



THE JEWELLED SKULL.

BY DICK DONOVAN,

Author of "The Man from Manchester," "Tracked to Doom," "Caught at Last," "Who Poisoned Hetty Duncan," "A Detective's Triumphs," "In the Grip of the Law," &c., &c.

BUSILY engaged one morning in my office in trying to solve some knotty problems that called for my earnest attention, I was suddenly disturbed by a knock at the door, and, in answer to my "Come in!" one of my assistants entered, although I had given strict orders that I was not to be disturbed for two hours.

"Excuse me, sir," said my man, "but a gentleman wishes to see you, and will take no denial."

"I thought I told you not to disturb me under any circumstances," I replied, somewhat tartly.

"Yes, so you did. But the gentleman insists upon seeing you. He says his business is most urgent."

"Who is he?"

"Here is his card, sir."

I glanced at the card the assistant handed to me. It bore the name—

COLONEL MAURICE ODELL.

The Star and Garter Club.

Colonel Maurice Odell was an utter stranger to me. I had never heard his name before; but I knew that the Star and Garter Club was a club of the highest rank, and that its members were men of position and eminence. I therefore considered it probable that the Colonel's business was likely, as he said, to be urgent, and I told my assistant to show him in.

A few minutes later the door opened, and there entered a tall, thin, wiry-looking man, with an unmistakable military bearing. His face, clean shaved save for a heavy grey moustache, was tanned with exposure to sun and rain. His hair, which was cropped close, was iron grey, as were his eyebrows, and as they were very bushy, and there were two deep vertical furrows between the eyes, he had the appearance of being a stern, determined, unyielding man. And as I glanced at his well-marked face, with its powerful jaw, I came to the conclusion that he was a martinet of the old-fashioned type, who, in the name of discipline, could perpetrate almost any cruelty; and yet, on the other hand, when not under military influence, was capable of the most generous acts and deeds. He was faultlessly dressed, from his patent leather boots to his canary-coloured kid gloves. But though, judging from his dress, he was somewhat of a coxcomb, a glance at the hard, stern features and the keen, deep-set grey eyes, was sufficient to dispel any idea that he was a mere carpet soldier.

"Pardon me for intruding upon you, Mr. Donovan," he said, bowing stiffly and formally, "but I wish to consult you about a very important matter, and, as I leave for Egypt to-morrow, I have very little time at my disposal."

"I am at your service, Colonel," I replied, as I pointed to a seat, and began to feel a

deep interest in the man, for there was an individuality about him that stamped him at once as a somewhat remarkable person. His voice was in keeping with his looks. It was firm, decisive, and full of volume, and attracted one by its resonance. I felt at once that such a man was not likely to give himself much concern about trifles, and, therefore, the business he had come about must be of considerable importance. So, pushing the papers I had been engaged upon on one side, I turned my revolving chair so that I might face him and have my back to the light, and telling him that I was prepared to listen to anything he had to say, I half closed my eyes, and began to make a study of him.

"I will be as brief as possible," he began, as he placed his highly polished hat and his umbrella on the table. "I am a military man, and have spent much of my time in India, but two years ago I returned home, and took up my residence at the Manor, Esher. Twice since I went to live there the place has been robbed in a somewhat mysterious manner. The first occasion was a little over a year ago, when a number of antique silver cups were stolen. The Scotland Yard authorities endeavoured to trace the thieves, but failed."

"I think I remember hearing something about that robbery," I remarked, as I tried to recall the details. "But in what way was it a mysterious one?"

"Because it was impossible to determine how the thieves gained access to the house. The place had not been broken into."

"How about your servants?" I asked.

"Oh, I haven't a servant who isn't honesty itself,"

"Pray proceed. What about the second robbery?"

"That is what I have come to you about. It is a very serious business indeed, and has been carried out in the mysterious way that characterised the first one."

"You mean it is serious as regards the value of the property stolen?"

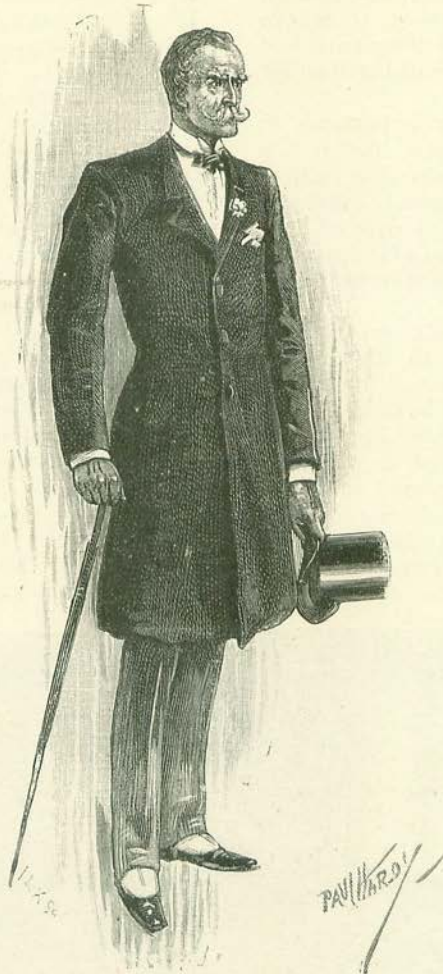
"In one sense, yes; but it is something more than that. During my stay in India I rendered very considerable service indeed to the Rajah of Mooltan, a man of great wealth. Before I left India he presented me with a souvenir of a very extraordinary character. It was nothing more nor less than the skull of one of his ancestors."

