LOLA CRAWSHAY

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"I would to God that I could think so!" he exclaimed, with fierce energy. "I would give my life to feel sure of it, but I can't Beryl, I can't. I have tried to piece the things together that you and I know and to find in them anything but the proofs of her deed, and I can't. Look at the things as I will they lead me nowhere but to one conclusion. There is not a man in England who if he knew what we know would not think what we think. I don't understand the thing. I can't, except on the one supposition that she is mad, and it breaks my heart to think that."

He paused, but Beryl did not break the silence.

"The thing is all so horribly complete! I have talked it over and over with Gifford, trying to get from him a suggestion that may point in another direction, but all his ingenuity cannot offer a hint that the evidence doesn't utterly smash. It is perfectly clear that she left the manor house before this man was killed. It is quite as certain that he wrote to her the letter telling her to meet him. It is clear again that she got the letter, and that she did go to see him, and just as clear that she was there and dropped that bracelet in the struggle with him and used that dagger, and then on the top of all comes this absolutely inexplicable flight. It would all be different if only she were here. If she would come here and lay her hand in mine and tell me she knew nothing of all this, I would believe her and hold out for her innocence against the whole world, mad or sane. But she doesn't come. And yet I hate and loathe myself for harboring the thought that, mad or sane, she could even think of taking this man's life. And the strain of it all is enough to kill one."

Beryl thought it best to let him speak freely and without interruption.

"There is only the one thing that I have often mentioned to you that I can't fathom—whether there was any sort of understanding between Lola and that brute. I have thought sometimes—in fact, Gifford suggested the idea to me—that he may have had some kind of hold over her, something that—but, there. I won't try to think in that vein. I wish to heaven I'd had the beggar out and shot him before he caused all this trouble!

"She says in her letter," he said, harking back suddenly to the thought which he had started and left and taking from his pocket Lola's last letter to him, already thumbed and soiled from constant reading, "that she was within an ace of telling me when something I said stopped her. What a tactless, blundering dolt I must be! If I hadn't checked her, all this misery and tragedy and ruin might have been saved. Oh, how I have cursed myself for that clumsiness!" he cried angrily.

"I see no need for self reproach," said Beryl. "It would have been better if she had been led to speak, but"—She left the sentence unfinished, and Sir Jaffray looked at her as though to question her.

While he was thinking what to reply the police inspector was announced.

"Excuse my troubling you again, Sir Jaffray," he said—he had already been once that day at the manor house—"but I am on my way to the adjourned inquest, and I thought you would like to know that I have arranged to complete the inquiry this afternoon and not have another adjournment."

"That is certainly what I wish, inspector."

The inquiry had indeed been somewhat hurried over in deference to the expressed wish of the baronet, while that course also fell in with the inspector's own desires. He had been pleased enough to get the utmost publicity given to the case and had himself secretly helped to insure this end by spreading some few unimportant but telling details.

But now the publicity was getting much greater than he wished, and the comments were taking quite a different form from what he wanted. The papers were trying the case and were handling him rather roughly in the process. Moreover, the details published were such as could not fail to put those implicated, however dense, on their guard and to keep them posted as to the actions of the police; hence the inspector's eagerness to stop the whole thing and by limiting as much as possible the scope of the inquest to hide the intentions and plans of the police.

His ambition was to burke the inquiry at the very moment when public curiosity was at the highest fever point and then suddenly and as if by a kind of police magic produce the culprit and the evidence of guilt. To do this he was prepared to go to quite unusual lengths.

"I don't think we need to go into anything more now but the barest facts," he continued. "We shall have the medical evidence of the cause of death, that the wound could not have been self inflicted and that the blow must have been struck by some one else. That will be enough to warrant the jury giving a verdict, and that's what we want."

"What will the verdict be, Mr. Borderham?"

"There can be but one, Sir Jaffray—willful murder by some person or persons unknown. That's clear. It's the only one that fits the facts."

"And you think the inquiry will finish today?"

