

Fergus Hume



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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066135607

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CHAPTER I

AN EXTRAORDINARY CRIME

Frank Darrel was a young man of twenty-five, with a sufficiency of good looks, and a comfortable income of five hundred a year. Also by way of employing his spare time, he was a realistic novelist of a particularly new school, founded on the axiom that fact invariably poaches on the domain of fiction. He neither conceived nor adopted, but set down actual details of the life around him, with so rigid an adherence to the truth that his published works read like police reports re-written in decent English. In a word, he held the mirror up to nature, and presented the reflection, beautiful or ugly, to the criticism of the British public.

To preach thoroughly his gospel of art, as he conceived it, Darrel lived in London, that microcosm of life in all its phases, good, bad, and indifferent. Usually he worked in the morning, slept in the afternoon, amused himself in the evening, and devoted the night from twelve to five to exploring the deeps of the metropolitan ocean. In a disguise of decent poverty more threadbare than ragged, this enthusiast would exploit the dark corners of the Strand, penetrate into Whitechapel slums, and explore the least-known recesses of the City. On occasion he would view the West End and its civilised vices by gaslight, make expeditions into suburbs of known respectability, and, when weary of observing middle class virtue, would haunt less reputable districts in search of character and adventure. All

his gleanings were then transmuted into vigorous prose, and figured, under picturesque titles, as novels of fact improved into fiction. This method of shifting the commonplace into romance was adopted by one Honoré de Balzac, with a result known to all the intellectual world. Darrel, with less genius than persevering observation, was a disciple of that great man.

One evening late in the summer of last year, Darrel, disguised as a respectable mechanic, found himself observing humanity within the narrow limits of Drury-lane. The hour of midnight had just boomed in twelve strokes from the towers of near churches, and the ragged, hoarse-voiced crowd was beginning to thin into scattered groups. Vendors of various wares had extinguished their flaring lights, and had wheeled home their barrows. Playgoers, chattering about their evening's pleasure, were disappearing into side streets; shops were being closed; hotel-keepers were driving forth late customers more or less intoxicated; and the whole machinery of the quarter's civilisation was running down rapidly, to stop altogether somewhere about the small hours of the morning. Frank, with a short pipe in his mouth, and a keen eye in his head, stood observingly at a corner, and took note of this slackening. It was at this moment that his attention was attracted to a red-headed man.

This individual was tall and stout. He was dressed in a seedy suit of greasy broadcloth; and his hair and beard were a violent red. He seemed restless and ill at ease, passed and re-passed young Darrel, looked into the window of a still open shop, glanced at a near policeman with obvious

nervousness, and conducted himself so uncomfortably that the novelist began to watch him.

"That fellow wants to do something," he thought, "and can't make up his mind to take the first step. I'll bet a criminal matter occupies his thoughts. I'll keep my eye on him."

Shortly the red-headed man walked past Frank with a resolute air, and disappeared down a dark lane to the left. Darrel, after some hesitation was about to follow, when the creature returned, and again, began his restless wanderings in the more populated lane. Once or twice he paused near the policeman, as though wishing to ask him some question, and once or twice his heart so failed him that he turned away, with a look of anxiety. Then he caught sight of Darrel, and advanced directly towards him; but again flinched and wilted away. At once interested and puzzled, Frank turned to observe the shop window, but in the meantime watched the red-headed man out of the corner of his eye. His appearance and behaviour promised an adventure.

For the third time this vacillating individual stepped up to the policeman and almost opened his mouth to speak; but before he could utter a word he shrank away, and placed himself at the shop-window next to Frank. The young man, apparently indifferent, out of diplomacy, became aware that he was being scrutinised; and judged that the man was debating the advisability of speaking to him. The next moment, his judgment proved correct.

"I beg your pardon," whispered the red-haired man in husky tones, "but could you tell me the whereabouts of Mortality-lane?"

"It is close at hand," replied Frank readily. "I'll take you there if you like."

"Thank you, no," said the other hurriedly; "just tell me where----"

"I can't explain," answered Darrel, cutting him short. "You would not be able to find it in this network of streets. If you don't trust me, ask that policeman to guide you."

The man winced and drew a quick breath, then looked again at Frank. "You are an educated man," said he--"a gentleman."

