

THE MYSTERIOUS CRIME ON THE S.S. NEPTUNE

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

Here all extracts from the diary likely to be of any use to us end, and if you will read them carefully, you will see that according to the report of Mrs. Dexter, faithfully given, Mrs. Verschoyle did not leave the house on the night of the sailing of the "Neptune," so she could not have been on board, and consequently must be innocent of the crime.

Now, of course, it is a debatable question whether or not Mrs. Verschoyle really did leave the house. You will perceive that she refused to come down to dinner, and stayed in her own room. After dinner, Mrs. Dexter went up to her door, found it locked, and could get no answer. Now, what was easier than for Mrs. Verschoyle to slip out of her room while all were at dinner, and the servants away in the kitchen, lock her door, to lead to the belief that she was still there, and go off to the ship, commit the crime, and come home again? Unluckily, Mrs. Dexter went to bed early, or Mrs. Verschoyle's return would not have escaped her lynx-eyes; so if she did go out, as I surmise—and, mind you it is only a surmise—the servants might have seen her return. I therefore questioned the servants, but could get no satisfactory answers out of them, as they could remember nothing; not even money could sharpen their wits. In this extremity, I behought myself of boldly asking Mrs. Verschoyle herself, and in the drawing-room after dinner, I led the conversation round to the excellence of the P. and O. steamers, and asked her if she had seen the "Neptune?" She winced and changed color a little, and then answered, "No." Mrs. Dexter then became my ally, and the conversation was as follows:—

Mrs. Dexter: Your sister went to England in the "Neptune?"

Mrs. Verschoyle: Yes, and so did my cousin, the Marchese Vassalla, but for all that, I did not see the boat.

Myself: Why—did you not go on board to say goodby?

Mrs. Verschoyle: No; I had a headache, and did not leave my room.

Mrs. Dexter: Yes, I remember. I knocked at your door, and could get no answer.

Mrs. Verschoyle, quickly: I was asleep.

Myself: It was a pity you did not see the "Neptune;" she is such a magnificent vessel.

This closed the conversation, and left things as they were. You see, Mrs. Verschoyle denies that she left the house on that evening; so this is the case, she can prove an alibi, and thus cannot be accused of committing the crime. I, however, am not satisfied with her denial; she winced when I mentioned the "Neptune;" moreover, she knew that her husband was on board, as she met him during the day; which, by the way, explains the passage in Mrs. Dexter's diary, that she returned in a rage.

To my mind, therefore, the only people who can definitely say if she were on board, are Miss Carmela Cotoner and the Marchese Vassalla; for even if she went on board secretly to see her husband, she could not have escaped notice by her sister and cousin. My advice, therefore, is for you to see either Miss Cotoner or the Marchese Vassalla, and find out if Mrs. Verschoyle were on board before the "Neptune" sailed; if so, we can pursue our

inquiries; if not, we must turn in another direction.

As I have now got all the information I can obtain here, I am leaving to-morrow for England, and if possible, will get the stiletto used in the committal of the crime from the authorities at Gibraltar. I may add that I have obtained a specimen of Mrs. Verschoyle's writing to compare with the paper you gave me; and though there is a similarity, there is also a distinct difference; but then handwriting does alter in five or six years, and the best thing will be to submit the papers to an expert, who can easily tell if they were written by the same person.

I will call at Mr. Foster's rooms directly on my arrival in England, and report more fully.

Yours obediently,
JULIAN ROPER.

CHAPTER XV.

After reading Roper's letter, Ronald went to Foster's chambers and showed it to him. The barrister read it in silence, and then laying it down on the table, looked hard at Monteith.

"You see, I was right," he said, tapping the letter with his fingers; "Miss Cotoner is, as I thought, the sister of Mrs. Verschoyle."

"Yes," replied Ronald, quickly; "but she has nothing in common with her."

"Ah! you think not—let me see," taking up the letter and glancing over it; "they both have tempers."

"Any woman would show temper, living with such a fiend as Mrs. Verschoyle," retorted Ronald, defending Carmela.

"They both loved the same man—meaning Verschoyle."

"But Carmela's love for him was only a girlish fancy, as she says herself in Mrs. Dexter's diary."

"In short," said Foster, replacing the letter on the table; "you are so much in love with her that you cannot see her imperfections."

"I am not blind to them, if that's what you mean," retorted Ronald, doggedly; "but all I know is, I love her, and intend to ask her to be my wife."

"When?"

