

A Frosty Morning.

BY RODRIGUES OTTOLENGUI.



WHEN as I understand it, you know that there is a thousand-pound note in this room, and yet you can't find it. In other words, Mr. Van Rawlston, you wish to know whether a thing can be lost when you know where it is."

The speaker's companion, a man of fifty, with the bearing of one accustomed to large affairs, frowned impatiently. A trusted and powerful financier, one grown gray in the management of huge interests, he chafed at the smallness of the mystery which yet seemed to reflect on his executorship of the estate to which the thousand-pound note belonged. And it was with some stiffness that he began:—

"Of course I understand that to a man of your experience this matter seems insignificant; but I am up to my ears in mystery. Mr. Barnes, the cleverest professional detective in New York, has spent hours in searching this room—without success. In despair I thought of you, with your cool, analytical brain, and I sent for you. But if you are in a jesting humor—"

"A thousand pardons," said the other, seating himself in the carved oak library chair. "That's one for each of your pounds. But there, forgive me and I will be serious. I received your note late because I did not reach home until dinner time. But here I am within half an hour of reading your message. Now, then, about this thousand pounds sterling. You are sure that the money is in this room?"

"Therein lies the mystery. I had it in my hands this morning and within a few minutes it had vanished."

"Seemed to have vanished, I presume you mean."

"There was no seeming about it. It was a single bank note and I placed it on this table. Five minutes later it had disappeared."

"Disappeared is a better word by long odds. That it passed out of your sight I can believe. The question is, how was this disappearance managed, for I do not believe that it was accidental. From what you say I deduce that two or more persons besides yourself were present at the time of said disappearance of said bank note. Am I correct?"

"There were three, but really I can't see how you guessed there was more than one person with me."

"It cannot be otherwise. Had there been only one person in the room with you, you would know absolutely that he took the note. That you have a doubt as to the identity of the culprit shows that you suspect one of two or more persons."

"Mitchel, I am delighted that I sent for you. You are exactly the man who will recover this money."

"What about Barnes? You mentioned his name."

"Yes, naturally my first thought was to send for a detective, and I remembered him in connection with that ruby robbery of yours which occurred at my house. He is now following a clue which he considers a good one, and will report during the evening."

"Good! Nothing would please me better than to succeed where Barnes fails. Every time I outwit him it is a feather in my cap, and another argument in favor of my theory that the professional detective is a much over-rated genius — but to your story, and be sure that you relate the exact circumstances of the affair."

As he finished speaking and leaned back in the padded library chair, the man's dark, clear-cut profile looked that of a scholar, an artist, anything but that of a detective. And indeed Mr. Robert Leroy Mitchel was both scholar and artist, — none the less so because of late years he had turned his trained powers of analysis to the study of crime and its motives, and to unraveling, as an amateur, certain mysterious offenses against the law, which had baffled the professional detective.

From cases involving life, death, millions of money or the jewels of a kingdom to the disappearance of a thousand-pound note might, indeed, have seemed a descent to the ordinary detective. Not so, however, to Mr. Mitchel, who valued mystery

not in proportion to the sum involved, but to the opportunity it gave for the exercise of subtle analysis. And certainly such opportunities seemed abundantly promised by the narrative whose details Mr. Van Rawlston now unfolded for the first time.

"Some thirty years or more ago," began Mr. Van Rawlston, "there came into my office a young Englishman, who introduced himself as Thomas Eggleston. The object of his visit was curious. He wished to borrow four thousand dollars upon collateral, which proved to be an English bank note for one thousand pounds; an odd request considering that he could have changed his note for American currency, but he explained that for sentimental reasons he did not wish to part with the note permanently. His expectation was to redeem it in the future, and to keep it as a memento, — the foundation of the fortune which he hoped to earn in this land."

"A singular wish," interrupted Mr. Mitchel.

"I should say so. Naturally my interest was keenly aroused. I agreed to advance the sum demanded, without charge. Moreover, I put him in the way of some speculations that turned out so well that it was not long before the thousand-pound note was back in his possession. Since then we have been close friends, I have visited him almost daily in this house, and when he died a few days ago, I was not surprised to find that he had named me as executor of his large estate."

"And the heirs?"