"It really rests with me and the coroner, Sir Jaffray, and, in truth, we both thought you would prefer to have the matter ended as soon as possible. We can do no good by prolonging an inquest of the kind, and I am simply not going to offer any evidence which will be likely to drag it out. Personally I

"No, no, Sir Jaffray; the tracing will have to be done quietly."

don't like working in the light in that way, with all the countryside knowing every step you take. If this thing's ever to be found out at all, it won't be by means of a coroner's jury. It's all a farce and nothing else. It's all right enough for a twopenny halfpenny tin pot case, where the facts lie as plain in sight as eggs in a thrush's nest, but where there's serious business inquests are worse than no good."

"I see," said Sir Jaffray shortly.

"Take such a thing as this matter of the dagger, now," continued the inspector. "What would a coroner's jury make of that, I should like to know? Suppose I was to tell 'em all the facts—that the dagger was one of two just alike which you brought home from America, and that the bracelet was one of two brought home just in the same way, and that, whereas Lady Walcote was missing and Miss Leycester here was on the spot, Miss Leycester's dagger and bracelet had got mixed up in this crime, while Lady Walcote's were both lying where they had always been, one in the cabinet and the other in the jewel case. What do you suppose they would make of that? What could they make of it?"

He stopped and looked at both his hearers in turn, as if waiting for them to speak.

But neither of them said anything, and he continued:

"That would be a poser by itself, but now just throw in a spice of mystery and try to imagine what the effect would be. Suppose I were to read them a letter that has been sent to me to the effect that at the time of the death of this Frenchman neither the dagger nor the bracelet was in the manor here, but that both were put in their places afterward, put there from Leycester Court. What do you think they would say then? Why, we should have all sorts of wild stories repeated everywhere, with all sorts of charges against all sorts of people. And how could I carry on my work of inquiry then?"

He stopped again, but only for a second, and it was evident now to both Sir Jaffray and Beryl that he was speaking with a purpose.

"But I don't work in that way. I simply leave that letter—of course it's anonymous—out of the question. If I ask any question, it is how the writer, whoever it is, comes to know so much about it. And then I argue thus: If the story be true and these things were put back, no one knows anything about it officially and authoritatively except myself and the people who may be supposed to have done it, and what isn't known officially can always be contradicted. And if it were ever known to be true that any one had, in a moment of misapprehension, done anything of the kind and wanted to cancel the arrangement nothing would be easier, supposing it is not officially known. Publicity, therefore, would be a huge mistake in all interests. No, no, Sir Jaffray; if this thing is ever to be traced, the tracing will have to be done quietly, under the surface, and altogether apart from any coroner's court."

He rose as he said this and made as if to leave the room, and when he reached the door he turned and said:

"You'll be at the inquest, Sir Jaffray? And I suppose there's no possibility of any mistake having been made, of any hoax having been played upon you and Miss Leycester in the matter of that dagger and bracelet. If it is possible in any way, I really think you ought to make some inquiries. It would be well to be able to give the lie to that anonymous writer."

"I shall be at the inquest," answered Sir Jaffray.

Then the police inspector went away, and the baronet turned to Beryl, feeling very uneasy at the unexpected turn matters had taken in regard to the replacing of the dagger and the bracelet.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"HER LADYSHIP, SIR JAFFRAY!"

For some time after the police inspector's departure neither Sir Jaffray nor Beryl spoke a word, both being overcome with astonishment at the hints which Inspector Borderham had dropped.

Beryl was the first to speak and characteristically took the blame upon herself.

"It is my fault," she said. "Oh, Jaffray, I am so sorry!"

"No, no, Beryl; I can't let you blame yourself. I ought to have seen what would certainly happen, though, now that it has happened, I am bound to say I am taken absolutely by surprise. Who can possibly have noticed that the things were absent for a time and then put back? At most there can only have been a few hours during which they could be missed. I wonder!" he cried and then stopped and exclaimed, "That is too dreadful a thought!"

"What is that?" asked Beryl anxiously.

"Can it be possible that any one can have seen Lola take that dagger out of the cabinet?"

"I had not thought of that. It can't be possible. Even if she did take it she would be cautious not to be seen."

"If!" he repeated. "If! I wish with all my heart I could feel that if. What I fear is that in the frenzy in which she must have acted she would be utterly heedless of anything and anybody and not give a thought to the question whether she was seen or not. But that is not the point now. I am mad with myself for ever having brought your name into this most miserable affair. The thing has been bruited all over the kingdom now, and to draw back seems as difficult as to go on."

