A COMING POSSIBILITY.

By GREG EDWARDS.

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CHAPTER I.

One might truly say that never was witnessed such a scene of tumult and confusion within the walls of the old parliament house in Edinburgh as upon the second day of the Cruikshank poisoning case. Of the passages converging to the high court of justiciary not a hand's breadth of pavement was to be seen, nothing save the heads of an eager, panting, struggling multitude. Here and there in a common epidemic of bad temper, fashionable bonnets fluttered and tossed and jostled each other; in the outskirts of the crush anxious young wigs hovered about in vain attempts to save the fashionable bonnets from ill treatment, while above all rose the clamor of mingled shouts, imprecations, tramplings and pushings.

"It's positively illegal—a shocking breach of rules—absolute contempt of court!" gasped Mr. Salomon, dean of faculty, as he was shot into jail with his wig in one hand and a crushed bundle of briefs in the other. "Do something, usher. Don't stand gaping in that helpless way. Clear the corridors and stop that row!" he cried angrily, as he proceeded to adjust the disorder of his apparel.

Thus bidden, the functionary addressed mounted a bench and called for order and silence, with as much authority as a feeble presence and a feebler voice could command and with as little result as might have been expected of one so endowed, whereupon another individual, of hybrid appearance suggestive of both beadle and waiter, sprang to a similar point of vantage and lustily lent his aid.

"Stan back, ma'am! Don't shove, ladies! Ye won't get in any sooner by shovin!"

"Let me in, then!" screamed a thin lady, waving aloft a bag of sandwiches.

"Where's yer ticket?" roared Hybrid.

"I haven't got one—didn't know they were necessary."

"Well, get out and don't block the door, woman!"

"I'm no woman; I'm Dr. Simpson's wife."

"Hang Dr. Simpson! Stan back."

"Let her in and have done with it!" came an impatient chorus from the mob.

"Confound ye! Come in, then." And, with the united efforts of Hybrid and usher, Mrs. Simpson was successfully extracted and smilingly landed in court.

"I say, usher," began a calm individual who had gained an easy admittance through a side door, "what's the meaning of all this commotion?"

"What's that ye're sayin?"

"I was asking the meaning of this commotion."

"Guid sakes!" yelled Hybrid excitedly, turning a hot and astonished visage at his questioner. "Perhaps ye'd like me to sit down and tell ye a tale. Move out of the way, ye fool, and let them people pass."

The maligned man, serenely heedless of this insult to his curiosity, sauntered away peacefully and buttonholed a less animated person.

"Can you tell me, sir, the reason for all this excitement?"

"The medical witnesses are to be examined today, and Dr. Angus Campbell will be called to complete his evidence," shouted the gentleman above the uproar.

"But is that a sufficient reason why the impenetrable granitic Edinburgh should behave like a volcano?"

"Maybe it isn't, but I suppose the real cause lies in that sensational statement of Dr. Campbell's yesterday before the adjournment."

"And who, may I ask, is Dr. Campbell?" persisted the stranger tranquilly.

"The greatest living toxicologist," vociferated the other.

"Ah, I see. But what's a toxicologist?"

"A fellow who's well up in poisons and that sort of thing."

"I understand. Yes—and—what was the sensational"—

"Excuse me. I can't shout any more. Read that and find out for yourself," bellowed his informant as he thrust into his hand a copy of the morning paper and tore himself away, leaving the inquisitive stranger to seat himself next to a young man of professional though shabby and threadbare appearance, who, to judge by his gestures and readiness to volunteer information, might be inferred to be personally interested in the events of the day.

Shortly afterward the courtroom became crowded to suffocation with a flushed and disheveled gathering, the tumult suddenly ceased as judge and jury took their places and the prisoners entered the dock, and the proceedings began.

When the venerable, white haired witness in whom centered the interest of the day gravely stepped into the box and rested his hands upon the ledge, the audience rustled in their seats and bent forward in breathless silence lest a word of the evidence should be lost, while the seedy young man, unable to control his excitement, whispered hurriedly to his neighbor:

"That's Dr. Campbell; finest man in the kingdom; my greatest friend and benefactor."

Turning to the witness, the lord advocate commenced the day's examination by saying:

"Before your lordship rose yesterday I had occasion to ask witness a question which I desire to put to him again. Dr. Campbell, is there any poison known to the medical profession which is fatal and which leaves no trace of its presence after death?"