"I might say the same of you," rejoined Darrel, who had noted the refined accent of the man, "but that is neither here nor there. Mortality-lane is to the left. Good-night, sir."

"Stay, stay!" cried the red-headed man as Darrel moved away. "I trust you; please guide me to the place."

Ever sparing of words, Frank nodded and turned down a side street, followed by his companion, who walked beside him in a cat-like way. In the narrow street there was but scant light, as the gas lamps were few and far between; still, the luminosity of the summer night revealed to Darrel that his companion kept at a respectful distance and had his right hand in the breast of his seedy coat. Evidently he was nervous of his guide, and feared a sudden assault in some dark corner. From this obvious fear Darrel concluded that his companion was not a criminal; and, moreover, carried some valuables about him which he dreaded might be stolen. On further reflection, the novelist decided that the red-headed man was a disguised gentleman, who was venturing into strange places and stranger company on some disreputable errand. Darrel wondered what his purpose might be, but did

not think it advisable to ask questions; nor, as he mentally admitted, had he the right to do so.

The two men walked onward in silence. The one a little in advance of the other. Turning down one street, crossing a second, walking up a third, they at length emerged into a small open space in which stood three four-wheeled cabs. Opposite the first of these, on the further side of the square, as it might be called, there was a narrow alley, and to this Darrel pointed.

"Yonder is Mortality-lane," he said, "but it is not a very safe place for a single person. If you like, I'll go down----"

"No--no," interrupted the red-headed man eagerly, "you have shewn me where it is; that is all I wish to know."

"Are you not going down the lane?" asked Darrel in surprise.

"On the contrary, I am going home," replied the man; then adding in an abrupt tone, "Good-night," he walked towards the first cab and spoke a few words to the driver. Darrel saw that he gave the cabman some money, then disappeared into the cab, closing the door after him. For two or three minutes the driver occupied himself in taking the blanket off his horse and adjusting the harness. Then he mounted the box and drove off slowly in the direction of the Strand.

At once a wild desire came on Darrel to ascertain the reason of the red-headed man's strange behaviour. Almost without thinking he crossed over to the second cab and opened the door.

"Follow that first cab," said he to the driver, "and I'll give you half a sovereign."

"Hullo!" replied the man, noting suspiciously the dress of his fare, "wot's yer little game?"

"Police business worth half a sovereign," was Darrel's diplomatic reply.

"Blimme, that's all right, sir," said the driver, accepting this explanation with alacrity. "Jump in, an' I'll ketch up t'other kebab in two shakes!"

Confident that the driver would earn his money, Darrel lay back on the cushions, and wondered what would be the outcome of his pursuit. That the red-headed man should have turned away at the very goal towards which he had requested guidance was most extraordinary. If he had no special business in Mortality-lane, why had he inquired for it? and if he had a reason for going, and his reason was an innocent one, why did he not ask the policeman in Drury-lane instead of applying to a complete stranger? Frank, ever on the alert for romance, asked himself these questions, but could find no answer to them. However, he hoped to gratify his curiosity when he caught up with the stranger who was the cause of it--provided the stranger was willing to afford an explanation.

The cab--presumably following the other vehicle--drove down Bell-street, and turned into the Strand, now almost emptied of traffic. It rolled along the thoroughfare as far as Trafalgar-square, then turned down Northumberland-avenue, passed along the Embankment, and up Arundel-street into the Strand again. Darrel was greatly puzzled by this circular route--the more so when he found his cab driving up Drury-lane. Then a sudden thought struck him.

"The red-headed man fancied I was watching him," he said to himself, "and drove away to get rid of me. I should not be surprised if the first cab, with him inside, returns to the entrance to Mortality-lane."

This proved to be the case, for following almost the same route as he had conducted the stranger, the first four-wheeler drove into the little square and took up its old station at the mouth of the lane. But by this time the third cab left behind had disappeared.

"'Ere y'are, sir!" said Darrel's driver, opening the door. "We've both come back 'ome an' never stopped the whole bloomin' time. Carn't mek out wot 'Enry's fare's bin arter."

Frank, as puzzled as the cabman, jumped out, and, walking to the first vehicle, looked inside. To his surprise, the red-headed man had vanished.

"Wot's wrong with moy keb, mister," said the gruff voice of the driver.