As it seemed to me a somewhat frivolous matter for the Colonel to take up my time because he had lost the mouldy old skull of a dead and gone Rajah, I said, "Excuse me, Colonel, but you can hardly expect me to devote my energies to tracing this somewhat gruesome souvenir of yours, which probably the thief will hasten to bury as speedily as possible, unless he happens to be of a very morbid turn of mind."

"You are a little premature," said the Colonel, with a suspicion of sternness. "That skull has been valued at upwards of twelve thousand pounds."

"Twelve thousand pounds!" I echoed, as my interest in my visitor deepened.

"Yes, sir; twelve thousand pounds. It is fashioned into a drinking goblet, bound with solid gold bands, and encrusted with precious stones. In the bottom of the goblet, inside, is a diamond of the purest water, and which alone is said to be worth two thousand pounds. Now, quite apart



"THE COLONEL."

from the intrinsic value of this relic, it has associations for me which are beyond price, and further than that, my friend the Rajah told me that if ever I parted with it, or it was stolen, ill fortune would ever afterwards pursue me. Now, Mr. Donovan, I am not a superstitious man, but I confess that in this instance I am weak enough to believe that the Rajah's words will come true, and that some strange calamity will befall either me or mine."

"Without attaching any importance to that," I answered, "I confess that it is a serious business, and I will do what I can to recover this extraordinary goblet. But you say you leave for Egypt to-morrow?"

"Yes. I am going out on a Government commission, and shall probably be absent six months."

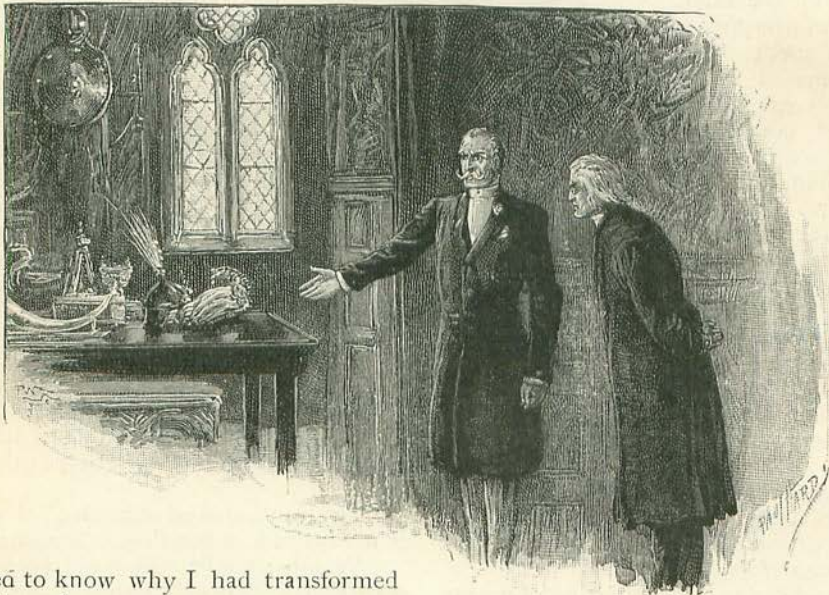
"Then I had better travel down to Esher with you at once, as I like to start at the fountain head in such matters."

The Colonel was most anxious that I should do this, and, requesting him to wait for a few minutes, I retired to my inner sanctum, and when I reappeared it was in the character of a venerable parson, with flowing grey hair, spectacles, and the orthodox white choker. My visitor did not recognise me until I spoke, and then he

I had assumed, for I considered it important that none of his household should know that I was a detective. I begged that he would introduce me as the Rev. John Marshall, from the Midland Counties. He promised to do this, and we took the next train down to Esher.

The Manor was a quaint old mansion, and dated back to the commencement of Queen Elizabeth's reign. The Colonel had bought the property, and being somewhat of an antiquarian, he had allowed it to remain in its original state, so far as the actual building was concerned. But he had had it done up inside a little, and furnished in great taste in the Elizabethan style, and instead of the walls being papered they were hung with tapestry.

I found that besides the goblet some antique rings and a few pieces of gold and silver had been carried off. But these things were of comparatively small value, and the Colonel's great concern was about the lost skull, which had been kept under a glass shade in what he called his "Treasure Chamber." It was a small room, lighted by an oriel window. The walls were wainscoted half way up, and the upper part was hung with tapestry. In this room there was a most extraordinary



THE TREASURE CHAMBER.

requested to know why I had transformed myself in such a manner.

I told him I had a particular reason for it, but felt it was advisable not to reveal the reason then, and I enjoined on him the necessity of supporting me in the character

and miscellaneous collection of things, including all kinds of Indian weapons; elephant trappings; specimens of clothing

as worn by the Indian nobility ; jewellery, including rings, bracelets, anklets ; in fact, it was a veritable museum of very great interest and value.

