

# THE STRAND MAGAZINE.

Contents for June, 1922.

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Frontpiece: "Get across! Quick! Quick! All of you. I'll hold this devil off!" He had seized a stout stick and faced the madman, daring him to spring across.

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# THE MURDERER IN THE DARK

by

## F. BRITTEN AUSTIN

**M**R. TODMORDEN rose from his seat in the railway carriage; he spoke in the tones of a man who ends a discussion:—

"Well, gentlemen, this is my station, and you haven't convinced me that a man ever commits a crime unless of his own free will. I'd show no mercy to the rascal! Good night!"

Mr. Todmorden was far from being so stern, either in appearance or character, as this emphatically uttered sentiment would suggest. As his short, stout figure moved along the platform, the head thrown back and a pair of bright little eyes, set in a chubby round face, glancing sharply through his spectacles for an acquaintance to smile at, he looked—what, in fact, he was—a successful City man whose original kindness of heart had mellowed into habitual benevolence—the type of man who moves through life beaming on people who touch their caps; salutation and recognition alike instinctive, meeting each other half-way.

Affable though Mr. Todmorden was, he had his prejudices and his pride: pride centred in the practice he had built up as a family solicitor of standing and renown; prejudices directed against those unfortunates who, from choice or necessity, transgressed the social code.

In the warm light of a late summer sunset, he strolled along the suburban streets to his home. Suddenly he stopped and contemplated through his spectacles a large house a little way back from the road. A long ladder resting against the wall was the uncommon object that had attracted his attention.

"Dear me!" he said to himself. "Old

ILLUSTRATED BY  
S. SEYMOUR LUCAS

Miss Hartley having the house painted again!"

Miss Hartley was one of his oldest and most valued clients. In fact, both repudiated the business term and called each other "friends." She was an elderly spinster, eccentric and wealthy; he a bachelor who could and did afford himself a whim. The long practice of watching her interests had developed a habit of affectionate protection in him. He was personally, not merely professionally, anxious on her behalf when the occasion required it.

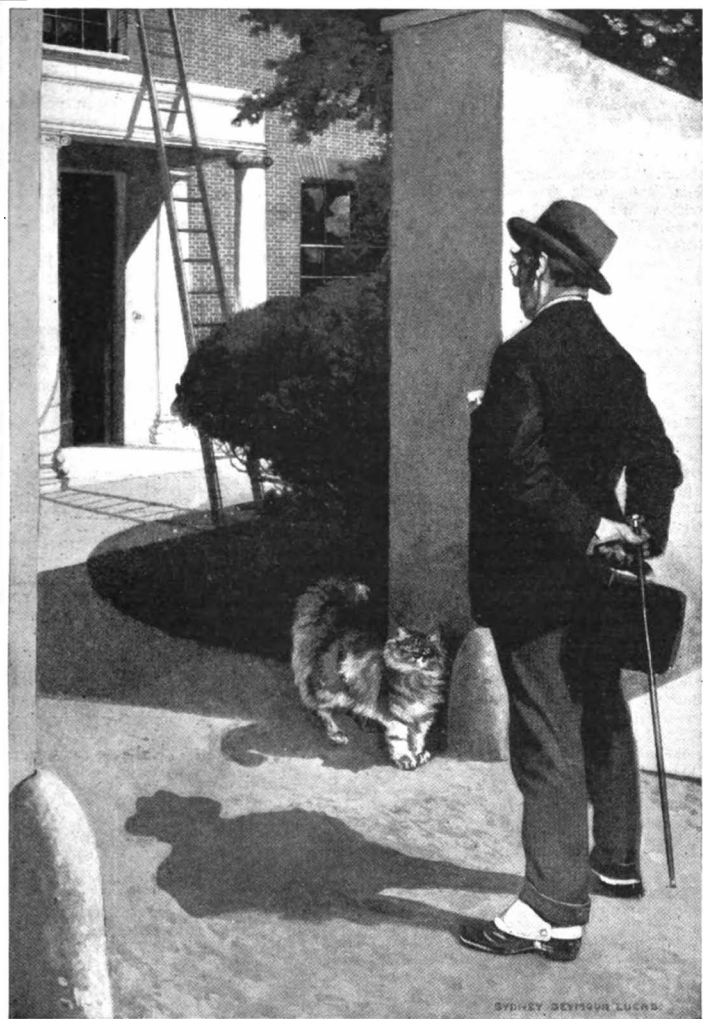
The sight of the ladder against the wall recalled one of his most common anxieties. It was a pet grievance of his that she would persist in living alone, save for one maid, in that large house. To his mind, she offered herself as a prey to the malefactor who should chance to correlate the two facts of her wealth and her solitude.

