

PEARSON'S MAGAZINE

CONTENTS FOR MAY, 1899

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No. III.—THE STORY OF No. 1, KARMA CRESCENT.

THE following story is the first full relation of the extraordinary features of the case connected with the house in South London, that at one time occupied so large a portion of the public attention. It may be remembered that several mysterious deaths took place within a few months of each other in a certain new suburb. In each instance the same unaccountable symptoms were present, and the successive inquests gave rise to a quite remarkable amount of discussion in the Press as the evidence furnished points of peculiar interest for the Psychological Societies.

It is a recognised fact that the public will die patiently, and to a large percentage, of any known and preventable epidemic before they trouble to make a stir about it, but they resent instantly and bitterly the removal of half-a-dozen individuals, provided these die

from some unknown and, therefore, unpreventable cause. Thus the fate of the victims at No. 1, Karma Crescent, raised a storm of comment, conjecture, and vague accusation; in time this died away, however, and the whole business was forgotten, or only recalled to serve as an example of the many dark and sinister mysteries London carries in her unfathomed heart.

As many people may not be able to recall the details to mind, a brief *résumé* of the chief incidents is given below, together with additional information supplied later by

Flaxman Low, the well-known psychological investigator.

Karma Crescent is one of several similar terraces planned and partially built upon a newly-opened estate in an outlying suburb of London. The locality is good, though not fashionable, hence the houses,



No. 1, Karma Crescent.
From a Photograph.

though of fair size, are offered at moderate rentals. Karma Crescent has never been completed. It consists of six or seven houses, most of which were let when Colonel Simpson B. Hendriks and his son walked over from the railway station to inspect No. 1. This was a detached corner house, overlooking an untidy spread of building and, beyond which railway sheds and a network of lines on a rather high level rose against the sky. To the right of the house an old country lane, deeply rutted, led away between ragged hedges to a congeries of small houses about half a mile distant. These houses form the outer crust of a poor district, of which no more need be said than that it provides a certain amount of dock labour.

The Americans were, however, not deterred by the dreary surroundings; they had come to London on business and since No. 1 was cheap, commodious, and well-furnished, they closed with the agent who showed them over. It was only when the lease was signed, and they had begun to inquire for servants, that the distinctive characteristics of the abode they had chosen was borne in upon them. Upon making inquiry they gathered that the house had been occupied by three successive

sets of tenants, all of whom complained that it was haunted by a dark, evil, whispering face, that lurked in dusky corners, met them in lonely rooms, or hung over the beds, terrifying the awakened sleepers.

This silent, flitting presence foretold death, for each family had left hurriedly and in deep distress upon the loss of one of its members, but as the drains and the roof were

sound, and it has been definitely decided that the English law can take no account of ghosts, the Hendriks were obliged to stick to their bargain. Finally, the Colonel, who was a widower, secured the services of a gaunt Scotch housekeeper, professing herself well acquainted with the habits of ghosts, and took up his residence with his son at No. 1, being fully persuaded that a free use of shooting-irons was likely to prove as good a preventive against hauntings as against any other form of annoyance.



They found their housekeeper scared and shaking.

Three days later, on the 5th February, the first symptoms of disturbance set in. The Hendriks had been out very late, and on their return in the small hours, found their housekeeper scared and shaking, and with a circumstantial story to tell of the apparition. She said she had been awakened from sleep by the touch of a death-cold hand. Opening her

eyes, she saw a fearsome, whispering face hanging over her; she could not catch the meaning of the words it said, but was persuaded that they were threatening.

A faint light flickered about the face, "like I've seen brandy on a dish of raisins," continued Miss Anderson, "and I could see it was wrapped up in its winding-sheet, gone yellow wi' age and lying by. At last the light went out wi' a flash, and I lay trembling in the dairk till I heard the latch-keys in the door, for I was fair frechtened at yon gha'st." One further detail she added, to the effect that on going to bed she had locked the door and put the key under her pillow, where she found it safe after the visit of the apparition, although the door was still fast locked when she tried to leave the room an hour later.

After this experience the Americans had all the bolts and locks of the house examined and strengthened, also one or other of them remained at home every evening.