The Colonel assured me that the door of this room was always kept locked, and the key was never out of his possession. The lower part of the chimney of the old-fashioned fireplace I noticed was protected by iron bars let into the masonry, so that the thief, I was sure, did not come down the chimney ; nor did he come in at the window, for it only opened at each side, and the apertures were so small that a child could not have squeezed through. Having noted these things, I hinted to the Colonel that the thief had probably gained access to the room by means of a duplicate key. But he hastened to assure me that the lock was of singular construction, having been specially made. There were only two keys to it. One he always carried about with him, the other he kept in a secret drawer in an old escritoire in his library, and he was convinced that nobody knew of its existence. He explained the working of the lock, and also showed me the key, which was the most remarkable key I ever saw ; and, after examining the lock, I came to the conclusion that it could not be opened by any means apart from the special key. Nevertheless the thief had succeeded in getting into the room. How did he manage it ? That was the problem I had to solve, and that done I felt that I should be able to get a clue to the robber. I told the Colonel that before leaving the house I should like to see every member of his household, and he said I should be able to see the major portion of them at luncheon, which he invited me to partake of.

I found that his family consisted of his wife—an Anglo-Indian lady—three charming daughters, his eldest son, Ronald Odell, a young man about four-and-twenty, and a younger son, a youth of twelve. The family were waited upon at table by two parlour-maids, the butler, and a page-boy. The butler was an elderly, sedate, gentlemanly-looking man ; the boy had an open, frank face, and the same remark applied to the two girls. As I studied them I saw nothing calculated to raise my suspicions in any way. Indeed, I felt instinctively that I could safely pledge myself for their honesty.

When the luncheon was over the Colonel produced cigars, and the ladies and the youngest boy having retired, the host, his

son Ronald and I ensconced ourselves in comfortable chairs, and proceeded to smoke. Ronald Odell was a most extraordinary looking young fellow. He had been born and brought up in India, and seemed to suffer from an unconquerable lassitude that gave him a lifeless, insipid appearance. He was very dark, with dreamy, languid eyes, and an expressionless face of a peculiar sallowness. He was tall and thin, with hands that were most noticeable, owing to the length, flexibility, and thinness of the fingers. He sat in the chair with his body huddled up as it were ; his long legs stretched straight out before him ; his pointed chin resting on his chest, while he seemed to smoke his cigar as if unconscious of what he was doing.

It was natural that the robbery should form a topic of conversation as we smoked and sipped some excellent claret, and at last I turned to the Colonel, and said :—

“It seems to me that there is a certain mystery about this robbery which is very puzzling. But, now, don't you think it's probable that somebody living under your roof holds the key to the mystery ?”

“God bless my life, no !” answered the Colonel, with emphatic earnestness. “I haven't a servant in the house but that I would trust with my life !”

“What is your view of the case, Mr. Ronald ?” I said, turning to the son.

Without raising his head, he answered in a lisping, drawling, dreamy way :—

“It's a queer business ; and I don't think the governor will ever get his skull back.”

“I hope you will prove incorrect in that,” I said. “My impression is that, if the Colonel puts the matter into the hands of some clever detective, the mystery will be solved.”

“No,” drawled the young fellow, “there isn't a detective fellow in London capable of finding out how that skull was stolen, and where it has been taken to. Not even Dick Donovan, who is said to have no rival in his line.”

I think my face coloured a little as he unwittingly paid me this compliment. Though my character for the nonce was that of a clergyman I did not enter into any argument with him ; but merely remarked that I thought he was wrong. At any rate, I hoped so, for his father's sake.

Master Ronald made no further remark, but remained silent for some time, and seemingly so absorbed in his own reflections that he took no notice of the con-

versation carried on by me and his father ; and presently, having finished his cigar, he rose, stretched his long, flexible body, and without a word left the room.

"You mustn't take any notice of my son," said the Colonel, apologetically. "He is very queer in his manners, for he is constitutionally weak, and has peculiar ideas about things in general. He dislikes clergymen, for one thing, and that is the reason, no doubt, why he has been so boorish towards you. For, of course, he is deceived by your garb, as all in the house are, excepting myself and wife. I felt it advisable to tell her who you are, in order to prevent her asking you any awkward questions that you might not be prepared to answer."

I smiled as I told him I had made a study of the various characters I was called upon to assume in pursuit of my calling, and that I was generally able to talk the character as well as dress it.

A little later he conducted me downstairs, in order that I might see the rest of the servants, consisting of a most amiable cook, whose duties appeared to agree with her remarkably well, and three other women, including a scullery-maid ; while in connection with the stables were a coachman, a groom, and a boy.

Having thus passed the household in review, as it were, I next requested that I might be allowed to spend a quarter of an hour or so alone in the room from whence the skull and other things had been stolen. Whilst in the room with the Colonel I had formed an opinion which I felt it desirable to keep to myself, and my object in asking to visit the room alone was to put this opinion to the test,

The floor was of dark old oak, polished and waxed, and there was not a single board that was movable. Having satisfied myself of that fact, I next proceeded to examine the wainscoting with the greatest care, and after going over every inch of it, I came to a part that gave back a hollow sound to my raps. I experienced a strange sense of delight as I discovered this, for it, so far, confirmed me in my opinion that the room had been entered by a secret door, and here was evidence of a door. The antiquity of the house and the oak panelling had had something to do with this opinion, for I knew that in old houses of the kind secret doors were by no means uncommon.