"I am coming to them presently. My friend died very unexpectedly," continued Mr. Van Rawlston. "Last Saturday he was well, and on Monday dead. Wednesday morning, the day of the funeral, his man of business brought me his client's will, and as the executor I appointed this morning for reading it, here in the library, to the family. This consisted of but two members. One was Alice Hetheridge, the daughter of a sister of Eggleston's who had accompanied him to this country and married here. As both Mrs. Hetheridge and her husband had died while their daughter was still a little girl, Alice had been brought up as her uncle's child, and it was expected would inherit his fortune. The only other relative present was Robert Eggleston, the nephew of the deceased, but practically a stranger to him, as he had never

been in this country nor even seen his uncle until he took up his abode in this house about three months ago."

"But you have mentioned only two relatives, and I understood you to say there was a third person present."

"And so there was. When I came I was surprised to find here Arthur Lumley, a young New Yorker, of whom I know nothing except that he is in love with Alice. But as Alice took me aside and explained that she had invited him, I was silenced.

"Now I come to the events of the day."

"Kindly be as explicit as possible," said Mr. Mitchel. "Omit no detail, however trifling."

"When we four had taken our places at this table I asked Alice, as being familiar with the house, to bring me a certain box named in the will. This she did. It was locked, the key having been brought to me with the will. Unlocking it, I took out a packet containing a bank note for a thousand pounds; the same upon which I had once loaned money. There were also some government bonds and railway securities. Having compared them with the list attached to the will, I then read aloud the testament of my dead friend. A part of this I will read to you as possibly shedding some light on the situation."

"One moment," interposed Mr. Mitchel; "you said that the packet taken from the box contained the bank note as well as the bonds and other securities. Are you sure the note was there?"

"Oh, yes! I found it first and placed it on the table in front of me, while I went through the papers and read the will. By this document, Robert Eggleston was made the heir of practically all his property, — a division that would have seemed decidedly unfair had it not been for the following paragraph."

Mr. Van Rawlston then proceeded to read an extract from the will, in which Eggleston explained why his beloved niece Alice was not made his heiress. In detail the writer related how, when he was a very young man, he had been left dependent on his half brother William, a man of wealth, ten years his senior; how this brother had paid his passage to this country and presented him with a thousand-pound note, on which the young fortune seeker had borrowed the money that became the nest egg of his present large estate: how William would never consent to a return of

the money, though his brother had preserved the original note with that end in view; and how, finally, the older brother had died suddenly, killed by the sweeping away of his entire fortune by unlucky speculation. The writer further stated that before his death William had given his son Robert a letter to his American uncle, claiming for that son a share of the fortune resulting from his father's gift.

In concluding, the writer said: —

“I took Robert into my home, and I am bound to say that I have not learned to love him. This, however, may be a prejudice, due to the fact that he had come between me and my wish to make Alice my heiress. In recognition of the possibility of this prejudice I feel compelled to ease my conscience by bequeathing to William's son the fortune which grew out of William's bounty. The original bank note, however, was a free gift to me, and I certainly may dispose of it as I please. I ask my niece Alice to accept it from me, as all that my conscience permits me to call my own.”

“An interesting and curious statement,” commented Mr. Mitchel. “Now tell me about the disappearance of the note.”

“There is my difficulty. I have so little to tell. After reading the will, I laid it down, and reached out my hand, intending to give the bank note to Alice, whereupon I discovered that it had disappeared.”

“Tell me exactly where each person was seated.”

“We were all at this table, which you see is small. I sat at this end, Alice at my right hand, young Eggleston at my left, and Lumley opposite to me.”

“So that all three were easily within reach of the bank note when you placed it upon the table? That complicates matters. Well, when you discovered that you could not find the note, who spoke first and what comment was made?”

“I cannot be certain. I was stunned, and the others seemed as much surprised as I was. I remember that Eggleston asked Alice whether she had picked it up, adding, ‘It is yours, you know.’ But she made an indignant denial. Lumley said nothing, but sat looking at us as though seeking an explanation. Then I recall that Eggleston made the very practical suggestion

that if each person in the room were searched and the note not found it would thus be proven that it had merely been blown from the table by some draught, in which case a thorough search should discover it. Once before, you may remember, I declined to have my guests searched, to my sorrow. It was at the time of the ruby robbery, when the suggestor himself had the jewel. Therefore when Eggleston made this suggestion I began with him. The search was thorough, I assure you, but I found nothing. I had as little success with Lumley, and I even examined my own pockets, with the vague hope that I might have inadvertently put the note in one of them. But all my looking was in vain."

