

CHAPTER XXV. "J. B."

Mr. Rook having completed his evidence, the police authorities were the next witnesses examined.

They had not found the slightest trace of any attempt to break into the house in the night. The murdered man's gold watch and chain were discovered under his pillow. On examining his clothes the money was found in his purse, and the gold studs and sleeve buttons were left in his shirt. But his pocketbook (seen by witnesses who had not yet been examined) was missing. The search for visiting cards and letters had proved to be fruitless. Only the initials, "J. B.," were marked on his linen. He had brought no luggage with him to the inn. Nothing could be found which led to the discovery of his name or of the purpose which had taken him into that part of the country.

The police examined the outhouse next, in search of circumstantial evidence against the missing man.

He must have carried away his knapsack, when he took to flight, but he had been (probably) in too great a hurry to look for his razor--or perhaps too terrified to touch it, if it had attracted his notice. The leather roll, and the other articles used for his toilet, had been taken away. Mr. Rook identified the blood-stained razor. He had noticed overnight the name of the Belgian city, "Liege," engraved on it.

The yard was the next place inspected. Foot-steps were found on the muddy earth up to the wall. But the road on the other side had been recently mended with stones, and the trace of the fugitive was lost. Casts had been taken of the footsteps; and no other means of discovery had been left untried. The authorities in London had also been communicated with by telegraph.

The doctor being called, described a personal peculiarity, which he had noticed at the post-mortem examination, and which might lead to the identification of the murdered man.

As to the cause of death, the witness said it could be stated in two words. The internal jugular vein had been cut through, with such violence, judging by the appearances, that the wound could not have been inflicted, in the act of suicide, by the hand of the deceased person. No other injuries, and no

sign of disease, was found on the body. The one cause of death had been Hemorrhage; and the one peculiarity which called for notice had been discovered in the mouth. Two of the front teeth, in the upper jaw, were false. They had been so admirably made to resemble the natural teeth on either side of them, in form and color, that the witness had only hit on the discovery by accidentally touching the inner side of the gum with one of his fingers.

The landlady was examined, when the doctor had retired. Mrs. Rook was able, in answering questions put to her, to give important information, in reference to the missing pocketbook.

Before retiring to rest, the two gentlemen had paid the bill--intending to leave the inn the first thing in the morning. The traveler with the knapsack paid his share in money. The other unfortunate gentleman looked into his purse, and found only a shilling and a sixpence in it. He asked Mrs. Rook if she could change a bank-note. She told him it could be done, provided the note was for no considerable sum of money. Upon that he opened his pocketbook (which the witness described minutely) and turned out the contents on the table. After searching among many Bank of England notes, some in one pocket of the book and some in another, he found a note of the value of five pounds. He thereupon settled his bill, and received the change from Mrs. Rook--her husband being in another part of the room, attending to the guests. She noticed a letter in an envelope, and a few cards which looked (to her judgment) like visiting cards, among the bank-notes which he had turned out on the table. When she returned to him with the change, he had just put them back, and was closing the pocketbook. She saw him place it in one of the breast pockets of his coat.

The fellow-traveler who had accompanied him to the inn was present all the time, sitting on the opposite side of the table. He made a remark when he saw the notes produced. He said, "Put all that money back--don't tempt a poor man like me!" It was said laughing, as if by way of a joke.

Mrs. Rook had observed nothing more that night; had slept as soundly as usual; and had been awakened when her husband knocked at the outhouse door, according to instructions received from the gentlemen, overnight.

Three of the guests in the public room corroborated Mrs. Rook's evidence. They were respectable persons, well and widely known in that part of Hampshire. Besides these, there were two strangers staying in the house. They referred the coroner to their employers--eminent manufacturers at Sheffield and Wolverhampton--whose testimony spoke for itself.

The last witness called was a grocer in the village, who kept the post-office.

On the evening of the 30th, a dark gentleman, wearing his beard, knocked at the door, and asked for a letter addressed to "J. B., Post-office, Zeeland." The letter had arrived by that morning's post; but, being Sunday evening, the grocer requested that application might be made for it the next morning. The stranger said the letter contained news, which it was of importance to him to receive without delay. Upon this, the grocer made an exception to customary rules and gave him the letter. He read it by the light of the lamp in the passage. It must have been short, for the reading was done in a moment. He seemed to think over it for a while; and then he turned round to go out. There was nothing to notice in his look or in his manner. The witness offered a remark on the weather; and the gentleman said, "Yes, it looks like a bad night"--and so went away.

The postmaster's evidence was of importance in one respect: it suggested the motive which had brought the deceased to Zeeland. The letter addressed to "J. B." was, in all probability, the letter seen by Mrs. Rook among the contents of the pocketbook, spread out on the table.

The inquiry being, so far, at an end, the inquest was adjourned--on the chance of obtaining additional evidence, when the reported proceedings were read by the public.

