

THE PERJURY OF THE CLOCK.

[CONCLUDED.]

The trial occupied two days. No new facts of importance were discovered in the interval. The evidence followed the course which it had taken at the preliminary examinations—with this difference only, that it was more carefully sifted. Mr. Dubourg had the double advantage of securing the view of the leading barriers in the circuit, and of moving the irrepressible sympathies of the jury, shocked at his position and eager for proof of his innocence. By the end of the first day, the evidence had told against him with such irresistible force, that his own counsel despaired of the result. When the prisoner took his place in the dock on the second day, there was but one competitor in the minds of the people—court—everybody said, "The clock will hang him."

It was nearly two in the afternoon, and the proceedings were on the point of being adjourned for half an hour when the attorney for the prisoner was seen to hand a paper to the counsel for the defense.

The counsel rose, showing signs of agitation which roused the curiosity of the audience. He demanded the immediate hearing of a new witness whose evidence in the prisoner's favor he declared to be too important to be delayed by a single moment. After a short colloquy between the judge and the bar, the court decided to continue the sitting.

The witness appearing in the box proved to be a young woman in delicate health. On the evening when the prisoner had paid his visit to the lady, she was in that lady's service as housemaid. The day after she had been permitted (by previous arrangement with her mistress) to take a week's holiday and go on a visit to her parents in the west of Cornwall. While there she had fallen ill, and had not been strong enough since to return to her employment. Having given this preliminary account of herself, the housemaid then stated the following extraordinary particulars in relation to her mistress's clock.

On the morning of the day when Mr. Dubourg had called at the house, she had been cleaning the mantelpiece. She had rubbed the paraffin which was under the clock with her duster, and accidentally struck the pendulum, and had stopped it. Having done so before she had been severely reproached. Fearing that a repetition of the offence the day after the clock had been regulated by the maker, might lead perhaps to the withdrawal of her leave of absence, she had determined to put matters right again, if possible, by herself.

After poking under the clock in the dark, and failing to see the pendulum going again properly in that way, she next attempted to lift the clock, and give it a shake. As she was doing so, she was so heavy that she was obliged to hunt for something which she could use as a lever. The thing proved to be not easy to find, and she was trying to get the handle of the clock by the moment, when she was seized by the hand, and what she wanted, she contrived to lift the clock a few inches and drop it again on the mantelpiece so as to set it going once more.

The next necessity was, of course, to move the hands on. Here again she was met by an obstacle. There was a difficulty in opening the glass case which protected the dial. After unsuccessfully searching for some instrument to help her, she got from the footman (without telling him what she wanted it for) a small chisel. With this she opened the case—after accidentally scratching the brass frame of it—and set the hands of the clock by guess. She was hurried at the time, fearing that her mistress would discover her. Later in the day she found that she had over-estimated the interval of time that had passed while she was trying to put the clock right. She had, in fact, set it exactly a quarter of an hour too fast.

No safe opportunity of secretly putting the clock right again had occurred, until the last thing at night. She had then moved the hands back to the right time. At the hour of the evening when Mr. Dubourg had called on her mistress, she positively swore that the clock was a quarter of an hour fast. It had pointed as her mistress had declared, to twenty-five minutes to nine—the right time then being, as Mr. Dubourg had asserted, twenty minutes past eight. Questioned as to why she had refrained from giving this extraordinary evidence at the enquiry before the magistrates, she declared that in the remote Cornish village to which she had gone the next day, and in which her illness had detained her from that time, nobody had heard of the enquiry or the trial. She would not have been then present to state the vitally important circumstances to which she had just sworn, if the prisoner's twin brother had not found her out on the previous day—had not questioned her if she knew anything about the clock—and had told (hearing what she had said) insisted on her taking the journey with him to the court next morning.

This evidence virtually decided the trial. There was a great burst of relief in the crowded court when the woman's statement had come to an end. She was closely cross-examined, as a matter of course. Her character was inquired into; corroborative evidence—relating to the clock—was sought for, and the frame was sought for, and was obtained. The end of it was that, at a late hour on the second evening, the jury acquitted the prisoner without leaving their box. It was not too much to say that his life had been saved by his brother. His brother alone had persisted from first to last in obstinately disbelieving the clock—for no better reason than that the clock asserted the prisoner's guilt. He had worried everybody with his inquiries, and he had discovered the absence of the housemaid after the trial had begun; and he had started off to interrogate the girl, knowing nothing, and suspecting nothing, simply determined to persist in the one overbearing question with which he persecuted everybody, "The clock is going to hang my brother; can you tell me anything about that clock?"

Four months later the mystery of the crime was cleared up. One of the disreputable companions of the murdered man confessed on his death bed that he had done the deed. There was nothing interesting or surprising in the circumstances. Chance, which had no innocence in peril, had offered impunity to guilt. An infamous woman—a jealous quarrel—and an absence at the moment of witnesses on the spot—these were really the components of material which had composed the tragedy of Pardon's Piece.—[Wills Col.]

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