Although I was convinced that the panel which gave back a hollow sound when rapped was a door, I could detect no means of opening it. Save that it sounded hollow, it was exactly like the other panels, and there was no appearance of any lock or spring, and as the time I had stipulated for had expired, I rejoined the Colonel, and remarked to him incidentally—

"I suppose there is no way of entering that room except by the doorway from the landing?"

"Oh no, certainly not. The window is too small, and the chimney is barred,

as you know, for I saw you examining it."

My object in asking the question was to see if he suspected in any way the existence of a secret door ; but it was now very obvious that he did nothing of the kind, and I did not deem it advisable to tell him of my own suspicions.

"You say you are obliged to depart for Egypt to-morrow, Colonel?" I asked.

"Yes. I start to-morrow night."



"I CAME TO A PART THAT GAVE BACK A HOLLOW SOUND."

"Then I must ask you to give me *carte blanche* in this matter."

"Oh, certainly."

"And in order to facilitate my plans it would be as well to make a confidante of Mrs. Odell. The rest you must leave to me."

"What do you think the chances are of discovering the thief?" he asked, with a dubious expression.

"I *shall* discover him," I answered emphatically. Whereupon the Colonel looked more than surprised, and proceeded to rattle off a string of questions with the object of learning why I spoke so decisively. But I was compelled to tell him that I could give him no reason, for though I had worked out a theory which intuitively I believed to be right, I had not at that moment a shred of acceptable proof in support of my theory, and that therefore I could not commit myself to raising suspicions against anyone until I was prepared to do something more than justify them.

He seemed rather disappointed, although he admitted the soundness of my argument.

"By the way, Colonel," I said, as I was about to take my departure, after having had a talk with his wife, "does it so happen that there is anything the matter with the roof of your house?"

"Not that I am aware of," he answered, opening his eyes wide with amazement at what no doubt seemed to him an absurd question. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I want to go on the roof without attracting the attention of anyone."

"Let us go at once, then," he said eagerly.

"No, not now. But I see that the greater part of the roof is flat, and leaded. Now, in the course of two or three days I shall present myself here in the guise of a plumber, and I shall be obliged by your giving orders that I am to be allowed to ascend to the roof without let or hindrance, as the lawyers say."

"Oh, certainly I will; but it seems to me an extraordinary proceeding," he exclaimed.

I told him that many things necessarily seemed extraordinary when the reasons for them were not understood, and with that remark I took my departure, having promised the Colonel to do everything mortal man could do to recover the lost skull.

Three days later I went down to the Manor disguised as a working plumber, and was admitted without any difficulty, as the Colonel had left word that a man was coming down from London to examine the

roof. As a servant was showing me upstairs to the top landing, where a trap-door in the ceiling gave access to the leads, I passed Ronald Odell on the stairs. He was attired in a long dressing-gown, had Turkish slippers on his feet, a fez on his head, and a cigar in his mouth, from which he was puffing great volumes of smoke. His face was almost ghastly in its pallor, and his eyes had the same dreamy look which I had noticed on my first visit. His hands were thrust deep in his pockets, and his movements and manner were suggestive of a person walking in his sleep, rather than a waking conscious man. This suggestion was heightened by the fact that before I could avoid him he ran full butt against me. That, however, seemed to partially arouse him from his lethargic condition, and turning round, with a fierceness of expression that I scarcely deemed him capable of, he exclaimed—

"You stupid fool, why don't you look where you are going to?"

I muttered out an apology, and he strode down the stairs growling to himself.

"Who is that?" I asked of the servant.

"That's the master's eldest son."

"He is a queer-looking fellow."

"I should think he was," answered the girl with a sniggering laugh. "I should say he has a slate off."

"Well, upon my word I should be inclined to agree with you," I remarked. "What does he do?"

"Nothing but smoke the greater part of the day."

"Does he follow no business or profession?"

"Not that I know of; though he generally goes out between six and seven in the evening, and does not come back till late."

"Where does he go to?"

"Oh, I don't know. He doesn't tell us servants his affairs. But there's something very queer about him. I don't like his looks at all."

"Doesn't his father exercise any control over him?"

"Not a bit of it. Why, his father dotes on him, and would try and get the moon for him if he wanted it."

"And what about his mother?"

"Well, her favourite is young Master Tom. He's a nice lad, now, as different again to his brother. In fact, I think the missus is afraid of Mr. Ronald. He doesn't treat his mother at all well. And now that the Colonel has gone away we shall all

have a pretty time of it. He's a perfect demon in the house when his father is not here."

As we had now reached the ladder that gave access to the trap door in the roof, I requested the maid to wait while I went outside.