"Tut, tut!" he said. "That ladder, now, is placed just right for a burglar. I'm sure it is. Dear me! How careless! How very careless!" He tried to measure the ladder from his remembrance of it, and, to end his doubts, returned and examined it again. The ladder rested close to a freshly-painted window-sill on the first floor.

"Dear me! dear me!" said Mr. Todmorden, genuinely perturbed. "That's the window of Miss Hartley's room!" He stood irresolute, debating whether he should ring the bell and point out the dangerous position of the ladder. A nervous fear of the old lady's smile restrained him. He knew she regarded him as an old "fusser."

He walked on again, carrying his fears.

"She is really too foolish, too foolish!" he repeated. "Living alone there—with only that stupid girl in the house! Anyone



SYDNEY SEYMOUR LUCAS

**"That ladder is placed just right for a burglar. I'm sure it is. Dear me! How careless! How very careless!"**

## The Murderer in the Dark

might break in. They've only to walk up that ladder! And she will persist in advertising that she has valuables!" The occasion of the final clause in Mr. Todmorden's mental arraignment was a particularly fine diamond brooch the old lady wore at all times, despite his protests. If there was a sentimental reason for its continual use, she concealed it under her quiet smile. The memory of that smile irritated Mr. Todmorden. "Confound her, she's so obstinate!"

His thoughts focused themselves on that brooch with a criminal lurking in the background. Gradually, they drifted to the criminal. He amused himself by picturing types of possible burglars. Finally, forgetting his original preoccupation, he thought of an ancestor of his own—his maternal grandfather—who had been transported for a doubtful case of murder. In contrast to that squalid page of family history, self-esteem read over his own achievements. Successful, respected, an alderman, a possible knighthood in front, he had surely wiped out that black patch on his pedigree. He savoured a very pleasant sense of personal probity as he walked up the drive to his house.

He ate his solitary dinner, and revived the feeling of well-being with a bottle of his favourite port. Then Miss Hartley's brooch recurred to his mind, and was followed by a thought of the ladder which led to it, and the criminal who might climb the ladder. As he sat in his big chair in the lonely dining-room, gazing at passing thoughts rather than thinking them, the case of his maternal grandfather cropped up in his reverie. Moved by a sudden whim, he rose from his chair and took down a battered old volume of law reports. Fortified by another glass, he read through the trial of his ancestor. He finished it, and sat thoughtful for a moment, before replacing the book.

"H'm, h'm!" he said to himself. "Very doubtful! Very doubtful! Ah, well, we've travelled a long road since then!" He smiled at his own success, and went off to bed in a contented mood. That doubtful grandfather was a long way back.

**I**N the morning, as he walked down to the station to catch his usual train, he noticed a group of people standing on the pavement and gazing up at a house. An unreasoning anxiety gripped him. He hastened his pace. Yes—surely—it was Miss Hartley's house which excited this unwonted interest. He arrived among the crowd, rather out of breath.

"What is it? What is it, my man?" he demanded of a gazing spectator.

Half-a-dozen voices replied.

"It's a murder! Old Miss Hartley!"

Mr. Todmorden did not wait to hear more. "Good gracious!" he said, as he hurried along the garden-path, and "Good gracious!" he repeated, as he rang the bell. He could not formulate a thought. He gazed, mentally, at the awful thing, stunned.