"Ah! well, as soon as this mystery is cleared up."

"I understand," said Foster, rising from his chair, and walking to and fro; "but, judging from this letter of Roper's, the elucidation seems as far off as ever."

"I don't see that—for, taking all things into consideration, I am inclined to think Mrs. Verschoyle is telling a lie."

"Oh! so you believe she was on board the "Neptune" that night?"

Ronald nodded.

"There's no proof."

"Certainly, not any actual proof," said Ronald, quietly; "but I think it is very probable that Roper's theory is correct, and she did leave her bedroom, lock the door, and then return without anyone seeing her."

"Well, the whole affair is easily settled—go and see Miss Cotoner, or Vassalla, and ask them if Mrs. Verschoyle came on board—they will certainly know."

"I don't believe Miss Cotoner knows anything about it," said Ronald, angrily; "if they quarrelled before leaving the house, you may be certain that Mrs. Verschoyle never came near her on the boat."

"But Miss Cotoner might have seen her sister."

"She might; but I won't ask her."

"Well, my dear boy," said Foster rather annoyed at this sentimental obstinacy; "go and see Vassalla."

"Yes, I'll do that—he'll be able to tell me whether she was on board or not."

"No doubt—if it suits him to acknowledge it," retorted Foster, dryly.

"What do you mean?" asked the Australian, impatiently; "you think—"

"I mean nothing—I think nothing," replied the other, quickly; "go and see the Marchese Vassalla, and then tell me what you discover."

"And then—"

"Well, then, it depends on his answers regarding our next move."

Ronald put on his hat and gloves, then, taking his leave, went outside into the roar and bustle of Fleet Street. Through an archway he could not help contrasting their solitariness and charm with the turmoil on the pavements.

"Hang it!" he said to himself, as he watched the busy crowds rushing past, "everyone here seems to live with their watches in their hands; I should not like to sleep here, but I suppose I'll have to stop till I find out all about Verschoyle's death;" and this last reflection putting him in mind of his engagement, he stepped into a hansom, and drove off to the Langham Hotel to see Vassalla.

Vassalla was upstairs, in a private, sitting-room, enjoying his breakfast, when Monteith's card was sent up to him. Carmela had gone out with Sir Mark and his daughter, so the Marchese felt perfectly secure against the chance of Ronald meeting her. He dreaded the meeting, because disagreeable explanations might be made which would reconcile the lovers, and ruin all his carefully prepared schemes. As he looked at the card thoughtfully, he was rapidly running over in his mind the reasons which might make Ronald thus seek him. No feasible one, however, presenting itself to him, he told the waiter to show the gentleman up, and quietly went on with his breakfast.

"He has some reason for coming," he muttered, quietly; "and I'll find it out; don't trouble yourself, Mr. Monteith—friend or enemy, I'm equal to either."

He arose from his seat with an enigmatical smile on his face as the Australian entered, and held out his hand. The other it took it with a silent reluctance, which was noticed by the clever Maltese gentleman.

"Hum!" he thought; "not quite friendly, I see."

Ronald took a seat, declined the offer of breakfast, and prepared to talk.

"Miss Cotoner is out," he said, coldly.

"Yes, with Sir Mark Trevor and his charming daughter," replied Vassalla. "Do you wish to see her?"

"No; I want to see you."

"Me?" the foreigner's eyebrows went up. "Well, I am at your disposal."

"It is about that murder that took place on board the "Neptune," said Ronald, going straight to the point. "Ah, indeed!" said the Marchese, quietly; "a most interesting subject. Have you discovered anything yet?"

"Yes, many things."

"Such as will lead to the detection of the assassin, I presume?"

"I don't know," answered Ronald shortly.

"That's a pity; can I assist you in any way?"

"I think you can."

"Then you may command my services," replied the Marchese, politely.

"Thank you; I will take advantage of your offer," said Ronald, glancing at the impassive face before him.

Vassalla bowed, folded his arms, and leaning back in his chair, prepared to listen.

"In the first place," said Ronald. "you knew him?"

Vassalla shook his head.

"No; I had not the honor of Mr. Ventin's acquaintance."

"His name was not Ventin."

"Indeed!"

"No; it was Leopold Verschoyle."

"Leopold Verschoyle," repeated the Marchese, looking at him sharply; "that was the name of the man who married my cousin."

"Yes, and from whom he was afterwards divorced."

"Exactly," said Vassalla. "I see you know the whole story; so he is the man who was killed?"