My object in going on to the roof was to see if there was any communication between there and the "Treasure Chamber." But the only thing I noticed was a trap door on a flat part of the roof between two chimney stalks. I tried to lift the door, but found it fastened. So after a time I went back to where I had left the servant, and inquired of her where the communication with the other trap door was, and she answered—

"Oh, I think that's in the lumber room; but nobody ever goes in there. They say it's haunted." I laughed, and she added, with a toss of her head, "Well, I tell you, I've heard some very queer noises there myself. Me and Jane, the upper housemaid, sleep in a room adjoining it, and we've sometimes been frightened out of our wits."

I requested her to show me where the room was, as I was anxious to see if there was any leakage from the roof. This she did, and in order to reach the room we had to mount up a back staircase, and traverse a long passage. At the end of the passage she pushed open a door, saying, "There you are, but I ain't a-going in."

As the room was in total darkness I requested her to procure me a candle, which she at once got, and then she left me to explore the room alone. It was filled up with a miscellaneous collection of lumber, boxes and packing cases predominating. There

was a small window, but it was closely shuttered, and a flight of wooden steps led to the trap door I had noticed on the roof. I examined these steps very carefully, and found that they were thickly encrusted with dirt and dust, and had not been trodden upon for a very long time. The door was fastened down by means of a chain that was padlocked to a staple in the wall; and chain and padlock were very rusty. The walls of the room were wainscoted, and the wains-

cot in places was decayed and worm-eaten. Going down on my knees, I minutely examined the floor through a magnifying glass and detected foot-marks made with slippered feet, and I found they led to one particular corner of the room where a sort of gangway had been formed by the boxes and other lumber being moved on one side. This was very suggestive, and rapping on the wainscot I found that it was hollow. For some time I searched for a means of opening it, but without result, until with almost startling suddenness, as I passed my hand up and down the side of the woodwork, the door swung back. I had unconsciously touched the spring, and peering into the black void thus disclosed by the opening of the door, I was enabled to discern by the flickering light of the candle, the head of a flight of stone steps, that were obviously built in the



"THE DOOR SWUNG BACK."

thickness of the wall.

At this discovery I almost exclaimed "Eureka!" for I now felt that I had the key to the mystery. As I did not wish the servant to know what I was doing, I went to the passage to satisfy myself that she was not observing my movements; but a dread of the ghost-haunted lumber-room

had caused her to take herself off altogether.

Closing the door of the room, I returned to the aperture in the wainscot, and minutely examined the head of the steps, where I saw unmistakable traces of the slippered feet which were so noticeable in the dust that covered the floor of the room. Descending the steps, which were very narrow, I reached the bottom, and found further progress barred by a door that was without handle or lock; but, after some time, I discovered a small wooden knob sunk in the woodwork at the side, and, pressing this, the door, with almost absolute noiselessness, slid back, and lo! the "Treasure Chamber" was revealed. In the face of this discovery, I no longer entertained a doubt that the thief had entered the room by means of this secret passage. And there was no one in the whole household upon whom my suspicions fixed with the exception of Ronald Odell. If my assumption that he was the thief was correct, the mystery was so far explained; and my next step was to discover why he had robbed his father, and what he had done with the property. He was so strange and peculiar that somehow I could not imagine that he had stolen the things merely for the sake of vulgar gain, my impression being that in carrying off the jewelled skull he was actuated by some extraordinary motive, quite apart from the mere question of theft, and this determined me to shadow him for a time in the hope that I should succeed in soon obtaining distinct evidence that my theory was correct.

Before leaving the house, I sought an interview with Mrs. Odell, who was anxious to know what the result was of my investigation; but I considered it advisable, in the then state of matters, to withhold from her the discovery I had made. But, as her curiosity to learn what I had been doing on the roof was very great, I informed her that my theory was at first that there was some connection between the roof and the "Treasure Chamber"; but, though I had not proved that to be correct, I nevertheless was of opinion that the purloiner of the articles resided in the house. Whereupon she very naturally asked me if I suspected any particular person. I answered her candidly that I did; but that, in the absence of anything like proof, I should not be justified in naming anyone. I assured her, however, that I would use the most

strenuous efforts to obtain the proof I wanted. Before leaving her, I remarked in a casual sort of way—

"I suppose Mr. Ronald is at the head of affairs during his father's absence?"

"Well," she began, with evident reluctance to say anything against her son, "Ronald is of a very peculiar disposition. He seems to live quite within himself, as it were, and takes no interest in anything. As a matter of fact, I see very little of him, for he usually spends his evenings from home, and does not return until late. The greater part of the day he keeps to his rooms. I am sure I am quite concerned about him at times."

The confidential way in which she told me this, and the anxious expression of her face, sufficiently indicated that Ronald was a source of great trouble to her. But I refrained, from motives of delicacy, from pursuing the subject, and was about to take my departure, when she said, with great emphasis—

"I do hope, Mr. Donovan, that you will be successful in recovering the goblet; for, quite apart from its intrinsic value, my husband sets great store upon it, and his distress when he found it had been stolen was really pitiable."