The door was opened by a policeman. Behind him stood the maidservant, white, frightened, and sobbing. She ran towards him with a cry of "Oh, sir!" but broke down, unable to utter a word.

"All right, all right, Ellen," said Mr. Todmorden, rather brusquely, pushing her aside. He addressed himself to the policeman.

"What has happened, constable? Surely not murder?"

"Yes, sir. I'm afraid so." He looked doubtfully at his questioner. "Are you one of the old lady's relatives, sir?"

"No. I'm her solicitor, and one of her oldest friends. Dear me! dear me! how terrible! Is there anyone in authority here, constable?"

"Two inspectors upstairs, sir."

"Can I see them?"

He was shown into the bedroom, and introduced himself to the police officers. They welcomed him with gravity. On the bed lay a covered figure. Mr. Todmorden drew aside the sheet and gazed upon the features of his old friend. They were marred by a bullet-hole through the forehead. He turned away, trembling, his face working with emotion. He could scarcely speak, but made the effort due to his dignity as the deceased's legal adviser.

"Any—any clue?" he asked.

"None, sir, at present," was the reply.

"Dear me! how terrible! How very terrible! She was my oldest friend"—he could not find the strength to repress his grief—"my oldest friend! Oh, it's awful. Inspector, awful! The—wickedness of it! She hadn't an enemy." He struggled for the control of himself. "What was it—robbery?"

"No, sir—nothing seems to be tampered with. Perhaps the murderer was startled."

"When was it discovered?"

"This morning, when the maid brought in the tea. She says she heard nothing. She admits being a heavy sleeper."

"And there is nothing missing?"

"Apparently not, sir. The drawers were locked, and the keys have not been interfered with. Nothing was disturbed, in fact."

"Ah!" Mr. Todmorden was gradually getting back into his legal clearness of mind.

"Has the girl looked carefully round to see if anything has disappeared?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Call her up, if you please, Officer."

Ellen appeared, still weeping, and was bidden to look round for anything out of place. Dabbing her eyes, she examined the room carefully. Suddenly she gave a cry.

"The mistress's diamond brooch! I put it here last night!" She pointed to a tray on the dressing-table. "It's gone!"

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Todmorden. "How very curious."

The inspectors looked at him sharply.

"Does that give you a clue, sir?" asked one of them.

"No—no," he replied, rather confused. "I—the fact is, I was thinking of that brooch only last night, and of how unprotected Miss Hartley was. I have often told her so—poor woman."

"Ah!" said the inspectors, in chorus. Mr. Todmorden felt there was something suspicious in their sharply-uttered exclamation. Even to himself his explanation had sounded lame. The police officers might imagine he was shielding somebody. The consciousness of his inability to explain how very startling the fulfilment of his fears had been to him made him feel awkward.

"Of course," he said, "the murderer must have come in by the ladder."

"The ladder?" asked one of the inspectors. "I saw no ladder."

"There was certainly a ladder resting close to the sill of this window at six o'clock last night," asserted Mr. Todmorden. "The house, you will observe, is being redecorated. I noticed the ladder, and it occurred to me that a first-class opportunity was being offered to a burglar. In fact, I was on the point of calling on Miss Hartley and warning her of it. I wish I had done so!"

"H'm!" The inspector scarcely deigned to trifle with the suggestion. It could be understood that it was his professional prerogative to evolve theories. "Yes—perhaps. But I think we can explain the entrance in a more likely way," he said, mysteriously. "It is scarcely probable that the decorator's men would leave the ladder there all night, sir."

"I'm sure the rascal came up the ladder!" Mr. Todmorden's affirmation was so vehement, came so involuntarily, that it surprised himself. Why was he so positive? He felt uncomfortable. He put on a bustling important air. "Well, well, I must get up to town, as I have a very important appointment. I will look in at the station on my way home this evening. If you hear of anything during the day you might communicate with me. Here is my card."

AS good as his word, he called at the police-station on his way home. The chief inspector received him.