"The man--the man with the red hair?" inquired the amazed Darrel.

"Oh, 'e's all right. Don't y' fret yerself about 'im. Wot y' poll-pryin' 'ere for, eh?"

"Y'd best taike care, 'Enry," remarked the other cabman, sauntering up. "This gent's to do with the perlice."

The insolence of Henry gave place at once to respect. "Didn't know you was a 'tec, sir. Might the cove with carrots be wanted?"

"He might be," said Darrel, not thinking it wise to disclaim the profession attributed to him by the two cabmen. "When did he get out?"

"Well, y' see, sir, he were never in, so to speak."

"What do you mean?"

"'Twas this way, sir. The carrots cove comes 'ere, an' sez: 'A man'--you, sir--'e's follerin' me. I'll give y' five bob to let me pass through yer keb an' down thet there lane. Then,' sez he, 'jes y' drive orf an' drive back, an' y' can pick me up and taik me 'ome.' So while I was talking the blannkit orf he whips in at one door, an' out of t'other, and down thet lane like mad. I drives orf, an' larfs when I sees you was follerin'. So 'ere I am back agin t' pick 'im up; but I don't see the bloomin' cove," concluded Henry, with a glance round.

It was with great amazement that Darrel listened to the story of the cabman. Strange indeed must have been the errand of the red-haired man to Mortality-lane, when he was so suspicious of a stranger and took such elaborate precautions against discovery. The word discovery no sooner flashed into Darrel's brain than he repeated it aloud. Discovery of what? With, perhaps, unpardonable curiosity, Frank made up his mind to acquaint himself with the reason of the man's strange conduct.

"Well," said he in reply to Henry, "I'll wait here with you until this man reappears."

"Y'll wait by yerself, then," said Henry, getting on his box. "It's past one o'clock, an', fare or no fare, I ain't a-goin to stay all night."

When he drove off Darrel was left alone with the other cabman, and turned towards him in some perplexity. "Are you going too?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Moy missus'll be expecting me," replied the man; "But," he added, taking down one of the cab lamps, "If

y' think the gent's in that lane I'll go down with yer, an' look him up. Then I can drive y' both t' Bow-street."

With great alacrity Frank assented to this, and they went down the middle of the lane. As the gas lamps were few, the cabman flashed the light he carried from right to left. Mortality-lane is not very long, and they were soon close to the end where it opens into Lincoln's Inn Fields. Here the cabman uttered an oath as he stumbled over a body. Darrel looked, and, in the circle of the light cast by the carriage candle, beheld the red-haired man stone dead, with an ugly wound over the heart.

CHAPTER II

THE BLONDE LADY

On Monday morning Darrel lingered over his breakfast, considering the woful issue of his Saturday night's adventure. The alarm having been given by Bike, the cabman, the police had taken charge of the body and of the case and had requested Darrel to hold himself in readiness to be called as a witness. But the novelist, although willing to give evidence, wished to take a more active part in the matter. He desired to learn the motive for the crime, to discover the criminal, and ascertain by what means the murdered man had been lured to his death in Mortality-lane.

In a word, Darrel wanted to change from spectator into actor, and to turn detective for the unriddling of this extraordinary enigma. To him the experience as he conceived, would be a liberal education in literary work.

While thus meditating, a card was brought to him inscribed, rather abruptly, with the curt name, "Torry." Who he might be Darrel could not guess, but the owner of this baronial appellation seemed to think that it was sufficient to introduce him, as one not unknown to renown. Somewhat amused by this hinted vanity, Darrel gave orders that the visitor should be admitted, and speedily found himself face to face with a short little man, smiling and voluble. Mr. Torry was extremely stout, with a plump, red-cheeked face, clean-shaven; very white teeth, and a fringe of scanty brown hair encircling a polished bald head. At first sight he looked a kindly, frivolous creature, but a closer inspection shewed that his eyes contradicted this opinion. These were of a greyish-blue, keen and penetrating, and changed colour in accordance with the emotions in their owner's mind. A man with such eyes could not be a fool, and, with characteristic caution, Darrel held his peace until the visitor should explain his business.

This was done in a moment.

"I have called," said Mr. Torry, taking a chair uninvited, "to see you about this Mortality-lane affair."

"From Scotland Yard?"