I assured her that it would not be my fault if I failed, and I said that, unless the goblet had been destroyed for the sake of the jewels and the gold, I thought it was very probable that it would be recovered. I spoke thus confidently because I was convinced that I had got the key to the puzzle, and that it would be relatively easy to fit in the rest of the pieces, particularly if I could find out where Ronald Odell spent his evenings; for to me there was something singularly suggestive in his going away from home at nights. That fact was clearly a source of grief to his mother, and she had made it evident to me that she did not know where he went to, nor why he went. But it fell to my lot to solve this mystery a week later. I shadowed him to a house situated in a *cul de sac* in the very heart of the city of London. The houses in this place were tall, imposing looking buildings, and had once been the homes of gentry and people of position. Their day of glory, however, had passed, and they were now for the most part utilised as offices, and were occupied by solicitors, agents, &c. It was a quiet, gloomy sort of region, although it led out of one of the busiest thoroughfares of the great metro-

polis ; but at the bottom of the *cul* was a wall, and beyond that again an ancient burial-place, where the dust of many generations of men reposed. The wall was overtopped by the branches of a few stunted trees that were rooted in the graveyard ; and these trees looked mournful and melancholy, with their blackened branches and soot-darkened leaves.

The house to which I traced Ronald Odell was the last one in the *cul* on the left-hand side, and consequently it abutted on the graveyard. It was the one house not utilised as offices, and I ascertained that it was in the occupation of a club consisting of Anglo-Indians. But what they did, or why they met, no one seemed able to tell. The premises were in charge of a Hindoo and his wife, and the members of the club met on an average five nights a week. All this was so much more mystery, but it was precisely in accord with the theory I had been working out in my own mind.

The next afternoon I went to the house, and the door was opened to my knock by the Hindoo woman, who was a mild-eyed, sad-looking little creature ; I asked her if she could give me some particulars of the club that was held there, and she informed me that it was known as "The Indian Dreamers' Club." But beyond that scrap of information she did not seem disposed to go.

"You had better come when my husband is here," she said, thereby giving me to understand that her husband was absent. But as I deemed it probable that she might prove more susceptible to my persuasive influences than her husband, I asked her if she would allow me to see over the premises. She declined to do this until I displayed before her greedy eyes certain gold coins of the realm, which proved too much for her cupidity, and she consented to let me go inside. The entrance-hall was carpeted with a thick, massive carpet, that deadened every footfall, and the walls were hung with black velvet. A broad flight of stairs led up from the end of the passage, but they were masked by heavy curtains. The gloom and sombreness of the place were most depressing, and a strange, sickening odour pervaded the air. Led by the dusky woman I passed through a curtained doorway, and found myself in a most extensive apartment, that ran the whole depth of the building. From this apartment all daylight was excluded, the light being obtained from a large lamp of

blood-coloured glass, and which depended from the centre of the ceiling. There was also a niche at each end of the room, where a lamp of the old Roman pattern burnt. The walls of the room were hung with purple velvet curtains, and the ceiling was also draped with the same material, while the floor was covered with a rich Indian carpet into which the feet sank. In the centre of the room was a table also covered with velvet, and all round the room were most luxurious couches, with velvet cushions and costly Indian rugs. The same sickly odour that I had already noticed pervaded this remarkable chamber, which was like a tomb in its silence ; for no sound reached one from the busy world without.

Although all the lamps were lighted it took me some time to accustom my eyes to the gloom and to observe all the details of the extraordinary apartment. Then I noted that on the velvet on one side of the room was inscribed in letters of gold, that were strikingly conspicuous against the sombre background, this sentence :

"TO DREAM IS TO LIVE ! DREAM ON,
FOR TO AWAKEN IS TO DIE !"

The dim light and the sombre upholstery of the room gave it a most weird and uncanny appearance, and I could not help associating with the Indian Dreamers' Club, rites and ceremonies that were far from orthodox ; while the sentence on the velvet, and which I took to be the club's motto, was like the handwriting on the wall at Belshazzar's feast. It was pregnant with a terrible meaning.

While I was still engaged in examining the room a bell rang, and instantly the Hindoo woman became greatly excited, for she said it was her husband, and that he would be so fiercely angry if he found me there that she would not be responsible for the consequences. She therefore thrust me into a recess where a statue had formerly stood, but the statue had been removed, and a velvet curtain hung before the recess. Nothing could have happened more in accord with my desire than this. For I was resolved, whatever the consequences were, to remain in my place of concealment until I had solved the mystery of the club. There was an outer and an inner door, both of them being thickly padded with felt and covered with velvet. When the woman had retired and closed these doors the silence was absolute. Not a sound came to my ears. The atmosphere

was heavy, and I experienced a sense of languor that was altogether unusual.

I ventured from my place of concealment to still further explore the apartment.

But I gave her to understand that nothing would turn me from my resolve; and if she chose to aid me in carrying out my purpose, she might look for ample reward. Recogn-



“COME, WHILE THERE IS YET A CHANCE!”

I found that the lounges were all of the most delightful and seductive softness, and the tapestries, the cushions, and the curtains were of the richest possible description. It certainly was a place to lie and dream in, shut off from the noise and fret of the busy world. At one end of the room was a large chest of some sort of carved Indian wood. It was bound round with iron bands and fastened with a huge brass padlock. While I was wondering to myself what this chest contained, the door opened and the Indian woman glided in. Seizing me by the arm, she whispered—

“Come, while there is yet a chance. My husband has gone upstairs, but he will return in a few minutes.”