"As far as I am aware there is no such poison—known—to—the—medical—profession."

The answer came slowly and hesitatingly, as if the witness felt a painful reluctance in expressing his opinion.

"Is there any such drug known to you yourself?" was the next question.

Again the same expression of pain fell upon the countenance of the old scientist as he paused under the searching eye of the counsel and then turned upon the judge a mute appeal for forbearance. But finding neither hope nor mercy upon the stolid face before him he answered in a low voice:

"There is."

"Silence!" cried the usher as a long drawn breath quivered through the thick atmosphere and low whisperings ran along the benches.

"In view of the fact that the prisoner has a wide knowledge of scientific questions, is it your opinion that that same poison or one of similar qualities might have been administered by the prisoner at the bar?"

"It is not."

"Why do you think it is improbable?"

"Because the deceased lady exhibited distinct symptoms of poisoning, while the drug of which I speak gives rise to none."

"Is the court, then, to understand," asked the lord advocate in an incredulous tone, "that there exists a drug, known only to yourself, which is fatally poisonous, which sets up no physical symptom and which leaves no post mortem trace within the body?"

"Yes, that is my meaning exactly," answered the witness.

"And now, Dr. Campbell, what is the name of this mysterious drug?"

"Stop, in heaven's name!" exclaimed the judge, with a sudden emphasis which made every one start in his seat. When the full import of the question

"What a terrible world this would be."

fell upon the people, every face grew pale and every knee trembled at the awful solemnity of the moment.

"My lord," said the counsel in a low voice, raising his blanched face until he looked at the judge, "had I but for a moment realized the gravity of the question it would never have been uttered."

* * * * * * *

"What a terrible world this would be if your secret had been divulged in open court, Dr. Campbell," said the seedy young man to his friend and benefactor, when they had left the courts of justice and were directing their steps homeward.

"That it would, Gardner. No one would be safe. The crimes of the Borgias would sink into oblivion and become trivial in comparison with the deeds which might be perpetrated if the world once had the drug in its power."

"But the poison would soon find its antidote if it ever became known to scientists?" hazarded Gardner.

"What would be the use of searching for an antidote at all if the administration of the poison is followed by no symptom? Its criminal employment would not be suspected. People would leave the world as silently and mysteriously as a breath of wind, and no one would be any the wiser. No, no. Never mind the antidote. If the poison should ever become publicly known, search for its pathological signs, find out its effect upon the system, and then the drug will become too dangerous a weapon to be handled by criminals." Presently the old doctor continued: "You must help me to destroy it this very evening. I shall not feel safe until I have got rid of the small quantity which I have in the house and placed it out of everybody's reach. Come to the library after dinner, Edward, and give me your assistance."

"Very well; I shall do so," responded Dr. Gardner as they stopped at their own residence in 6 Catharine square.

CHAPTER II.

When Edward Gardner found himself in his own room upon that same night, he was moved to great stealthiness and caution in his behavior, for he not only tiptoed about in his stockings, but also, before closing the door and scrutinizing its fastenings, stepped back into the corridor and listened in the stooping attitude of still attention, until the throbbing of his temples was distinctly audible in his ears.

Having secured himself against the possibility of sudden interruption, he took off his coat with a careful and deliberate movement, and then drew from its outer breast pocket a waterproof bath bag, whence he extracted a dripping sponge. This he squeezed over a glass tumbler, and having smelled and examined with absorbing interest the liquid therein contained he poured it into a pair of glass stoppered vials, which he labeled "Bimeconate of morphia," muttering as he wrote, "As well one name as another."

He then seated himself upon the nearest chair, and with his chin resting upon his open palm, his eyes staring before him in vacant abstraction, he became plunged in deep, silent thought. What were his reflections can never be known to mortal being, but of their result upon the physical man the knowledge is certain.

A shudder passed over him, perspiration broke out upon his face, and as a long sigh escaped his lips he passed a wet hand over his brow as if to remove some mental picture which troubled and oppressed him. He had barely done so when a tremor seized upon his limbs and startled him to activity, but his movements were as uncertain as those of intoxication. He stepped unsteadily forward to possess himself of the vial which stood upon the table, but his hands clitched the air as he fell back in stupor and forgetfulness.

