

The Accusing Leaves

by a New York Detective

It is astonishing what a small circumstance will sometimes serve to detect a criminal. I have known the most simple thing, which in itself seemed so trivial as to be deemed scarcely worthy of notice, in more than one instance serve to clear up a mystery and bring a guilty party to justice. The history I am about to relate is a case in point.

Some six years ago there lived in a good substantial dwelling, about a mile from Hoboken, a gentleman of the name of Palmer. His household consisted of himself, an only daughter, and a servant girl. I became acquainted with Mr. Palmer in a rather curious manner.

I was at the theatre one night, and noticed an old gentleman seated in front of me, who was very vociferous in his applause. This appeared to annoy a young man who sat by his side, and he several times made some disparaging remark at the old man's expense. This at last became so annoying that the latter took it up, and high words ensued between them. At last the young man rose from his seat as if to strike the old gentleman. It was then that I caught light of his face for the first time, and recognized in him a noted pickpocket. I thought it was now time for me to interfere. I laid my hand gently on the young man's shoulder, he turned sharply round, but the moment he saw me he turned pale, and could not utter a word.

“Don't you think you had better leave the theatre, Emory?” said I.

“Certainly, Mr. Brampton, if you say so,” he replied, completely cowed by my presence.

“Go, then!” I exclaimed, pointing to the door.

Emory took up his hat and walked out without saying a word. When he was gone the old gentleman introduced himself to me as Mr. Palmer, and thanked me for the interference in his behalf, although he could not understand the power I exercised over his antagonist. This, however, I soon made clear to him by relating to him the nature of my profession, and the occupation followed by the young man who had insulted him.

Mr. Palmer invited me to occupy the seat beside him, and we were soon engaged in a most interesting conversation. I found him to be a very intelligent man, well read, and with an extraordinary knowledge of theatrical matters. In the course of conversation he told me that he had a fine collection of old plays at home, and invited me to visit him to examine them. This was a temptation I could not resist, and I promised to visit him the following week. When the theatre was over we separated, mutually pleased with each other's society.

The next week I kept my promise, and visited Mr. Palmer at his house. He treated me most hospitably, and introduced me to his daughter, a charming young girl about eighteen years of age. He then took me over his grounds, which were kept with remarkable neatness and order.

“What tree do you call that?” I asked, pointing to one isolated from the rest.

“That is an almond tree,” replied my host. “It was planted by my father, and I prize it above all others in the garden.”

I had never seen an almond tree before, and examined it attentively. I was particularly struck with the beauty of its leaves. After dinner he led me into his library, and spread before me his fine collection of old plays. I was soon deeply absorbed in Wycherly, Congrove, Dryden and Beaumont and Fletcher. It was quite late when I returned to New York, after promising to renew my visit at an early date.

About a week after this visit I was walking down Broadway, when I met Hardin, a brother officer of mine, with whom I was on terms of intimacy. We stopped and shook hands.

“That was a terrible murder last night,” said he, after we had passed a few remarks upon the weather.

“What murder?” I returned. “I have heard nothing of it.”

“Is it possible? Are you not aware that Mr. Palmer of Hoboken was found early this morning murdered in his garden?”

“Mr. Palmer!” I cried, in the greatest astonishment. “Impossible!”

“I assure you it is true. News came to the office of the chief-of-police at seven o'clock, and Lewis has been sent over the river to investigate the matter.”

“I shall go myself,” I returned. “This Mr. Palmer was a friend of mine.”

“You will find Lewis there.”

After a few more words we separated, and I hurried through my business, and by twelve o'clock I was at Mr. Palmer's residence. I met Lewis in the parlor.

“Well, Lewis,” said I, “what do you make of it?”

“Did the chief send you here?” was his reply.

My success in the P— case where he had so signally failed, had rankled in his heart and he was not on the very best of terms with me.

“No,” I returned, “this Mr. Palmer was a friend of mine, and I am not here in a professional capacity at all.”

“If you are here only as a friend to the deceased, I don't mind answering your questions. The person who murdered Mr. Palmer is arrested.”

“Indeed!” I returned. “I am glad you have been so successful.”

“Yes. I think I am legitimately entitled to take great credit to myself for the way I have worked it out.”

“Who is the murderer?” I asked.

“Guess.”

