

# David Poindexter's Disappearance

By Julian Hawthorne

Among the records of the English state trials are to be found many strange stories, which would, as the phrase is, make the fortune of a modern novelist. But there are also numerous cases, not less stimulating to imagination and curiosity, which never attained more than local notoriety, of which the law was able to take but comparatively small cognizance, although they became subjects of much unofficial discussion and mystification. Among these cases none, perhaps, is better worth recalling than that of David Poindexter. It will be my aim here to tell the tale as simply and briefly as possible—to repeat it, indeed, very much as it came to my ears while living, several years ago, near the scene in which its events took place. There is a temptation to amplify it, and to give it a more recent date and a different setting; but (other considerations aside) the story might lose in force and weight more than it would thereby gain in artistic balance and smoothness.

David Poindexter was a younger son of an old and respected family in Sussex, England. He was born in London in 1785. He was educated at Oxford, with a view to his entering the clerical profession, and in the year 1810 he obtained a living in the little town of Witton, near Twickenham, known historically as the home of Sir John Suckling. The Poindexters had been much impoverished by the excesses of David's father and grandfather, and David seems to have had few or no resources beyond the very modest stipend appertaining to his position. He was, at all events, poor, though possessed of capacities which bade fair to open to him some of the higher prizes of his calling; but, on the other hand, there is evidence that he chafed at his poverty, and reason to believe that he had inherited no small share of the ill-regulated temperament which had proved so detrimental to the elder generations of his family.

Personally he was a man of striking aspect, having long, dark hair, heavily-marked eyebrows, and blue eyes; his mouth and chin were graceful in contour, but wanting in resolution; his figure was tall, well knit, and slender. He was an eloquent preacher, and capable, when warmed by his subject, of powerfully affecting the emotions of his congregation. He was a great favorite with women—whom, however, he uniformly treated with coldness—and by no means unpopular with men, toward some of whom he manifested much less reserve. Nevertheless, before the close of the second year of his incumbency he was known to be paying his addresses to a young lady of the neighborhood, Miss Edith Saltine, the only child of an ex-army officer. The colonel was a widower, and in poor health, and since he was living mainly on his half-pay, and had very little to give his daughter, the affair was looked upon as a love match, the rather since Edith was a handsome young woman of charming character. The Reverend David Poindexter certainly had every appearance of being deeply in love; and it is often seen that the passions of reserved men, when once aroused, are stronger than those of persons more generally demonstrative.

Colonel Saltine did not at first receive his proposed son-in-law with favor. He was a valetudinarian, and accustomed to regard his daughter as his nurse by right, and he resented the idea of her leaving him forlorn for the sake of a good-looking parson. It is very likely that his objections might have had the effect of breaking off the match, for his daughter was devotedly attached to him, and hardly questioned his right to dispose of her as he saw fit; but after a while the worthy gentleman seems to have thought better of his contrariness. Poindexter had strong persuasive powers, and no doubt made himself personally agreeable to the colonel, and,

moreover, it was arranged that the latter should occupy the same house with Mr. and Mrs. Poindexter after they were married. Nevertheless, the colonel was not a man to move rapidly, and the engagement had worn along for nearly a year without the wedding-day having been fixed. One winter evening in the early part of December, Poindexter dined with the colonel and Edith, and as the gentlemen were sitting over their wine the lover spoke on the topic that was uppermost in his thoughts, and asked his host whether there was any good reason why the marriage should not be consummated at once.

“Christmas is at hand,” the young man remarked; “why should it not be rendered doubly memorable by granting this great boon?”

“For a parson, David, you are a deuced impatient man,” the colonel said.

“Parsons are human,” the other exclaimed with warmth.

“Humph! I suppose some of them are. In fact, David, if I didn’t believe that there was something more in you than texts and litanies and the Athanasian creed, I’ll be hanged if I’d ever have let you look twice at Edith. That girl has got blood in her veins, David; she’s not to be thrown away on any lantern-jawed, white-livered doctor of souls, I can tell you.”

David held his head down, and seemed not to intend a reply; but he suddenly raised his eyes, and fixed them upon the colonel’s. “You know what my father was,” he said, in a low, distinct voice; “I am my father’s son.”

“That idea has occurred to me more than once, David, and to say the truth, I’ve liked you none the less for it. But, then, what the deuce should a fellow like you want to do in a pulpit? I respect the cloth as much as any man, I hope, but leaving theory aside, and coming down to practice, aren’t there fools and knaves enough in the world to carry on that business, without a fellow of heart and spirit like you going into it?”

“Theory or no theory, there have been as great men in the pulpit as in any other position,” said David, gloomily.

“I don’t say to the contrary: ecclesiastical history, and all that: but what I do say is, if a man is great in the pulpit, it’s a pity he isn’t somewhere else, where he could use his greatness to more advantage.”

“Well,” remarked David, in the same somber tone, “I am not contented: so much I can admit to the father of the woman I love. But you know as well as I do that men nowadays are called to my profession not so much by the Divine summons as by the accident of birth. Were it not for the law of primogeniture, Colonel Saltine, the Church of England would be, for the most part, a congregation without a clergyman.”