"From New Scotland Yard, to be precise. I am Torry the detective, and the case I spoke of has been placed in my hands for elucidation."

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Torry," cried Darrel eagerly, "and any evidence I can give is at your disposal. But I have a favour to ask of you."

"A favour!" cried Mr. Torry, in his turn, "Granted. I love doing favours."

"Then do me this one," said Frank. "Let me assist you in the conduct of this case."

Mr. Torry's eyes flashed like steel, and his mouth shut with a snap on the curt query: "Why?"

"Well," said Darrel slowly, "you see, I am a novelist who tries to set forth things as they are, for the benefit of the B. P. I have written one or two detective novels, and have explained the mysteries of divers crimes, simply because, in the first instance, I invented those crimes. To parody Gilbert's song, I made the crime fit the discovery, and, so to speak, built up a house of cards, to be knocked down in the final chapter. Now here, Mr. Torry," pursued the young man with uplifted finger, "here is a crime in actual life, of chance's own making, which I, not having conceived, cannot elucidate. I, therefore, wish to set my wits to work, in order to learn if they will serve me as well in fact as they have done in fiction. I desire to take an active part in the working out of this real problem, to see if my literary method of detective analysis is correct. On these grounds--purely selfish ones, I fear--I ask you to let me assist you."

Mr. Torry, who had listened to this long speech with his head on one side like an elderly bird, nodded at its conclusion. "I need not take time to consider your request," said he briskly; "you shall be my right hand if you will; but"--more gravely--"on one condition."

"And that is?----"

"That you let me guide you in every way, and that you take no step without consulting me."

"Surely! I am only too glad to bow to your experience and judgment."

"Then that settles it; we are partners. Your hand, Mr. Darrel," and novelist and detective shook hands on their agreement.

After coming to this conclusion, they settled themselves to discuss the important matter which had brought them together.

"Our task is to find out who killed this red-haired man, I suppose?" said Darrel slowly.

"Well, not exactly, sir. You see, I know who killed him," replied the detective, nodding.

Frank jumped to his feet. "You know who killed him?" he cried in amazement.

"Yes. A lady with fair hair."

"Are you sure?"

"Going by circumstantial evidence, I am."

"But are you sure? How do you know? Is she arrested?" The questions poured out of Darrel's mouth until Torry stopped him with a gesture.

"She is beyond the power of the law," said he.

"She is--dead."

"Dead!" cried Darrel, recoiling.

"Murdered."

"Another crime?"

"Precisely; and committed within an hour of the other. Red-hair was murdered, presumably, between the hours of

twelve and one o'clock. Fair-hair was stabbed between one and two, also presumably."

"It seems all presumption, Mr. Torry."

"Naturally," replied the detective, "and must continue so, until the post-mortem examination, which takes place tomorrow at three."

"Where was the woman's body found?"

"On the Embankment, to be precise," added Torry using his favourite phrase. "The corpse was discovered on the steps of Cleopatra's Needle leading down to the water."

"Oh!" said Darrel thoughtfully; "then the presumption is that the assassin tried to throw the body of his victim into the river?"

"I think so; but probably he was interrupted while dragging it down the steps and was forced to fly."

"Who found the body?"

"A tramp who went to wash his hands in the river at six o'clock in the morning. I was busy examining the clothes of the red-haired man, when I heard of this new murder. Learning that it was a woman, I hurried off to view the body."

"Had you any particular reason for this haste?" asked Frank.

"I had a theory," rejoined Torry reflectively. "Rather far-fetched, to be sure; still a feasible theory. See here!"

From his breast the detective produced a narrow strip of black lace much torn, and threw it on the white cloth of the breakfast-table. Darrel looked at it casually, and then glanced inquiringly at Torry.

"That lace," explained Torry, "was in the left hand of the red-haired man; therefore I judged that when stabbed by the assassin he put out his hand to ward off the blow and mechanically clutched at the garments of his assailant. Now men do not wear lace, so I naturally concluded that the person who killed him was a woman. You follow me?"

Darrel nodded. "Yes, your theory is a natural one. But how did you connect the one woman with the other?"