“I haven't the most remote idea.”

“What would you say to Miss Charlotte Palmer?”

“Who?” I exclaimed, not believing my ears.

“Miss Charlotte Palmer, the daughter of the deceased.”

“Ridiculous!” I replied.

“Of course, I expected you would say that,” replied Lewis. “I tell you what it is. Brampton, you think there is nobody as clever as yourself.”

“My dear fellow,” I returned, in a good-natured tone, “rely upon it, you have found a mare's nest.”

“You can think as you please, but the proof will be made manifest on the day of trial who is right.”

“The idea of Miss Charlotte Palmer murdering her own father is to me so supremely ridiculous, that I cannot entertain it for a moment. But I would be much obliged to you, Lewis, if you would relate to me the particulars of the proofs you have against her.”

“Certainly, I have no objection to do that. Mr. Palmer's body was discovered very early this morning under the almond tree in his garden, with his throat cut. The man who discovered the body—a carpenter living in Hoboken—immediately went to the house to give the alarm. He found all the house fastened up, and knocked for sometime without being able to arouse the inmates. He then immediately left for the city, and brought information to the chief's office. I was immediately sent over. I made a strict examination of everything connected with the case. I soon discovered the strongest proofs that Miss Palmer was the perpetrator of the deed. I traced drops of blood from the front door to her room. When she was awakened her bedroom window was found open, some drops of blood were on the window sill, and underneath her window in the long grass was found the knife with which the deed had been committed. She had evidently thrown it out of the window after committing the deed.”

“That is a strange conclusion to arrive at,” said I.

“How so?” he returned.

“Why in the name of all that's wonderful should she take the weapon back with her to her bed-chamber after committing the deed?”

“In the excitement of the moment she doubtless forgot she held the knife in her hand, and only found it out when she reached her own chamber.”

“But what could be her motive for committing this deed?”

“That I have not discovered yet. I have heard it whispered that Mr. Palmer opposed her marriage to a young man whom she loved.”

“Where is Miss Palmer now.” I asked.

“She is in custody, of course.”

“But where?”

“In Hoboken.”

“Well, Lewis, strong as you think the proofs are against the young lady, I assure you, you have made a mistake. I would stake my life she is innocent.”

“You would lose it, Brampton, for she is guilty of this murder as sure as I am standing here. Just examine the proofs yourself, and I am sure you will be of my opinion.”

Lewis a few minutes afterwards returned to New York, and left me a clear field for action. Before even I began my examination I was perfectly convinced of Miss Palmer's innocence. Everything was against it. In the first place I knew that she loved her father devotedly, and that under no circumstances could she possibly commit such a deed. A single glance at the wound by which the deceased met his death satisfied me that she had not physical strength enough to have inflicted it. No woman's hand dealt that blow.

I proceeded to visit the spot where the body had been found. It was in the midst of November, and the ground was strewn with the leaves of the almond tree, for a violent wind had been blowing on the night the deed was committed. There appeared to be no evidence of any struggle having taken place, for with the exception of a pool of blood of considerable size, the place presented its natural appearance.

I inquired which was Miss Palmer's bedroom, and found that the window looked out into the garden where the deed had been committed. That side of the house was covered with thick grape vine which ascended to the very roof. I examined this grape vine very minutely, and was soon rewarded for my trouble, for I discovered distinct marks of some one having recently clambered up it. On some of the branches the pressure of the foot was plainly to be seen. I came at once to

the conclusion that whoever had committed the deed had entered Miss Palmer's apartment by the window, no doubt for the sole purpose of fixing the guilt on her. I then traced the stains of blood which Lewis had considered such a positive proof of the young lady's guilt. To my mind they proved her innocence, for just outside her chamber door they were plentiful, and grew less as they descended, until at the front door they were scarcely discernible. If Miss Palmer had been guilty, the exact reverse would have been the case. It was perfectly evident to me that the murderer had descended the stairs from Miss Palmer's chamber, and then ascended them again, and escaped through the window by which he had entered. The fact of the window being found open strengthened the hypothesis.

My next proceeding was to visit the young lady in custody. My profession procured me an order instantly, and I was shown into her presence. I found her naturally in a state of great excitement, but she immediately recognized me and pressed my hand warmly. I commenced the conversation by expressing my firm conviction of her innocence. She could not restrain her tears, but wept bitterly.