“Gad! I’m much of your opinion,” returned the colonel, with a grin; “but there are two doors, you know, for a second son to enter the world by. If he doesn’t fancy a cassock, he can put on His Majesty’s uniform.”

“Neither the discipline nor the activity of a soldier’s life would suit me,” David answered. “So far as I know my own nature, what it craves is freedom, and the enjoyment of its capacities. Only under such conditions could I show what I am capable of. In other words,” he added, with a short laugh, “ten thousand a year is the profession I should choose.”

“Ah,” murmured the colonel, heaving a sigh, “I doubt that’s a profession we’d all of us like to practice as well as preach. What! no more wine? Oh, ay, Edith, of course! Well, go to her, sir, if you must; but when you come to my age you’ll have found out which wears the best—woman or the bottle. I’ll join you presently, and maybe we’ll see what can be done about this marrying business.”

So David went to Edith, and they had a clear hour together before they heard the colonel's slippered tread hobbling through the hall. Just before he opened the door, David had said: "I sometimes doubt whether you wholly love me, after all." And she had answered:

"If I do not, it is because I sometimes feel as if you were not your real self."

The colonel heard nothing of this odd bit of dialogue; but when he had subsided, with his usual grunt, into his arm-chair beside the fire-place, and Edith had brought him his foot-stool and his pipe, and put the velvet skull-cap on his bald pate, he drew a long whiff of tobacco smoke, and said:

"If you young folks want to set up housekeeping a month from to-day, you can do it, for all I care."

Little did any one of the three suspect what that month was destined to bring forth.

David Poindexter's father had been married twice, his second wife dying within a year of her wedding-day, and two weeks after bringing David into the world. This lady, whose maiden name was Lambert, had a brother who was a gentleman farmer, and a tolerably successful one. His farm was situated in the parish of Witton, and he owned a handsome house on the outskirts of the town itself. He and David's father had been at one time great friends, insomuch that David was named after him, and Lambert, as his godfather as well as uncle, presented the child with the usual silver mug. Lambert was never known to have married, but there were rumors, dating as far as back David's earliest recollections, to the effect that he had entertained a secret and obscure passion for some foreign woman of great beauty, but of doubtful character and antecedents. Nobody could be found who had ever seen this woman, or would accept the responsibility of asserting that she actually existed; but she afforded a convenient means of accounting for many things that seemed mysterious in Mr. Lambert's conduct. At length, when David was about eight years old, his godfather left England abruptly, and without telling any one whither he was going or when he would return. As a matter of fact he never did return, nor had any certain news ever been heard of him since his departure. Neither his house nor his farm was ever sold, however, though they were rented to more than one tenant during a number of years. It was said, also, that Lambert held possession of some valuable real estate in London. Nevertheless, in process of time he was forgotten, or remembered only as a name. And the new generation of men, though they might speak of "the old Lambert House," neither knew nor cared how it happened to have that title. For aught they could tell, it might have borne it ever since Queen Elizabeth's time. Even David Poindexter had long ceased to think of his uncle as anything much more substantial than a dream.

He was all the more surprised, therefore, when, on the day following the interview just mentioned, he received a letter from the late David Lambert's lawyers. It informed him in substance that his uncle had died in Constantinople, unmarried (so far as could be ascertained), intestate, and without blood-relations surviving him. Under these circumstances, his property, amounting to one hundred and sixty thousand pounds, the bulk of which was invested in land and houses in the city of London, as well as the country-seat in Witton known as the old Lambert House, and the farm lands thereto appertaining—all this wealth, not to mention four or five thousand pounds in ready money, came into possession of the late David Lambert's nearest of kin, who, as it appeared, was none other than the Reverend David Poindexter. Would that gentleman, therefore, be kind enough, at his convenience, to advise his obedient servants as to what disposition he wished to make of his inheritance?

It was a Saturday morning, and the young clergyman was sitting at his study table; the fire was burning in the grate at his right hand, and his half-written sermon lay on the desk before him.

After reading the letter, at first hurriedly and amazedly, afterward more slowly, with frequent pauses, he folded it up, and, still holding it in his hand, leaned back in his chair, and remained for the better part of an hour in a state of deep preoccupation. Many changing expressions passed across his face, and glowed in his dark-blue eyes, and trembled on the curves of his lips. At last he roused himself, sat erect, and smote the table violently with his clinched hand. Yes, it was true—it was real; he, David Poindexter, an hour ago the poor imprisoned clergyman of the Church of England—he, as by a stroke of magic, was free, powerful, emancipated, the heir of seven thousand pounds a year! And what about tomorrow's sermon?

He rose up smiling, with a vivid color in his cheeks and a bright sparkle in his eyes. He stretched himself to his full height, threw out his arms, and smote his chest with both fists. What a load was gone from his heart! What a new ardor of life was this that danced in his veins! He walked with long strides to the window, and threw it wide open, breathing in the rush of bright icy air with deep inhalations. Freedom! emancipation! Yonder, above the dark, level boughs of the cedar of Lebanon, rose the square, gray tower of the church. Yesterday it was the incubus of his vain hopes; to-day it was the tomb of a dead and despised past. What had David Poindexter to do with calling sinners to repentance? Let him first find out for himself what sin was like. Then he looked to the right, where between the leafless trees Colonel Saltine's little dwelling raised its red-tile roof above the high garden-wall. And so, Edith, you doubted whether I were at all times my real self? You shall not need to make that complaint hereafter. As for to-morrow's sermon—I am not he who wrote sermons, nor shall I ever preach any. Away with it, therefore!

