

THE MURDER AT JEX FARM

GEORGE IRA BRETT

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The facts of the case were simple enough. A young woman had been found lying at the orchard gate of the farm, 37 1/2 yards from the house, dead, with a bullet in her head. Suicide was out of the question, for there was no pistol about, and it was not in evidence that the girl had any cause for despondency. There was no reason for her taking her life. But then again, she was not known to have an enemy.

I like to put down my impressions on paper, pretty fully and quite freely, as I go on. I am doing so now, not as a report for my chief, nor for any sort of publication, but just as a help to myself. I am not exactly a literary man, as my mates in the force will have it that I am, but I have received a liberal education. I have been taught the use of my own language, and I have always considered that in our profession, which is a very complicated one, the more clearly an officer can put his thoughts into words and his words on to paper the better chance he has of doing good work in the detective line.

Crime detection is not a secret art; anybody can do it if he has the wits, and the time, and patience to get at all the facts, and if he knows enough of the ways of men and women. It sounds like boasting to say so much, but it isn't; we all fail too often to be vain, and, when I fail, I always say, "I couldn't get at the facts," or "I didn't know enough about the sort of people concerned."

I don't seem like getting to the bottom of this Jex Farm crime yet; the facts are too provokingly few and simple. I have been here two days already and have learnt little more than I have written down above.

Here I paste in a paragraph from a county paper which pretty nearly tells the story with all its circumstances so far as we have got at present.

"MURDER IN SURREY.—Jex Farm, two miles from Bexton, in Surrey, was the scene of a terrible and mysterious crime on the evening of Wednesday last. A young unmarried lady of the name of Judson, a niece of Mrs. Jex, the widowed owner of Jex Farm, was found murdered late on Wednesday night just inside the orchard gate of the farm, and within a stone's throw of the house. There were no signs of a struggle, but Miss Judson's gold watch and chain were missing. The crime must have been committed at late dusk on Wednesday evening, 17th inst. (October). It is singular that no sound of firearms was heard by any inmate of the house; and the crime was not discovered till the family were about to meet at supper, when Miss Judson's absence was noticed.

"After waiting awhile and calling the name of the young lady in vain, the night being very dark and gusty, young Mr. Jex and the farm-labourers started out with lanterns. They almost immediately came upon the dead body of the unfortunate young girl, which was lying on the walk just inside the orchard gate, and it is stated that the first discoverer of the tragedy was Mr. Jex himself. It adds one more element of gloom to the fearful event when we add that it is rumoured in the neighbourhood that Mr. Jex, the only son of the lady who owns the farm, was engaged to be married to the victim of this terrible tragedy.

"No clue has yet been obtained. It is clear that the motive of the crime was robbery, and it is supposed in the neighbourhood that, as the high road runs within twenty yards of the scene of the tragedy, the perpetrator may have been one of a very rough set of bicyclists who were drinking at the Red Lion' at Bexton in the afternoon, and who were seen at nightfall to retrace their journey in the direction of Jex Farm. We understand that Inspector

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Battle, the well-known London detective, has been despatched from Scotland Yard to the scene of the murder. Inspector Battle is the officer whose name has recently attained considerable prominence in connection with the successful discovery and conviction of the perpetrators of the great jewel robbery at Leonard Court."

Rather penny-a-lying and wordy, but, barring the too flattering allusion to myself, on the whole a fair enough account of the facts.

It was young Mr. Jex himself who supplied the information about the bicyclists. He had been shooting rabbits at an outlying farm of his own a mile beyond Bexton, and stopping to get a glass of beer at the chief inn, found himself surrounded in the bar by a group of rowdy bicyclists. The Surrey countryman generally dislikes the cycling Londoners who travel along the roads of his county in extraordinary numbers. Mr. Jex had noticed that these men, instead of continuing their journey towards London, had turned again in the direction of Jex Farm. If they repassed the "Lion" at Bexton they must have done so at night, for they were not seen again.

Mr. Jex is a fine young man with good looks, twenty-eight years of age, six foot one in height, a sportsman, and popular in the neighbourhood. He is giving me every assistance in his power, and is resolved, he says to bring the villains to justice. He is naturally much distressed and overcome at the sudden ending of all his hopes and prospects.

His mother is a kind and motherly woman nearly seventy years of age. I understand from herself that she fully approved of the approaching marriage of her son. I gather in the neighbourhood that Mr. Jex, like so many of his class, has been very hard hit by the prevailing agricultural depression, and that his proposed marriage with his cousin, Miss Judson, an orphan, with property of her own, was something of a godsend to himself and his family.

My written orders from head-quarters had been to install myself in the house, if I could obtain an invitation, in order the better to unravel the facts as to the crime, and I was to take my full time in the investigations. I showed my instructions on this head to Mrs. Jex and her son, and was by them at once cordially invited to consider the farm my home for the time being.

It was a somewhat delicate situation, and I put it plainly to each of them, to Mr. Jex, to his mother, and to a young lady on a visit to them, Miss Lewsome. I was a detective officer, I told them, on a mission to detect a great crime. Though I was a guest at the farm, I was bound as a police officer to a minute and suspicious inquiry into everybody's conduct since and before the murder. They must not take it amiss if I was particular and even impertinent in my questions, and vexatious in my way of putting them.

The reasonableness of all this was apparent to them all, and I at once began my investigations at the farm and outside it.

The first person I interviewed was young Mr. Jex himself. On the 29th he had returned from shooting at his farm on the other side of Bexton, and he stopped on his way home for a drink at the "Red Lion." "At what time?" I asked. "It was growing dusk," said Jex. "I should say it was within a few minutes of half past five; three men were drinking at the bar, bicyclists; I was thinking they would be overtaken by night; I did not like the look of those men." "Never mind the bicyclists for the present, Mr. Jex. You stayed some time in the bar?" "An hour or more." "Did you meet any one you knew at the Lion? Any neighbours?" "Yes, I met James Barton and—" "Don't trouble yourself with their names just now! You met friends who can speak to your being at the inn?" "I did." "That will do. I want to get to the dates. At about five-thirty you started for home?" "It was exactly on the stroke of six by the clock of the Lion." "You had no doubt taken a glass or two of ale?" "No, I took a glass of whisky and water." "Or two?" "I took two glasses." "You took two glasses of whisky and water, good; and then you set off for the farm? Was your man with you?" "What man?" "The man who carried your game, or was it a boy?" "I had no man or boy with me. I had brought three rabbits in my pocket, and these I left as a present to Mrs. Jones of the 'Lion.'" "You had your gun with you?" "Of course I had." "Was it loaded?" "Yes, but I drew the charges as I neared home." "You noticed nothing unusual as you came in?" "Nothing." "Yet you passed within a yard of the orchard gate where the poor girl must have been lying dead?" "I must have, but it was pitch dark under the trees. I saw nothing but the lights in the parlour windows from the time I opened the gate out of the road." "And coming along the road you did not notice or hear anything?" "Yes, I saw the lanterns of three cyclists coming towards me when I had got a few hundred yards from the 'Lion.' I never saw men travelling faster by night; they nearly got me down in the road between them." "Did they speak to you?" "One cursed me as he

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passed; I had gone near to spill him, he said. They never slackened speed: I just felt the swish and wind of their machines as they shaved past me." "You noticed nothing else? I mean on the road home?" "Yes, I thought I heard some shots far away—poachers I thought at the time—in Squire Watson's woods." "How many shots?" "Three." "Close together?" "As close as I speak now: one—two—three." "Was this long after you met the cyclists?" He took a moment to think. "Come, Mr. Jex, you can't want time to answer a simple question?" "It was some time before I met them." "How far might it have been from the Lion' when you heard the three shots?" "A matter of half a mile." "Then it was after you met the cyclists?" "No, it was before." "It was after, for you told me just now you met them a few hundred yards, and now you say you heard the shots when you were half a mile on your way home. Half a mile is not a few hundred yards; half a mile is 880 yards." Mr. Jex seemed puzzled. "You are too sharp on a fellow," he said. "I had need to be, Mr. Jex," I answered.