“Thank God!” she exclaimed, through her sobs, “there is at least one person who believes my innocence. I cannot at present realize the fact that I am accused of murder. I fancy I am suffering from some hideous nightmare. I repeat to myself the question over and over again, ‘can it be possible I am arrested for murder, and the murder of my own father?’ No, no, it cannot be!”

“Miss Palmer,” I returned, “unless we can set aside the evidence, I know not what we must do. To the vulgar mind the evidence is strong against you. Let me hear your statement.”

“I have no statement to make. I retired early to bed last night leaving my father up. I slept all night through without waking. In fact I was asleep when the officers of justice entered my room.”

“Has your father had any quarrel with any one lately?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“There is a rumor abroad that your father opposed your marriage with a young man whom you love.”

“There is not a word of truth in it, Mr. Brampton—in fact it is exactly the reverse. A young man named Charles Butler has for some time past been persecuting me with his addresses, but I have always disliked him. His persecution at last became so annoying that I was obliged to appeal to my father for protection. He called to see him, and I have only met the young man once since that time.”

“When was that?”

“It is about a week ago. He always used to be loitering about our house. After tea on the evening in question, I left the house to take short stroll by moonlight. I had scarcely gone a dozen yards when he presented himself before me.”

“What passed at that interview?”

“He was extremely violent. He informed me that father had called on him, and forbade him ever addressing me again, but that he would be revenged on both of us. I told him that I despised his threats. He left me in a towering passion, and I have never seen him since.”

“This information is of very great importance,” I returned.

“You cannot surely think that he could have been guilty of my poor father's murder?”

“There is no telling what a man will not do for revenge. Where does the young man live?”

“He lives about two miles from my father's house. His father is a miller.”

“Well, I shall call and see him.”

I now took my leave, promising to see her again as soon as I could. I immediately directed my steps to the residence of Mr. Charles Butler, and had strong hopes of being able to obtain some important information from my visit.

In about an hour's time I had reached the dwelling in which the young man's father lived. It was an old mansion and beside it was the mill, which stood on the banks of a rapid stream of water. The mill was enclosed by a fence, and the entrance was by means of a stout gate. I tried to open it, but I found that it was secured by a large block of stone being placed on the other side, the lock having been broken. I pushed at the gate for some moments, but found I could not move the stone. I then rattled it violently. This summons brought out an old German, who appeared to be in charge of the building.

“Good morning,” said he when he saw me.

“Good morning,” I replied. “Can't you let me in? I want to speak to you about grinding some corn.”

“In a minute, mein Herr, you see dat de lock is broken. Mr. Karl, he broke dat wit his foot.”

“Mr. Charles broke it with his fool, did he?” I replied, while the old man was moving the stone away; “how was that?”

“Mr. Karl, he came home vary late last night, and he found de gate locked, then he kick him open mit his foot.”

“Mr. Charles must be a very impatient young gentleman,” I observed.

“You may well say dat, mein Herr—he be one wild boy.”

“He must have been out late last night,” I said.

“Ya, ya, he be come home vary late, it be four o'clock in de morning.”

“Where had he been?”

“Das weis ich nicht—but he be vary pale -- like a ghost.”

“What time did he go out last night?” I asked.

“He left his home at ten o'clock, for I see him go.”

This information was very important to me, and I continued to interrogate the old German, but he began to grow suspicious of my questions, and at last declined to answer any more of my interrogations. But I had heard sufficient for my purpose.

“Is Mr. Butler at home?” I asked, of the old man.

“Ya, mein Herr—he and his son be in de house yonder.”

“Well, perhaps I had better see them about my business?”

“Mebbe you had,” said my German friend, very glad I am sure to get rid of me.

I left the old man and went to the house, and ringing the bell asked to see Mr. Butler on business. After a little delay, I was ushered into a parlor where both father and son were sitting. The former was a fine old man, about sixty years of age, the latter was a young man about two and twenty. He was decidedly handsome, but there was restlessness about his eyes which immediately struck me. I also noticed that he was very pale. He was in his shirt sleeves, but his coat hung on the back of a chair.

“Mr. Butler,” said I, when I entered the room, “could you grind me fifty bushels of corn tomorrow?”