He strode back to the table, took up the sheets of manuscript from the desk, tore them across, and laid them on the burning coals. They smoldered for a moment, then blazed up, and the draught from the open window whisked the blackened ashes up the chimney. David stood, meanwhile, with his arms folded, smiling to himself, and repeating, in a low voice:

“Never again—never again—never again.”

By-and-by he reseated himself at his desk, and hurriedly wrote two or three notes, one of which was directed to Miss Saltine. He gave them to his servant with an injunction to deliver them at their addresses during the afternoon. Looking at his watch, he was surprised to find that it was already past twelve o'clock. He went up-stairs, packed a small portmanteau, made some changes in his dress, and came down again with a buoyant step. There was a decanter half full of sherry on the sideboard in the dining-room; he poured out and drank two glasses in succession. This done, he put on his hat, and left the house with his portmanteau in his hand, and ten minutes later he had intercepted the London coach, and was bowling along on his way to the city.

There was a dramatic instinct in David, as in many eloquent men of impressionable temperament, which caused him every now and then to hook upon all that was occurring as a sort of play, and to resolve to act his part in a telling and picturesque manner. On that Saturday afternoon he had an interview with the late Mr. Lambert's lawyers, and they were struck by his calm, lofty, and indifferent bearing. He seemed to regard worldly prosperity as a thing beneath him, yet to feel in a half-impatient way the responsibility which the control of wealth forced upon him.

“It is my purpose not to allow this legacy to interfere permanently with my devotion to my higher duties,” he remarked, “but I have taken measures to enable myself to place these affairs upon a fixed and convenient footing. I presume,” he added, fixing his eyes steadily upon his interlocutor, “that you have thoroughly investigated the possibility of there being any claimant nearer than myself?”

“No such claimant could exist,” the lawyer replied, “unless the late Mr. Lambert had married and had issue.”

“Is there, then, any reason to suppose that he contemplated the contingency that has happened?”

“If he bestowed any thought at all upon the subject, that contingency could hardly have failed to present itself to his mind,” the lawyer answered.

David consented to receive the draft for a thousand pounds which was tendered him, and took his leave. He returned to his rooms at the Tavistock Hotel, Covent Garden. In the evening, after making some changes in his costume, he went to the theatre, and saw Kean play something of Shakespeare’s. When the play was over, and he was out in the frosty air again, he felt it impossible to sleep. It was after midnight before he returned to his hotel, with flushed cheeks, and a peculiar brilliance in his eyes. He slept heavily, but awoke early in the morning with a slight feeling of feverishness. It was Sunday morning. He thought of his study in the parsonage at Witton, with its bright fire, its simplicity, its repose. He thought of the church, and of the congregation which he would never face again. And Edith—what had been her thoughts and dreams during the night? He got up, and went to the window. It looked out upon a narrow, inclosed court. The sky was dingy, the air was full of the muffled tumult of the city. His present state, as to its merely external aspect, was certainly not so agreeable as that of the morning before. Ay, but what a vista had opened now which then was closed! David dressed himself, and went down to his breakfast. While sitting at his table in the window, looking out upon the market-place, and stirring his cup of Mocha, a gentleman came up and accosted him.

“Am I mistaken, or is your name Poindexter?”

David looked up, and recognized Harwood Courtney, a son of Lord Derwent. Courtney was a man of fashion, a member of the great clubs, and a man, as they say, with a reputation. He was a good twenty years older than David, and had been the companion of the latter’s father in some of his wildest escapades. To David, at this moment, he was the representative and symbol of that great, splendid, unregenerate world, with which it was his purpose to make acquaintance.

“You are not mistaken, Mr. Courtney,” he said, quietly. “Have you breakfasted? It is some time since we have met.”

“Why, yes, egad! If I remember right, you were setting out on another road than that which I was travelling. However, we sinners, you know, depend upon you parsons to pull us up in time to prevent any—er—any *very* serious catastrophe! Ha! ha!”

“I understand you; but for my part I have left the pulpit,” said David, uttering the irrevocable words with a carelessness which he himself wondered at.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Courtney, with a little intonation of surprise and curiosity, which his good breeding prevented him from formulating more explicitly. As David made no rejoinder, he presently continued: “Then—er—perhaps you might find it in your way to dine with me this evening. Only one or two friends—a very quiet Sunday party.”

“Thank you,” said David. “I had intended going to bed betimes to-night; but it will give me pleasure to meet a quiet party.”

“Then that’s settled,” exclaimed Courtney; “and meanwhile, if you’ve finished your coffee, what do you say to a turn in the Row? I’ve got my trap here, and a breath of air will freshen us up.”