"Now, Mr. Jex," I said, "there is another point on which I am afraid I must question you." "I guess what it is," said he, "go ahead. You mean about me and Miss Judson?" "That is so, about Miss Judson and yourself. You were engaged to her?" "I was." "Had the engagement lasted long?" A month." "And she had been two months your mother's guest at the farm?" "Going on for three." "And there was nothing to stand in the way of your wishes?" "I don't understand what sort of thing you mean?" "Well, any misunderstanding between you—quarrels, you know." "Oh, lovers' quarrels! They don't amount to much, do they? We had the usual number, I suppose." (This is a queer, indifferent sort of a lover, I thought.) "Well, even a lovers' quarrel has a cause, I suppose—and its mostly jealousy; perhaps there was some neighbour you did not fancy the look of?" "God bless you, no! She didn't know the neighbours—hardly." "Or some old London friend the young lady may have had a liking for once?" "Couldn't be," said Jex positively. "Because Mary only had one friend. She had been engaged to him, and she threw him over. She fancied me better, you see. She told me all about him. She told me everything, you know." "Ah, women always do!" "They do when they care for a fellow," said Jex warmly. "Well, perhaps they do, but you see, here's a mysterious crime, and I want to find a motive for it." "Who could have a motive?" "Possibly a disappointed rival—from London." "Why, man," said Jex, "I tell you it couldn't be; the man I spoke of is in New Zealand—thousands of miles away. I tell you the motive was robbery. Why, wasn't the girl's fold watch taken?" "That might be a blind, Mr. Jex," said, I looking him straight in the face: "it's a common trick, that." "Oh, nonsense; we all agreed at the inquest it was robbery, and we fastened it on to those three cyclists I saw at the 'Lion,' and coming back along the road, hot foot, just in the nick of time to do the trick. Don't you go wasting your time, Mr. Battle, over rivals, and rot of that sort!" I let my gentleman run on, but I thought well presently to throw a little dash of cold water over his cock-sureness.

"Mr. Jex," I said, "do you remember that at the inquest the county police put in plaster casts of all the footprints found next morning round about where the body had lain?" "Well, what if they did?" "I've just compared those footprints with the bootprints of the inmates of this house, and every single mark corresponds with the boots worn by the three labourers at the Farm, and—by yourself." This staggered him a bit. "Of course," he said, "we made these marks when we carried the body in." "I know that," I said. "And one country boot," said Jex, "is just as like another as one pea is like another." "Not quite so like as that. But Mr. Jex, did you ever know a cyclist to ride his machine in hobnailed boots? So you see, the murderer could not be one of your bicyclists." Jex kept silence for a minute, and he went rather pale as I watched him. "The man who committed this murder, Mr. Jex, never wore a cyclist's boot."

"I'll tell you what," he said after a longish pause, "we'd trampled down the ground a good bit all round; we must have trampled out the murderer's footprints." "It's just possible," said, "but not likely that you shouldn't have left a square inch of shoeprint anywhere. However, that is of no matter to me at present. I've another bit of evidence that I'll work out first." "A clue?" asked Jex eagerly, "what is it?" "Well, Mr. Jex, you'll excuse me for not mentioning it just at present. You'll know soon enough." I gave him a moment to think over the matter, then I went on—

"Now, sir, I should like to ask you one or two more questions, if you're quite agreeable." "Fire away," said Jex, regaining his assurance. "I'm here to answer you." "I'm told you used to meet Miss Judson on your return from shooting, or what not, at the orchard gate?" "That's so." "At nightfall?" "Yes as it grew from dusk to dark." "Might she be expecting you there on the 17th just as night fell?" "Likely she might." "But about that time you were drinking in the bar parlour of the Lion?" "Well, if you call two goes of whisky and water after a long day's walking, drinking, I was." "The landlady is an old friend of your mother's, I'm told." Jex laughed. "Whoever told

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you that, told you wrong; my mother does not particularly cotton to Mrs. Jones." "What! the two old ladies don't hit it off, don't they?" "Who told you that Mrs. Jones was an old lady?" said Jex, "she's a young one and a very pretty one into the bargain." "Then that accounts," said I, "for the present of rabbits, eh?" Jex winked.

I have mentioned a fourth inmate at Jex Farm at the time of the murder in the person of Miss Maud Lewsome, a young lady friend of Miss Judson's, and a distant cousin of hers, but no blood relation of the Jex family. Miss Lewsome had come as a friend of Miss Judson, and had resided at the Farm some five weeks. She is a tall, dark, handsome girl, gentle and reserved in manner, but as I should judge, extremely intelligent. I hear that the profession in life is the literary one, but whether in the way of book-writing or journalism I am not told. She had also been for a short time on the stage. I have as yet had hardly any conversation with Miss Lewsome, so overcome is she with nervous shock of the tragedy of which her dearest friend has been the victim.

I need not reproduce here at any length the evidence of the country surgeon who made the post mortem, as given at the inquest. It was to the effect that death had not resulted as at first reported in all the papers from a single bullet, but from three bullet wounds in the side of the head, one just behind the ear and two just above it. The shots must have been fired from the distance of a few yards, for there was no burning or discolouration of the skin. That they must have been fired in rapid succession was evident from the fact of the three wounds being within a circle whose radius was not more than three inches in length. The charges of powder, in the doctor's opinion, must have been light, for after passing through the walls of the skull, there was little penetration. The bullets, three, had been extracted—very small round leaden bullets of the size of large peas, not of the conical shape used in revolvers of the more expensive kind. Death must have been instantaneous for the bullets were all three found buried in the brain, one still spherical, the others flattened by contact with bone.

Now it is obvious that this increases the difficulty connected with the fact that no one at the Farm, neither Mrs. Jex nor Miss Lewsome nor any of the labourers or female servants who were indoors and at supper at the time, had heard the sound of firearms. It is true that on the evening of the 17th half a gale of wind was blowing from the north-west, and the orchard, where the fatal shots were fired, is nearly south-east of the house; all doors and windows were closed, the night being cold and rainy but the sitting-room faces the south-east, and though a tall yew hedge interposed, it was difficult to see how three pistol shots fired less than forty yards away should not be audible by the inmates of the room. Was Mrs. Jex hard of hearing? I asked. She was not, she declared. Had she heard positively nothing? Nothing but the roaring of the wind in the chimney and every now and then the rattling of the windows. Was she absorbed in reading or talk? No, she was knitting by the fireside. Miss Lewsome had been writing at the table all the evening. From time to time she had talked with Miss Lewsome who had remained with her in the room from before sundown till supper time.

