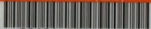


Princeton University Library



32101 068171352

The CRIMSON
CRYPTOGRAM

A Detective Story

FERGUS HUME

3793

Laurance J. Bower

New York

June 1402

123

Library of



Princeton University.

Bequest of
Laurance J. Bower
Class of '96

The Crimson Cryptogram

The Crimson
CRYPTOGRAM

A Detective Story

By **F E R G U S ^{W.} H U M E**

Author of "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab," "The Dwarf's Chamber," Etc.



New Amsterdam Book Company
156 FIFTH AVENUE : NEW YORK CITY : 1902

UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY
PRINCETON

YTRBIVMU

YIAROLI

J. M. NOTCHES

CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE,	9
II. THE WRITING IN BLOOD,	19
III. AN OPEN VERDICT,	28
IV. THE READING OF THE BLOOD SIGNS,	38
V. MRS MOXTON SEEKS COUNSEL,	49
VI. A FRESH DISCOVERY,	59
VII. WHAT THE CABMAN KNEW,	69
VIII. A MUSIC-HALL STAR,	79
IX. THE AUSTRIAN,	89
X. A STRANGE DENIAL,	99
XI. A HALF CONFESSION,	108
XII. MR BUSHAM, SOLICITOR,	117
XIII. MRS MOXTON'S SURRENDER,	126
XIV. THE PIMLICO HOUSE,	135
XV. WHAT MRS AMBER KNEW,	144
XVI. ANOTHER MYSTERY,	153
XVII. A LIFE HISTORY,	163

DEC 10 1914

(RECAP)

3793
133
1328

Contents

CHAP.	PAGE
XVIII. WHAT REALLY HAPPENED, - - - - -	173
XIX. THE RED POCKET-BOOK, - - - - -	183
XX. BUSHAM AT BAY, - - - - -	193
XXI. THE BLIND GIRL, - - - - -	201
XXII. JANET'S DISCOVERY, - - - - -	210
XXIII. THE BEGINNING OF THE END, - - - - -	219
XXIV. THE TRUTH, - - - - -	228
XXV. A CONFESSION, - - - - -	237
XXVI. THE END OF THE STORY, - - - - -	246

The Crimson Cryptogram

CHAPTER I

A MIDNIGHT SURPRISE

"POVERTY, naked and unconcealed! One can endure that, with some patience, as a beaten soldier in the battle of life. But genteel pauperism—the semi-poverty of the middle-class, that lives a necessary lie at the cost of incessant worry and constant defeat—there you have the true misery of life. Believe me, Cass, there is no torture like that of an ambition which cannot be attained for lack of money."

"I did not know you were ambitious, Ellis."

"Not of setting the Thames on fire. My desires are limited to a good practice, a moderate income, a home, and a wife to love me. These wishes are reasonable enough, Heaven knows, yet some cursed Fate prevents their realisation. And I have to sit down and wait; a doctor can do nothing else. I must listen with such philosophy as I have for the ring of the door bell to announce my first patient, and the ring never comes. The heart grows sick,

The Crimson Cryptogram

the brain rusty, the money goes, the temper sours, and so I pass the best days of my life."

"All things come to him who knows how to wait," said Cass, knocking the ashes out of a well-smoked briar.

"And the horse is the noblest of all animals," retorted Ellis. "I never *did* find consolation in proverbs of that class."

The two men sat in their dingy sitting-room talking as usual of a problematical future. Every night they discussed the subject, and every discussion ended without any definite conclusion being arrived at. Indeed, only Fortune could have terminated the arguments in a satisfactory manner, but as yet the fickle deity showed no disposition to make a third in the conversation. Therefore, Robert Ellis, M.D., and Harry Cass, journalist, talked, and talked, and talked. They also hoped for the best, a state of mind sufficiently eloquent of their penniless position. Unless they or their relatives are sick, rich people have no need to hope for the best. The second virtue dwells almost exclusively with the poor and ambitious, as do her two sisters.