It was in the course of the following week that young Lamar-tine Hendriks went out to a theatre, leaving his father at home. He was absent something over three hours and a half. When he returned between eleven and twelve o'clock, he found Colonel Hendriks sitting at the table in the dining-room, his body swollen to an enormous size, his face of a livid indigo, and quite dead. Calling down the housekeeper, the young man went for a doctor. He recollected having seen a doctor's plate on the door of a house in a shabby street close by. Dr. Mulroon was at home, a big powerful Irishman, rather the worse for liquor, but with the deep eye and square jaw that indicate ability. Hendriks hurried him round to Karma Crescent. On the way Mulroon asked no questions, he walked silently into the dining-room and looked steadily to the Colonel. Then he shook his head.

"Bedad! It's just what I expected!" he said.

"What?" asked Hendriks sharply.

Mulroon was sober enough by this time.

"It's the old story," he replied with a strong brogue. "This makes the fourth case of this kind I've been called in to see in this house during the last eighteen months."

"In this neighbourhood?"

"In this house, faith, and nowhere else! Didn't ye know it was haunted? Haven't you heard of the 'Strange Deaths in South London'?' The papers had them in capitals an inch long."

Hendriks leant against the table and spoke hoarsely.

"We have just come from America, and I can recall something of what you mention, but I did not connect them with this house. As you have attended



"Bedad! It's just what I expected!" he said.

similar cases, tell me what is the cause of death?"

"The Public Analyst himself couldn't do that! Not in the way you want to hear it. I made an examination in each case as well as he, and maybe I'm as capable as he, perhaps more so! For I swept off every medal and honour that came in my way at Dublin, and—but what's the use of talking? No man living can tell you more than this. The blue colour of the tissues and the swelling are produced by a change in the condition of the blood, though the most exhaustive examination has failed to discover any reason or cause for such a change. The result is death, that is the only certainty about it."

A long silence ensued, and then Hendriks said quietly: "If it takes me to the last day of my life, I'll get at this business from the inside. I'll never give it up until I know everything!"

"Well, now, look here, Mr. Hendriks, will you take my advice? The police and the doctors have done their living best over this business, and they're just where they were at the beginning. There's only one man in Europe can help you—Flaxman Low, the psychologist."

But Hendriks demurred on the ground of having seen enough of such gentry in the States.

"Low is not like any of them. He is as sensible and as practical a man as you or I. I know what he can do and how he sets about it, for I was in practice in the country four or five years ago, and he came down there and cleared up a mystery that had bothered the neighbourhood for above ten years. Leave this room exactly as it is. Wire for him first—you can get the police in after."

The upshot of this conversation was that Mr. Low arrived at Karma Crescent soon after it became light, having been fetched by Mulroon in person.

The dining-room was a square room opening on to the garden by a French window. It was richly furnished, everything was in order, there was no sign of a struggle. At the table about ten feet from the glass doors sat the dead man—a disfigured and horrible spectacle. The body was inclined to

the left side, the head dropped rather forward on the left shoulder, the left arm hanging straight down at his side, and the left trouser leg slightly turned up. Low bent over him and looked at the puffed blue lips.

"Does the attitude suggest anything to you?" asked Flaxman Low after some time.

"He was bending forward to get his breath," returned Mulroon.

"On the contrary he had been stooping forward and to the left, but leant back for relief when the final spasm seized him," said Low. "Whatever may have been the cause of death, its action was rapid. Now can you give me the details of the former deaths which have taken place here?"

"I can do that same." Mulroon drew out a pocket-book. "Here you are."

"The first tenant of this house was Dr. Philipson Vines (D.D., you understand). On the 16th November, 1889, he was found dead sitting in that same chair by the servants at 6.30 a.m. A fine edition of Froissart was open on the table before him. He had evidently been dead for several hours. His age was fifty-three, the body was well nourished, and all the organs healthy.

