

# Rainforth's Strange Case.

By WILL LIENBERG.

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Continued from last week.

## CHAPTER II.

Had the earth opened to swallow me I could not have been more surprised than I was at the constable's announcement.

"Gerald Rainforth arrested for murder!" I gasped in astonishment. "Surely there must be some dreadful mistake!"

"The officer shook his head. "I hope the young man will be able to prove himself clear," he said, "but the detectives claim to have some very strong evidence against him."

"It is all a terrible mistake. He is as innocent of any crime as you or I."

"I hope so, but we can't always judge by appearances."

"Where have they taken him?"

"To the Mayburg jail." And with this the officer bade me good afternoon and walked up the street.

I threw myself into a chair and began to reflect on the startling news I had just heard. I must go to Gerald Rainforth at once. I had no doubt of his innocence and felt confident of his speedy release. Perhaps he could easily explain how it had happened that he had been suspected of committing the crime. I knew that the detectives, hoping to gain the reward, would jump at the most flimsy plea to arrest some one.

A half hour later I called at the jail. I found Gerald seated by the grated window, calmly puffing a cigar while he perused the columns of a late New York paper.

He greeted me warmly as I came in, then pushed me a chair and bade me be seated with an air as calm and untroubled as if nothing had happened.

"In the name of heaven, what does this mean, Gerald?" I exclaimed.

"Only another blunder of those stupid, blockhead detectives," he answered carelessly. "I suppose they thought it necessary to arrest some one, and I happened to be the victim selected. I hope they won't detain me long," he added, "for I have planned to be off for France within a week."

I was surprised at his expressed intention to go away so soon, but I felt greatly relieved to know that he regarded his arrest so lightly and had confidence in speedy release.

I remained with him for nearly an hour, but to my surprise he gave no hint of any circumstances regarding his arrest. In fact, he seemed to wish to avoid the subject altogether, and I left him more mystified than ever. On my way to my office I met the mayor of Mayburg. He had just had an interview with the detective who had caused the arrest to be made, but that individual, like all those of his profession, was very reticent regarding the affair, but seemed very positive in his belief that the right man had been captured. He had stated, however, that Jack Peters, the gardener at Darkwood Hall, had recognized young Rainforth as the man he had seen passing through the grounds on the night of the murder. He had other evidence, he asserted, which would be brought forward at the proper time.

In spite of the light manner in which young Rainforth regarded the affair I recognized the fact that matters were assuming a serious complexion. He was a comparative stranger in the place. Even I, who was perhaps more intimately acquainted with him than any one in Mayburg, knew little of his past history, and it was plain to see how easily suspicion might point to him, being the only stranger in the village.

Was it really he whom the gardener had seen at Darkwood Hall on that fatal night? If so, what errand could have taken him thither? He had never mentioned the matter to me. Then it was claimed that there were other things back of this which would be made known at the proper time. It did not require much reflection for me to see that, although I felt convinced of the young man's innocence, there might be woven about him such a network of circumstantial evidence as to give him far more trouble than he dreamed of escape from its meshes.

As I walked on toward my office the surprising intelligence I had just received gave me ample food for reflection. Then another event had occurred, which, had it happened at any other time, would have caused considerable comment. The master of Darkwood Hall, so the report ran, had at last come to make his abode in his long neglected country seat. Strange servants had been seen about the place, and a young woman of surpassing loveliness—evidently the daughter of old Isaac Dangerfield—had been seen walking in the grounds. When they had arrived no one seemed to know, for the recent murder had so absorbed the attention of the inhabitants of Mayburg that they gave little heed to events of a social character.

It was almost sunset when I reached my office. To my surprise, I found a servant from Darkwood Hall waiting for me with a carriage. He informed me that my services were required at the hall at once. Miss Dangerfield was very ill—in fact, she was lying in an unconscious condition at that moment—and the housekeeper had dispatched him for a physician with instructions to make all possible haste.

As soon as I could enter my office and get my case I climbed into the carriage and was driven rapidly away. From the servant, who was very talkative and volunteered to impart a great deal of information, I learned that Isaac Dangerfield had died a year before, and that his daughter Grace, now the sole mistress of the hall, had arrived there with her servants on the 9th inst, and would probably make the place her permanent abode.

The mysterious tragedy which had taken place so near the hall, the servant informed me, had completely un-

strung the nerves of the young lady. She had been fearfully shocked and horrified at the event and had for days been confined to her room, and now her symptoms had grown decidedly alarming.

On reaching the hall I was met at the door by the housekeeper, a kindly faced woman of about 40, who conducted me through a long wide hall and up a flight of stairs. Then, passing through another hall, I was ushered into a room occupying the eastern wing of the building. Every article of furniture in the room betokened opulence and exquisite taste, and upon a luxurious couch, from a curiously fashioned dragon shaped chandelier overhead, a cluster of waxen tapers shed a subdued radiance, revealing the face and arms of a young woman of surpassing beauty. Her face was of the purest type—olive tinted, with traces of suffering about the delicate mouth. Her eyes were closed, and her hair trailed in a dark wavy mass across the snowy pillow.