David and Courtney spent the day together, and by evening the young ex-clergyman had made the acquaintance of many of the leading men about town. He had also allowed the fact to transpire that his pecuniary standing was of the soundest kind; but this was done so skillfully—

with such a lofty air—that even Courtney, who was as cynical as any man, was by no means convinced that David's change of fortune had anything to do with his relinquishing the pulpit. "David Poindexter is no fool," he remarked, confidentially, to a friend. "He has double the stuff in him that the old fellow had. You must get up early to get the better of a man who has been a parson, and seen through himself!"

David, in fact, felt himself the superior, intellectually and by nature, of most of the men he saw. He penetrated and comprehended them, but to them he was impenetrable; a certain air of authority rested upon him; he had abandoned the service of God; but the training whereby he had fitted himself for it stood him in good stead; it had developed his insight, his subtlety, and, strange to say, his powers of dissimulation. Contrary to what is popularly supposed, his study of the affairs of the other world had enabled him to deal with this world's affairs with a half-contemptuous facility. As for the minor technicalities, the social pass-words, and so forth, to which much importance is generally ascribed, David had nothing to fear from them; first, because he was a man of noble manners, naturally as well as by cultivation; and, secondly, because the fact that he had been a clergyman acted as a sort of breastplate against criticism. It would be thought that he chose to appear ignorant of that which he really knew.

As for Mr. Courtney's dinner, though it may doubtless have been a quiet one from his point of view, it differed considerably from such Sunday festivities as David had been accustomed to. A good deal of wine was drunk, and the conversation (a little cautious at first, on David's account) gradually thawed into freedom. It was late when they rose from table; and then a proposition was made to go to a certain well-known club in St. James's Street. David went with the rest, and, for the first time in his life, played cards for money; he lost seven hundred pounds—more money than he had handled during the last three years—but he kept his head, and at three o'clock in the morning drove with Courtney to the latter's lodgings, with five hundred pounds in his pocket over and above the sum with which he had begun to play. Here was a wonderful change in his existence; but it did not seem to him half so wonderful as his reason told him it was. It seemed natural—as if, after much wandering, he had at last found his way into the place where he belonged. It is said that savages, educated from infancy amid civilized surroundings, will, on breathing once more their native air, tear off their clothes and become savages again. Somewhat similar may have been David's case, who, inheriting in a vivid degree the manly instincts of his forefathers, had forcibly and by constraint of circumstances lived a life wholly opposed to these impulses—an artificial life, therefore. But now at length he had come into his birthright, and felt at home.

One episode of the previous evening remained in his memory: it had produced an effect upon him out of proportion with its apparent significance. A gentleman, a guest at the dinner, a small man with sandy hair and keen gray eyes, on being presented to David had looked at him with an expression of shrewd perplexity, and said:

"Have we not met before?"

"It is possible, but I confess I do not recollect it," replied David.

"The name was not Poindexter," continued the other, "but the face—pardon me—I could have taken my oath to."

"Where did this meeting take place?" asked David, smiling.

"In Paris, at —'s," said the gray-eyed gentleman (mentioning the name of a well-known French nobleman).

"You are quite certain of that?"

"Yes. It was but a month since."

"I was never in Paris. For three years I have hardly been out of sight of London," David answered. "What was your friend's name?"

"It has shipped my memory," he replied. "An Italian name, I fancy. But he was a man—pardon me—of very striking appearance, and I conversed with him for more than an hour."

Now it is by no means an uncommon occurrence for two persons to bear a close resemblance to each other, but (aside from the fact that David was anything but an ordinary-looking man) this mistake of his new acquaintance affected him oddly. He involuntarily associated it with the internal and external transformation which had happened to him, and said to himself:

"This counterpart of mine was prophetic: he was what I am to be—what I am." And fantastic though the notion was, he could not rid himself of it.

David returned to Witton about the middle of the week. In the interval he had taken measures to make known to those concerned the revolution of his affairs, and to have the old Lambert mansion opened, and put in some sort of condition for his reception. He had gone forth on foot, an unknown, poor, and humble clergyman; he returned driving behind a pair of horses, by far the most important personage in the town; and yet this outward change was far less great than the change within. His reception could scarcely be called cordial; though not wanting in the technical respect and ceremony due to him as a gentleman of wealth and influence, he could perceive a half-concealed suspense and misgiving, due unmistakably to his attitude as a recreant clergyman. In fact, his worthy parishioners were in a terrible quandary how to reconcile their desire to stand well with their richest fellow-townsmen, and their dismayed recognition of that townsman's scandalous professional conduct. David smiled at this, but it made him bitter too. He had intended once more to call the congregation together, and frankly to explain to them the reasons, good or bad, which had induced him to withdraw from active labor in the church. But now he determined to preserve a proud and indifferent silence. There was only one person who had a right to call him to account, and it was not without fearfulness that he looked forward to his meeting with her. However, the sooner such fears are put at rest the better, and he called upon Edith on the evening of his arrival. Her father had been in bed for two days with a cold, and she was sitting alone in the little parlor.

She rose at his entrance with a deep blush, and a look of mixed gladness and anxiety. Her eyes swiftly noted the change in his dress, for he had considerably modified, though not as yet wholly laid aside, the external marks of his profession. She held back from him with a certain strangeness and timidity, so that he did not kiss her cheek, but only her hand. The first words of greeting were constrained and conventional, but at last he said:

"All is changed, Edith, except our love for each other."