"Next, Richard Stephen Holding, a retired linendraper, with a large family, took the house. On the 3rd February, 1890, he was found dead by his wife at 2 a.m. He was also seated at the table, and in the same attitude as you have noticed in Colonel Hendriks's case. Like the Colonel, he was still warm. His age was sixty-three, and a progressive heart trouble existed—which was not, however, the cause of death.

"Next, the house was taken by a widow lady named Findlater, with one daughter and an invalid son. The son kept to his bedroom during the first fortnight of their stay, but one warm May morning he ventured down here. His sister left him in an armchair at 11.45 in the forenoon, and on returning half-an-hour after to bring him some beef-tea, she found him seated at the table, blue and swollen and dead, just like the others. Findlater was twenty-seven, and must in any case have died shortly from phthisis."

"Can you recollect the attitudes of the bodies when you saw them?"

"Only in the case of Holding. The two

others had been laid on the couch before my arrival," answered Mulroon.

"Have you not noticed this left trouser leg?" continued Low.

"Yes; it was the same with Holding's. Probably a convulsive clutch at the last moment, and, no doubt, involuntary."

Some further conversation having taken place, it was eventually arranged that Mr. Low should return in the evening to spend a few days with young Hendriks, and to study the surroundings.

After he had gone notice of the death was given and the usual formalities were carried out. The police examined the whole house, but as far as could be judged by prolonged searching, no one from outside could have got in, yet Colonel Hendriks had been done to death although no wound appeared upon the body.

The evidence of Miss Anderson at the inquest excited much attention. Several persons interested in psychical mysteries were present and made copious notes, besides cross-examining the house-keeper subsequently at great length. But no one, police, doctors, or psychists, had any workable theory to offer. Miss Anderson stated before the coroner that she wished to leave No. 1, Karma Crescent at once, as she was firmly persuaded that the malignant whispering face, which hung over her while she lay in bed, was the face of the "Wicked One."

The jury returned an open verdict, and Hendriks walked back to his house feeling very dejected. His father's unaccountable death weighed upon him. He could not rid himself of the remembrance of the hideously changed aspect of the keen, handsome face that had been so much to him from his boyhood.

He knew that Flaxman Low had been present unofficially at the inquest, and resolved to question him on arrival. But when Low came, he declined to commit himself to any opinion, though he went so far as to say that he hoped some further information might soon be forthcoming. And with this Hendriks had to be satisfied.

"I should like to occupy your late house-keeper's room, where, I understand, several manifestations have taken place," continued Mr. Low, "and if you would allow it to be understood that I am merely a servant, whom you have hired for the time being to attend upon you, I think it might be a wise precaution."

During the next few days Flaxman Low was busy. He had brought with him a number of solid and peculiar bolts, which he fixed on the various doors and windows, it seemed, almost at random. He shut off the basement very securely, and put another bolt on the *outside* of the shutters inclosing the glass doors leading from the dining-room into the garden. Yet, after all, Hendriks noticed that he went to bed for several nights leaving one or other of these fittings unbolted.

Meanwhile, Low loitered about the garden, and inside and outside the house. He walked over to

the railway junction, and lingered in the little lane. He visited the unpleasant colony of houses by the river, and altogether gained a pretty thorough knowledge of the neighbourhood.

"Has that garden door from the lane been much used since you came here?" he asked Hendriks one morning.

"No; my father thought that, under the circumstances, it had better be secured. It was never used. And, as there is no



He visited the unpleasant colony of houses by the river.

cellarage, I don't see how any persons can enter the house except after the ordinary style of the burglar."

Mulroon dropped in very often to see them, and one night he inquired of Flaxman Low if the apparition had made its appearance.

To his astonishment, Mr. Low replied in the affirmative.

"What did you do?" asked Mulroon.

"Nothing," replied Mr. Low. "My plans do not admit of any overt action yet. But I can assure you that Miss Anderson is a good observer, she gave us a very correct description of its appearance."

"Then it was an evil spirit?"

Mr. Flaxman Low smiled a little.

"Undoubtedly," he said.

That night Mr. Low securely locked off the basement from the upper floor. He had since his coming insisted that no one but himself should enter the dining-room at any time or for any purpose. He begged that it should be neither ventilated nor aired, but left closed and unopened. Every day he went in and remained for some time, morning and evening. On this occasion he paid the room his usual nightly visit, and Hendriks from the hall could hear him locking the French windows.