"A very mysterious affair, Mr. Todmorden. Very mysterious!"

"It is very terrible to me," replied the old gentleman. "Miss Hartley was a very old friend. I feel myself in some way responsible. The possibility of such a tragedy actually occurred to me on my way home last night, and I might have warned her of it. I shall never forgive myself. Miss Hartley relied upon me. It is terrible to think I failed her in this supreme instance."

"You refer to the ladder," said the inspector. "We have made inquiries about that. It appears it was overlooked last night, and was fetched away by one of the decorator's men at six o'clock this morning. Undoubtedly the murderer used it. In fact, he left the window open behind him."

"I was certain of it," said Mr. Todmorden. "And there is no clue to the criminal?"

"Scarcely any. The constable on the beat reports that, at two o'clock this morning, he saw the figure of a man running along the road away from the house. That man was wearing a very light suit—possibly a flannel one. A curious dress for a burglar, I think you will admit. The constable particularly noticed that there was no sound of footsteps as the man ran. He must have been wearing rubber shoes. Unfortunately, the constable lost sight of him when he turned the corner."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Todmorden. Only half his mind had listened to the inspector's words, the other half was occupied by that curious and fairly common hallucination of a previous and identical incident. The description was oddly familiar. He seemed to know it in advance. At an intense moment of the hallucination he had a glimpsed memory of himself running, running along a road at the dead of night, running silently. He shook off the uncomfortable and absurd feeling. "Dear me! How very strange!"

The inspector was observing him narrowly. "I suppose you cannot give us any hint that might help us, Mr. Todmorden? You know no one who bore the old lady a grudge?"

"Certainly not. She was the best and kindest of women."

"May I ask who benefits by her death?"

"She has only one relative, a nephew, who inherits everything. He is in America. I have cabled to him, and received a reply."

"Ah! So he's out of it."

"Of course, of course."

"This business of the brooch, Mr. Todmorden—it seems strange that the murderer should have taken that, and that only. He made no attempt on anything else. You know no one who had an interest in it?"

"No one. Miss Hartley wore it always. I have often expostulated with her for wearing so valuable a piece of jewellery in the

street. Someone might have noticed it and resolved to obtain it."

"Yes, yes, of course. A very strange affair, Mr. Todmorden, very strange! I confess I cannot see light in it. Fr—her affairs are quite in order, of course?"

"Quite. I keep the accounts; they are open to investigation. The name of Todmorden and Baines is a sufficient guarantee, I think," he added, with a smile. "But, of course, it is natural you should wish to make sure. You can examine the books to-morrow."

"Unnecessary, my dear sir, I'm quite certain. Of course, I am bound to ask these unpleasant questions."

"Don't apologize. I am as anxious as you are to catch the criminal. I have, in fact, a personal interest in it. Miss Hartley was so good a friend to me that I shall never rest until I have brought the scoundrel to justice. A reward may help. I will personally give a hundred pounds for his apprehension. You might have bills printed to that effect."

AS Mr. Todmorden went home, he looked years older than the man who had traversed the same ground twenty-four hours earlier. Grief-stricken though he was at the loss of his dear friend, his predominant emotion was a fierce lust for vengeance on the murderer. His fingers worked, gripping the air, as he brooded on him—the hated unknown—and his pace oscillated from fast to slow and slow to fast, as thoughts, hopeful or despondent, got the upper hand. If he could only lay hands on the rascal!

"I'll double that reward if he isn't caught within a week!" he decided. The decision comforted him.

All through his solitary dinner he brooded on the crime, and sat afterwards, for long hours, trying to think of someone who might have an urgent reason for possessing himself of that diamond brooch. He went to bed at last, baffled, weary, heartsick. Had he met the murderer on the stairs he would gladly have throttled him with his own hands.

Putting on his pyjamas, he noticed something unusual—something hard—in the pocket. Mechanically he drew out the object and looked at it. He stood as if petrified, his eyes staring, sweat breaking out on his brow.

In his hand he held Miss Hartley's diamond brooch!

