

The White Perfumery Bottle;
or,
The Murderer Detected

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A few years ago the good citizens of Alexandria were greatly excited, in consequence of an extraordinary murder which had been perpetrated in the immediate vicinity of their little town. It was a circumstance the like of which had never occurred there since the settlement of the place; and there were old men living in the town whose fathers had been born there.

It was true that men had shot each other down in the streets of Alexandria; but it was either to recent insults, in self-defense, in some individual or family quarrel, some misunderstanding at the card table, some political difference of the parties, or from some other equally reasonable cause. But a downright, cold-blooded murder, where the only apparent object was robbery,—a murder attended as this was with the most marked inhumanity, was really astounding!

The facts were these:—

For many years a Jew peddler named Abrams had been in the habit of frequenting the town, where he usually laid in his assortment of goods, consisting of every imaginable article likely to be required by the customers whom he regularly supplied.

He had a particular district of the country, to which for years he had confined himself; and always made his circuits with such regularity that the people of the different neighborhoods knew, to an hour, when to look for him. Abrams had become so well known, as an honest dealer, that he was frequently entrusted with many, and sometimes important, commissions.

If there were any watches or jewelry to be repaired, they were laid aside 'till the visit of "honest Abrams," as he was familiarly called, who would have them put in order by a fellow countryman in Alexandria, and bring them home on his next regular round; or if an especial article of dress or ornament was needed Abrams was commissioned to purchase it. He could push a better bargain than his customers; and was so well acquainted with their particular tastes that he never failed to make the very selections that they themselves would have done.

Nor was the honest peddler popular alone among his country patrons; for his returns to town were hailed as fortunate occurrences by all the principal storekeepers of the place; and his capacious two-horse, covered wagon was considered one of the important "institutions" of Alexandria.

Abrams' habit was to spend two days in the town at every visit, making his purchases, and waiting for such articles as he was to take to the country; and on the evening of the second day to drive out to a planter's house, about five miles distant, where he remained overnight. Between town and this point he never unlocked his cases, or attempted to sell any of his stock. This was in accordance with a special understanding with the town traders.

One night Abrams had been detained in town later than usual, and it was some hours after the closing of the stores, that he was known to have passed the bridge over the creek, upon the outskirts of the place. The next morning a plantation hand coming early to market, found the peddler's horse tied to a tree, and nearby the wagon, which had been rifled of its contents. But the peddler himself was nowhere to be found. It was scarcely yet daylight, but the negro thought he could see stains of blood upon the seat of the wagon. Hastening to town, the man lost no time in informing the people of what he had discovered, and in half an hour hundred had hurried to the spot to investigate the matter.

After daylight had appeared they had no difficulty in finding the body of the peddler. He had been most horribly mutilated and bruised with clubs, several of which were lying about the wagon, plainly indicating that several persons had been engaged in the murder. The body had been dragged a good distance up the creek, and thrown down the high cliff; but catching in the top of a tree, hung suspended midway between the top of the bank and the water. The tracks of several moccassined feet were discovered about the wagon, and could be traced toward the town as far as the bridge. But here they ceased. On the bridge, which was of planks, and free from soil, they were lost sight of. The wearers had probably exchanged them for shoes, and beyond, in the frequented road, the track could no longer be followed.

By the time the people returned to the town with the body of the poor murdered man, the whole community was aroused, and the utmost excitement prevailed. His death was considered as a very great public loss; and in fact such it was, as he had not only brought much money into the place, but had made himself and his wagon almost indispensable to the country about.

Hundreds volunteered to assist the sheriff in searching for the plundered goods and the murderers, and for weeks the woods, negro quarters, and, in fact, every spot likely to be used for the concealment of the property, for miles about the town, were searched. But all in vain. Not a trace could be found by which the perpetrators of the blood deed could be followed.

At length the merchants, who considered themselves the greatest losers by the death of the peddler, who had been so valuable a customer, clubbed together, and offered a reward of one thousand dollars for any clue by which the murderer might be detected, and five hundred dollars, payable on the day of conviction, for each of the murderers.

This reward again stimulated the search, and many innocent persons were arrested, and afterwards, on providing alibis, were liberated without formal trials.

Nearly three months had passed away, and although rumor, as is usual on such occasions, was busy with conjectures, and evil-minded persons took advantage of the murder, to throw out dark hints against those for whom they might hold a secret malice, nothing satisfactory had been developed. But about this time suspicion began to fall upon an individual named Phil Newcomb, or "Uncle Phil," as he was generally called.