Supper was just over, but even cold beef, pickles and bottled beer, with the after comfort of a pipe, could not make Ellis happy. The more philosophical Cass lay on the ragged sofa and digested his meal, while the doctor walked up and down the room railing at Fate. He was a tall young man, clean-limbed, and sufficiently good-looking. Poverty and former opulence showed themselves in

A Midnight Surprise

the threadbare velveteen smoking suit he wore; and the past recurred to him as he flicked some ash off this relic of bygone days.

"O Lord!" he said regretfully, "how jolly life was when I bought these clothes some five years ago! My father had not died a bankrupt country squire then; and I was a rowdy medico, with plenty of money, and a weakness for the other sex."

"You haven't strengthened in that direction, Bob."

"Perhaps not; but I never think of women now—not even of a possible wife. Matrimony is a luxury a poor man must dispense with, if he wants to get on. I have dispensed with every blessed thing short of the bare necessities of existence, yet I don't get any reward. Every dog has his day, they say: but the day of this poor cur never seems to dawn."

"You are more bitter than usual, Ellis."

"Because I am sick of my life. You have some compensations, Harry, in connection with that newspaper you write for. You mix with your fellow-men; you exchange ideas; you have your finger on the pulse of civilisation. But I sit in this dismal room, or walk about this Bœotian neighbourhood, in the vain hope of getting a start. I can't rush out and drag in someone to be dosed; I can't go from house to house soliciting patients. I can only wait wait, wait, until I feel inclined to blow my brains out."

"If you did that, Bob, the folly of the act would

The Crimson Cryptogram

prove that you have none," said Cass. "Come, old man, buck up ; something is sure to turn up when you least expect it."

"Then nothing will turn up, for I am always in a state of expectation. I wish I hadn't set up my tent at Dukesfield, Harry. It is the healthiest London suburb I know ; no one seems ill, and the graveyard is almost empty. I don't believe people ever fall sick or die in this salubrious spot."

Cass ran his fingers through a shock of bronze-coloured hair, and laughed at this professional view of the situation. "Haven't you seen any likely patient ?" he asked, in his most sympathetic manner.

"Not one!" rejoined Ellis, sitting down and relighting his pipe. "Oh, yes, by the way, that young Moxton."

"Who the deuce is he ?"

"A young ass I have met several times in the underground train, and with whom I have had some conversation at various times."

"Why do you call him an ass ?"

"Because he is one," growled the doctor ; "he is burning the candle at both ends, and killing himself with dissipation. Tallow face, blood-shot eyes, dry lips. Oh, Mr Moxton is making for the graveyard at racing speed !"

"Why don't you warn him ?"

"It isn't my business to meddle with a stranger. I don't care if he lives or dies—unless he takes me as his medical attendant. Even then my interest

A Midnight Surprise

in him would be purely professional. He is a detestable young cub."

"There is a want of pity about that speech, Bob!"

"Want of money, you mean. I have no pity for anyone save mine own poor self. Give me success, give me an income, and I'll overflow with the milk of human kindness. Poverty and disappointment is drying it all up. Hullo! Come in, Mrs Basket."

This invitation was induced, not by a rap at the door, but by the sound of stertorous breathing outside it. Mrs Basket's coming was audible long before she made her appearance; so Ellis, forewarned, usually saved her the trouble of knocking. She rolled heavily into the room, labouring like a Dutch lugger in a heavy sea. Indeed, she was built on similar lines, being squat and enormously stout—so bulky, indeed, that she could hardly push herself through the door. Like most fat women, Mrs Basket had a weakness for bright colours; and now presented herself in a vividly blue dress, a crimson shawl, and a green tulle cap decorated with buttercups of an aggressive yellow hue. Her unshapely figure, her large proportions and barbaric splendour, would have made the eyes and heart of an artist ache; but as Mrs Basket's lodgers knew little of art, they never troubled about her looks. Moreover, they liked and respected her as a kindly soul, for on several occasions, when funds were low, she had pressed neither of them for rent. Mrs Basket was immensely proud of having a medical man under her

The Crimson Cryptogram

roof; and always personally polished the brass plate with "Robert Ellis, M.D.," inscribed on it. For Cass she had less respect, as being merely a "writing person"; but she tolerated him as the doctor's friend. Like the moon, he shone with a reflected and weaker glory.