"Won't you draw your patent safety bolt outside, too?" he called out. "You've forgotten that every night."

"I think I may leave that for the present," was Low's reply.

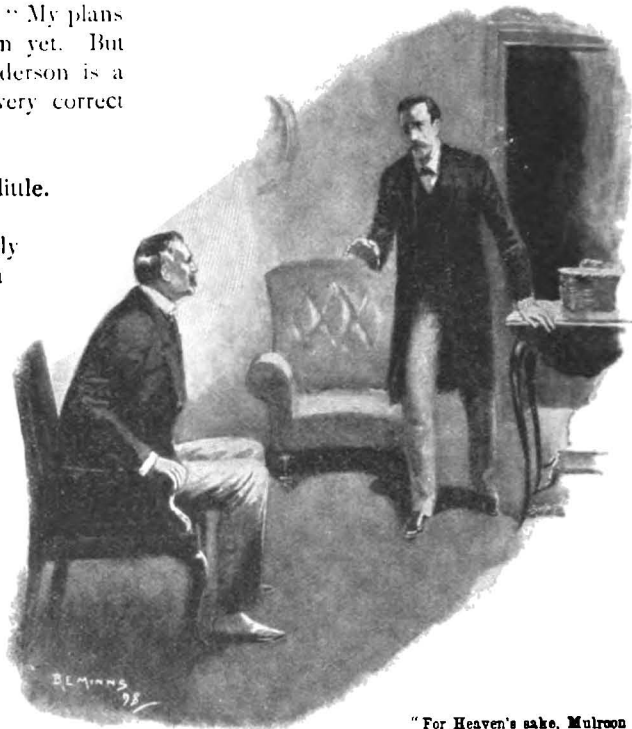
"There's nothing to be got out of you, Mr. Low," said Hendriks with some irritation.

"Not yet, but I hope soon to have something to say for myself," Flaxman Low answered.

On the next day Mr. Low did not visit the dining-room until the afternoon. He opened the doors to air the room and lit the fire, after which he locked the French windows, and, shutting the door behind him, went to speak to Hendriks in the next room.

"I am going out for a short time," he said. "Will you be good enough not to enter the dining-room during my absence? Mulroon will probably come round. Please warn him a-l-o."

It was already growing dark when Mr. Low left the house. He remained away but a short time, and on his return was much dis-



"For Heaven's sake, Mulroon don't move!"

turbed by hearing Mulroon's big voice arguing with Hendriks in the dining-room. He opened the door. Mulroon was sitting in the same high-backed chair. He was a little tipsy, and, in consequence, annoyingly obstinate.

Mr. Low laid down the basket he held in his hand.

"For Heaven's sake, Mulroon, don't move! If you do, you're a dead man!" he said, approaching him. "Now, keep your legs straight—so, and rise gently."

Mulroon, grumbling a good deal, but partially sobered by Flaxman Low's manifest alarm, did as he was told.

"Now," added Low, "if you will kindly leave me for a few minutes alone, I will join you later."

Mulroon, however, had patients to attend to, and left, so that when Mr. Low followed Hendriks into the drawing-room a quarter of an hour afterwards, he found the American alone.

"There were two questions which I set myself to answer when I came to this house," said Low. "One was—Why did these persons die? There was a peculiar and obscure cause, of which we saw the effects. The second was—By what agency were these persons subjected to the cause of death? I have partially solved one problem to-night. To-morrow I have some hope of reaching the other. To begin with, I have already satisfied myself as to the precise manner of death. To-morrow night, if you and Mulroon will meet me here, I will tell you, as far as I can, how the whole mystery may be solved."

All the next day Flaxman Low and Hendriks kept close to the house. After dark Flaxman Low disappeared, and had not returned by eleven o'clock. Mulroon and Hendriks sat waiting for him in the drawing-room, until presently he walked into the room, and threw himself into an arm chair.

"I think now," he said, "that I may venture to say that I have something to show you.