I then examined Miss Lewsome by herself as I had already examined Mrs. Jex. She corroborated what that lady had said. The wind was loud that night, said Miss Lewsome. It rattled the windows and made a great noise in the chimney. She was writing all the evening, she said. "Forgive my curiosity," I said, "was it something that took up your attention and would have prevented your hearing a noise outside?" She hesitated. "I was writing up my diary," she answered. "You keep a diary?" "Yes." "May I see it?" "Oh no!" she said. "That would be quite impossible. I could not show it to anyone. You must really not ask to see it." "I am very sorry," I said, "but I am afraid you must let me read it." "Why?" "Because I am a police officer, and am here to enquire into the death by violence of Miss Mary Judson, and because your diary may throw some light upon the circumstances of the crime." "How can it help you? It is all—personal; it is all about myself." "I am not in a position to say how the diary can help me till I have seen it; but see it I must." She still hesitated; after a pause she asked, "Do you really insist?" "I must." "She walked to her desk, opened it, and gave me red leather-covered book with a lock and put it with the key into my hands.

That night I read the diary. The entries were, as Miss Lewsome had told me, scanty, that is at first referring to such trivial events as her arrival at the farm, for the diary began with the beginning of her visit. As it went on, however, the entries became fuller, and the occurrences of the six or seven days previous to the murder were narrated with considerable fulness; and before I had ended my perusal of the book certain vague suspicions that I had already formed in my mind began to gather in strength and to acquire full corroboration.

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EXTRACTS FROM MISS LEWSOME'S DIARY.

October 3.—The more I see of what is going on between Charles and Mary the more I blame myself for my fatal weakness. Had I only known of their engagement!... why, oh why, did they keep it a secret from me? He never should have earned my passion for him—never should have... oh fool, fool that I have been! Poor Charles, I hardly blame him. In honour he is bound to poor Mary, and yet I see day by day that he is getting colder and colder to her and more and more devoted to me. In honour he can't break off his engagement. Poor fellow too, he needs his cousin's money. Without it I know ruin stares him in the face. Were it not for that, as he says, he would break with Mary to-morrow. I believe him.

October 5.—What am I to do? The situation becomes more and more difficult every day. I see that I must leave Jex Farm, but it will break my heart, and I fear it will break Charles's too.

October 6.—Mary suspects nothing, though Charles grows daily colder to her.

October 11.—Charles and I have had an explanation. I have told him that I can bear it no longer. He said he could not break off the engagement; if he could he would. He spoke almost brutally. I must have Mary's money, he said. Without it my mother, I, my sisters and brothers and the farm must all go to the devil. I hate the woman, he cried out. "Don't, don't say that, Charles; it is so dreadfully cruel and wicked. What has poor Mary done to you?" "She has come between me and the only woman I ever loved. Is not that enough?" "But you have told me that your cousin's money must come to you some day or other?" "Yes, but only on her death." "Don't, Charles it is too dreadful." "Yes, isn't it? Just awful!" "Well, but..." He laughed. "Oh, women never understand business, but I see what you are driving at, my dear, a post obit or a sale of the reversion of Mary's estate, eh?" I nodded, just wishing to see what his meaning was, but of course never dreaming of anything so mercenary and hateful. He went on. "Then you think, I suppose, that with the cash in hand I could break off with Mary and make amends for the wrong I have done you? Is that your little game?" At that moment I almost hated Charles. Tears of mortification came into my eyes. "Oh, Charles, don't think so meanly of me!" "Meanly! Why, hang it, it was in my own head, why should it not be in yours too? You are the cleverest girl I know, for all you are so quiet; of course you thought of it! So did I, only that cock won't fight, my girl. Oh no; I consulted a lawyer, and he upset all my little plans. You could not raise a penny, says he, for Miss Judson might marry, and if she does and dies, her estate goes to her children, if she has any. Anyhow you can't touch the reversion till she dies single, or dies childless." "Then, Charles, there is nothing for me to do but to go out into the wide world, poor, abandoned and miserable, with all the weight of my sin and shame on me!" He looked at me a long time with a curious look in his eyes, frowning. Then he kissed me suddenly on the mouth. "Maud," he said, "you love me—really? really? really?" "I love you," I said, "with all my heart and soul and strength." "And what?" he asked, "what would you do to gain my—my company for ever...?" I made him no answer for I did not understand him. I do not understand him now. Then he said suddenly, "If you look at me like that with those great brown eyes of yours and kiss me with those lips I would... there is nothing, by Jove, nothing I would not—" Then without another reasonable word and with an oath, he broke from me and left the room.

The last entry in Miss Lewsome's diary was on the evening of the murder, and it was no doubt written at the very moment when the tragedy was being enacted within a few yards of the farmhouse windows. This gave her written words a strange impressiveness to me. The handwriting of this last entry, I noticed, was as firm as it had been throughout—such a hand as and have expected from what I knew and had heard of this young lady's character and temperament; a strikingly beautiful dark-skinned girl she is, quiet and reticent in manner, impulsive and headstrong, perhaps where her passions led her—the diary show this only too clearly—but gentle, repressed in all her ways and speech; a woman, in short, with such powers of fascination as few men can resist. It is just such a girl as this for whom men commit untold follies, and just such a girl as would hold an obstinate, dull-witted, overbearing and vain young fellow as I judge Charles Jex to be, in the hollow of her hand. These lines that follow are the last in the diary:—

I have had a long talk with Mary to-day. Charlie has at last spoken to her about his feelings towards her, and his feelings towards me. He has told her plainly that he no longer cares for her, but that he will marry her if she insists upon holding him to his promise. The communication has come upon her as a shock, she said. She was

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overwhelmed. She could give him no answer. She could not believe that I had encouraged him. did I really love him, she asked me. Did he really love me? Was it not all a horrible dream? I told her the truth, or as much of it as I dared without giving away the secret of my shame. I told her he had made me care for him long before I knew or even guessed there was anything between him and her. I would go at once. To-morrow I could take the train to town and never trouble him, or her, or anyone connected with Jex Farm again. Poor Mary cried—she behaved beautifully. She said, "Maud, you love him, he loves you. You can make him happy, I see now that I cannot. His happiness is more to me than my own. I will go away, and you shall be his wife. I will never marry." We did not speak for several minutes. I could not at first believe in such a reversal of misery. Then all the difficulties of the situation flashed upon me. My poverty; the financial ruin he had to face; the wealth that would save him. "No," I said, "Mary, it cannot be; you are generous, and I love you, but it cannot be. I cannot allow you to make this sacrifice." We talked long together, and we both of us cried a great deal. I do not think the world holds so sweet and unselfish a woman as Mary Judson. Whatever our lots are in life, hers and mine, we shall always be as sisters one to the other. To-morrow I leave Jex Farm.