“Certainly,” replied the old gentleman, “send it in, and I will do it to your satisfaction.”

“Your neighborhood has been the scene of a terrible tragedy,” said I.

“Fearful,” returned Mr. Butler, senior, “but they tell me that there can be no doubt but that the unfortunate man's daughter committed the deed.”

“The proofs are very strong against her,” I returned, glancing at Mr. Charles Butler.

He was very uneasy, and moved restlessly about the room.

“It seems to me very extraordinary that she should have committed this deed,” said the old gentleman—“the father and daughter always appeared to me to live on the best of terms together.”

“She must have had some secret motive for the act—perhaps she was actuated by a feeling of revenge.”

As I uttered the last word I fixed my eyes on the young man's face. He could not stand my gaze. His face assumed a livid hue, and he turned away his head.

“It was a very windy, dark night, just fitted for such a crime,” said Mr. Butler, senior.

“I believe it was, but your son can better answer that question, as he was out nearly all night.”

“My son out last night—you make a mistake,—he went to bed before I did.”

“The gentleman is in error,” said the young man with a ghastly smile. “I was not out last night.”

“You have forgotten,” I replied, quietly. “You left the house at ten o'clock, and did not return until four in the morning. When you wanted to enter the gate leading to the mill you found it locked. You then knocked the gate with your foot and broke the lock.”

“Is this true?” said the father, gazing sternly on his son, who stood trembling in every limb, unable to utter a word.

“Is this true, I ask?” repeated the old man in a more peremptory tone of voice.

The young man made a violent effort over himself, and replied in a broken voice:

“Yes, I believe I was out last night, now I come to think about it.”

“It is very strange you should have ever forgotten it,” returned the old man; “pray what were you doing out last night?”

“I went to Jersey City on business,” replied the son, with a determined air.

“To Jersey City on business, in the middle the night?” repeated the old man, in a tone of astonishment and incredulity.

“Your son makes a slight mistake,” I observed; “he did not go quite as far as Jersey City.”

“What do you mean?” said Mr. Charles Butler, gazing fiercely on me, for he was evidently getting desperate.

“I simply mean that you went no further than Mr. Palmer's,” I returned.

The young man staggered, while his father looked at me, with surprise most intensely marked on his face.

“I—I—don't—understand you,” stammered Mr. Charles Butler.

“O, yes you do,” I returned, “you understand me very well. I may as well tell the truth at once, gentlemen. I am a detective officer, my name is Brampton, and it is my painful duty to arrest Mr. Charles Butler, charged with the willful murder of Mr. Palmer.”

“It is a false charge,” exclaimed the accused, assuming a kind of bravado.

“Your denials are of no avail, young man,” I replied. “The proofs are only too evident against you. Your case is a very bleak one. Not content with taking the life of that poor old man, you must endeavor to fix the guilt on his child. For that purpose you ascended to her window by means of a grape vine, and took the trouble to drop the blood from her chamber to the front door.”

“Who is the witness against me?” said the young man, his bravado giving way when he saw that all was known.

“The Almighty,” I returned, advancing to the spot where his coat hung on the back of a chair. “Examine the back of your coat. Do you see those two leaves from the almond tree sticking to it? They are fastened there by the blood of your victim. The high wind blew them after you, as you had in all probability turned to leave the spot, and there they are, a damning proof of your guilt.”

Charles Butler fell back in a chair, buried his face in his hands, and did not utter a word.

The moment I had entered the room, I had noticed the almond leaves on the back of his coat, and I knew that I stood in the presence of Mr. Palmer's murderer. Mr. Butler senior was utterly overwhelmed by the accusation made against his son. He saw in a moment from the young man's manner, that he was really guilty, and gave way to his feelings by a paroxysm of grief.

I immediately procured assistance, and removed the murderer to prison. He maintained an obstinate silence, but proofs in addition to what I had already discovered were soon forthcoming. A witness was found who had seen him loitering about Mr. Palmer's premises; a dealer in cutlery recognized him as the man who had purchased the knife with which the deed had been committed—in short the evidences of his crime became perfectly overwhelming.

Miss Palmer was at once set at liberty. In due time Charles Butler was tried and convicted. He did not, however, die on the scaffold, for a week before the day fixed for his execution, he was seized with a violent fever which carried him off in three days.

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