The nurse, who was seated by the bedside, arose as I entered.

"I think she is better now," she said in a low tone. "She must have fainted, for she was unconscious for some time, but she revived, and now she has fallen asleep."

I seated myself by the couch and laid my hand gently on the patient's wrist. Her pulse was a little weak now, but there was no indication of any specific complaint aside from what might have been occasioned by undue excitement or overtaxed strength. I readily perceived that all she needed was rest and quiet and perfect freedom from all mental disturbance. I prepared a soothing mixture, which I instructed the nurse to administer to her when she should awake, but not to disturb her on any account as long as she would sleep.

I remained nearly a half hour to see if the patient would awake, but as she did not and seemed to be resting quietly I rose to leave. As I did so my movement caused her to move uneasily upon her pillow, and drawing her left hand from beneath the coverlet she threw it across her breast. As my eyes rested for one moment on the shapely hand I gave a start of astonishment. The first finger was missing!

Like a flash, the finding of the human finger in the murdered man's valise came to me, causing me to stand there for several moments as if in a dream. The nurse must have noticed my agitation, for stepping noiselessly to my side she threw a light covering across the sleeper's breast, casting a glance of impatience and displeasure at me at the same time.

Quickly recovering myself, I gave a few orders regarding the medicine I had left, then quitted the apartment and was conducted to the outside, where the carriage was waiting to carry me back to the village.

On reaching my office I found other calls awaiting me, and it was almost 12 o'clock before I was permitted to retire for the night. But it was 2 before I closed my eyes in sleep, for the strange discoveries I had made during the day rendered sleep impossible and kept my mind greatly disturbed.

Was it possible that the object found in the dead man's luggage could in any way be connected with the young mis-

telegraphed to New York for my attorney and a detective. They arrived early this morning, and I am now expecting them every moment."

"I thank you for your confidence," I said, "and let me assure you that whatever circumstances may point to the contrary I shall never question your innocence."

He pressed my hand warmly.

"I am more than grateful for your friendship and the assurance of your confidence in my innocence," he replied. "I trust soon to prove to you that it has not been misplaced."

"Gerald," I said, "I have made some important discoveries in this case, and it was to acquaint you with these that I came this morning."

I then related the circumstance of my discovering the human finger containing the diamond ring in the murdered man's luggage; then of my visit to Darkwood Hall, of Miss Dangerfield's sudden illness and the discovery that one of her fingers was missing.

A look of utter astonishment and perplexity crossed his face at my revelation.

"It's something that I can't understand," he remarked after a long pause. "It is very strange—very strange."

"It is indeed," I answered, "and I think the facts ought to be given to the detectives at once."

"No, no," he said, with sudden energy. "Keep your discoveries a secret for the present. I have good reasons for asking this—reasons which you shall know in due time."

"But surely this matter ought to be investigated at once," I replied, not a little puzzled at his strange request.

"You are accused of a great crime, and it is my duty as well as yours to see that everything relating to the matter should be brought to light."

"I know it," he replied, "but I should prefer that you keep your discoveries a secret for a short time at least. Remember that I ask this thinking it is for the best."

"But the preliminary examination is set for this evening, and there is no time for delay."

"Never fear about that. I will consult with my attorney and then decide on some course of action. We can introduce you as a witness if we think proper to do so."

"Just as you please," I replied. "I am willing to do whatever you advise."

At this instant the jailer came to the door and announced that a gentleman was waiting to see the prisoner.

"It's my attorney," said Gerald. Then to the jailer, "Show him in immediately."

Thrusting the manuscript which the young man had given me into my pocket, I withdrew from the room, promising to be present at the preliminary examination.

It is hardly necessary to state that I was considerably mystified at young Rainforth's strange conduct, yet I saw no course left but to follow his advice. He was certainly the most interested party in the affair and would doubtless do what was most to his own advantage.

My calls kept me busy till near the middle of the afternoon. Then eating a hurried lunch I started for the courthouse, not yet having found time to read the manuscript Gerald had given me. What strange story the manuscript had to tell I was very anxious to ascertain, but it was far more important that I be present at the preliminary.

When I reached the little courthouse, I found it already well filled with an eager, expectant crowd, all anxious to catch every detail of the terrible case. Edging my way through the mass of humanity, I managed to obtain a seat inside the railing near the prisoner, where I was introduced to Gerald's attorney, who was one of the great criminal lawyers of the metropolis.

The attorney for the state was a shrewd man and possessed great ability as a criminal lawyer, and I knew that he would make a strong fight. What evidence he was to present against the prisoner was not known.