"Well," said Torry, smoothing his bald head in a puzzled manner, "you have me there, for I don't exactly know how I can explain my idea. It was a flash of genius, I suppose. I thought it peculiar that a man should have been murdered by a woman, and then, on the same night, that a woman should have been killed also. The man was stabbed to the heart; the woman was stabbed to the heart. The first was killed in Mortality-lane; the second on the Embankment, no very great distance away. All these facts made me fancy that the one crime might be the outcome of the other."

"I don't wonder at your fancy," said Darrel; "with coincidences the same thought would have occurred to me. So you went to look at the woman's body?"

"Yes; and I found lace on her mantle similar to that; also half a yard torn off the front. There is about half a yard there," said Torry, pointing to the lace on the table; "in fact, I have no doubt but that the woman murdered the man."

"It seems like it," assented Darrel; "but who murdered the woman?"

"Ah! that is the problem we have to solve, Mr. Darrel. There is no mark on the woman's linen, no letter in her pocket, no name on her handkerchief. She seems to have

been a well-to-do woman, in easy circumstances, as her clothes are of good material and well made. How to establish her identity I really do not know; there there is absolutely no point whence one can start."

"Why not start from the red-headed man?" suggested Frank.

"Why," said Torry, pinching his chin between thumb and forefinger, "I might do that if he had not been disguised."

"Disguised?"

"Yes; the red hair is a wig, the red beard is false. The deceased is a gentleman of some age nearer sixty than fifty. He has a plump face and a bald head with a fringe of white hair--something like me," said Mr. Torry in parenthesis, "only my hair is brown. The man is clean-shaven and has several teeth stopped with gold."

"You think he is--or rather was--a gentleman?"

"I'm sure of it. His hands and feet are carefully attended to, and his linen is beyond reproach."

"Ha! His linen. Is there no mark on it?"

"There is. He changed his outward garments, but not his linen or socks--which shows that he was an amateur in disguising himself. A man who was in the habit of masquerading for evil purposes would have changed from top to toe. But this poor creature, not expecting to be murdered, never thought it was necessary to change anything but his outward aspect."

"Is there a name on his shirt, then?"

"No; there are initials. On his shirt, his undershirt, his pants, and on his socks are two letters, 'J.G.'"

"The initials of his name."

"I should think so," replied Torry. "All his underclothes are in good taste and of an expensive quality. I judge him to be a rich man."

"You speak of him in the present instead of the past," said Darrel grimly. "He is not a man now, but a thing. Well, Mr. Torry, can't you trace his identity by those initials?"

"Doubtless; especially as the name of the firm who made the shirt is stamped on the neck of it--Harcot and Harcot, of Bond-street. Oh, I don't think there will be any difficulty in identifying the man; but it will be more difficult to discover the name of the woman."

"I don't think so," argued Darrel. "The one crime includes the other. Find out the motive of the woman in killing the man, and you will doubtless be led to discover the reason she was killed herself. I should begin from the clue of the initials."

"Perhaps I will," said Torry thoughtfully; "and failing that clue, I'll try the other."

"The other! What other?"

"Why," said the detective, looking directly at his companion, "the clue of the Blue Mummy."

CHAPTER III

MR. TORRY'S THEORY

"The Blue Mummy," repeated Darrel wonderingly; "what do you mean?"

"Why!" said the detective, "I should rather say, the clue of the *two* Blue Mummies. Here they are."

Out of his pocket, Torry produced two little clay images in the shape of mummies, each six inches in length, and coloured a deep blue. The lifeless faces, the swathings and bandages of the rigid forms, were perfectly modelled in clay, and on the breast of each was a representation of the sun rayed round with spiral flames. These idol-s--as they doubtless were--appeared to be of great antiquity, and were, undoubtedly, fine specimens of ceramic art. That the relics of a dead and gone civilisation should be connected with a modern criminal case, amazed Frank not a little.

"Egyptian workmanship without doubt," said he, examining one of the little figures, "although I am not learned in such matters. Where did you get them?"

"One was found in the pocket of the dead woman, the other on the ground near the body of the man. Another proof, to my mind, that there is a connection between the two crimes."

"Curious," murmured Darrel, his eyes fixed on one of the images. "I wonder what they symbolise. If we could learn we might discover the motive for this double crime."

"You don't know the meaning of these idols, I suppose, sir?"

Darrel shook his head. "No," said he, "but I am acquainted with an Egyptologist who might tell us all about them. I'll take them to him if you like, Mr. Torry."