He gazed at it, overwhelmed with amazement and horror. What was happening? Was he crazed? Was his mind unhinged by the event of the morning? Was this an hallucination? All that was his familiar self prayed, prayed hard, that this might be

madness. Or—his instinct of self-preservation caused him to clutch at the thought—was he the victim of some atrocious trick? Impossible. Was it real? He felt the jewel—turned it so that it sparkled under the electric light.

"My God!" said Mr. Todmorden, sinking into a chair. The familiar concrete surroundings crumbled about him; were dissipated. He gazed into unfathomable mysteries.

How could the brooch have got into his pocket? Someone must have put it there! Someone! Who? Who could have come into his bedroom and put that damnyarn brooch into the pocket of his pyjamas? The servants? He reviewed them swiftly. Impossible! Then who? Not—surely not—he must be going mad—not himself! It was absurd, unthinkable. He had gone to bed and slept without a dream. Or, was there a dream—a dream of running in the darkness, fast, barefoot? Nonsense! Nonsense! He did not get up in the middle of the night, walk down the street, murder his dearest friend, and come back as though nothing had happened! His mind flashed on the portrait of Miss Hartley, and he felt the cruel irony of the supposition, though he himself made it. Then who—who? A wave of superstition swept over him. Devils? It was inexplicable. He revolved at something obscure within him, something which pointed a finger to the accusing brooch, which whispered the inexorable corollary in his ear. No! No! It could not be! He was innocent; he was conscious, instinctively conscious, of his innocence.

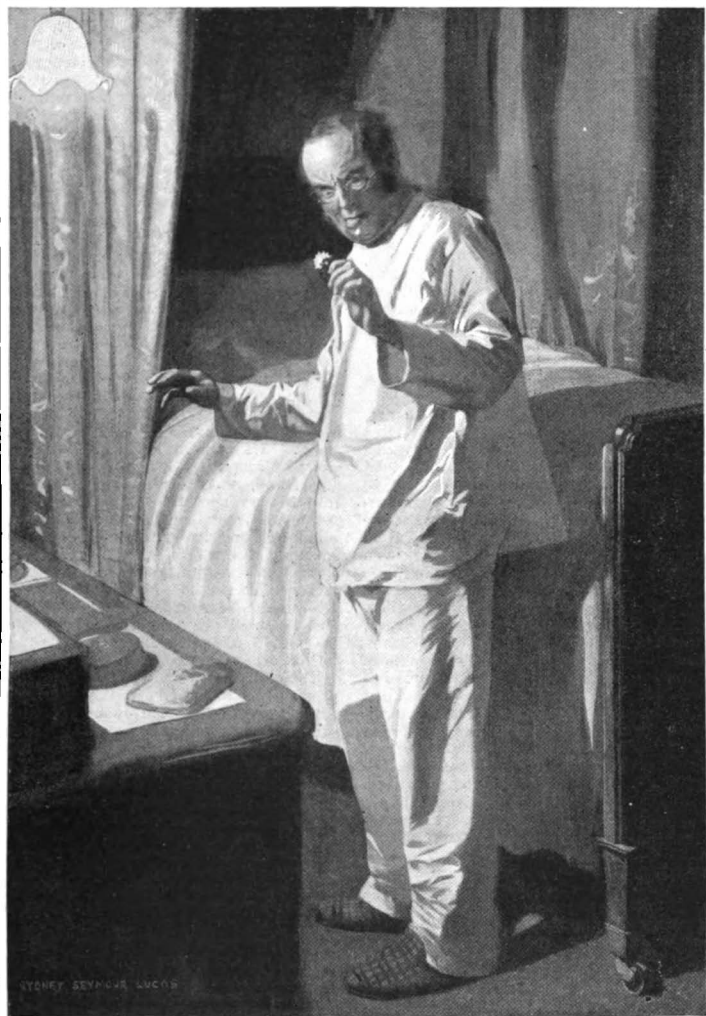
But was he?