While the prosecuting attorney was getting ready to open the case Rainforth called me to his side, and we conversed in a low tone for some time. He was not going to make any fight, he in-

formal case, save as far as it was necessary to enable him to be released on bail. He would shortly be in possession of evidence, he confidently asserted, which would not only result in establishing his own innocence, but would secure the conviction of the real criminal. How this evidence was to be obtained or what was its character he gave no hint. He would introduce no evidence at the preliminary examination—in fact, he had none to offer at present, he said—but he felt confident that no evidence could be offered against him of sufficient importance to prevent his being admitted to bail.

The first witness called for the prosecution was James Marks, who had discovered the body of the murdered man. His testimony was substantially the same as that given at the inquest. The next witness was Jack Peters, the gardener at Darkwood Hall.

He stated that he saw the prisoner passing through the grounds at the hall about 8 o'clock on the night of the murder. He had seen his face distinctly in the moonlight. He was coming from the direction of the house and going toward the spot where the murder had taken place. He did not know the man at the time, but had seen and recognized him while in Mayburg a few days later. He was positive that the prisoner was the same man he had seen in the Darkwood Hall grounds.

The next witness to take the stand was Webb Davis, a laborer. The substance of his testimony was as follows:

"My name is Webb Davis. I am a laborer and reside on the Bentley farm, three miles southwest of Mayburg, in the state of New York. I am employed as a farm laborer by Mr. Bentley. I was in Mayburg on Sept. 10. I came on foot. I left for home about 8 o'clock. I did not go by the road, but to shorten my journey I took a near cut through the Darkwood park. When about midway of the park and about an eighth of a mile from the road, I saw a man coming at a rapid walk from the direction of the hall and traveling toward Mayburg. I stopped in the shadow of a tree. He passed within a rod of where I stood. I saw his face in the moonlight. He did not see me, to my knowledge. I recognize the prisoner here as the man seen in the park."

John Judd, the porter at the Redfield inn, was the next witness. I will only give the leading points of his testimony, which were as follows:

"I am employed as porter at the Redfield inn. I have known the prisoner since the 1st of last July, when he came to the inn to stay. He is a painter and has two of the best rooms in the house. He has always paid liberally for everything he received. He spent a good deal of his time sketching scenes in the vicinity of Mayburg. He was at the inn on Sept. 10. About half past 6 on the evening of the 10th he left the inn. He did not return till between 8 and 9 o'clock. I was on the porch as he came in. He seemed greatly disturbed, for he paced restlessly up and down the porch for some time. Then he went to his room. I don't think he retired. I went to bed at about 10. I think it was almost midnight when I was awakened by hearing voices in the office below. I got up and dressed and went down stairs. As I passed the room occupied by the prisoner I saw that a light was still burning. He was not in the habit of leaving his light burning after retiring."

I found the constable in the office talking with the proprietor. He (the officer) informed me that a murder had been committed and wanted to know if there were any strangers staying at the place. I went down to Dr. Dixon's office and saw the murdered man. I didn't see the prisoner among the crowd there. I think he remained at the inn. He seemed out of sorts for days after the murder and spoke of going abroad soon and got me to assist him in packing some of his things. On the second day after the murder I was cutting some weeds in the yard when I found this knife under the prisoner's window."

Here the witness produced a large pocketknife, with a blade about 6 inches long, which opened and fastened with a catch. The blade was almost covered with blood. The knife was passed to the justice, and a great sensation ran through the courtroom.

But at that instant there was a little stir near the door. Those who were packed in the aisle began to move aside to allow some one to pass who was approaching through the crowd. Presently a woman richly dressed came through the aisle. She wore a thick veil over her face. Approaching the sheriff, she said something in a low tone. Instantly the officer conducted her forward to the justice's desk.

"If your honor please," the officer said, "here is a lady that wants to be put on the witness stand. She states that she has a confession to make that will clear up the whole mystery surrounding this case."

A buzz of excitement ran like an electric thrill through the audience.

"Let her come forward and be sworn," said the justice.

The prosecuting attorney arose quickly, evidently believing that this was some subtle maneuver of the defense.

"If it please your honor, I object to this witness taking the stand," he said. "This is an unusual proceeding, and I ask that Mr. Judd be allowed to continue his testimony."

Rainforth's attorney came forward and was about to address the court when the justice said:

"I overrule the gentleman's objection. The lady will please take the stand and be sworn."

The lady advanced and threw back her veil, revealing the face of Grace Dangerfield of Darkwood Hall. As she reached the stand she staggered like one groping in the darkness, her face as white as death. She stretched out her hands as if grasping some invisible support. Then she spoke, despair and agony in her face and voice:

"It—it was I who committed the murder!" And with the words upon her lips she sank down in an apparently lifeless heap upon the floor.

(To be continued.)

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