Uncle Phil was an old bachelor, who was considered scarcely compos mentis, and who lived some seven or eight miles from the town, in the heart of the piney woods. The old man had for his only companion a negro, about his own age. The two supported themselves by making

shingles and hunting, and had always been looked upon as honest and inoffensive people. While the country was being searched, therefore, for clues of the murder, no one ever thought of searching Uncle Phil's cabin. But one day some young men from Alexandria, who were out hunting, were overtaken by a shower, in the vicinity of the shingle-maker's cabin, and sought shelter in it from the rain.

While they were waiting for the storm to pass, they observed, hanging from a joist, overhead, and partially concealed by a blanket, several pairs of buckskin moccasins. At the time, they thought little of the circumstance, as those articles were worn by many of the piney woods people. But several days after, when some casual reference was made to the murder of Abrams, the young men remembered the moccasins they had seen at Uncle Phil's, and spoke of them. One of the deputy sheriffs happened to be present, and observing that it would be well enough to give the old man a call, immediately started for his place.

The moccasins, four pairs, were found as the young men had described them, and Uncle Phil, when questioned about them, seemed to hesitate at first about giving correct answers. At length, however, he asserted that they had been found by his negro Sam, who, he said, would tell him all about them.

Sam was called in, and when the officer demanded to know where the moccasins came from, the negro answered promptly —

“I found 'em, marster.”

“But *where* did you find them?” persisted the deputy.

“I found 'em, master, in Swam's creek, under de bridge, two of three days arter dat peddler done been killed.”

“But why,” asked the white man, “did you not bring them to town, and given them up to the sheriff? They are doubtless the same as were worn by the murderers of Abrams!”

“Cause, marster, I tell yer, de fact is, marster Phil, here, and I thought them ar moc'sins would be so nice when the cold weather come, we 'cluded we'd hang 'em up in de smoke and say nothing about whar we got 'em to nobody,” and the old fellow said this with such a manner of truth and simplicity, that the officer was satisfied that he knew nothing more, and had really found the moccasins, as he had asserted; and taking the articles with him, returned to town.

But as well convinced as the deputy sheriff might be of the innocence of Phil Newcomb and his man Sam, there were those who persisted in asserting that these men knew more about the murder than they chose to acknowledge. There were even those who declared it their opinion that they were really concerned in the bloody deed. Suspicion thus fairly aroused against them, the current of public opinion began to set strongly against Uncle Phil and Sam; and finally, on making a thorough search of the premises, various articles belonging to the murdered man's assortment, were found, and they were arrested and conveyed to jail.

There was now, in the minds of the people, but little doubt, that the shingle-maker and his negro, were two, at least, of the murderers of honest Abrams; and so great was the excitement of their arrest, that it was difficult for the sheriff, and the more moderate citizens, to save them from being lynched by the mob.

During the examination before the magistrate the prisoners declared their innocence of crime, and their ignorance of anything relating to the murder; but insisted that they had found the goods, discovered on their premises, in a hollow log, on the bank of Swan creek, where it flowed through the piney woods. The spot they described was examined, and other articles, which were identified as having belonging to the peddler, were found.

It was now proposed to force a confession from the black, by torture. He was therefore brought from the prison, and, after being tied to a tree, was whipped severely, and then hung by the throat till he promised to confess anything they desired. To save his life he was willing to depose to anything; and, under the dictation of the mob, the negro declared that himself and master were the real murderers of the peddler; but did not implicate others as being connected to them.

This confession, however, could not be used as positive testimony against uncle Phil. But, as circumstantial evidence, coupled with other facts, it was considered by the jury that sat upon their trial, sufficient to convict both of them of the murder and robbery of the Jew.

They were therefore sentenced to suffer the penalty of the law, and were to be hung on the last Friday of the following month, which would be October.

At this period I was a resident of Alexandria, where I had been for several years engaged in business, as an apothecary and druggist; and had been accustomed to furnish various goods in my line to the honest Jew. Some of the articles I had sold him on his last visit to the town, I had recognized among the goods found at the cabin of Phil Newcomb, and had testified to them on the trail. But for my life, I could not be satisfied of the guilt of the simple shingle maker. There was no doubt in my mind that he came by the things in the way he stated, and no other; and the confession of poor Sam, extorted by the lash and the rope, was regarded by me, as altogether a fabrication. In fact, the old negro, after the trial, acknowledged it as such. But I was alone in this belief; and found it useless to attempt any measures to obtain a commutation of the sentence of the court against the unfortunate prisoners.