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Consulting a later number of the newspaper Emily discovered that the deceased person had been identified by a witness from London.

Henry Forth, gentleman's valet, being examined, made the following statement:

He had read the medical evidence contained in the report of the inquest; and, believing that he could identify the deceased, had been sent by his present master to assist the object of the inquiry. Ten days since, being then out of place, he had answered an advertisement. The next day, he was instructed to call at Tracey's Hotel, London, at six o'clock in the evening, and to ask for Mr. James Brown. Arriving at the hotel he saw the gentleman for a few minutes only. Mr. Brown had a friend with him. After glancing over the valet's references, he said, "I haven't time enough to speak to you this evening. Call here to-morrow morning at nine o'clock." The gentleman who was present laughed, and said, "You won't be up!" Mr. Brown answered,

"That won't matter; the man can come to my bedroom, and let me see how he understands his duties, on trial." At nine the next morning, Mr. Brown was reported to be still in bed; and the witness was informed of the number of the room. He knocked at the door. A drowsy voice inside said something, which he interpreted as meaning "Come in." He went in. The toilet-table was on his left hand, and the bed (with the lower curtain drawn) was on his right. He saw on the table a tumbler with a little water in it, and with two false teeth in the water. Mr. Brown started up in bed--looked at him furiously--abused him for daring to enter the room--and shouted to him to "get out." The witness, not accustomed to be treated in that way, felt naturally indignant, and at once withdrew--but not before he had plainly seen the vacant place which the false teeth had been made to fill. Perhaps Mr. Brown had forgotten that he had left his teeth on the table. Or perhaps he (the valet) had misunderstood what had been said to him when he knocked at the door. Either way, it seemed to be plain enough that the gentleman resented the discovery of his false teeth by a stranger.

Having concluded his statement the witness proceeded to identify the remains of the deceased.

He at once recognized the gentleman named James Brown, whom he had twice seen--once in the evening, and again the next morning--at Tracey's Hotel. In answer to further inquiries, he declared that he knew nothing of the family, or of the place of residence, of the deceased. He complained to the proprietor of the hotel of the rude treatment that he had received, and asked if Mr. Tracey knew anything of Mr. James Brown. Mr. Tracey knew nothing of him. On consulting the hotel book it was found that he had given notice to leave, that afternoon.

Before returning to London, the witness produced references which gave him an excellent character. He also left the address of the master who had engaged him three days since.

The last precaution adopted was to have the face of the corpse photographed, before the coffin was closed. On the same day the jury agreed on their verdict: "Willful murder against some person unknown."

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Two days later, Emily found a last allusion to the crime--extracted from the columns of the South Hampshire Gazette.

A relative of the deceased, seeing the report of the adjourned inquest, had

appeared (accompanied by a medical gentleman); had seen the photograph; and had declared the identification by Henry Forth to be correct.

Among other particulars, now communicated for the first time, it was stated that the late Mr. James Brown had been unreasonably sensitive on the subject of his false teeth, and that the one member of his family who knew of his wearing them was the relative who now claimed his remains.

The claim having been established to the satisfaction of the authorities, the corpse was removed by railroad the same day. No further light had been thrown on the murder. The Handbill offering the reward, and describing the suspected man, had failed to prove of any assistance to the investigations of the police.

From that date, no further notice of the crime committed at the Hand-in-Hand inn appeared in the public journals.

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Emily closed the volume which she had been consulting, and thankfully acknowledged the services of the librarian.

The new reader had excited this gentleman's interest. Noticing how carefully she examined the numbers of the old newspaper, he looked at her, from time to time, wondering whether it was good news or bad of which she was in search. She read steadily and continuously; but she never rewarded his curiosity by any outward sign of the impression that had been produced on her. When she left the room there was nothing to remark in her manner; she looked quietly thoughtful--and that was all.

The librarian smiled--amused by his own folly. Because a stranger's appearance had attracted him, he had taken it for granted that circumstances of romantic interest must be connected with her visit to the library. Far from misleading him, as he supposed, his fancy might have been employed to better purpose, if it had taken a higher flight still--and had associated Emily with the fateful gloom of tragedy, in place of the brighter interest of romance.

There, among the ordinary readers of the day, was a dutiful and affectionate daughter following the dreadful story of the death of her father by murder, and believing it to be the story of a stranger--because she loved and trusted the person whose short-sighted mercy had deceived her. That very discovery, the dread of which had shaken the good doctor's firm nerves, had

forced Alban to exclude from his confidence the woman whom he loved, and had driven the faithful old servant from the bedside of her dying mistress-- that very discovery Emily had now made, with a face which never changed color, and a heart which beat at ease. Was the deception that had won this cruel victory over truth destined still to triumph in the days which were to come? Yes--if the life of earth is a foretaste of the life of hell. No--if a lie is a lie, be the merciful motive for the falsehood what it may. No--if all deceit contains in it the seed of retribution, to be ripened inexorably in the lapse of time.