"Might not one of these men have secreted the bank note elsewhere, and then have possessed himself of it after your search?"

"I took care to prevent that. As soon as I had gone through Eggleston, I unceremoniously bundled him out of the room. I did the same with Lumley, and neither has been allowed in here since."

"What about the young lady?"

"It would be absurd to suspect her. The note was her property. Still she insisted upon my searching her, and I examined her pocket. Of course I found nothing."

"Ah! You examined only her pocket. Well, under the circumstances, I suppose that was all you could do. Thus, having sent the three persons out of the room, you think that the bank note is still here. A natural deduction, only I wish that the woman might have been more thoroughly searched. By the way, you said that Mr. Barnes assisted you in examining the room for the note. What view does he take of the case?"

Before Mr. Van Rawlston could reply there was a sharp ring at the door bell, and a moment later Mr. Barnes himself was ushered in, by his appearance completing a trio often before met together for the unraveling of mysteries.

As usual, his coming was the signal for a battle of wits between the professional detective and the expert criminologist, each bent on demonstrating the superiority of his method.

To-day the detective seemed for the time in the ascendant. With what appeared the authority of knowledge, he ridiculed Mr.

Mitchel's theory that the case was a complex one, and proceeded, point by point, to state the steps that led to his view of the case.

They were, first, that the note was either mislaid or stolen; second, that if mislaid it would have been found, and that therefore it was stolen; third, that if stolen it was taken by one of the three persons; and fourth, that as one of the three owned the note, and another had just heard of the inheritance of a large fortune, the third by necessity came under suspicion.

To this conclusion, however, Mr. Mitchel, acquiescent up to this point, took strong exceptions. For in the first place, he said, people had been known to steal their own goods; in the second place, rich men were often thieves; and in the third place, Mr. Lumley, being in love with the owner of the note, was as unlikely to steal it as was she herself. One point only he would concede, that Lumley might have stolen the note before he heard that his sweetheart was to inherit it; in which case, of course, he might have desired to return it and yet not had the opportunity. In that event, however, the question arose how he could get out of the room with the stolen property.

"He must have hidden it elsewhere than in his pocket," said Mr. Barnes. "Remember that you cannot thoroughly search a man in the presence of a lady. At any rate I have strong grounds for believing that he stole the note, as you shall hear."

His narrative seemed indeed to support his theory beyond the shadow of doubt. For by following Mr. Lumley, after he had left the house, he had discovered that this impecunious lover of Alice Hetheridge went straight to his employer and resigned his position, and then betook himself to a business agency where he obtained an option to purchase a partnership in a good concern, agreeing to pay five thousand dollars for the same. From there Mr. Barnes had tracked him to the New York Central Station, whence the young man had left the city about two hours before.

"What his destination was I don't know," the detective concluded, "but one of my men who was stationed there is following him, and will report to me in" — pulling out his watch — "in half an hour, so I have no time to lose."

As the detective left the room, Mr. Mitchel, unruffled by Mr. Barnes's apparent victory, turned to his friend with a strange

request. This was no other than that he might spend the night in the library that had been the scene of the strange robbery, and that his presence should be concealed from Eggleston and Miss Hetheridge.

Van Rawlston looked at his friend inquiringly.

"I see," he said finally, "you wish to make a search on your own account, eh? Very good; I will arrange it. And, by the way, as there's to be an auction sale of the library to-morrow — Eggleston had arranged for it before his death — you'll see the necessity of settling this mystery as soon as possible. Meantime, as it's nine o'clock and I need rest, I'll go home, meeting you here in the morning."

Before going, however, Mr. Van Rawlston took time to find out that Eggleston was not in the house and that Miss Hetheridge was in her room. Then he dismissed the servant and locked Mr. Mitchel in the library. Next he went upstairs to Miss Hetheridge, told her that he had thought best to lock the library door, and bade her good night. Passing out to the street, he handed the door key to Mr. Mitchel through the front window.