The something whispered persistently. An idea came to him—the proof. He went quickly across to a drawer in his dressing-table and took out his revolver. With trembling hands he examined the charges. One had been exploded! Had devils fired his revolver also? Oh, Heaven! He thought he was going to faint.

How? Why? How? Why? These two questions besieged him incessantly, battering at his crumbling mind. He clasped his head in his hands, rocking to and fro on his chair.

Madness? Madness came in these sudden attacks, so an imp of thought assured him. He was mad! Mad!

For hours he strode up and down the room, wrestling with demons in the night. He had killed his dearest friend. He had no doubt of it, the realization filled him with an agony of horror and grief. He would gladly have died rather than have done this awful thing. And how had he done it? How had he committed this crime without the faintest remembrance of it? It was



In his hand he held Miss Hartley's diamond brooch! He gazed at it, overwhelmed with amazement and horror.

impossible! He had not—then he looked at the brooch, and knew he had. It was monstrous, unthinkable—but true.

At length, physically exhausted, he threw himself on the bed and continued the struggle—striving, striving to see light in this appalling mystery. At last he fell asleep.

He woke and looked around him. He was in a dark room. That was strange. He knew he had left the light on. He was standing up. He held something in his hand—a book. Puzzled, he put out his hand to where the switch of the electric light should be. It was not there. In a new terror that surged up, obliterating the older horrors of the night, he groped along the wall for the switch, and found it. The place sprang into light. He was in the dining-room! In his hand he held the report of his grandfather's trial. The truth flashed on him.

He was a somnambulist!

WITH a wild cry he sank down in a swoon.

When he returned to consciousness, the electric lamps were yellow patches in the sunlight which filled the room. He struggled to his feet and switched them off. He stood for some moments unsteadily, trying to adjust his mind to these unfamiliar surroundings to remember—to remember something. Then his ghastly situation rushed on his mind, vivid with a new light. He was a criminal! He risked discovery, ruin! He heard people moving about—servants. They must not suspect him of any abnormality. Haggard, trembling, giddy, an old, old man, he tottered up the stairs to his own bedroom.

Escape—escape from the consequences of his involuntary crime—was his master impulse. He was no longer the benevolent Mr. Todmorden; he was a vile criminal, haunted by Furies. He must not be found out. He sobbed in self-pity, and strove for the control of his faculties. He must think—must think. The brooch must be got rid of. He would drop it over London Bridge. Yes, that was the way. The brooch gone, beyond all possibility of recovery, who would suspect him? He had not suspected himself. He breathed more freely, feeling himself already safe. He would triple that reward. That would avert suspicion.

But suppose there was some trace of the crime on him? He must make sure. The inspector's story of the light-suited fugitive came into his mind—his pyjamas! That fugitive must have been himself in his pyjamas. He had again that flashed memory of running, running silently. He doubted no longer, but examined the pyjamas on his body, searching for a spot of blood, for any sign that might betray him. Yes! There on the trouser-leg was a smear of stone-

coloured paint—the paint on Miss Hartley's window-sill. He must get those pyjamas away, destroy them—somehow. He thought of half-a-dozen plans, and rejected all. Everything he thought of seemed to proclaim his guilt. The problem was still unsolved when another danger occurred to him. His revolver contained a discharged cartridge. He must reload it. Feverishly he did so. As he clicked the chambers into place there was a knock at the door. He grasped the revolver and listened in a sudden panic. The knock was repeated. He tried to speak and could not. At last words came.

"What is it?"

"Please, sir, a man from the police-station wants to speak to you at once."

He tried hard to reply in his normal tones.

"All right. Tell him I'll be down soon."

"Please, sir, he says he can't wait. It's very urgent."

Discovery? No! Impossible—as yet! He kept a tremor out of his voice by an effort.

"Show him into my dressing-room."

