obtained was the expression of purblind opinion by the authorities of the detective department which pointed to Isabel, or to one of the servants, as the undiscovered thief. Thinking the matter over in the retirement of his own office--and not forgetting his promise to Isabel to leave no means untried of establishing her innocence--Mr. Troy could see but one alternative left to him. He took up his pen, and wrote to his friend at the Government office. There was nothing for it now but to run the risk, and try Old Sharon.