Left thus alone in a strange house, Mr. Mitchel dropped into an easy chair and began to analyze the situation. He did not light the gas, as that would have betrayed his presence, but the glowing grate fire shed light enough for him to get the lay of the land, to note that the long library occupied the whole of one side of the house, the parlors being on the opposite side of the hallway, and that the windows in front overlooked the street, and at the back opened upon a small yard. He even took the pains to find out that just below these back windows stood a shed, the roof of an extension which served as a laundry.

Then returning to his seat, Mr. Mitchel went over in his mind the incidents which had been related to him, and two of his conclusions are worthy of note here.

"Barnes argues," thought he, "that Lumley may have taken the bank note before he knew that it had been bequeathed to his sweetheart. But the same holds good with the girl herself, and might well explain her stealing what was really her own property. That is one point worth bearing in mind, but the best of all is my scheme for finding the note itself. Why should I trouble myself

with a search which might occupy me all night, when by waiting I may see the thief take the note from its present hiding place, always supposing that it is in this room? Decidedly patience is a virtue in this instance, and I have only to wait."

A couple of hours later, Mr. Mitchel started up from a slight doze, and realized that he had been disturbed, though at first he could not tell by what. Then he heard a sound which indicated that some one was fitting a key into the lock. Perhaps the thief was coming! This thought awakened him to his full faculties, and he quickly hid among the folds of some heavy draperies which served upon occasion to divide the room into two apartments. The door opened, and he heard the stealthy tread of soft footsteps, though at first the figure of the intruder was hidden from his view by the draperies which surrounded him. In a few moments his suspense was at an end. A young woman, of girlish figure, passed by him and went over to the fireplace. She was in a dainty night-robe, her long black hair hanging in waving masses down her back. She leaned against the mantel and gazed into the fire without moving for some minutes, and then, turning suddenly, crossed the room, going directly to one of the bookshelves. Here she paused, then took down several books which she placed upon a chair near by. Her back was towards Mr. Mitchel, but he could see her reach into the recess with her arm, which was bared by the act, the loose sleeve of her gown falling aside. Then there was a clicking sound just perceptible to the ear, and Mr. Mitchel muttered to himself:—

"A secret closet, with a spring catch."

In another moment the girl was replacing the books, and, this done, she hurried from the library locking the door after her. Mr. Mitchel emerged from his hiding place, and going to the shelf where the girl had been, removed the books and searched for the spring which would unlock the secret compartment. It was not easily found; but Mr. Mitchel was a patient and persistent man, and after nearly an hour discovered the way of moving a sliding panel, and took an envelope from the recess behind. Carrying this to the fireplace, he dropped to his knees, and withdrawing its contents, held in his hand a Bank of England note for one thousand pounds. He looked at it, smiled, and said in a low tone:—

“And Mr. Barnes was so certain that he would catch the thief!” Then he smiled again, replaced the books on the shelf, decided that the large sofa might serve as a comfortable bed, and so went to sleep.

He was awakened early, by a sense of cold. Starting up, for a moment dazed by his unfamiliar surroundings, he gazed first at the gray ashes of the dead fire in the grate, and then looked towards the windows thickly covered with frost, and shivered. Remembering where he was, he threw his arms about, and walked up and down the long room to start his blood moving, and induce a little warmth. Presently he went to the back windows and looked at the beautiful arabesques of frost, which resembled long fern leaves. Suddenly he seemed unusually interested, and especially attracted to one of the panes. He examined this closely, and taking a note book from his pocket made a rapid sketch of the pattern on the glass. Then he raised the sash, looked out upon the shed, and emitted a low whistle. Next he stepped out through the window, went down on his hands and knees upon the tinned roof, and looked closely at something which he saw there. Returning to the room, he proceeded to the most curious act of all. He again opened the secret panel, replaced the envelope containing the bank note, and seated himself at the table where Mr. Van Rawlston claimed that the note had vanished, and in the chair where Mr. Van Rawlston had been when he read the will.

Several hours later, when Mr. Van Rawlston came in, Mr. Mitchel was sitting in the same chair looking through a Bible.

“Well,” said Mr. Van Rawlston, “how did you pass the night? Did the thief pay you a visit?”

“I think so,” replied Mr. Mitchel.

