

My First Case
by Frank Dumont

I had not been in the detective service long when a singular case came under my notice. I was sitting in my cozy little office looking over the county newspaper, when the door opened and a tall man walked in.

His face seemed familiar, but at that moment I could not imagine where I had seen it.

“Mr. Wyant, I believe,” said the stranger. He bowed and drew a chair to the window and sat down. “I am Mr. Wyant, at your service, and you, sir—“

“Ralph Barnes. Now you know my name, I will proceed. I come to see you on a very painful piece of business; in fact, sir, there has been a murder committed.”

Mr. Ralph Barnes drew from his pocket a soiled handkerchief and carried it to his eyes. This part being done, he walked to the matchbox, took a Lucifer and lit a cigar, or the stump of one.

“Murder?” I said, quickly rising. “When and where?”

“Last night at my house,” replied Barnes, and great sobs welled up from his heart so violent in appearance that I really thought the organ of life would break.

“Who was the unfortunate victim of this murder?” I asked.

The answer came slowly. “My adopted daughter,” amid a fresh flow of tears.

“Do you suspect any one, or have you any clue?”

“I have no clue,” said Barnes, “but I suspect Jasper Morton, my cousin, for he was seen late last night with her, and again was the handkerchief pressed to his eyes.

The man Barnes told his story in such a cool way, and played the hypocrite so well, that I put him down for a cool villain before he had spoken a dozen words to me. In a moment more I locked my office, and we both went on our way to the scene of the murder. About a mile from the town we came to a cottage surrounded by dense foliage. Barnes kicked open the gate, and we walked up a narrow path to the house. A woman stood in the doorway, crying and wringing her hands in despair.

“This is a constable. He will soon fix matters,” said Barnes to the woman. Then to me, “Walk in, Mr. Wyant, and see for yourself.” I stepped into the back room, and a horrible sight presented itself to my view such as I never want to see again. On the floor, in a pool of blood, lay a young girl; the skull was crushed in several places, as if by some blunt weapon. From these wounds tiny streams of blood still flowed. The features were beautiful, even in death, though she met a horrible fate. A smile seemed to play about those bloodless lips that I shall never forget.

Her golden hair—but now no longer golden, as the blood had dyed it crimson—was matted and half hidden beneath her right arm, which lay beneath her head. The light dress she wore was torn, as if a struggle had taken place. I turned to Barnes, and said: “Can I be alone for a few minutes?”

“Certainly,” he said, and they both left the room. I closed the door and bent over the form of the murdered girl, and drew aside the light waist she wore and bared her breast. *There, right over the heart, scarcely visible, was a small dagger wound.* The blow had been a sure one, and driven with such force that the under part of the hilt was outlined on her fair skin; and there must have been some mark on it, for there were two letters of the sentence that I could see by gazing sharp. The letters were W and S. Strange that no blood had flowed from that wound; but I judged that it had been well washed. I had seen enough; and now all was clear to me. The murderer or murderers, (for I doubted not there were two), had caused her death by that wound; then had crushed her skull after death, to make it appear she died in that manner—making the murder more horrible in appearance.

I rejoined Barnes and his wife in the front room. They had been conversing in a low tone, but when I entered they ceased.

“Well, where does Jasper Morton reside?” I asked, taking out my note-book.

“Right opposite,” replied Barnes. “They tell me he is sick, but it is merely to screen his bloody work of last night.”

“Well, I am going over to see him, and on your accusation I will arrest him.”

“Do,” said Barnes. “Let me go with you, for he is a dangerous customer.”

“No, I am going alone. I shall be back here as soon as I have him safe. Don’t touch the body until I see the coroner.”

With this admonition I left the house and crossed over to Morton’s house. I entered without knocking. On the bed lay a young man apparently in the last stages of consumption. He looked up as I entered, and a sad smile illumined his pale features.

“Oh, you are the County Detective,” he said.

I replied that I was.

“Take a seat, sir,” he said. I have very urgent business with you. The young man pointed to a chair, and I sat down, and he began.

“You of course know Mr. Travers who lives on the hill, he is known by all to be a man of mystery, no one in these parts knew him before he bought the estate on the hill, or where he came from, he always took a great interest in Mary Barnes, Ralph Barnes’ adopted daughter.

I have always thought that Mary was a relative of old man Travers. Well, he died last week, and he had left Mary his estate, placing the will in Ralph Barnes' hands until his adopted daughter becomes of age. Now Barnes is a man who would not hesitate to put her out of the way to gain possession of the property himself. Mary is my promised wife. But I shall never live to make her mine, for I feel I am dying;" he paused for his respiration became difficult. I saw his hours were numbered.

How was I to break the sad news that her he loved was lying cold in death? Poor Morton, his fears were well founded, I saw through the whole plot at once, the idea of Barnes accusing the weak, dying youth of the murder was really absurd, for the present, however, I would keep mum. With a promise to look after Barnes and call again, I left the house. As I passed up the path to Barnes' house something glittered in the grass, I stooped and picked up a queer shaped knife, the blade was no longer than my little finger and very narrow. I hardly thought that such a small weapon would cause death. I looked again, the hilt had just the impression I had seen on the breast of Mary Barnes, there also were some marks very faint indeed, but I could trace two letters, "W" and "S". *The weapon I held in my hand had caused Mary's death.* I entered the house.

"Did you arrest him?" asked Barnes.

I replied that I had.

"Well, Mr. Wyant you will take tea with us."

Being hungry and for other motives I accepted.

"It is funny," said Barnes, "we could find nothing to prove against him save that we saw him with her."

"Yes," said I, "'tis strange, but do you know this knife," Holding the dagger before his staring eyes.

Had a mine exploded beneath him he would not have been more astonished, he turned pale, and stammered a reply. From an inside pocket I drew a revolver and leveled it at him.

"Ralph Barnes, I arrest you for the murder of your adopted daughter, Mary. With a yell of despair he drew from his book a long glittering knife, but before he could use the arm that raised it, it fell to his side shattered by a shot from my revolver.

The woman was a perfect tigress, but I managed to walk them before me for a long distance, when several persons passing on the road came to my aid, and I soon had them in a safe place.

The man Barnes confessed all, and was treated to an aerial exercise on the gibbet, his weaker accomplice in the crime was sent to the state prison where she ended her days by suicide. Jasper Morton never lived to hear the news, for he remained in a long trance, then died calling on his Mary.

The will, after a search, was found secreted in an old closet, and it awaits the arrival of a distant relative to claim it at the County Clerk's office. Thus ended my first case.

New York Fireside Companion, June 27, 1868