The immediate effect upon my mind of the reading of this evidence was to supply me with what had been wanting: a motive for the crime. Everything pointed in my estimation to treachery in the household; everything seemed to be against the possibility of the crime being committed by an outsider.

Assuming thieves and murderers not connected with the household, what possible reasons could have brought them to run such a risk as to shoot down an innocent unoffending girl within forty yards of a dwelling-house, where probably several men were within call, and certainly within earshot of the sound of firearms? Then again, if a stranger had done this thing for the sake of robbery, how could he be sure that the girl would have money or a watch about her? A third and stronger reason against any stranger criminal, was the fact that no stranger had left the imprint of his steps within five yards of the gate on the further side of which the girl had fallen. Her head, as she lay, all but touched the lower bar of the orchard gate. She had been shot down at her accustomed trysting-place with her lover, in the dusk, and with the shade of the trees, the deep of darkness of late evening. What stranger could guess she would be there? What stranger could know so well where and how she would stand as to be able to fire three following shots, through the shadows of falling night, with such deadly aim as to take effect within an inch of each other on the poor girl's temple?

I abandoned the idea of a murder for the sake of robbery; it was untenable. I scouted the theory suggested by Charles Jex, and persevered by him with curious insistence, that the murderers were the bicyclists whom he had seen in the bar at the "Lion." The murderer was an inmate of Jex Farm; of that there could be no manner of doubt; the evidence of the footprints was proof enough of that.

Who, then, was the murderer?

Before I answer that question I put in another document, a very important piece of evidence. It is the report—the very concise but careful report of one of the most conscientious, painstaking and intelligent provincial officers I have ever had the pleasure of doing business with, Sergeant Edwardes of the Surrey Constabulary.

"Sergeant Edwardes' report on the footprints near the spot where the body of Miss Judson was found at 9:35 P.M., on October 17, 189—."

"I have counted 43 distinct human footprints and 54 partial imprints.

"Of the 43, 24 are made by the left foot and only 19 by the right.

"Of the 54 faint or partial impressions I found 17 of the left foot and only 12 of the right, the rest are not distinctive enough to pronounce upon.

"Of the total number of the fainter footprints 18 are deeply marked in the soft clay, the others are less strongly impressed. Of the 18 that are deeply marked, 11 are made by the left foot, 7 by the right.

"This accords with what I was told subsequently—that Mr. Jex's three labourers, and Mr. Jex himself, on finding Miss Judson's dead body, at once took it up in their arms and bore it into the house.

"Bearers of a heavy weight, such as a dead body, walking together, invariably bear heavily

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upon the left foot, both those who are supporting it on the left and those who are supporting it on the right side.

"Distinguishing the bootprints by their length, breadth, and the pattern of the nail marks upon them, I find that they are the footprints of five separate persons, all of them men. I also found, clearly impressed, the footprints of the victim herself.

"There had been heavy rain in the morning of the 17th, and the soil is a sticky clay. I examined it at daybreak on the morning of the 18th, and, as it had not rained during the night, the impressions were as fresh as if they had just been made. By my orders no one had been allowed to come near the spot where the body was found during the night. Just inside the gate of the orchard the grass has been long trodden away by passers-by, leaving the earth bare; and this patch of bare earth forms an area rather broader than the gate. On this area the body had fallen, and round about the spot where it had lain I found all the footprints on which I am reporting.

"I have compared the boots worn by the labourers with the impressions near the gate. They correspond in every particular.

"I therefore conclude that all three men came upon the spot only to carry away the body of the girl, and had no hand in her death.

"I argue the same from the footprints made by Mr. Jex. He also had borne more heavily with the left than with the right foot. He also, therefore, must have come on the spot only to bear off the body and could have taken no part in the girl's murder.

"There are almost an exactly equal number of impressions plain or faint, of the footprints of the four persons.

"There remain the footprints of a fifth person. They are the impressions of a man's foot, but the hobnailed boots that made them, though full-sized, are of a lighter make than the others, and the nail marks are smaller, the boots are newer, for the sides of the impressions have a cleaner cut, and what is important, the impressions of the left foot are in no case deeper than those of the right.

"This person, therefore, clearly did not assist in the carrying of the body.

"The person who made these footprints is, in my opinion, the man who, on the night of the 17th of October last, murdered Miss Mary Judson."

Conclusion

The conclusion, so clearly and logically arrived at by Inspector Edwardes, at once narrows the field of investigation. My own inquiries bring out a still more startling discovery. The footprints of the murderer—the almost self-convicted murderer—correspond in length and breadth, and in the number of nail marks, twelve in the print of the left foot, ten (there being two gaps, which also correspond) in that of the right, with a pair of boots in the possession of Mr. Charles Jex.

This very damning fact must not be driven home in proof of Mr. Jex's guilt too hastily. It is absolutely necessary, in inquiries of this very grave character, to proceed with caution and deliberation. Another man might have worn the boots with the intent to deception on the night of the murder. A murderer, with the devilish cunning of one who seeks to compass the death of a fellow-being without risk of detection, frequently uses wily precautions such as this.

Let us take the women inmates of the house first. There was Miss Lewsome—but it could not have been her, for first there was the direct evidence of old Mrs. Jex, that the young lady had not left her side in the sitting-room since sundown. There is the almost stronger indirect, undesigned and internal evidence of Miss Lewsome's diary, with the entry of this very date calmly and fully set out at the very time the murder must have been effected.

Then, again, there are the two maids, well-behaved, innocent rustic girls. It could be neither of them, for their presence in the kitchen the whole evening was vouched for by the evidence of the other servants. The same applied to the three farm labourers. Not one of the servants, male or female, had left the kitchen or scullery that night. From sundown to supper-time is the hour of rest and recreation at a farm, and the day, which has been spent in work and silence, generally ends, for rustic folk, in talk and laughter. The whole five of them had been

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enjoying themselves noisily round the kitchen fire. Their loud talk and the blustering wind, that roared about the farm chimneys on this tempestuous evening, had, doubtless, prevented any one of them from hearing the three revolver shots on the night of the murder.

There remains Mr. Jex. Let us impartially examine the facts that throw suspicion upon him. Here is a man who clearly no longer loves, probably never did love, the girl whom he is about to marry for her money; who certainly does care for another woman; who has entangled himself in an intrigue until this second woman, which he may reasonably expect to come to light at any moment and endanger his prospects of a rich marriage; who, by the impartial evidence of that woman's diary, has indulged in vague threats against the murdered girl. Lastly, he is the only person who will benefit by her death, and who will, in fact, enjoy a welcome and immediate relief, by this event, from impending bankruptcy. On the other hand, Mr. Jex at the moment when the crime was probably committed, was at Bexton, or on the road homeward; but we have no knowledge of the hour at which Mary Judson met with her death. It might be, for all we know, a good half hour later than Mr. Jex's return to the farm. We know nothing of Mr. Jex's movements from the time of his coming home till his entry at nine o'clock into the sitting-room where his mother and Miss Lewsome were awaiting him. No servant opened the door for him; he let himself in. No one saw or heard him enter. What was he doing during all the time that elapsed between his coming home and the discovery of the murder? By his own statement, there were nearly two whole hours to be accounted for. He says he was taking off his wet things and putting on dry ones, lounging about in his bed-room, resting. It may be so, but the time so occupied seems unnecessarily long.