“Then you know who took the note?” asked Mr. Van Rawlston eagerly.

“Perhaps! I do not like to jump at conclusions. This is a magnificent Bible, Mr. Van Rawlston. Is it in the sale to-day? If so, I think I will bid on it.”

“Oh, yes, it is to be sold,” replied Mr. Van Rawlston testily. He thought Mr. Mitchel merely wished to change the subject, and at that moment he was more interested in bank notes than in Bibles.

He had no idea that Mr. Mitchel really coveted the Bible. But then he did not know that Mr. Mitchel collected books as well as gems.

He was therefore much astonished, some hours later, when the auction was in progress, to find Mr. Mitchel not only bidding on the Bible, but bidding heavily.

At first the bidding was spiritless, and the price rose slowly until Mr. Mitchel made an offer of five hundred dollars. After a moment's hesitation young Eggleston bid fifty dollars more, and it was seen that the contest was now between him and Mr. Mitchel. Bidding fifty dollars at a time they had advanced the price to nine hundred dollars, when Eggleston remarked:—

"I bid nine fifty," then turned to Mr. Mitchel and added:—

"This is a family relic, sir, and I hope you will not raise me again."

"This is an open sale, I believe," said Mr. Mitchel, bowing coldly. "I offer a thousand dollars."

"One thousand and fifty," added Eggleston quickly.

At this moment Mr. Barnes entered the room, accompanied by a short young man, and Mr. Mitchel's attention seemed attracted away from the Bible. The auctioneer noticing this, called him by name and asked if he wished to bid again.

"One moment, please," said Mr. Mitchel. "May I look again at the volume?"

It was passed to him, and he appeared to scrutinize it closely, started slightly as though making a discovery, and handed it back, saying:—

"I have made a mistake. I supposed that this was a genuine Soncino, but I find that it is only a reprint." Then he turned to Eggleston with a curious smile and said, "You may have the family relic. I shall not bid against you."

The auction over, the crowd dispersed, and when all strangers had departed, Mr. Mitchel nodded meaningly to Mr. Barnes, and approached young Eggleston, who was tying up the Bible in paper. Touching him upon the arm he said very quietly:—

"Mr. Eggleston, I must ask the officer here to arrest you!"

Eggleston's hands quivered over the knot, and he seemed too agitated to speak. The detective, realizing that Mr. Mitchel had solved the problem, quickly stepped closer to Eggleston.

"What does this mean?" asked Mr. Van Rawlston.

"Call Miss Hetheridge and I will explain," said Mr. Mitchel.

"No! No! Not before her!" cried Eggleston, breaking down completely. "I confess I loved Alice and wished to make it impossible for her to marry Lumley. The note is here! Here, in the Bible. I stole it and hid it there!" With nervous fingers he tore off the wrappings, and rapidly turning the pages searched for the note. "Heavens! It is not here!" He looked at Mr. Mitchel anxiously.

"No! It is not there. You paid too much for that Bible. Mr. Van Rawlston, I prefer to have the lady called, if you please."

Mr. Van Rawlston left the room, and Mr. Mitchel addressed Mr. Barnes.

"By the way, Barnes, have you abandoned your theory?"

"I suppose I must now, though I had not up to a moment ago. By the aid of my man I found Mr. Lumley, and accused him of the theft. He would offer no explanation, but willingly agreed to return with me."

"We seem to have arrived just in time," said Mr. Lumley quietly.

"In the very nick of time, as you shall hear," said Mr. Mitchel. "Ah! Here is Miss Hetheridge. Will you be seated, please, Miss Hetheridge." He bowed courteously as the young woman sat down, and then proceeded.

"I did not think that the bank note had been removed from this room. Why? Because I argued that the theft and the hiding must have necessarily occupied but a moment; a chosen moment when the attention of all three others was attracted away from the table where it lay. The one chance was that Miss Hetheridge might have hidden it in the folds of her gown. The men's pockets seemed too inaccessible. I agreed with Mr. Barnes that the lady would scarcely steal what was her own, though even that was possible if she did not know that it was to be hers. For a similar reason, I did not suspect Mr. Lumley, and thus by elimination, there was but one person left upon whom to fasten suspicion. I supposed he would return here during the night to recover the bank note, and I remained in this room to watch for him."