"I do not hold you to that," she answered, quickly.

"But you can not turn me from it," he said, with a smile.

"I do not know you yet," said she, looking away.

"When I last saw you, you said you doubted whether I were my real self. I have become my real self since then.

"Because you are not what you were, it does not follow that you are what you should be."

"Surely, Edith, that is not reasonable. I was what circumstances forced me to be, henceforth I shall be what God made me."

"Did God, then, have no hand in those circumstances?"

"Not more, at all events, than in these." Edith shook her head. "God does not absolve us from holy vows."

“But how if I can not, with loyalty to my inner conscience, hold to those vows?” exclaimed David, with more warmth. “I have long felt that I was not fitted for this sacred calling. Before the secret tribunal of my self-knowledge, I have stood charged with the sin of hypocrisy. It has been God’s will that I be delivered from that sin.

“Why did you not say that before, David?” she demanded, looking at him. “Why did you remain a hypocrite until it was for your worldly benefit to abandon your trust? Can you say, on your word of honor, that you would stand where you do now if you were still poor instead of rich?”

“Men’s eyes are to some extent opened and their views are confirmed by events. They make our dreams and forebodings into realities. We question in our minds, and events give us the answers.”

“Such an argument might excuse any villainy,” said Edith, lifting her head indignantly.

“Villany! Do you use that word to me?” exclaimed David.

“Not unless your own heart bids me—and I do not know your heart.”

“Because you do not love me?”

“You may be right,” replied Edith, striving to steady her voice; “but at least I believed I loved you.”

“You are cured of that belief, it seems—as I am cured of many foolish faiths,” said David, with, gloomy bitterness. “Well, so be it! The love that waits upon a fastidious conscience is never the deepest love. My love is not of that complexion. Were it possible that the shadow of sin, or of crime itself, could descend upon you, it would but render you dearer to me than before.”

“You may break my heart, David, if you will,” cried the girl, tremulously, yet resolutely, “but I reverence love more than I love you.”

David had turned away as if to leave the room, but he paused and confronted her once more.

“At any rate, we will understand each other,” said he. “Do you make it your condition that I should go back to the ministry?”

Edith was still seated, but the condition of the crisis compelled her to rise. She stood before him, her dark eyes downcast, her lips trembling, nervously drawing the fingers of one hand through the clasp of the other. She was tempted to yield to him, for she could imagine no happiness in life without him; but a rare sanity and integrity of mind made her perceive that he had pushed the matter to a false alternative. It was not a question of preaching or not preaching sermons, but of sinful apostasy from an upright life. At last she raised her eyes, which shone like dark jewels in her pale countenance, and said, slowly, “We had better part.”

“Then my sins be upon your head!” cried David, passionately.

The blood mounted to her cheeks at the injustice of this rejoinder, but she either could not or would not answer again. She remained erect and proud until the door had closed between them; what she did after that neither David nor any one else knew.

The apostate David seems to have determined that, if she were to bear the burden of his sins, they should be neither few nor light. His life for many weeks after this interview was a scandal and a disgrace. The old Lambert mansion was the scene of carousals and excesses such as recalled the exploits of the monks of Medmenham. Harwood Courtney, and a score of dissolute gentlemen like him, not to speak of other visitors, thronged the old house day and night; drinking, gaming, and yet wilder doings gave the sober little town no rest, till the Reverend David Poindexter was commonly referred to as the Wicked Parson. Meanwhile Edith Saltine bore herself with a grave, pale impassiveness, which some admired, others wondered at, and

others deemed an indication that she had no heart. If she had not, so much the better for her; for her father was almost as difficult to manage as David himself. The old gentleman could neither comprehend nor forgive what seemed to him his daughter's immeasurable perversity. One day she had been all for marrying a poor, unknown preacher; and the next day, when to marry him meant to be the foremost lady in the neighborhood, she dismissed him without appeal. And the worst of it was that, much as the poor colonel's mouth watered at the feasts and festivities of the Lambert mansion, he was prevented by the fatality of his position from taking any part in them. So Edith could find no peace either at home or abroad; and if it dwelt not in her own heart, she was indeed forlorn.

What may have been the cost of all this dissipation it was difficult to say, but several observant persons were of opinion that the parson's income could not long stand it. There were rumors that he had heavy bills owing in several quarters, which he could pay only by realizing some of his investments. On the other hand, it was said that he played high and constantly, and usually had the devil's luck. But it is impossible to gauge the truth of such stories, and the Wicked Parson himself took no pains either to deny or confirm them. He was always the loudest, the gayest, and the most reckless of his company, and the leader and inspirer of all their wild proceedings; but it was noticed that, though he laughed often, he never smiled; and that his face, when in repose, bore traces of anything but happiness. For some cause or other, moreover—but whether maliciously or remorsefully was open to question—he never entirely laid aside his clerical garb; he seemed either to delight in profaning it, or to retain it as the reminder and scourge of his own wickedness.