Whatever my prepossessions were towards the young farmer, under whose roof I had made my temporary home, in whose company I had lived on familiar terms for days, I could not resist the suspicions that were gathering more strongly, day by day, round the man. To speak frankly, I had got to like Charles Jex; his rough, downright, hearty ways had, at first, quite disarmed my suspicions. I admit that likes and dislikes are unprofessional things in a service where a man should keep his personal predilections to himself; but I will confess that it takes a cooler brain and a calmer temper than mine to keep clear of them. This is one of the miserable drawbacks of a detective's life; duty compels him too often to turn upon the man he has broken bread with; to slip the handcuff over the hand that has passed him drinks and helped him to his meat. I struggled to the very last against the damning facts that were accumulating against Charles Jex, and fastening upon him the guilt of this base and cruel murder.

This man too was, I saw now, a fool as well as (assuming his guilt) and cruel murderer. It was the very extremity of his stupidity indeed, that drew me to hope him innocent. It was almost unthinkable that such a shrewd fellow as Jex had the character of being in the country-side—keen at a bargain, quick at a joke, a hearty, jovial companion at board and bar, knowing and clever in all the signs of coming change in weather and market, should have proved so clumsy a fool in this deadly affair; leaving traces enough and supplying motives enough to hang a dozen men. Of all men, one would suppose that a man of the fields and a sportsman, used to the marks and tracking of game, would be careful how he left the print of his footprints on the sort clay. Why, that evidence alone, with time fitting and motive thrown in was enough to bring him to the gallows! As if this was not enough, further most damning evidence was forthcoming.

Let me trace out step by step, the history of the murder, on the assumption that Jex is the actual murderer. As to motive I have said enough. No one but Jex had a pecuniary motive for the murder of the girl whom he certainly did not love. The evidence of the footprints is very strong, but I have said enough of them. To touch upon the immediate cause of death. There were three small bullets found in the brain. I have already stated that these bullets were not of the conical kind usually found in revolver cartridges. They were round, and of the size that are used in the dangerous toys known as drawing-room pistols. They were, in short, slugs, bullets of the size of a very large pea. During one of Jex's absences on the farm, I had carefully overhauled the saddle-room, where the young farmer kept his guns and ammunition. I found all his guns, cartridge-fillers, wads, shots of different sizes, arranged with the neat order that a good sportsman uses. The guns, carefully cleaned and oiled, were slung on the wall. Two were of the ordinary kind—12-in. bore and double-barrelled. A third was a heavy, single-barrelled duck gun, no doubt meant for use in the neighbouring marsh. Half-a-dozen of the old-fashioned shot pouches hung along the wall, full or half full of shot.

These receptacles, as every one knows, were formerly employed for muzzle-loaders, when men put in first the powder, then the wadding then the shot, and a wad over that. One of these pouches caught my eye. It was of

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larger size than the others. I took it from the wall, held it mouth downward over my left hand, and pressed the spring which releases a charge of shot. No shot fell into my hand, but three slugs. I snapped the spring again, and three slugs again fell out. I repeated the experiment again and again, every time with the same result. The brass measure, meant to hold an ordinary charge of shot that would weigh about one ounce, held just three of the slugs, neither more nor less, every time. It was a revelation, for the slugs were identical in size and weight with those found in the brain of the unfortunate young lady.

The obvious conclusion was that the murderer had loaded his gun from this leather pouch!

There was another corollary to be drawn. The theory of three shots from a revolver was no longer tenable; it seemed clear that the fatal shot had been fired at one discharge, and from a gun. It was also certain from other evidence that the person who fired the shot had been one well acquainted with firearms and their use. He would have been anxious that the discharge of his gun should make as little noise as possible. A man knowing in gun-firing knows that to do that he must use a minimum of powder, with a soft paper wadding in place of the usual tightly-fitting circular wad. So fired, the report of a gun is little louder than the clap of a man's two hands when he holds them half curved. It was in evidence that the bullets had made but little penetration, only just enough to kill, and that therefore the charge was light. It is true that no such paper wadding as I believed had been employed to further muffle the sound of the discharge, had been found near the scene of the murder.

It was well, though not absolutely indispensable, in order to bring home the perpetration of the crime to Jex, and in order to show that it was the deed of an expert—in order to show that his story of his hearing the three shots was a lie—in order to find a reason for the gun report, fired so close to the house, having been unheard by its inmates;—it was well, I say, to show that the noise had actually been deadened by the use of paper wadding.

I walked straight to the orchard gate. I placed myself where the murderer must have stood, within two or three yards of it; he must have fired point-blank at the girl, who stood, probably, with her hands resting on the top rail. The paper wadding, or any wadding would have flown out at an angle more or less acute to the line of fire, right or left of it, some four or five yards from the muzzle of the gun, and would have fallen, and must now be lying hidden in the grass on one side of the orchard path.

I searched the long wisps of grass, and in two or three minutes had the satisfaction of finding, half-hidden among the roots, first one, then a second piece of crumpled paper, charred and blackened with gunpowder. Inspector Edwardes had overlooked this important piece of evidence. By the time I had spread the papers out upon a board, they were little but damp film, but enough was left of their original appearance to show that they were pieces of the county paper, the *Surrey Times*, the paper taken in regularly by Mr. Jex.

The man who fired that shot therefore was a proved expert. He was one who had strong reason for not wishing the shot to be heard; and, with half a load of powder, a light one of shot, and loose wadding, he had taken the very best means to effect this purpose. Who in the household was thus expert in firearms? Who, alone, could have known of the existence of the slugs in the saddle-room? Clearly, no one but Charles Jex. He had loaded the gun, too, with paper obtainable in his own house.

I had now more than evidence enough to justify Jex's arrest for the murder of Mary Judson, but I was willing to accumulate still more. I therefore contented myself with obtaining a warrant for his arrest from the magistrates at Bilford, prepared to execute it the moment circumstances should make it expedient. Jex had, for some time, shown himself uneasy. He shunned me; it was clear he suspected me of having got on the trail of the crime. I began to get anxious lest he should think the game was up, and try to escape from justice. I wired for two of my men, whom I had left at Bilford, and instructed them to watch the farm by night, and lay hands on the farmer if he should attempt to break away in the darkness. By day I could keep my own eye upon him. I did not let him get far out of my sight, but, careful as I was, he showed signs of knowing he was watched.

On the morning of the 22nd of October it was my third day on this job—he came down early, dressed rather more smartly than usual, and, before breakfast, he went round to the stables. I affected not to have observed this suspicious movement, and, in the course of the morning, I accepted Miss Lewsome's invitation to accompany her on a walk to Bexton. We both went to make ready. Jex left the room at the same moment. He went towards the stables; I was watching him from my bedroom window. I ran downstairs, prepared for what was coming, and, making my way quickly into the road, stood behind the tall, quickset hedge.