The middle of October had arrived and passed, and the fatal Friday was close at hand; and still no circumstance had occurred to change the tide of public opinion. Uncle Phil and his faithful servant and friend, would soon suffer for a crime I was satisfied they were innocent of. As the time drew nearer, I again endeavored to convince my friends of the fatal error they had made, and assured them that the time would certainly come, when they would be forced to agree with me, in the entire innocence of those simple and imbecile old men. But I feared *that* time would come too late to save them.

It came, however. Through a singular circumstance, I was made the happy medium through which the whole mysterious affair was brought to light, and two innocent and harmless fellow-beings snatched from the hangman's noose.

Thursday morning—the day previous to that appointed for the execution of Phil Newcomb and Sam, and while the sounds of the workmen engaged in the erection of the fatal scaffold were distinctly heard in my place of business—a young man called upon me, and producing from his pocket, a peculiarly shaped, white, cut glass bottle, which had contained perfume, inquired if I could prepare for him a similar article.

I immediately recognized the bottle, as the same I had frequently refilled with a particular kind of choice and expensive perfumery of my own invention, for Abrams. He sold a good deal of it to his country customers, and filled their little flasks from this bottle. I had filled it for him the last evening he was seen alive.

I have always been somewhat noted among my intimate friends for having a peculiarly strong control over my feelings. But I must confess, that on the sight of that well-known bottle, and catching the scent of the familiar odor, I had all I could do to constrain my astonishment and joy, for instantly I thought I had in my possession a clue to the real murderers of our peddler.

By the by, I should not neglect to say, that I had never manufactured for any other of my customers this particular sort of perfumery, and Abrams was the only person who had disposed of it to others.

“Yes,” said I, endeavoring to conceal my emotion by smelling the bottle, “I think I can come pretty near the thing. But, my dear sir, have the kindness to step into the backroom with me while I prepare it.”

And leading the way to my private laboratory, I handed him a chair; and seating myself opposite him, with the bottle still in my hand, I fixed my eyes sternly upon his face, and with all the firmness of manner I could command, demanded:

“Where, sir, did you get this bottle?”

At first the young man’s face flushed scarlet red, but only for an instant, for the color disappeared as suddenly as the flash of midnight lightening, and then a ghastly pallor overspread his features, which seemed to shrink, and collapse, as I remembered to have seen those of the miserable victims of Asiatic cholera, whom I had encountered in the hospitals of New Orleans.

A tremor as of ague seized upon him—his lips moved, but no articulation proceeded from them.

Still keeping my eyes fixed sternly upon him, and placing my hands upon his trembling shoulders, I continued, in a voice now scarcely louder than a whisper:

“This bottle belonged to the peddler Abrams! And you are one of his murderers!”

Hardly had the words passed my lips, than the young man, giving forth a cry of horror, leaped wildly to his feet, and then, as if shot to the heart, fell insensible upon the floor, his frame still quivering as in the throes of a convulsion. It was the most fearful demonstration of guilt I ever witnessed.

I immediately sent for a magistrate; and, in the presence of one of my assistants, I detailed to him what had occurred, while the young man remained in my backroom, still lost to what was going on about him.

At length he was restored to consciousness; and then, in the presence of the magistrate and my assistants, he confessed the whole affair.

He, in company with three other individuals, gamblers, who had been a long time hanging about the town, had murdered the peddler for his goods and money, and had deposited the former in various places—some in the piney woods, near the cabin of Uncle Phil, who, he declared, was entirely ignorant of the transaction.

The young man, whose name I withhold on account of his respectable connections, and who was led on, step by step, first to gambling, then to defrauding his employer, (a merchant of the town), and then to the perpetration of the murder, by his wicked associates, was permitted to turn State's evidence against them; and in due course of law, they suffered the penalty due their crimes.

It is needless to say that we lost no time in giving publicity to the above facts; and the sheriff took the responsibility of delaying the execution of the sentence upon Uncle Phil and Sam till the governor had been informed of the true state of things; and then, on the representation of the judge and jury, who had condemned them on strong circumstantial evidence, their sentences were remitted, and they were escorted in triumph to their old cabin in the piney woods.

They are living there yet, and almost the first man I met on revisiting the place recently, was black Sam, who, with his master and friend, Uncle Phil Newcomb, still remember with gratitude the interest I took in their favor.

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