"Lor', gentlemen, how them stairs do try me!" said the good lady, panting in the doorway and patting her ample breast; "they're that steep and that narrer, as to squeeze the breath out of me."

"You'll stick half-way up some day!" said Cass, chuckling, "then we shall have to send for a carpenter to saw you out!"

Mrs Basket laughed, in nowise offended, and announced that she had come to clear away supper, which she did with much clatter and hard breathing. Once or twice she glanced at the doctor's gloomy face, and blew a sigh with considerable noise. She knew of her lodger's bad fortune, and pitied him profoundly; but not daring to speak, she resumed her work with a mournful wag of the buttercup cap. Ignoring this by-play, which invited conversation, the young men resumed the subject of Moxton. Mrs Basket, dying to join in, at once espied an opportunity of doing so. The mere mention of the name was enough to set her off.

"Lor', gentlemen, you do turn me cold to my bones. Moxton! Why, the name makes me shiver," and Mrs Basket shivered duly to prove the truth of her words.

Usually the lodgers did not encourage their landlady to talk, as her tongue, once set wagging,

A Midnight Surprise

was difficult to stop. But on this occasion her speech was so significant of mystery that Ellis wheeled round his chair to face her, and the reporter on the sofa, with true journalistic instinct, was at once on the alert for news. Mrs Basket, pleased with these tokens of interest, improved upon her speech.

"He has a wife!" said she, and closed her eyes with another shiver.

"Is that a remarkable circumstance?" asked Cass, drily.

"P'r'aps not, sir," replied Mrs Basket, with great dignity. "But what that pore young thing suffers the butcher and the baker do know."

"Does Moxton ill-treat her?"

"'Eaven only knows what he do do, doctor. Nobody's ever seen her save the telegraph boy as called after dark, to be met with a carving-knife."

"A carving-knife! This is interesting. Who had the carving-knife, Mrs Basket?"

"Mrs Moxton, of course. She is young and pretty, I do assure you, gentlemen, yet she came on the child with a knife in her 'and like Lady Macbeth in the play."

"What was that for?"

Mrs Basket wagged her head and the buttercups responded. "She told the boy as she thought he was robbers, and came out with the wepping to protect the silver. But it looks like loonatics to me."

"Do you mean to say she is mad?"

"Doctor, I says nothing, being above scandal."

The Crimson Cryptogram

But this I do say, as she ought to be mad if she ain't. That Moxton"—Mrs Basket shivered like a jelly—"goes out night after night, leaving her shut up in that lonely 'ouse."

"Is the house lonely?"

"Mr Cass, I won't deceive you. It's that lonely as graveyards is company to it. Myrtle Viller they calls it, and it's the larst 'ouse of the row as is spreading out in the brickfield direction. The other villers are unfinished, the contractor as was building them 'aving died with only Myrtle Viller ready to move into. His relatives is a-quarrelling so over his money as they've let the villers be for six months. Mr and Mrs Moxton took up 'ouse in the larst of 'em three months come next week, and they're the only pair as lives in that 'orrible lonely road."

As Mrs Basket drew breath after this long speech and lifted the tray, Ellis put a leading question: "Don't they keep a servant?"

"No, they don't, sir, not as much as a work'us orfan. She is all alone in the 'ouse night after night, as I tells you, and it ain't no wonder as she keeps the carving-knife 'andy."

"Where does Moxton go so regularly?"

"Ah, Mr Cass, where indeed? P'r'aps the perlice may know."

"Come now, Mrs Basket, you have no ground for making such a statement."

"Oh, 'aven't I?" cried Mrs Basket, indignantly. "Why, he's well orf and passes his days indoors doing nothing. 'Ow then does he earn his money?"

A Midnight Surprise

Why does he leave her alone? What's she doing with no servant and a carving-knife? No grounds!" Mrs Basket waddled towards the door, nose in air, and paused there to deliver a last word: "I shouldn't be surprised at 'earing of a tragedy between 'em. Oh, that dratted bell! And at half-past eleven, too! Decent folk should be a-bed."

The night-bell of Ellis's was ringing furiously, and Mrs Basket, putting down the tray, squeezed through the door as hurriedly as her unwieldy form permitted. As the tail of her blue skirt whisked out of sight, Cass jumped up from the sofa and smote the doctor's shoulder.