Presently I heard the hurried steps of the groom in the avenue; in a moment more he had opened the gate wide, and as he did so, the dog-cart appeared with Jex driving his grey mare very fast. He called to his servant to

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look sharp and hardly stopped for the man to climb up behind. I moved quickly in front of the mare.

"Hulloa, Mr. Jex, you're in a hurry this morning!"

"Yes, confound you, I am; get out of my way or we shall do you a mischief," and he whipped the mare and tried to drive past me.

"Softly, sir—softly, if you please." I took hold of the bridle and kept a firm hold.

"Well, what is it?"

"Going to catch a train, Mr. Jex?"

He hesitated.

"You're in a fair time for the 12:10 up, you know. Going to town, mayhap."

"N—no—I'm not. Going to meet a friend at Lingham Junction that's all."

"Will you take me with you, Mr. Jex?"

"No room, Inspector. My friend and his things, and my fellow will take all there is to spare."

"Oh, leave Sam behind. I can hold your mare at the station, you know."

He muttered an oath, stupidly, but there was no way for him out of the scrape.

"Jump up, then," he said sulkily. "Sam," he called to his man, "you can go back to your horses."

I sat by his side in the cart, and we drove at a fair pace to the station without half-a-dozen words passing between us.

No doubt he was thinking the matter out; so was I. I knew just what was passing in his thick head. He was devising how he might slip into the train while I stood outside holding the horse. He forgot the telegraph. Dealing with these rustic criminals and their simple ways, is bad practice for us London officers, who have to set our wits, in town, against some of the sharpest rogues in creation.

We got in good time to the station. The up-train signal went up as we drove to the gate.

"Now, Mr. Jex, you'll be wanting to meet your friend; shall I walk the mare about?"

"Ay, do so, Mr. Battle," said Jex, "that's a good fellow. You might take her two hundred yards or so up the road. Keep her behind that outhouse, where she can't see the engine passing, will you? She's a bit shy."

I laughed in my sleeve at the fellow's shallowness. They don't take in Inspector Battle from Scotland Yard quite so easily as that.

"All right, give us the ribbons. Hullo, you've got a bag!"

"Only a parcel for the up-train."

"Oh, I see; only a parcel for the up-train. Look sharp then and get the label put on it."

I looked up and down the line; the train was not in sight; there was no need for hurry. I turned the mare round and drove her slowly towards the buildings Jex had pointed to. I saw him watch us for a bit from the station gateway before he went in. As he did so I beckoned to a boy standing by.

"Here's a sixpenny job, my lad. Just you walk the mare up to that outhouse, and keep her there out of sight of the train till I come back. D'ye hear?"

Then I slipped into the station, and, keeping out of sight, saw, as I expected I should see, Jex taking his ticket. I waited till the train was in, and just as the young farmer, bag in hand, had stepped on to the footboard of a second-class carriage, I laid my hand upon his shoulder.

"Charles Jex," I said, clear out, for him and the others around to make no mistake, "I arrest you for the murder, on the 17th instant, of Miss Mary Judson."

There was a crowd of ten to fifteen porters, guards, farmers, and others round us in a minute. Jex just swore once. Most criminals that I have taken this way lose their pluck and turn pale, but Jex behaved differently. It was clear that my move had not taken him by surprise.

"I expected as much," he said. He looked round at the people on the platform—his friends to a man, for the young farmer is a known and popular character in the neighbourhood. "Half a minute more," said he under his breath, "and I'd have done it."

I slipped one of my pair of bracelets over his wrist and clicked the catch, keeping fast hold of the other iron.

"Anyhow, the game's up now, my man," I said.

"Ay, you're right, Battle, the game's up now, sure enough."

The crowd of his friends became rather obstreperous. I called on the stationmaster and his guards to stand by me, telling him and the people about who I was.

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There was a bit of a hustle, and rough talk and threats, and I tried to get the other handcuff on, but my prisoner and I were being pushed about in spite of what the station people did to help us, and I should not have managed it but for Jex himself.

He held his free hand out alongside of the manacled one. "Oh, damn it, Battle, if that's what you want, get done with it and let's be off out of this."

I put the second handcuff on and locked it. The sight angered his friends, the farmers standing about, and one of them shouted—

"Now, then, boys, one more rush to goal and we'll get it."

"Hold on, gentlemen, if you please," I cried. "I warn you in the Queen's name! This is my lawful prisoner; I'm an Inspector of Police, and I hold a warrant for the arrest of the body of Charles Jex, for murder."

They held back at this for a moment and I hurried my prisoner through the station entrance, and the guards and stationmaster closed round and shut the gate in the faces of the crowd.

I never yet knew a man take it so coolly as Jex. When we got to the dog-cart he held up his two hands with the handcuffs on them. I guess you'll have to drive yourself, Mr. Inspector."

We got in, and I took the reins and drove off fast. When we had travelled some half a mile from the station, and he had not opened his lips, I said—

"So you were going to town, were you, Mr. Jex?"

"Mr. Inspector" he said quietly, "haven't you forgot to caution your prisoner before you ask him any questions? Isn't that the rule?"

He had me there, sure enough. It was a clear cop for him.

"I warn you," I said, coming in with it rather late, I must admit, "that any statement you make may be used against you on trial."

"That's just what I had in my mind, Inspector," said Jex, and he never uttered another word till we neared the farm. Just as we sighted the farm buildings I made out on the road in the distance a woman's figure. It was Miss Lewsome. She stood in the middle of the road, and I should have driven over her if I had not pulled up.

"What is this, Mr. Battle? Why is it you who are driving? Tell me—tell me quick."

"You'll know soon enough, Miss. Stand aside, if you please."

"Oh, what is it? Charles, speak, for God's sake, speak!"

Jex had kept his hands under the apron; he did not say a word, but presently held out his two wrists manacled together for the girl to see.

She gave a loud scream.

"O God, you have arrested him, Mr. Battle! No, no, you can't—you—c——"

As she was speaking a faintness came over her; she turned from red to very pale, muttering incoherent words which we could not catch, and staggered back against a road gate, but for the bar of the gate to which she clung she would have fallen.

"Help her," said Jex. "Get down and help the girl. You know I can't."

"It's all right, she'll get over it. We'll let her be, and send the women to her presently," and I drove the cart the forty or fifty yards that took us into the stable-yard.

I had wired from the station for my two men from Bilford, and it was my intention to lodge my prisoner, after dark that evening, in the keeping of the county police, but events were to happen before nightfall that put a quite different face upon the matter. As soon as I had given my prisoner into my men's charge, with orders that one or the other was to be with him till we should give him over to the police at Bilford, I called to two of the women of the farm and went with them to the help of Miss Lewsome. We found her lying by the roadside in a dead faint. A farmer's wife—a passer-by—was kneeling by her side, and trying to recall her to her senses.

"Poor thing! It's only a bit of a faint. She'll come to if you wait a little."