"In—the—name—of—all—that's—reasonable—what—does—this—mean?" gasped Dr. Gardner when he sat up in bed on the following morning and looked with astonishment round the apartment. Upon the carpeted floor lay a portmanteau, ripped open and cut in fantastic curves, the leather hanging from it in strips. In a moment he had bounded from bed and was kneeling upon the floor, gazing in bewilderment at the wreck of his property. Then he hastily stepped across the room to examine the lock of his door. Both it and the window bar were intact. Surely he was dreaming, he thought, as he sat upon the edge of the bed to collect his faculties. And then his eyes rested upon the pillow.

"Mercy on me! What has happened to this?" he exclaimed.

Also slashed and cut as if by the knife of a frenzied maniac. The whole thing was inexplicable.

Yonder the door of a press cupboard showed lines of whitewood through the paint. It had been repeatedly stabbed.

Even the soap had not escaped. There it lay upon the washstand in a heap of thin shavings. What absurd fit could have induced any one to commit such senseless acts as these? Had the room been entered while he slept? To believe that and explain the locked door and barred window was impossible. Somebody must have experienced a gloating sort of pleasure in cutting the portmanteau. That was evident from the way in which it was done. It was not a simple act of destruction. The curved incisions showed how carefully and deliberately it had been carved, as if the knife had dwelt with a lingering joy over each sweep of its blade.

For some minutes he sat upon the bed staring in perplexity and bewilderment at the evidences of madness before him, and then there passed a fleeting expression across his eyes, and his face was suffused with a deathly pallor.

A light was thrown across his understanding, for he instantly started to his feet, and the next moment his nervous fingers were busily playing over the lock of an oaken case whose contents became subjected to an intent and eager scrutiny. A long black handled operating knife appeared to engage his chief attention, for he several times felt its edge, breathed upon it, held it up to the light of day and contrasted its appearance with that of others in the box.

Two hours afterward Dr. Gardner stepped out of his room, lingering for a short space at the door to reassure himself that every trace of disorder had been concealed, and in due time entered the breakfast room, where Dr. Campbell and his daughter already sat.

"Oh, Ned, I'm very sorry that your room was so unprepared!" was the remark with which he was greeted by the young lady as she rose to receive him.

"Why need you be sorry at all, May? I was quite as comfortable as I always am, thanks to you."

"So I have told her," broke in the old gentleman without raising his eyes from the letter which he held in his hand. "But like every other dear little housewife she is never satisfied unless her department rolls on with the unswerving regularity of the solar system. The maids forgot to give you a pillow, or something of that sort, and May has done little else but worry over the omission since she came to breakfast. I fear she worries herself about other folks far more than she does about her old father," he said, with a sly look at his daughter.

"Well, I assure you, May, that I did not notice the omission," said his assistant.

"Of course you didn't. Don't trouble about it just now," interrupted the old scientist impatiently. "Come and help me with this correspondence. Bah!" he exclaimed, dropping a letter from his fingers as if it had burned them. "If you find in that bundle any more such atrocities as these, throw them into the fire."

Thus requested, Dr. Gardner drew the pile of letters near his plate and began his examination of them.

"Oh, sir, what a princely offer," he said suddenly in a tone of astonishment.

"What is it? Another of the same sort?" asked Campbell, with his face darkening, while his assistant devoured the contents of the letter.

"Yes, I suppose it is. An anonymous correspondent, who will meet you by appointment, offers £1,000 for one dose of the drug mentioned by you in your evidence yesterday, and"—

"Tear it up. Stamp on it!" cried the old gentleman vehemently.

"Evidently a woman's handwriting," proceeded Gardner meditatively.

"Tear it up! Throw it into the fire, man! Don't handle it! It comes from perdition!" cried his friend, with increasing violence, and the young man, slowly loosening his grasp, dropped the letter upon the floor.

After a sharp pause, during which Dr. Campbell dabbed his forehead in an attempt to regain his composure, Edward observed in a quiet tone:

"The whole bundle will no doubt consist of the same kind of correspondence, so I will just take them to the library and destroy them."

"Yes, do so, please. But, pray, finish your breakfast first of all," replied the old gentleman, rising from the table and walking out of the room.

CHAPTER III.

