

## *The Murder in the Room*

FROM THE NOTE BOOK OF AN EMINENT PHILADELPHIA LAWYER, LATELY DECEASED.

The narrative which I present, I give as I find it in my notebook. It was taken in almost the very words of the murderer, though not committed to writing until next day; for the narrative made a very powerful impression on my mind. The disappearance of the murdered man had excited much conjecture as to his fate; but the general impression was that he had absconded to avoid his creditors, and his friends often wondered whether he would ever return.

### THE MURDERER'S STORY

There were five of us together—constant companions—fond of women, wine, and the dice-box. We made love in company, got drunk together, and gambled from the same purse. A very slender purse it was, too—but that's not to the point.

There was Harry Pierce and his brother Fred—little Tom Needham—Jack Fry and myself. Harry was impetuous, hasty, irritable, but in the main good-hearted; his brother was cooler, more calculating, and if anything a little avaricious. Tom was a true toper, who enjoyed his glass to the extreme, and was never happy except when half drunk; and Jack was a kind of hanger-on and toady for the whole of us. For myself, there was only two peculiarities worth mentioning, from their apparent inconsistency. As quick as a flash, the least angry word would arouse me to a tempest of ungovernable passion, which, when subsided, would find me as cold as ice, and with a mind free to plot and contrive anything.

On one evening we had lost a good deal of money more than we could well afford—at poker, and had left the gaming-room in no very good spirits. Fred Pierce had not been with us, or perhaps we should not have played so long, for Fred, unlike the majority of gamblers, who play most desperately when fortune in most unkind, invariably stopped when a certain maximum of loss was arrived at.

In the morning Fred called to see me, having heard something about the loss, and was astonished and angry when he learned the amount. He remonstrated with me, and when I laughed at his words, grew irritated. One word, as the saying goes, brought another; we both became angry, and at length he told me that he thought it an unjustifiable outrage on our parts to lose his share of the money during his absence. I called him a fool, and he retorted that I was a scoundrel. In a towering rage, I seized the tongs, which stood on the side of the hearth, and before I gave a thought to the consequences, struck him on the head with all the force of which I was master. He fell instantly. The next moment restored me to consciousness, and I raised him up. The blow had fractured his skull, and although no blood had flown—his thick cap, which he had not removed during the conversation, deadening somewhat the blow—he was evidently dead.

A moment's reflection convinced me that one or two things must be done—either to conceal the body, or to discover the fact, and proclaim that I had done the deed in self-defense. The fear that I could not well make it appear so to the public, deterred me from the latter course. I had stated the day before to my landlady that I intended to send a box full of books and papers to my

uncle's residence in the country; and the large packing box procured for the purpose then stood in my room. I determined to put the body in this, and thus dispose of it. As I was about to do this, I heard a ringing at the doorbell. Thrusting aside the window curtain, I put my head through the window, which was luckily half hoisted, and saw that my companions of the night before had come to pay me a visit. I knew that they would at once come to my room, and take no denial for entrance. In an instant my course was determined on. I hastily dragged the body to the closet, placing it upright, and taking my dueling-case from the place of its usual bestowment, closed the closet door. I then threw on my great coat, put on my hat, and tossed the chairs in confusion round my room. I had scarcely done this when I heard the steps of the party on the stairs, and as they entered the room, I gave a tremendous oath, with every other evidence of counterfeit passion.

“Hallo!” exclaimed Harry Pierce, “what is the matter with you? Going out?”

“I have this moment come in,” said I, “to get my pistols. I thought I'd practice this morning—and some vagabond has been in my room, and turned everything upside down. It's too bad, by Jove; there's a whole pile of shirts, just from the wash, tossed on the floor.”

My friends burst into a wild laugh, and Tom Needham exclaimed:

“Served you right. What business had you to own so many shirts? I have only one. In fact, that was what kept me from you yesterday so long. I had to lie in bed while it was being washed and ironed—and the woman kept it two hours beyond time, because I owed her a little bill.”

“Well,” said I “I wish you'd stop your nonsense and fix up matters; and we'll go out and take a crack or two this morning.”