One night there was a great gathering up at the mansion, and the noise and music were kept up till well past the small hours of the morning. Gradually the guests departed, some going toward London, some elsewhere. At last only Harwood Courtney remained, and he and David sat down in the empty dining-room, disorderly with the remains of the carousal, to play picquet. They played, with short intermissions, for nearly twenty-four hours. At last David threw down his cards, and said, quietly:

“Well, that's all. Give me until to-morrow.”

“With all the pleasure in life, my boy,” replied the other; “and your revenge, too, if you like. Meanwhile, the best thing we can do is to take a nap.”

“You may do so if you please,” said David; “for my part, I must take a turn on horseback first. I can never sleep till I have breathed fresh air”

They parted accordingly, Courtney going to his room, and David to the stables, whence he presently issued, mounted on his bay mare, and rode eastward. On his way he passed Colonel Saltine's house, and drew rein for a moment beside it, looking up at Edith's window. It was between four and five o'clock of a morning in early April; the sky was clear, and all was still and peaceful. As he sat in the saddle looking up, the blind of the window was raised and the sash itself opened, and Edith, in her white night-dress, with her heavy brown hair falling round her face and on her shoulders, gazed out. She regarded him with a half-bewildered expression, as if doubting of his reality. For a moment they remained thus; then he waved his hand to her with a wild gesture of farewell, and rode on, passing immediately out of sight behind the dark foliage of the cedar of Lebanon.

On reaching the London high-road the horseman paused once more, and seemed to hesitate what course to pursue; but finally he turned to the right, and rode in a southerly direction. The road wound gently, and dipped and rose to cross low hills; trees bordered the way on each side; and as the sun rose they threw long shadows westward, while the birds warbled and twittered in

the fields and hedges. By-and-by a clump of woodland came into view about half a mile off, the road passing through the midst of it. As David entered it at one end, he saw, advancing toward him through the shade and sunlight, a rider mounted on a black horse. The latter seemed to be a very spirited animal, and as David drew near it suddenly shied and reared so violently that any but a practiced horseman would have been unseated. No catastrophe occurred, however, and a moment afterward the two cavaliers were face to face. No sooner had their eyes met than, as if by a common impulse, they both drew rein, and set staring at each other with a curiosity which merged into astonishment. At length the stranger on the black horse gave a short laugh, and said:

“I perceive that the same strange thing has struck us both, sir. If you won’t consider it uncivil, I should like to know who you are. My name is Giovanni Lambert.”

“Giovanni Lambert,” repeated David, with a slight involuntary movement; “unless I am mistaken, I have heard mention of you. But you are not Italian?”

“Only on my mother’s side. But you have the advantage of me.”

“You will understand that I could not have heard of you without feeling a strong desire to meet you,” said David, dismounting as he spoke. “It is, I think, the only desire left me in the world. I had marked this wood, as I came along, as an inviting place to rest in. Would it suit you to spend an hour here, where we can converse better at our ease than in saddle; or does time press you? As for me, I have little more to do with time.”

“I am at your service, sir, with pleasure,” returned the other, leaping lightly to the ground, and revealing by the movement a pair of small pistols attached to the belt beneath his blue riding surtout. “It was in my mind, also, to stretch my legs and take a pull at my pipe, for, early as it is, I have ridden far this morning.”

At the point where they had halted a green lane branched off into the depths of the wood, and down this they passed, leading their horses. When they were out of sight of the road they made their animals fast in such a way that they could crop the grass, and themselves reclined at the foot of a broad-limbed oak, and they remained in converse there for upward of an hour.

In fact, it must been several hours later (for the sun was high in the heavens) when one of them issued from the wood. He was mounted on a black horse, and wore a blue surtout and high boots. After looking up and down the road, and assuring himself that no one was in sight, he turned his horse’s head toward London, and set off at a round canter. Coming to a cross-road, he turned to the right, and rode for an hour in that direction, crossing the Thames near Hampton Wick. In the afternoon he entered London from the south, and put up at an obscure hostelry. Having seen his horse attended to, and eaten something himself, he went to bed and slept soundly for eighteen hours. On awaking, he ate heartily again, and spent the rest of the day in writing and arranging a quantity of documents that were packed in his saddle-bags. The next morning early he paid his reckoning, rode across London Bridge, and shaped his course toward the west.

Meanwhile the town of Witton was in vast perturbation. When Mr. Harwood Courtney woke up late in the afternoon, and came yawning down-stairs to get his breakfast, he learned, in answer to his inquiries, that nothing had been seen of David Poindexter since he rode away thirteen hours ago. Mr. Courtney expressed anxiety at this news, and dispatched his own valet and one of David’s grooms to make investigations in the neighborhood. These two personages investigated to such good purpose that before night the whole neighborhood was aware that David Poindexter had disappeared. By the next morning it became evident that something had happened to the Wicked Parson, and some people ventured to opine that the thing which had happened to him was that he had run away. And indeed it was astonishing to find to how many worthy people this evil-minded parson was in debt. Every other man you met had a bill against the Reverend David

Poindexter in his pocket; and as the day wore on, and still no tidings of the missing man were received, individuals of the sheriff and bailiff species began to be distinguishable amid the crowd. But the great sensation was yet to come. How the report started no one knew, but toward supper-time it passed from mouth to mouth that Mr. Harwood Courtney, in the course of his twenty-four hours of picquet with Poindexter, had won from the latter not his ready money alone, but the entire property and estates that had accrued to him as nearest of kin to the late David Lambert. And it was added that, as the debt was a gambling transaction, and therefore not technically recoverable by process of law, Mr. Courtney was naturally very anxious for his debtor to put in an appearance. Now it so happened that this report, unlike many others ostensibly more plausible, was true in every particular.