Seven years have rolled by since the eventful scene at court in which Dr. Angus Campbell figured so prominently. Many changes have taken place at 6 Catharine square within that time, not the least being the death, four years ago, of the distinguished old scientist, who left behind him the memory of a great name and a small fortune, bequeathed to his only daughter. That lady, promoted to the rank of wife, now occupies her post at the head of the table, while her husband, Dr. Edward Gardner, sits opposite to her, dividing his attention between the morning papers and the meal set before him.

Other changes may be observed in the apartment itself. Instead of the homely, cozy old chairs, the great mahogany chiffonier, always in a high state of polish, the antiquated corner cupboards, resplendent with brass knobs and keyholes, the faded mahogany screens, worked in beads by the late Mrs. Campbell, the portraits of old ladies in frills and huge brooches, of Dr. Campbell himself, looking into the room with the county of Perth behind him, and of his reverend father, bedecked in coils of white tie, with his glasses in one hand and a concordance in the other—instead of all these are seen the modern and costly in art and fashion, luxurious couches and chairs, massive sideboards, heavy velvet curtains, thick carpets, huge canvases, dazzling in the freshness of new paint and framed in all the gorgeousness that gilt can give for money.

In every part of the house—which, in fact, is less a house than an "establishment"—as in the room now occupied by the doctor and his wife, reigns the air of wealth and splendor such as would have astonished the lady's father had he lived to witness it. But while these changes are of interest as significant of worldly progress we must needs turn aside and direct our attention rather to persons than things. Dr. Gardner himself is at the present moment a person in whose appearance there is something unusual to attract the eye.

That he is the victim of an unsettling mental emotion is evident from the manner in which he stares at the sheet in his hand. The absence of all color in his face, the quivering lip, the dilated nostril, the trembling limbs conveying a rustling sound to the paper held in his grasp, are in themselves sufficient testimony to its violence.

"What is the matter, Ned? Tell me, darling, are you ill?" cried his wife in a frightened voice as she ran to him and fell upon her knees by his chair.

Her husband's breathing seemed to have stopped for a time, but presently he drew in a prolonged inspiration, as if he would have exhausted the very room, and then with a too apparent effort at composure he asked:

"Did I startle you, my dear? Upon my word you look quite shaken."

As he tenderly patted her cheek his lips distorted themselves into the semblance of a smile—the least fitting expression for his face to wear, for every vestige of color had left it.

"Tell me, though, dear, what is the matter with you?" persisted his wife.

"Nothing but a stitch, May. It bit me terribly sharp right over the heart, but I am quite well now," he answered, trying to speak cheerfully, though his looks wandered everywhere but to the pure light of his wife's countenance.

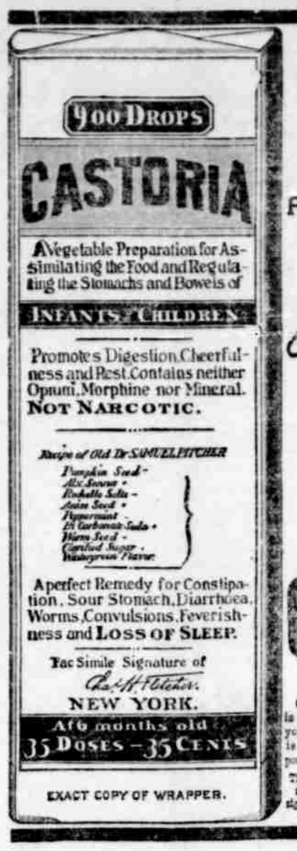
"But, Ned, darling, was there—I mean—please don't be vexed with me for asking—was there nothing in the paper to alarm you?"

"Oh, May, how foolish you are!" he replied, with a laugh which had no mirth in it. "I assure you that there was absolutely nothing wrong with me but that pain; only, to tell the truth, when it came so instantaneously I was just going to read you a bit of news which, to say the least, is rather dreadful. But go to your seat first. Yes; well, give me another kiss before you go."

Mrs. Gardner slowly rose to her feet and proceeded to her place at the table, while the doctor, with his face carefully hidden behind the paper, went on with his remarks.

"Now, where was I? Ah, yes; I wonder, May, if you would remember that tall woman who came here once or twice about three months ago to consult me."

To Be Continued.



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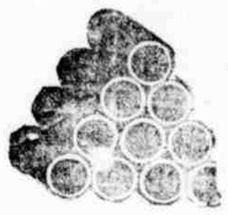

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