“Not with me,” answered Tom. “It's too cold for the fingers. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll have a game of whist. There's just a snug party. I wonder where Fred is?”

“I don't know,” said I, “he promised yesterday to come and see me.”

“I'll bet a sous,” cried Jack Fry, “that he was the Robin Goodfellow who upset your wardrobe.”

“Just like him,” I replied, “but nevertheless, I am bent on shooting this morning.”

“So you shall shoot, old fellow,” cried Tom Needham, “so you shall; and you needn't cool your fingers either. You leave this old rat-trap tomorrow, don't you?”

“Yes.”

“Very good. Then we'll give your landlady a proof of our solid regard. Here;” and he took a piece of coal from the hearth as he spoke—“I'll chalk out the old lady on this closet door. Load the pistols—it's about twelve paces from the other side of the room—and we'll put more balls into the old feminine, than she puts pepper corns into her mock turtle soup.”

A general yell of approval greeted this novel proposition, amid which Tom gravely proceeded to sketch what he called a remarkably correct portrait of the mistress of the house; and Harry Pierce sat to work to load the pistols. When Harry had finished he claimed the first shot for his pains; which Tom claimed for the same reason, insisting that as he had set up the wind mill, he ought to tilt at it. A mock altercation followed, which was finally settled by a toss up, which Harry won. He grasped the pistol accordingly, and fired.

A noise of something followed. The concussion had disturbed the body, which in falling had struck the side shelf, and overturned some books. We all started.—Needham, however, did not notice it, and presented his pistol fired again, but entirely too low, exclaiming when he saw the result,—“There’s a ball in her ladyship’s calf, by Jupiter.”

Harry turned to me as white as ashes, and said:—“Did you hear anything?”

“I did,” I replied, “the ball from your pistol, and be hanged to you, has upset some of my books I suppose.”

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Harry, “I have a terrible presentiment. Suppose my brother should have hid himself in the closet.” And he sank down on the chair as he spoke. We gathered round him; and Tom Needham burst into a fit of laughter.

“Upon my soul,” said he, “you are worse than the baker’s daughter.” Here he cried in a squeaking tone, “If I were to be married, and were to have a little baby, and it were to come here and to get into the oven and be burned to death—boo—boo!” Then resuming his natural tone he exclaimed: “You are the most ridiculous fools, the whole of you, I ever saw. Have you any brandy in your den? I must have a little to revive me, after this scene. You’d better give Harry some. Lord knows he needs it?”

My heart throbbed with a strange delight. The web of my difficulties was being rapidly unraveled—my escape was almost certain; but what if they should discover the fracture? I walked boldly forward to the closet, and placing my hands on the catch knob said,—“In order to dissipate your doubts, I’ll open the mystery.” As I spoke I threw the door wide open.

Mine was an affected shout, but not so that of the rest. I shall never forget the wild shriek of despair which left the bosom of Harry Pierce as he knelt forward and raised the body of his brother, nor the terrible tones of that hoarse whisper, in which he said,—“I’m a Cain—God forgive my folly!” and then he sank into the arms of Tom Needham.

My companions examined the body. The ball of Harry had evidently gone through his heart. The absence of blood was at once accounted for by inward bleeding; and as we were examining the body, we heard the shrill voice of our hostess lady outside scolding because we were firing pistols and shrieking in our room.

A debate now ensued in regard to the disposal of the dead body. I knew that the blow on the head would be discovered, if the thing were divulged; and I at once suggested that we had better bury the body secretly. I told them it could be packed in the long box which lay there; and that one of

us could meet the conveyance out of town, take it to some out of the way spot, where I would assist to bury the body. In the meanwhile, Needham could purchase a coffin, and other necessary materials as though to send it off to the country; and at night we could bury it.

Harry Pierce made no opposition, he was incapable of anything. The plan was carried out as I suggested; and each parted. The rest were convinced, and are still, that a brother had been the unwilling murderer of a brother. Harry Pierce died last year in a mad-house, and I am here, twenty years after, with grey hairs on my head, and an unclouded reputation, to tell you the tale.

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