At this Miss Hetheridge made a movement of her lips as though about to speak, but no words escaped, and she shrank back in her chair.

"During the night," proceeded Mr. Mitchel, "Miss Hetheridge came into this room and hid something. After she had left the room, relocking the door with a duplicate key, I found what she had hidden. It was a one-thousand pound note."

There was silence for a moment, then Miss Hetheridge cried out:—

"I can explain!"

"That is why I sent for you," said Mr. Mitchel.

"The note was my own," said the girl, speaking rapidly, "but after the disappearance of the other I was afraid to have it in my room lest it be found, and seem to inculcate me. I received it only a few days before my dear uncle died. He told me that his brother William had sent it as a present to my mother upon her marriage, but as he had doubted the good intentions of my father, he had kept the matter a secret. As both my parents died, he had held the note in trust for me. He did not invest it, because he thought that his own fortune would be an ample legacy to leave me. A short time before he died I passed my twenty-first birthday, and he gave me the note. That is the whole truth."

"To which I can testify," interjected Mr. Lumley. "And I may now add that Miss Hetheridge had not only promised to be my wife, but she offered me the use of her money to buy the partnership, which to Mr. Barnes seemed such a suspicious act."

"I have only to explain, then," continued Mr. Mitchel, "how it was that I decided that Miss Hetheridge was not a thief. This morning I found heavy frost on the window panes. Upon one, however, I noticed a circular, transparent spot, where the pattern of the frosting had been obliterated. Instantly I comprehended what had occurred. The thief, the real thief, had come in the night, or rather in the morning, for I know almost the hour. He stood upon the shed outside, and melted the frost by breathing upon the pane, with his mouth close to the glass. Thus making a peep-hole, he must have seen me asleep on the sofa, and so knew that it would be useless for him to attempt an entrance. As the person who did this trick stood upon the shed, I had but

to measure the distance from the shed to his peep-hole to be able to guess his height, which I estimated to be more than six feet. Next there was some very interesting evidence in the frost on the tin roof, — the marks made by the man's feet, or his heels rather, for the frost was so light that only the impressions of the nails in the heels would show. My own made complete little horse-shoe-shaped marks, composed of dots. But those of my predecessor were scarcely more than half a curve, which proved that he walks on the side of his foot, thus slightly lifting the opposite side from the ground, or roof, as it was in this instance. This much decided me that Miss Hetheridge was not the thief, and I returned her bank note to the place where she had hidden it. Then I sat at the table where the will was read, and studied the situation. The easiest way to hide the note quickly seemed to be to slip it into the Bible which stood on the table. Therefore I was not surprised when I found the bank note, which I have here."

He drew forth the bank note from his pocket and handed it to Mr. Van Rawlston, who asked:—

"But why, then, did you try to buy the Bible?"

"I had no idea of doing so. You forget that I had not seen Mr. Lumley. He, too, might have been six feet high, and he, too, might have had the habit of walking on the side of his heel, as I quickly observed that Mr. Eggleston does. With only one of the men before me I decided to run up the price of the Bible, knowing that if he were guilty he would bid over me. Mr. Eggleston followed my lead, and I was almost sure of his guilt until he made the remark that he was buying a family relic. It was a possible truth, and I was obliged to go on bidding, to see how anxious he was to possess the volume. Then, as I said awhile ago, Mr. Lumley arrived in the nick of time. One glance at his short stature, and I was ready to let the Bible go."

"You said you could almost tell the hour at which this man peeped through the window," said Mr. Barnes.

"Ah, I see! You want me to teach you tricks in your own trade, eh? Well, frost forms on a window pane when the thermometer is near or below thirty-two. On the wall here I found a recording thermometer, which discloses the fact that at three

o'clock this morning the temperature was as high as forty-five, while at four it was below thirty. Frost began to form between those hours. At five it was so cold, twenty degrees, that I awoke. Our man must have come between half past four and five. Had he come before then, his peep-hole would have been fully covered again with frost, whereas it was but thinly iced over, the mere freezing of the water of the melted frost, there being no design, or pattern, as there was over every other part of the window pane. So I may offer you a new version of an old saw, and say that, "Frost shows which way a thief goes."