"Why not go through with it?" asked Beryl firmly.

"Because we cannot. It is a sheer impossibility. So long as there was no question asked and the weapons remained to speak for themselves there was no serious responsibility. Heaven knows I had no intention of doing anything wrong. I know your object, Beryl, well enough, and I cannot tell you how inexpressibly grateful I am to you for it, but we have been wrong. We have tried to set the honor of our family before the truth, and now we see the result. I have tried to shield my poor, misguided wife, and I've sacrificed you instead. I've been miserably selfish just when I ought to have been most careful to guard you."

"I think you blame yourself without cause, Jaffray. I am not one bit ashamed of what I have done. I would stand up tomorrow in the face of all England and tell what I did, and, what is more, I would do it again tomorrow, and I don't believe the bulk of people would blame me. If they did, I should not care," she added, flushing in her enthusiasm, "if I had helped you."

"Spoken like my dear, dear old friend and playmate, Beryl," he said, taking her hand and pressing it. "You brace one's faith in human nature, and I believe with you that the world would not blame you for what has happened, but that would only make my responsibility the greater. But now there is no use in regretting. I must find out what we can do."

"Do you think really that Mr. Borderham has had that letter?"

"Unquestionably I do, and, what is more, he means us to understand that he will act upon it if I make it necessary for him. I will go to the inquest and hear what transpires, and then I will have a talk with Gifford. I must speak plainly to him."

"He knows," said Beryl.

"How do you mean?" asked the baronet quickly.

Beryl told him what Mr. Gifford had said to her about the absence of dust on the dagger and the significant way he had spoken.

Sir Jaffray listened with a gathering frown of regret and annoyance.

"Borderham may have suspected it even then," he said. "Those men don't carry about faces like open books. I'll speak to Gifford and see what happens at the inquest. Meantime try to think I am really and honestly troubled to have brought this on you."

He stood for a moment near her, as if going to say more, and Beryl, thinking this, did not reply, but he said nothing, and at the close of a somewhat embarrassed pause he went out of the room, just turning by the door to smile to her.

She was a little puzzled by his conduct, and with a frown of perplexity on her forehead she sat for a minute or two thinking of it all. Then she smiled to herself very slightly and murmured: "I'm glad I did it. Whatever happens they can't do anything very dreadful to me, and Jaffray must see I did it for his sake." Then she went up stairs to Lady Walcote's rooms.

At the inquest everything went as Inspector Borderham had anticipated. He offered just such evidence as he thought necessary, and the coroner summed up the case on the evidence presented. One juryman was disposed to question the desirability of not going into more of the facts, but the other 11, who had been drawn carefully from the Walcote estates, took their cue from the foreman and declared themselves perfectly satisfied and gave their verdict in the exact terms the inspector had prophesied that they would.

"And now," said the inspector to Mr. Gifford and Sir Jaffray when it was all over and the courtroom was emptying fast—"now begins the serious business of the investigation."

"You've had some anonymous letter, I hear, about the weapon," said Mr. Gifford, to whom the baronet had already spoken. "Do you mind my seeing it?"

"Not in the least. Here it is." And he produced it. "You see the suggestion," he said pointedly.

"And a most monstrous one it is," exclaimed Mr. Gifford, "a most monstrous one! I suppose you haven't a ghost of an idea who wrote this?"

"If I had, I am afraid I could hardly tell you, Mr. Gifford," was the reply, given with a smile, "but I have not. I am thinking where to look."

"So am I," returned the other shortly. "Who is there owes you a grudge, Sir Jaffray—Miss Leycester or, for that matter, Lady Walcote either? Hate of some kind inspired that letter."

"I am at a loss even to guess," replied Sir Jaffray.

"May I take a tracing of a bit of the letter, Mr. Borderham?" And without waiting for permission Mr. Gifford did so, rapidly and cleverly, and handed the letter back to the inspector, and then Sir Jaffray and the private detective walked back together to the manor house, the baronet explaining more fully all that had passed.

"What do you think of it, Mr. Gifford?" he asked at the close.

"I can't see it all yet, but I have a suspicion. I think the better plan will be to hold out against the inspector's hint, at any rate for a time. It's clear enough what he means. What he wants is to be spared the trouble of having to solve the mystery of the weapon, and somebody seems to want to help him. Who's that somebody?"