"He was, and I want to find out who killed him."

The eyebrows went up again incredulously.

"I hope you will succeed," said Vas-

salla, politely, "but in what way can I help you?"

"Do you know anyone who desired his death?"

"No."

"Not even his—wife?"

Vassalla rose to his feet with a bound, and looked fiercely at Ronald. "This is an insult, sir," he hissed out between his teeth. "Do you dare to accuse my cousin of the murder?"

"I accuse no one," retorted Ronald, coolly. "I merely asked you if his wife would have been sorry at his death."

Vassalla threw himself back in his chair, with a short, angry laugh.

"Upon my soul, sir," he said, coldly, "I hardly recognize your right to speak to me about such a thing; but as you seem so bent on knowing, I think she would have been—very sorry indeed."

"Oh! Then she still loved him?"

Vassalla cast his fine eyes up to the ceiling.

"Passionately!"

"That is curious," said Ronald, sardonically, "as I have a document in my possession, written five or six years ago, in which she threatens to kill him."

"Indeed, and how did you obtain such a document?"

"I found it among some papers left by Verschoyle with his sister, Mrs. Taunton."

"Ah!" Vassalla thought a moment; so this was the reason Monteith was with Mrs. Taunton; it was business, not love, that brought them together; well, at all events, he would not let Carmela know. After a moment's deliberation, he faced his adversary with a clear brow.

"Very likely it was written in her first outburst of jealous anger at being so betrayed by her husband; but I assure you she loved her husband deeply, in spite of the way he wronged her, and often spoke of him with affection."

Judging from the story told to him by Verschoyle, and the extracts from Mrs. Dexter's diary, Ronald thought this doubtful, but restrained his desire to give an opinion on that point.

"Did Mrs. Verschoyle come on board, the night the "Neptune" left Malta?"

Vassalla glanced keenly at him.

"Why should she?"

"To see you and Miss Cotoner off."

"Suppose she did come on board?"

"She might have seen her husband."

"Impossible! She did not know he was on board."

"Yes, she did; Verschoyle told me he met her in Valetta on that day."

Vassalla drummed quickly in an annoyed manner on the table with his fingers, then answered abruptly:

"She did not come on board."

"Oh!" Ronald was disappointed; were all his suspicions groundless, after all?

"No; she was confined to her room all the evening with a headache."

This statement, as Ronald knew, tallied with Mrs. Dexter's diary, and he felt that, after all, it might be the truth, and that Mrs. Verschoyle had not been on board; in which case—who was the assassin?

Vassalla saw the expression of disbelief flitting across Ronald's expressive face, and arose to his feet.

"In order to convince you," he said, quickly, "I will show you the letter I received from my cousin."

"There is no need," began Ronald, but Vassalla interrupted him.

"Pardon me, there is," he said, coldly; "I wish you to be thoroughly convinced that Mrs. Verschoyle was not on board, and could not have either seen her husband or have had anything to do with his death."

"I did not say she had," interrupted Ronald, hastily.

"No, but you thought so," retorted the Marchese, as he left the room.

Ronald arose to his feet, and walked hastily to and fro. He was wrong, then; Mrs. Verschoyle was innocent of her husband's death. Who, then, was the assassin, for no one else appeared to have had any reason to wish him evil. Vassalla himself? not it could not be he, because he had no motive. The theory of Mrs. Verschoyle's criminality having been thus effectually disposed of, there appeared to be absolutely no clue to the perpetrator of the crime.

Vassalla returned with the letter, and handed it to Ronald, showing him at the same time the passage he alluded to.

"I was so sorry," said the letter, "not to have been able to come down and see you and Carmela away by the boat, but I had a very bad headache and was shut up all the evening in my room."

Ronald handed back the letter in

silence, but first thoughtfully glanced at the writing. It certainly resembled that in the letter written five or six years ago, but he could not recollect it with sufficient clearness to satisfy himself.

"You are convinced?" said Vassalla, as he placed the letter in his pocket-book.

"Yes," answered Ronald, "I am convinced; good-by, and thank you for your kindness in answering my questions."

"A pleasure," said the Marchese, and bowed his visitor out with smiles, which, however, faded as the door closed.

"Curse that meddling fool," he muttered to himself, "why can't he mind his own business; but I've baffled him this time, and I'll baffle him again if he interferes."

To be Continued.

Hope Had Departed.

THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S RESCUE FROM GREAT SUFFERING.

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