In two or three minutes Miss Lewsome opened her eyes, and presently stood up, and, with our help, she walked to the house. She said nothing, in her seemingly bewildered condition, of what had happened, and presently afterwards she was induced to lie down in her bedroom, and for the time I saw no more of her.

In little more than an hour, however, I had a message from her through one of the farm girls. She desired to see me at once, and alone.

I found her sitting up in an armchair, pale and excited in looks, but at first she did not speak. I drew a chair

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near her and sat down. She did not notice the few phrases of condolence I uttered. Suddenly she spoke, and I judged of what she must have felt by the strained tones of her voice.

"He is innocent, Mr. Battle."

I said nothing. Poor girl! My heart bled for her.

"Innocent, I tell you! Innocent, and you must release him at once!"

"You mustn't excite yourself about this matter, Miss Lewsome. It is not a thing for a young lady to meddle with."

"Yes, but I must meddle with it! I must, I must, I must!"

She raised her voice to a scream.

"Yes, yes, my poor girl, I know how shamefully you have been treated."

"I shamefully treated? No, no! He has treated me so well. No one could be so good as he has been."

"Your diary, Miss Lewsome?"

"Lies, all lies, all wicked, cowardly lies, to save myself and hurt him. Yes, to hurt the only man I ever loved. Oh, I am a devil, a malignant, horrible, hateful devil! No woman, since the world began, ever schemed so hellish a thing as I have schemed.

She covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

What should I do? I was wasting my time in listening to the raving of a love-sick, hysterical girl. I rose to leave her.

"You are doing your health no good, dear Miss Lewsome. You must see the doctor, not me; he shall give you a sleeping-draught, and you will be all right again in the morning."

"By the morning you will have gone away, and you will have taken Charles with you to disgrace, perhaps to death. No, they can't, they can't! the law can't convict him, can it?"

"It is not for me to say. The evidence is very strong."

"Very strong? But there is none! there can be none!"

"If that man did not murder Mary Judson," said I, getting impatient with her hysterical nonsense, "who did?"

She did not answer for a space of time in which I could have counted twenty slowly, but she kept her eyes on me with a look in them that almost frightened me.

"I did!"

"Ah, no! young lady, I see what you're driving at, but it won't do. No, Miss Lewsome, it's a forgivable thing; your trying this on to save your friend, but I tell you at once it won't do."

"I murdered Mary Judson!"

I shook my head and smiled.

"I tell you I shot Mary Judson at half-past six o'clock on Wednesday night. I did it because I was a jealous, malignant devil, and hated her, and hated him."

"Quite impossible. You never left Mrs. Jex's side all the evening, from before sundown till supper-time. It's in evidence."

"She says so—she believes I did not. She dozes for an hour every evening, and doesn't know that I went from the room. I slipped out the moment she dozed off, and came back before she woke. Oh, I had plenty of time."

"But your footprints were not there, and Jex's were."

"I put on his boots. I had often done it in fun. I did it that day in earnest."

"Did you want to hang him?"

"I did. I hated him so—then."

"Why, in your diary you say you loved him!"

"I did; oh, I do now! But then, when she was alive, I hated them both—her and him. But you can't understand. Men can never understand women. I was mad."

"You are mad now, Miss Lewsome, if you think to save your lover by telling me these falsehoods—for you know they are falsehoods. Mind, I don't blame you for trying it on but don't expect me or anyone to believe you."

"I shot her in the dusk at the gate, with his gun I put three little balls in it that I took from a shot-pouch in the saddle-room."

"You couldn't load the double-barrel with powder and balls without a cartridge, and none was used for none was found."

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I thought to catch her tripping in her invention here.

"I did not use the double-barrel. I used the single-barrel. I loaded it as I had seen Charles load it. I put a bit of paper over the powder, and another over the bullets, and rammed them down as I have seen Charles do, and I put a cap on as he had shown me how."

"Come now, that gun with a full charge would have knocked you down."

"I know it would, but I put in only half a charge."

"Stop a bit now, Miss Lewsome, and I will catch you out. I found the paper wadding in the grass. What sort of paper was it you put in—brown paper?"

"No, a bit of newspaper; the county paper. I tore off a bit of the *Surrey Times*."

This was beginning to puzzle me.

"Stop now, Miss Lewsome. You say Mr. Jex is an innocent man. Then why does he attempt to run away? He tried this very day to throw dust in my eyes and go by the express to London."

"I guessed he would, and that is why I wished to get you out of his way this morning."

"Had you told Mr. Jex, then, what you tell me now?"

"No, but he suspects me—oh, I am sure he knows it is I who have done this dreadful thing!"

"Then if he knows that you are the real murderer and himself innocent, why did he try to escape? You see your story won't hang together, Miss Lewsome."

"Mr. Jex tried to escape, I tell you, to save me."

"But why should he put his own neck in the halter to save a guilty woman—if guilty you are?"

"Because he loves me. He would be suspected, not I."

She was certainly in one story about it all.

"Yes, he loves me so that he has run this great risk to save me from being found out and hanged."

"He has told you this?"

"No, he has told me nothing, nor have I told him anything; but these last days I have guessed by his face that he knows. I have seen it in his eyes. Oh, he loathes and despises me now!"

I said nothing for a few moments.

"Now, Miss Lewsome, I will ask you once more deliberately, and mind you, your story will be sifted to the utmost, and what you say now may be used against yourself in court. You tell me you shot Miss Mary Judson at half-past six o'clock on the night of the 17th of October?"

"I did."

"You used Mr. Jex's gun, and you charged it yourself?"

"Yes."

"You wore Mr. Jex's boots when you went out in the dark to kill your dearest friend, and you committed this black crime in order to throw suspicion upon Mr. Jex who was your lover—the man to whom, according to your own diary, you had given yourself?"

"That part is true. I had. It was because of that I shot her. Oh, I was quite mad! I can't understand it. But there was only hatred and bitterness in my heart, and I saw nothing but blood—there was blood in my eyes."

"And what was your object? What did you think would come of it?"

"Nothing, I think, only I hated her so. I was too miserable because the time was coming near when he would marry her and I be left alone."

"But, according to your first story, you were writing your diary, if not at the time of the murder, at least immediately after it was done. Do you wish me to believe that a murderess, hot-handed, can sit down and write long entries in a diary?"

"It was a lie I told to take you in. I wrote that entry in the diary—all those lies, to throw dust in your eyes—in the forenoon."

"You expected nothing, then, from the murder?"

"I think I expected that perhaps Charles would inherit her money and be able to marry me, when it had all blown over."

"But why did you say just now that you hated him, and had committed this cruel crime to spite him? You must have guessed that you would bring him in peril of his life."

"Ah, you don't understand women. Women understand women; men never do. I tell you I felt a devil. Why

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did he want to make her his wife and leave me in the cold? Oh, I hated him for that; I should never have killed her if I had not so hated him."

"Surely you could not have expected him to marry a woman who had committed a murder?"

"I never thought he would guess. I never thought of all these discoveries. No one would have known if you had not taken him up."

"But you brought that about by wearing his boots and firing with his gun and his ammunition."