"To begin at the beginning, this house was declared by successive tenants to be haunted. Further, the manifestations were said to be connected in some way with the deaths that took place after the apparitions had been seen—in all cases by some member of the household other than the victim. Whether these saw or heard anything prior to death was naturally beyond the power of their relatives to discover. But I fancy I can now answer that question. I have fairly good proof that they did not see any apparition."

"There never was any sign of a struggle or disturbance," put in Mulroon. "And that reminds me of what an old Irish charwoman, who worked here in the Findlaters' time, told me—that many cases had been known in her part of Ireland where the sight of a ghost turned the blood in the veins of the

beholder. To be sure, we only smile at such sayings, but if you can give me any better reason why these men died, I'll thank you."

"This is exactly the point I hope to make," replied Low. "But to return to the manifestations. Miss Anderson's account of the ghost tallies with the stories of other residents. It nearly always appeared to the servants, by the way. The thing was evil and whispered, and each was convinced they could have understood what it said had they not been too frightened to do so. Then all agreed in saying it wore its winding-sheet. This added strength to my first conclusion and the further I pushed my inquiries the more I was confirmed in my theory."

"But the deaths. You cannot account for them?" asked Hendriks. "You can't persuade me that any whispering face killed my father. He would have put a bullet through it on sight."

"Pray be patient," said Flaxman Low. "You must remember that I had very little data to go upon. In all cases the post-mortem aspect was the same—the terribly distended bodies, the puffy lips, the bluish skin. Something had brought about this aspect with its concurrent effect—death, but no one could find out anything more. Knowledge stopped at the ultimate fact of death. It appeared to be impossible to get behind that last wall."

Hendriks made a movement of impatience.

"Yes, yes, but where do the ghosts come in?"

"Nowhere," replied Flaxman Low decisively. "At a very early stage of the business I entirely cast aside all thoughts of spiritual phenomena. Two points I noticed in connection with Colonel Hendriks' appearance aided me—the turning up of the left trouser leg and the position of the body in the chair. From these two facts the conclusion was obvious. I then knew why the people had died. There was, of course, no ghost at all. They had simply been murdered!"

"By whom? I shall be glad to meet that man," said Hendriks suddenly.

"But allow me to ask you what you deduced from the winding-sheet and the whisperings?" asked Mulroon.

"Taken in conjunction with the manner of death of the inmates of this house," said Flaxman Low, "I deduced a Chinaman. The winding-sheet meant simply loose garments, which might readily be nothing more than the formless wide-sleeved jacket of dirty yellow worn by the Chinese. Upon this I searched the whole neighbourhood for a yellow skin, and came upon a furtive little colony down by the riverside."

"But we had this house secured in all sorts of ways. How could this fellow have gained an entrance, and what grudge can he bear against us? Then, as you know, there was no struggle."

"The reason of the haunting and the murders are evident. Certain persons wanted to keep this house empty. They have some means of entering from the basement, and they are in possession of duplicate keys for every lock, a matter which reduces the haunting to a very simple process. If you remember one of my very first steps was to fix bolts—which cannot be unlocked—upon some of the doors. I bolted off the basement for two nights after my arrival and consequently I slept in peace. On the third night I left the dividing door locked only, and I was at once favoured with a glimpse of the whispering face lit up by the usual phosphorescent trick. As I expected, the face was of the Malay cast, and it threatened in mumbling pidgin English.

"You told me, Mr. Hendriks, that the garden door had not been opened since your tenancy began—that it was in fact secured. I had reason to think otherwise, and made certain of the correctness by tying a thread across the doorway on the inner side, which was broken more than once. From the garden door to the French window in the dining-room was a natural step in my theory."

"But that bolt you put upon the outside of the wooden shutters?" said Mulroon.

"It suited my plans to put it there; in fact, I hope it is holding well at this moment. Knowing that duplicate keys existed, I presumed that someone would enter the dining-room shortly, for a purpose which I will presently explain. I, therefore, put up my little thread-detective, and it also gave satisfactory evidence. Someone had entered the

room, and to make sure of their motive for doing so, I purchased a rat, which I brought back in a basket with me last evening, but Mulroon very nearly saved me the trouble of trying any experiment on my own part by sitting down in the chair which seems to be the fatal one here."