Probably there was more gossip at the supper-tables of Witton that night than in any other town of ten times the size in the United Kingdom; and it was formally agreed that Poindexter had escaped to the Continent, and would either remain in hiding there, or take passage by the first opportunity to the American colonies, or the United States, as they had now been called for some years past. Nobody defended the reverend apostate, but, on the other hand, nobody pretended to be sorry for Mr. Harwood Courtney; it was generally agreed that they had both of them got what they deserved. The only question was, What was to become of the property? Some people said it ought to belong to Edith Saltine; but of course poetical justice of that kind was not to be expected.

Edith, mean while, had kept herself strictly secluded. She was the last person who had seen David Poindexter, but she had mentioned the fact to no one. She was also the only person who did not believe that he had escaped, but who felt convinced that he was dead, and that he had died by his own hand. That gesture of farewell and of despair which he had made to her as he vanished behind the cedar of Lebanon had for her a significance capable of only one interpretation. Were he alive, he would have returned.

On the evening of the day following the events just recorded, the solitude of her room suddenly became terrible to Edith, and she was irresistibly impelled to dress herself and go forth in the open air. She wound a veil about her head, and, avoiding the main thoroughfare, slipped out of town unperceived, and gained the free country. After a while she found herself approaching a large tree, which spread its branches across a narrow lane that made a short-cut to the London highway. Beneath the tree was a natural seat, formed of a fragment of stone, and here David and she had often met and sat. It was a mild, still evening; she sat down on the stone, and removed her veil. The moon, then in its first quarter, was low in the west, and shone beneath the branches of the tree.

Presently she was aware—though not by any sound—that some one was approaching, and she drew back in the shadow of the tree. Down the lane came a horseman, mounted on a tall, black horse. The outline of his figure and the manner in which he rode fixed Edith's gaze as if by a spell, and made the blood hum in her ears. Nearer he came, and now his face was discernible in the level moonlight. It was impossible to mistake that countenance: the horseman was David Poindexter. His costume, however, was different from any he had ever before worn; there was nothing clerical about it; nor was that black horse from the Poindexter stables. Then, too, how noiselessly he rode!—as noiselessly as a ghost. That, however, must have been because his horse's hoofs fell on the soft turf. He rode slowly, and his head was bent as if in thought but almost before Edith could draw her breath, much less to speak, he had passed beneath the boughs of the tree, and was riding on toward the village. Now he had vanished in the vague light and shadow, and a moment later Edith began to doubt whether her senses had not played her a trick.

A superstitious horror fell upon her; what she had seen was a spirit, not living flesh and blood. She knelt down by the stone, and remained for a long time with her face hidden upon her arms, and her hands clasped, sometimes praying, sometimes wondering and fearing. At last she rose to her feet, and hastened homeward through the increasing darkness. But before she had reached her house she had discovered that what she had seen was no ghost. The whole village was in a fever of excitement.

Everybody was full of the story. An hour ago who should appear riding quietly up the village street but David Poindexter himself—at least, if it were not he, it was the devil. He seemed to take little notice of the astonished glances that were thrown at him, or, at any rate, not to understand them. Instead of going to the Lambert mansion, he had alighted at the inn, and asked the innkeeper whether he might have lodging there. But when the innkeeper, who had known the reverend gentleman as well as he knew his own sign-board, had addressed him by name, the other had shaken his head, seemed perplexed, and had affirmed that his name was not Poindexter but Lambert; and had added, upon further inquiry, that he was the only son of David Lambert, and was come to claim that gentleman's property, to which he was by law entitled; in proof whereof he had produced various documents, among them the certificates of his mother's marriage and of his own birth. As to David Poindexter, he declared that he knew not there was such a person; and although no man in his senses could be made to believe that David Poindexter and this so-called Lambert were twain, and not one and the same individual, the latter stoutly maintained his story, and vowed that the truth would sooner or later appear and confirm him. Meanwhile, however, one of his creditors had had him arrested for a debt of eight hundred pounds; and Harwood Courtney had seen him, and said that he was ready to pledge his salvation that the man was Poindexter and nobody else. So here the matter rested for the present. But who ever beard of so strange and audacious an attempt at imposition? The man had not even made any effort to disguise himself further than to put on a different suit of clothes and get another horse; and why, in the name of all that was inconceivable, had he come back to Witton, instead of going to any other part of the earth's surface? What could he expect here, except immediate detection, imprisonment, and ruin? Was he insane? He did not seem to be so; but that interpretation of his conduct was not only the most charitable one, but no other could be imagined that would account for the facts.