“When do the members of the club meet?” I asked.

“At seven o’clock.”

“Then I shall remain in that place of concealment until they meet!” I answered firmly.

She wrung her hands in distress, and turned her dark eyes on me imploringly.

nising that argument would be of no avail, and evidently in great dread of her husband, she muttered:

“The peril then be on your own head!” and without another word she left the room.

The peril she hinted at did not concern me. In fact, I did not even trouble myself to think what the peril might be. I was too much interested for that, feeling as I did that I was about to witness a revelation.

The hours passed slowly by, and as seven drew on I concealed myself once more in the recess, and by slightly moving the curtain back at the edge, I was enabled to command a full view of the room. Presently the door opened, and the husband of the woman came in. He was a tall, powerful, fierce-looking man, wearing a large turban, and dressed in Indian costume. He placed three or four small lamps, already lighted, and enclosed in ruby glass, on the table; and also a number of quaint Indian drinking cups made of silver, which I

recognised from the description as those that had been stolen from the Manor a year or so previously, together with twelve magnificent hookahs. These preparations completed, he retired, and a quarter of an hour later he returned and wound up a large musical box which I had not noticed, owing to its being concealed behind a curtain. The box began to play muffled and plaintive music. The sounds were so softened, the music was so dreamy and sweet, and seemed so far off, that the effect was unlike anything I had ever before heard. A few minutes later, and the Indian once more appeared. This time he wore a sort of dressing-gown of some rich material braided with gold. He walked backwards, and following him in single file were twelve men, the first being Ronald Odell. Five of them were men of colour; three of the others were half-castes, the rest were whites. But they all had the languid, dreamy appearance which characterised Odell, who, as I was to subsequently learn, was their leader and president.

They ranged themselves round the table silently as ghosts; and, without a word, Ronald Odell handed a key to the Indian, who proceeded to unlock the chest I have referred to, and he took therefrom the skull goblet which had been carried off from Colonel Odell's "Treasure Chamber" by—could there any longer be a doubt?—his own son. The skull, which was provided with two gold handles, and rested on gold claws, was placed on the table before the president, who poured into it the contents of two small bottles which were given to him by the attendant, who took them from the chest. He then stirred the decoction up with a long-handled silver spoon of very rich design and workmanship, and which I recognised, from the description that had been given to me, as one that had been taken from the Colonel's collection. As this strange mixture was stirred, the sickening, overpowering odour that I had noticed on first entering the place became so strong as to almost overcome me, and I felt as if I should suffocate. But I struggled against the feeling as well as I could. The president next poured a small portion of the liquor into each of the twelve cups that had been provided, and as he raised his own to his lips he said—

"Brother dreamers, success to our club! May your dreams be sweet and long!"

The others bowed, but made no response, and each man drained the draught, which

I guessed to be some potent herbal decoction for producing sleep. Then each man rose and went to a couch, and the attendant handed him a hookah, applied a light to the bowl, and from the smell that arose it was evident the pipes were charged with opium. As these drugged opium smokers leaned back on the luxurious couches, the concealed musical-box continued to play its plaintive melodies. A drowsy languor pervaded the room, and affected me to such extent that I felt as if I must be dreaming, and that the remarkable scene before my eyes was a dream vision that would speedily fade away.

One by one the pipes fell from the nerveless grasp of the smokers, and were removed by the attendant. And when the last man had sunk into insensibility, the Indian filled a small cup with some of the liquor from the skull goblet, and drained it off. Then he charged a pipe with opium, and, coiling himself up on an ottoman, he began to smoke, until he, like the others, yielded to the soporific influences of the drug and the opium and went to sleep.

My hour of triumph had come. I stepped from my place of concealment, feeling faint and strange, and all but overcome by an irresistible desire to sleep. The potent fumes that filled the air begot a sensation in me that was not unlike drunkenness. But I managed to stagger to the table, seize the goblet and the spoon, and make my way to the door. As I gained the passage the Hindoo woman confronted me, for she was about to enter the room.