Mulroon turned pale, and laughed in a forced manner.

"Well, well," he said; "the drink makes fools of us all, but my luck stood to me. How did I escape, Mr. Low?"

"You had the luck of long legs, that is all. When you sat in the chair, the backs of your knees did not come against the frame of the seat; if they had, you would have been in your coffin by now."

"Then you have discovered how my father met his death?" exclaimed Hendriks.

"Yes. In examining the chair, I found the legs had been neatly cut, so as to tilt back the chair at a slight angle, and any person sitting in it would naturally sit far back in consequence, thus bringing the back of the knees against the wooden bar in front of the seat. To the left of this bar I found a tiny splinter of steel fixed in, and I tried its effect last night upon a rat, with the result that it died almost immediately, its body being dreadfully swollen in the course of a few minutes. The turned-up trouser on the left leg led me directly to this discovery. To take the case of Colonel Hendriks, he felt the prick on the inner side of the left knee, and was turning up his trouser when the poison took effect, and he died in the act."

"I remember now that at the post-mortem examination you pointed out a hardly visible mark on the Colonel's knee," said Mulroon; "but it seemed too faint and tiny to afford any clue. But as you are in a position to prove that the persons who have died here have died of poison, can you account for the fact that no trace of poison has been discovered in any of the bodies?"

"Other known poisons disappear from the system in a similar manner. In this instance, guided by my supposition that the perpetrators of the murders were Chinese, I naturally set about finding out as much as possible upon the subject of Chinese poisons. I cannot tell you the name, much less the specific nature

of the poison used here, but I am prepared to show proofs that similar results have been recorded with regard to the victims of a certain dreaded secret society in China, which owes much of its power and prestige to the fact that it can strike its opponents with the dreaded 'Blue Death.'

"But we are as far as ever from finding the murderer," objected Hendriks. "To find him and punish him is all that I care for. Nothing else has the slightest interest for me."

"I calculated," began Low, when this outburst was over, "I calculated that as the murderer had not yet accomplished his purpose of driving us out of the house, he would return to his diabolical work sooner or later.



"All right," said Hendriks, showing his revolver.

Hence I was quite cheered when the ghost visited me. I had identified my man two days ago, but I waited to get an opportunity of bringing his crimes home to him. Will you come with me into the dining-room?"

Hendriks and Mulroon followed Flaxman Low, who carried a candle. For a second he listened at the door of the dining-room, but dead silence reigned. "I bolted the shutters of the windows on the outside after I had seen my man enter to renew the supply of poison on the steel point," said Flaxman Low. "I hope

we may find him still here. He will probably make a dash at us. Will you be careful?"

"All right," said Hendriks, showing his revolver.

Low opened the door. Nothing moved inside the room, but sitting at the table was a huddled figure. The hat had fallen off, the head with its coiled pig-tail lay upon the outstretched arms. Another moment made it clear that the man was dead. They lit the candles on the mantel-piece, and proceeded to examine the dead body.

The yellow face was puffed beyond recognition, the whole man was strangely and quiescently horrible. On the table before him lay a small lacquered box containing a scrap of a dark ointment, and in the man's forefinger was found a splinter of steel. Finding himself trapped, he had made away with himself rather than face his captors.

At this stage of the proceedings, Flaxman Low retired from the affair.

The police managed to hush up the business—the death of a Chinaman more or less makes little stir at any time—and they had further investigations of importance to make, which they wished to keep quiet.

It was, indeed, ultimately proved that No. 1, Karma Crescent, formed a very convenient head-quarters for

Chinese and other ruffianism, being situated as it was near a junction, near the river, and near a low part of London. It was found that extensive excavations had been made in communication with the house and a well-built tunnel opened by a cleverly masked entrance into the lane. Thus by Flaxman Low's efforts a very distinct danger had been warded off, for the society in question were making very alarming headway in London, chiefly by allying themselves with other bands of criminals in this country, to whom they offered a secure place of hiding.