Witton slept but little that night; but who shall describe its bewilderment when, early in the morning, a constable arrived in the village with the news that the dead body of the Reverend David Poindexter had been found in some woods about fifteen miles off, and that his bay mare had been picked up grazing along the roadside not far from home! Upon the heels of this intelligence came the corpse itself, lying in a country wagon, and the bay mare trotting behind. It was taken out and placed on the table in the inn parlor, where it immediately became the center of a crowd half crazy with curiosity and amazement. The cause of death was found to be the breaking of the vertebral column just at the base of the neck. There was no other injury on the body, and, allowing for the natural changes incident to death, the face was in every particular the face of David Poindexter. The man who called himself Lambert was now brought into the room, and made to stand beside the corpse, which he regarded with a certain calm interest. The resemblance between the two was minute and astonishing; it was found to be impossible, upon that evidence alone, to decide which was David Poindexter.

The matter was brought to trial as promptly as possible. A great number of witnesses identified the prisoner as David Poindexter, but those who had seen the corpse mostly gave their evidence an opposite inclination; and four persons (one of them the gray-eyed gentleman who has been

already mentioned) swore positively that the prisoner was Giovanni Lambert, the gray-eyed gentleman adding that he had once met Poindexter, and had confidently taken him to be Lambert.

An attempt was then made to prove that Lambert had murdered Poindexter; but it entirely failed, there being no evidence that the two men had ever so much as met, and there being no conceivable motive for the murder. Lambert, therefore, was permitted to enter undisturbed upon his inheritance; for he had no difficulty in establishing the fact of the elder Lambert's marriage to an Italian woman twenty-three years before. The marriage had been a secret one, and soon after a violent quarrel had taken place between the wife and husband, and they had separated. The following month Giovanni was born prematurely. He had seen his father but once. The quarrel was never made up, but Lambert sent his wife, from time to time, money enough for her support. She had died about ten years ago, and had given her son the papers to establish his identity, telling him that the day would come to use them. Giovanni had been a soldier, fighting against the French in Spain and elsewhere, and had only heard of his father's death a few weeks ago. He had thereupon come to claim his own, with the Singular results that we have seen.

Here was the end of the case, so far as the law was concerned; but the real end of it is worth noting. Lambert, by his own voluntary act, paid all the legal debts contracted by Poindexter, and gave Courtney, in settlement of the gambling transaction, a sum of fifty thousand pounds. The remainder of his fortune, which was still considerable, he devoted almost entirely to charitable purposes, doing so much genuine good, in a manner so hearty and unassuming, that he became the object of more personal affection than falls to the lot of most philanthropists. He was of a quiet, sad, and retiring disposition, and uniformly very sparing of words. After a year or so, circumstances brought it about that he and Miss Saltine were associated in some benevolent enterprise, and from that time forward they often consulted together in such matters, Lambert making her the medium of many of his benefactions. Of course the gossips were ready to predict that it would end with a marriage; and indeed it was impossible to see the two together (though both of them, and especially Edith, had altered somewhat with the passage of years) without being reminded of the former love affair in which Lambert's double had been the hero. Did this also occur to Edith? It could hardly have been otherwise, and it would be interesting to speculate on her feelings in the matter; but I have only the story to tell. At all events, they never did marry, though they became very tender friends. At the end of seven years Colonel Saltine died of jaundice; he had been failing in his mind for some time previous, and had always addressed Lambert as Poindexter, and spoken of him as his son-in-law. The year following Lambert himself died, after a brief illness. He left all his property to Edith. She survived to her seventieth year, making it the business of her life to carry out his philanthropic schemes, and she always dressed in widows' weeds. After her death, the following passage was found in one of her private journals. It refers to her last interview with Lambert, on his death-bed:

“. . . He smiled, and said, 'You will believe, now, that I was sincere in renouncing the ministry, though I have tried to serve the Lord in other ways than from the pulpit.' I felt a shock in my heart, and could hardly say, 'What do you mean, Mr. Lambert?' He replied, 'Surely, Edith, your soul knows, if your reason does not, that I am David Poindexter!' I could not speak. I hid my face in my hands. After a while, in separate sentences, he told me the truth. When he rode forth on that dreadful morning it was with the purpose to die. But he met on the road this Giovanni Lambert, who so marvelously resembled him, and they sat down together in the wood and talked, and Giovanni told him all the story of his life. . . . As Giovanni was about to mount his horse, which was very restive, he saw a violet in the grass, and stooped to pick it. The horse

lashed out with its heels, and struck him in the back of the neck and killed him. . . . Then the idea came to David to exchange clothes with the dead man, and to take his papers, and personate him. Thus, he could escape from the individuality which was his curse, and find his true self, as it were, in another person. He said, too, that his greatest hope had been to win my love and make me his wife; but he found that he could not bring himself to attempt that, unless he confessed his falsehood to me, and he had feared that this confession would turn me from him forever. I wept, and told him that my heart had been his almost from the first, because I always thought of him as David, and that I would have loved him through all things. He said, 'Then God has been more merciful to me than I deserve; but, doubtless, it is also of His mercy that we have remained unmarried.' But I was in an agony, and could not yet be reconciled. At last he said, 'Will you kiss me, Edith?' and afterward he said, 'My wife!' and that was his last word. But we shall meet again!"