Mr. Todmorden thought swiftly for a vivid second. That smear of paint must be concealed. He slipped on a dressing-gown. Then he caught sight of his revolver on the table, and, on a blind impulse, dropped it into his pocket. He took a long breath. Now—was there anything suspicious about him? He opened his dressing-gown and surveyed himself in the mirror. Yes!—there was a button gone from his pyjama jacket! Where had he lost that button? He would have given anything for certainty. But he must not keep the police waiting. He girded his gown about him and went into the dressing-room.

The chief inspector awaited him. An expression of surprise came into the officer's face.

"I have had a bad night, Inspector," said the old gentleman, noticing the look, and feeling his haggard appearance needed explanation.

The inspector consoled with him.

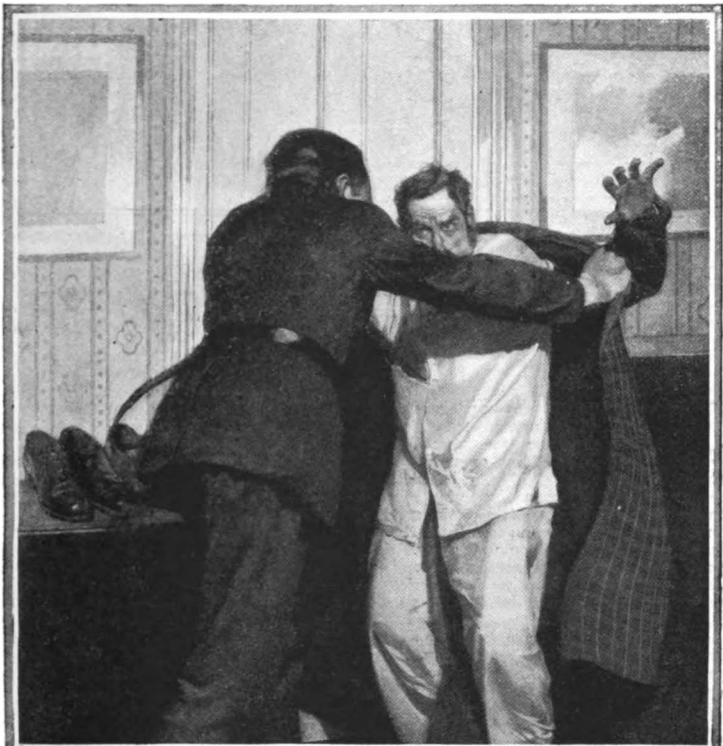
"I am pleased to say we have found a slight clue to the criminal, Mr. Todmorden," he said, looking again sharply at the old gentleman. Mr. Todmorden felt he quailed under the glance. "It's a button. And the curious thing is, it is a pyjama button."

"Yes?" Mr. Todmorden's mouth went dry.

"Funny wear for a burglar—pyjamas," commented the inspector. "Don't you think so, sir?"

"Very curious." Mr. Todmorden recognized the urgent necessity for a normal voice. "Yes; very curious." He must talk—say something! "By the way, Inspector, I've been thinking about that reward. I've decided to triple it. I—I am determined to catch the scoundrel."





The inspector stepped quickly to the old gentleman and flung aside his dressing-gown.

"Very kind of you, sir. I hope we shall ask you for the cheque. We're on the road, anyway. We've only got to find out where those pyjamas came from, and, quite likely, we shall get on his track."

"Yes, yes; quite so." Would the interview never end? Mr. Todmorden agonized.

"If we can only find some buttons like this, we can make a start. There are differences even in pyjama buttons, you know, sir. I have compared it with mine, but it doesn't tally. Would you mind comparing it with yours, sir? We must not neglect any chance of getting a clue. Allow me!"

He stepped quickly to the old gentleman and flung aside his dressing-gown. The buttons, with the hanging thread of their missing fellow, were revealed. Triumph flashed in the inspector's face.

"James Henry Todmorden, I——"

Mr. Todmorden jumped back from his grasp. With a sharp cry he drew his hand swiftly from his pocket. There was a report, and he dropped to the floor.

The inspector looked at his lifeless body.

"I thought the old rascal did it," he said, smiling grimly. "A well-planned bit of work, though."