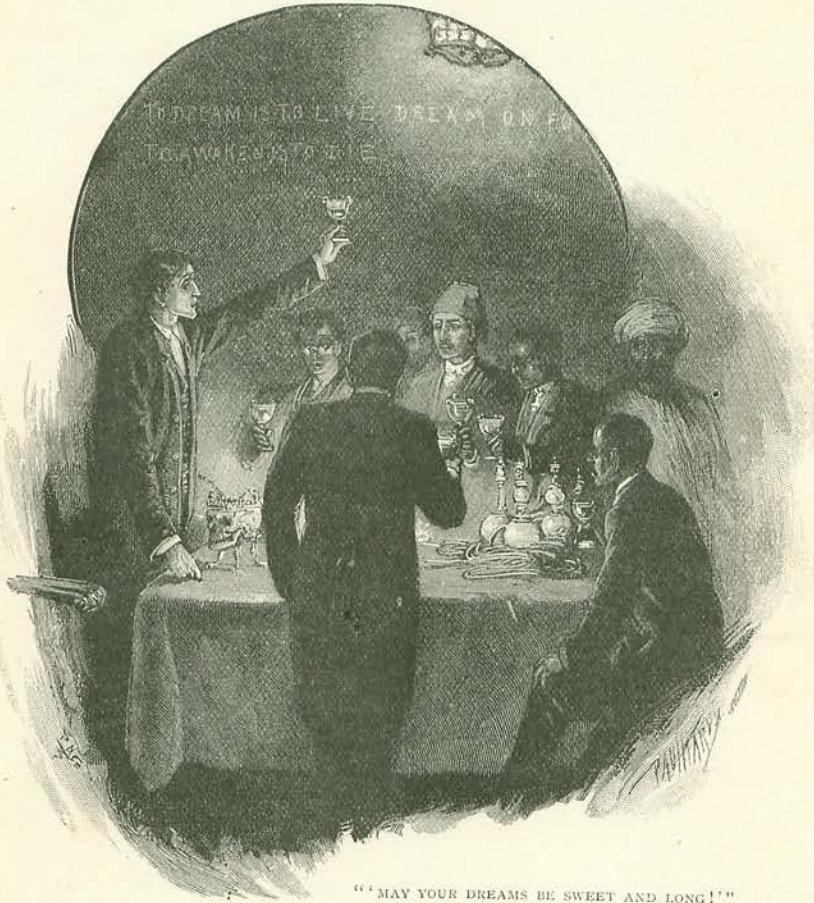
"What is the meaning of this?" she cried, as she endeavoured to bar my passage.

"Stand back!" I said, sternly. "I am a detective officer. These things have been stolen, and I am about to restore them to their rightful owner."

She manifested supreme distress, but recognised her powerlessness. She dared not raise an alarm, and she might as well have tried to awaken the dead in the adjoining churchyard as those heavily drugged sleepers. And so I gained the street; and the intense sense of relief I experienced as I sucked in draughts of the cold, fresh air cannot be described. Getting to the thoroughfare I hailed a cab, and drove home with my prizes, and the following morning I telegraphed to Egypt to an address the Colonel had given me, informing him that I had recovered the goblet.

The same day I went down to the Manor at Esher, and had an interview with Mrs. Odell. I felt, in the interest of her son, that it was my duty to tell her all I had

nounced it to be a very powerful and peculiar narcotic, made from a combination of Indian herbs with which he was not familiar.



learnt the previous night. She was terribly distressed, but stated that she had suspected for some time that her son was given to opium smoking, though she had no idea he carried the habit to such a remarkable extreme. She requested me to retain possession of the goblet and the spoon until her husband's return, and, in the meantime, she promised to take her weak and misguided son to task, and to have the secret passage in the wall effectually stopped up.

I should mention that I had managed to save a small quantity of the liquor that was in the goblet when I removed it from the club table; and I sent this to a celebrated analytical chemist for analysis, who pro-

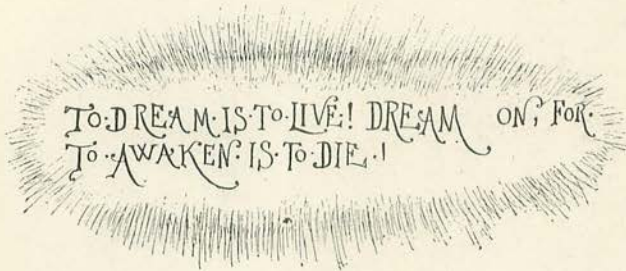
The *dénouement* has yet to be recorded. A few days later Ronald Odell, after drugging himself as usual, was found dead on one of the couches at the club. This necessitated an inquest, and the verdict was that he had died from a narcotic, but whether taken with the intention of destroying life or merely to produce sleep there was no evidence to show. Although I had no evidence to offer, I was firmly convinced in my own mind that the poor weak fellow had committed suicide, from a sense of shame at the discovery I had made.

Of course, after this tragic affair, and the exposure it entailed, the Indian Dreamers' Club was broken up, and all its luxurious

appointments were sold by auction, and its members dispersed. It appeared that one of the rules was that the members of the club should never exceed twelve in number. What became of the remaining eleven I never knew; but it was hardly likely they would abandon the pernicious habits they had acquired.

In the course of six months Colonel Odell returned from Egypt, and though he was much cut up by the death of his son, he was exceedingly gratified at the recovery

of the peculiar goblet, which the misguided youth had no doubt purloined under the impression that it was useless in his father's treasure room, but that it would more fittingly adorn the table of the Dreamers' Club, of which he was the president. I could not help thinking that part of the motto of the club was singularly appropriate in his case: "Dream on, for to awaken is to die." He had awakened from his dream, and passed into that state where dreams perplex not.



[It will be observed that this month there is no detective story by Mr. Conan Doyle relating the adventures of the celebrated Mr. Sherlock Holmes. We are glad to be able to announce that there is to be only a temporary interval in the publication of these stories. Mr. Conan Doyle is now engaged upon writing a second series, which will be commenced in an early number. During this short interval powerful detective stories by other eminent writers will be published. Next month will appear an interview with Mr. Conan Doyle, containing amongst other interesting matter some particulars concerning Mr. Sherlock Holmes.]