"Here is your first patient, Bob. Fortune is knocking at the door!"

"Ringing, you mean," said Ellis, joking, to hide his agitation.

As he spoke, the voice of Mrs Basket was heard in wordy expostulation, and a light-footed visitor flitted along the passage and into the room. The new-comer proved to be a woman, young and pretty, bareheaded, and apparently wild with terror. Her entrance and appearance were dramatic.

"The doctor!" she gasped, leaning against the door-post to support her trembling limbs.

"I am a doctor," said Ellis, advancing. "What is it?"

"My husband — my husband is — dead!" She paused with a catching in the throat, then her voice leaped to alto: "Murdered!"

"Murdered!" exclaimed both men, with a simultaneous movement forward.

CHAPTER II

THE WRITING IN BLOOD

THE long arm of coincidence was startlingly apparent in this instance. Both men were so amazed at the terrible news fitting in so neatly, not only with the subject of conversation, but with Mrs Basket's prophetic remark when the bell rang, that they looked at one another dumb-founded. Mrs Moxton stared at their motionless figures with indignant eyes.

"Are you not coming?" she demanded vehemently, seizing the hand of Ellis. "Don't I tell you my husband is dead!"

"I am coming, Mrs Moxton," said Ellis, hurriedly. "But if he is dead my presence will be useless. This is a case for the police."

If Mrs Moxton was pale before she became even paler at this last remark, and, shrinking back, spread out her hands with a terrified gesture. "No, no, not the police! Why the police?"

"You say your husband has been murdered," cried Cass, with sudden suspicion; "therefore the police must be called in at once. Who murdered the man?"

"I don't know," murmured Mrs Moxton. Then

The Crimson Cryptogram

his imperious, suspicious tone seemed to stir her indignation. She threw back her head haughtily. "I don't know," she repeated deliberately. "My husband went out this evening. I sat up for him as he promised to return about midnight. Shortly after eleven"—here she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece—"I heard a cry, and thinking something was wrong I ran to the door. There was someone moaning on the garden path. I went to see who it was, and found my husband bleeding to death from a wound in the back. He died a minute afterwards, and I came for you."

"How did you recognise your husband in the dark?"

"I—I had a candle," she replied, in a low voice and with hesitation.

"It's blowing awful," wheezed Mrs Basket at the door, and the other woman turned towards her abruptly. The landlady's full moon of a face had suspicion written in every wrinkle. "Had you the carving-knife?" she asked.

"The carving-knife?"

"Yes, the same as you frightened the telegraph boy with?"

"I had no carving-knife," returned Mrs Moxton, haughtily. "What do you mean by these questions?" She turned again to the men and burst into furious speech. "Have I come to a lunatic asylum?" she cried. "You talk, this woman talks, and I want help. Doctor, come! Come at once! And you, sir, go for the police if it is necessary."

The Writing in Blood

Ellis hastily threw on a cap, snatched up some needful things for a wounded man, and followed Mrs Moxton out of the house. Mrs Basket and Harry were left face to face with the same thought in their minds.

"What did I say about her 'aving the carving-knife, sir?"

"Yes, by Jove! And her talking of exploring with a lighted candle in this wind!"

"She's afraid of the police, too, Mr Cass," said Mrs Basket, in tragic tones. "She's done for him, sir."

"Well — she — might — No," cried Harry, rumpling his hair. "If she was guilty she would not come for Ellis."

Mrs Basket snorted in a disbelieving manner.

"Oh, wouldn't she, sir? You don't know the hussies women are. That Mrs Moxton's a deep 'un as ever was."

"Here," cried Cass, rummaging about for his cap, "I'm losing time. I must go for the police at once."

"Come back and tell me if they takes her," shouted Mrs Basket after him with morbid glee. "I believe she's done it with the carving-knife."

But Cass did not hear her, as the wind was high and he was already some distance away. As he sped along the silent streets storm-clouds were racing across the face of a watery moon, and a drizzle of rain moistened his face. Being a reporter, Cass was friendly with constables, and knew the station at Dukesfield well, having often