"I can't imagine."

"Exactly. Neither can I at present, but we must find that out. In the first place, is it a somebody at all, or is it just a dodge of our friend Borderham? If he had a ghost of an idea that anything of the kind had been done, it's all on the cards he'd get such a letter written to himself just to bounce us into throwing that trump card down on the table. It stands to common sense that he'd give a lot to get the difficulty of that dagger business cleared up, and if he could show that it really was Lady Walcote's dagger and not Miss Leycester's it would be a good enough thing for him to conclude that Lady Walcote was the person wanted. And, don't make any mistake, that inspector would give half his nose to spot the truth in this thing. I never saw a man keener. He scents promotion in it, removal to a busy center and reputation as a clever spot—I mean, detective. I know him."

"His manner was in the highest degree courteous to me," said Sir Jaffray in reply.

"'Cause he's no fool," was the blunt answer. "He wants to stand well with you, and, if anything is to be found out that will pain you, to have it seem to be forced out. But he's quite clever enough to try to use you all the same, Sir Jaffray. You see, he argues in this way: If there's been any exchange of these daggers, he can frighten you to go running off to your solicitor in the fear that you may be involved as some sort of accessory"—

"Do you mean"— began the baronet hurriedly, taking alarm for Beryl's sake at the other's words and bursting in with his interruption.

"Wait a moment, sir, please, and try to hear what I have to say. He wants to frighten you to go rushing off to tell some very respectable, steady going solicitor all the facts, knowing full well that such a man's first advice will be to you to take Borderham's hint and make the change again while the chance seems open"—

"If there is any possibility," interrupted Sir Jaffray again, when his companion cut him short once more:

"Please, please, please allow me and do try to hear me patiently. If you do that, Borderham will not hesitate one minute. He'll be off to the nearest J. P. and get a warrant for Lady Walcote's arrest. At present he has absolutely nothing to go on, bar the fact of her ladyship's absence and the circumstance that there was a quarrel on the morning of the day about her as the result of which you turned the Frenchman out of the house. That's all the evidence he's got, because we've got all the rest, and at best it's only mere flimsy suspicion. But add the fact of the dagger found in the man's heart being the property of her ladyship, and you have just that substantial evidence on which a man can work and act. You see that?"

"Yes, yes. Of course," assented the baronet hurriedly.

"Exactly. Well, then, if it's bounce, it's clear that you had better not give the thing away yet. But I'm not disposed to think it's bounce. I believe he did receive a letter."

"Well, but who could send such a thing?"

"Precisely. We'll see about that presently. First let us see what we ought to do in this matter, supposing the letter's genuine. What can he do? He won't threaten you. He knows better than to do that for personal reasons. If you were a poor and obscure individual, and if Miss Leycester were a wretched, friendless girl, nothing would be easier than to take you both by the throat, so,to speak, and just shake the knowledge out of you. There's no difference between rich and poor in the eye of the law, you know, but there's a deal of difference between 'em in the hands of the police, I can tell you," said Mr. Gifford dryly.

"As it is," he continued after a pause, "the inspector comes to you all soft tongued and pleasant, hints that if you've been hoaxed you may wish to see that the thing is put right, and so on. I know all that sort of talk, and, putting it bluntly, it means that so long as you don't speak he daren't try to make you unless—unless, mind you, he can get some definite, positive evidence. You needn't bother yourself one little bit about the thing yet, therefore, but when he comes, as he will, of course, you can just say that you wouldn't think of doing anything, because some skulking coward has written as an anonymous letter what a newspaper penny a liner might hint for the purpose of getting up a sensation, and if—excuse my giving you a hint—if you'll put on a little grandee manner and tell him you are surprised he should let himself be fooled by an anonymous correspondent you may do a good deal to check him."

"This is all very distasteful to me, Mr. Gifford," said Sir Jaffray after he had thought over the other's suggestion.

"I've no doubt it is, Sir Jaffray," returned his companion shortly, "but the alternative is an immediate warrant for Lady Walcote's arrest on the charge of murder."

"But I object very strongly to any course that entails this deceit and falsehood. I have no right to put this indignity upon Miss Leycester. If she were questioned"—

(To be continued.

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