"Ah, yes, there is the pity. I did not reason; I wanted to punish him for his jilting of me. He would be in my power. Oh, I did not reason. I only felt—I only felt a vindictive devil. Have no mercy on me; I deserve everything. I hate myself!"

I got up.

"We will talk of this again to-morrow," I said, "when you are calmer."

"Yes," she said, quietly, "when I am calmer."

"You will let me send for the doctor?"

"Why?"

"To give you a sleeping draught."

"Yes, send for him; but you won't tell Mrs. Jex. She is very old and feeble."

"No, I will tell her nothing to-night, at any rate—nothing of what has happened. She need not even know that her son has been arrested. He will not go from here to-night."

"Can you manage that?"

"Yes, I can manage that."

The farm servants, of course, knew that their master was in custody. I told them they were to keep it from the old lady. I sent one of them for the doctor, and when he came I bade him give a strong sleeping dose to Miss Lewsome.

I went into Jex's bedroom. He was lying on the bed with handcuffs still on. My two men were with him. I motioned them to leave me.

I took out my key and unfastened the handcuffs and removed them.

"What's up?" he asked.

"I've some fresh evidence, that's all."

"Am I no longer under arrest, then?"

"Please to consider yourself in custody for the present. I have said nothing to your mother about all this. She knows nothing. Isn't that better so?"

"Much better. I'll come down to supper to keep it up."

"I was going to ask you to."

"How is Miss Lewsome?"

"Very excited and disturbed. I've sent for the doctor to give her a sleeping draught. Miss Lewsome has made a communication to me."

"Ay, ay." He showed no further curiosity in the matter.

The doctor came, gave Miss Lewsome a pretty strong dose of chloral and departed, having learned nothing, by my express orders to the servants, of what had taken place that day at Jex Farm.

One of my men remained that night in Mr. Jex's bedroom and the other had orders to watch the house from the outside.

Miss Lewsome's absence was easily accounted for to Mrs. Jex, who was too old and feeble to be easily roused to curiosity by a story of a chill and a headache that had obliged her guest to retire to her bedroom.

The hours after breakfast next morning passed slowly. No fresh developments of any kind occurred. Jex asked no questions, and I cared to answer none. I waited for Miss Lewsome's awakening and deliberated as to my next step. Was her confession to be seriously acted upon? It had shaken me, but not convinced me, curiously supported though it was by a whole chain of circumstantial evidence. Was I bound to arrest this evidently hysterical girl, on the strength of a story which might after all be nothing but a tissue of cunning lies to save her lover?

I have not often been so puzzled. I have not often found the facts and probabilities for and against so equally poised in the balance. Midday came and there had been no sign or sound of stirring in Miss Lewsome's bedroom.

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I sent in one of the servants and waited outside. Presently the maid screamed and ran out, pale and speechless.

"What is it?" I asked, rather fearful myself. "What's up now, my girl?"

"Go to her, sir; go in to her quick! Oh, I don't know—I can't tell, but I'm afraid it's... Her hands are cold, stone cold, and her face is set. I can't waken her!"

"My God! The jade's given me the slip after all!" She was dead—had been dead for hours—and on the dressing-table, propped against the pincushion, was a closed letter addressed to myself.

"I, Maud Lewsome, make this dying confession. I, of my own will, no one knowing, no one advising, no one helping me, shot my friend Mary Judson at the orchard gate of Jex Farm. I had on Mr. Jex's boots over my shoes in order that the crime might be shifted from my shoulders to his. I shot her across the orchard gate, in the dark, just at nightfall, when she could not see me. She was waiting for him. Perhaps I could not have done it, though I had resolved I would, but that as I came up she said, Is it you, dearest?' Then I raised the gun and fired—seeing her against the little light still in the evening sky.

"The gun made no noise hardly, but I was afraid they might somehow guess indoors it was me and I waited a long time not daring to go in. Presently the gate from the road was opened. I knew it was Charles Jex coming from Bexton to her, and I was glad then that I had done it. I thought he would see me if I ran into the house so I opened the orchard gate very softly and crouched down beside the body. He came up to the gate and called 'Mary' twice, but he could see nothing and went away. Then I felt quite hard and callous, but my mind was very clear and active and I thought I would take her watch so that people might think she had been robbed. I took it and her chain and coming in again I buried them with my hands two or three inches deep in the flower-bed near the porch and smoothed the mould down over it. Then I was afraid he would see me in the passage and I took off the thick boots and carried them in my hand. I could hear him in his bedroom overhead and I took the gun to the saddle room and the boots I rubbed dry with a cloth and laid them in a row with the others. Then I felt I must see him and I went up very lightly and knocked at his door and he came out in his shirtsleeves and said in a whisper, 'How pale you are, Maud,' and he kissed me and I kept my hands behind me lest he should see the garden mould on them, but he did not notice that, and he said again, How pale you look to-night; have you seen a ghost?' And I ran back to my room and washed my hands and looked at myself in the glass and thought, that is not the reflection of Maud Lewsome, that is the reflection of a murderess. And in my ears there is always the report of the gun as I fired it at Mary Judson and in my nostrils the smell of the gun-powder smoke, and since then I have heard and smelt these two things day and night; but Mary's face, when I killed her, I did not see, and I am glad I did not. The doctor has given me chloral, and presently I shall take another double dose from a bottle of it I have, and before morning I shall be dead for I cannot live after this that I have done. I thought I could forget it, but I cannot and I must die. I tell the exact truth now in the hope that God may listen to my confession and my repentance, and forgive me for the awful wickedness that I have committed. I shot her with Charles's large gun; I had watched him loading it often, and I did as he did, and I put three little bullets in it that I took from the shot pouch that hangs third in the row on the wall."

The first thing I did after reading this was to call one of my men and bid him turn over the soil in the flower border close to the porch. He did, and in my presence he found Mary Judson's watch and chain. Taking it in my hands I carried it to Jex.

"We have found this, Mr. Jex."

"Where?"

I told him. He nodded but said nothing.

"Will you please to read this paper, sir?" and I handed him that on which Miss Lewsome had written her confession. He read the first few lines and started up. "Good God! Has she——?"

I nodded.

"She took her own life last night."

He sank down on a chair and covered his face with his hands, but his emotion lasted but a moment. "Poor girl!" he said sadly. "I expected it."

"Then you knew she had done the murder?"

He made no answer, but read calmly through the confession he held in his hand, then he gave it back without comment.

"After this, Mr. Jex, you are of course at liberty. I have only to apologise to you for the inconvenience I have

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put you to, but the evidence against you was strong, you must admit."

"You could not do otherwise, Inspector Battle, than you have done," and he held out his right hand to me. I made some pretence of not seeing his action. I did not take Charles Jex by the hand.

Except for certain formalities that I need not set down, the interest of the case was over.

With such evidence before us as Miss Lewsome's confession it was, of course, impossible to charge Mr. Charles Jex with any part in this murder; but remembering all the circumstances since, I have sometimes asked myself, was the girl alone guilty, or was she a tool in the hand of a scheming villain, or was she perhaps only a victim and entirely innocent?

(End.)