

## *A Detective's Sketch*

by Paul Read

Some ten or twelve years ago (began the narrator), while practicing law in the town of Brighton, I became acquainted with two young men, cousins, named Charles Mason and Ralph Darwin. They were orphans, and had each been adopted when mere boys, by their uncle, a wealthy old bachelor, named Thomas Seymour, and now resided with him in a large house situated on the outskirts of the village.

Charles Mason was a fine, promising young man, about twenty-two years of age, with a frank, generous disposition, and a winning look in his handsome face, and clear honest blue eyes, that at once gained him the friendship of all whom he met. He and I were great friends and were almost inseparable.

Ralph Darwin I did not like near so well. I do not know the reason, but from the first I had conceived for him an invincible dislike, which all my subsequent efforts could not overcome. He was rather handsome, but there was an expression of low cunning upon his sensual features, and a cruel, evil gleam in his small, restless eyes, that instinctively inspired me with distrust for him.

Mr. Thomas Seymour was a man of about sixty years of age. He was, in the main, a good man, and had a kind heart; but he was obstinate and "crotchety," and was very passionate when thwarted in his desires.

He was very fond of Charles—[indeed], he seemed to care more for him than he did for Ralph—but unfortunately he had set his heart upon his marrying Miss Chester, the only child, an heiress, of a wealthy banker, while Charles was deeply in love with Mary Barton, the daughter of a widow lady in straightened circumstances, residing in the village.

Mary Barton was a very beautiful maiden. Her form was graceful and well-proportioned; her regular features were lighted by dark, blue eyes, and her small well-shaped head was adorned with a wealth of silky brown hair, which fell in natural curls over her rounded shoulders. Her demeanor was modest and lady-like, and her nature was affectionate and loving. The love with which she was regarded by Charles Mason, was fully returned by her, and they became engaged.

When Mr. Seymour became aware of this, he flew into a violent passion, and declared that if Charles did not immediately dissolve the engagement, he would disinherit him, and not leave him a penny of his wealth. This Charles firmly, but respectfully, refused to do; and Mr. Seymour becoming angrier still, they had a hot dispute, and that night for the first time in their lives they parted in anger.

The next morning the whole village was thrown in to a state of the greatest excitement by the announcement that Mr. Seymour had been murdered during the night by his nephew, Charles Mason, who had been arrested and was now in the custody of the sheriff.

Of course I was greatly astonished and declared that he was innocent; for I considered it impossible for him to take the life of one whom he loved so well.

But I must confess, that when I became acquainted with the circumstances which had led to his arrest, my belief in his innocence was considerably shaken.

It seemed, from what I heard, that shortly before daybreak, the servants were aroused, from their sleep, by hearing loud cries coming from the room in which Mr. Seymour slept; and on hastening there, they were horrified at seeing, lying upon the floor, the body of their master, his night-clothes saturated with blood; while bending over him, and holding in his hand a bloody dagger, was Charles Mason.

They seized him and aroused Ralph Darwin, who immediately sent for the police. They soon arrived, and took Charles Mason, who protested his innocence, into custody, and he was committed to prison.

The knife with which Mr. Seymour had been murdered, was proven to be Charles', his name, in full, being graven on the blade; and in his room, his valise, in which several articles of clothing were packed, was found, showing that after committing the murder, he had meditated flight.

Immediately on hearing the above circumstances, I hastened to the jail in which Charles was confined, and as I was acquainted with the jailer, I had no difficulty in gaining admittance to my friend's cell.

Poor fellow! His face was pale; dark lines were around his eyes, and there was a look of suffering and anguish upon his features that filled me with [heartfelt] pity. He silently pressed my hand, and then his feelings overcame him, and, leaning his head upon my breast, he wept and sobbed convulsively. Whatever doubts of his innocence I had had, all vanished now. I let his emotion exhaust itself, for I knew it would do him good, and when his sobs had subsided, I led him to a seat, and asked him to tell me what he knew of the case.

"I know but little," answered he. "You are aware of the dispute between my uncle and me last night. He wished me to break my engagement with Mary, and marry Miss Chester. This I of course refused to do, for I love Mary too well for that, and, besides, I knew that I could never care for Miss Chester—at least, not as a husband should care for his wife. I told my uncle this, but he would listen to nothing, and after a violent dispute we parted.

"After retiring to my room, I thought the matter over a long time, and at last came to the conclusion that after what had happened, I would remain no longer with my uncle, but depart from his roof, and make my own way in the world. So I packed a few articles of clothing in my valise, intending to leave the house early in the morning.

"I retired to rest, and shortly before daybreak awoke, arose, and dressed myself, and was just upon the point of leaving, when I was startled by hearing groans and smothered cries, mingled with sounds of a struggle, issuing from my uncle's chamber.

“I immediately hurried thither. The door of the room was partially open, and entering, I was almost paralyzed with horror at seeing my uncle lying upon the floor, his clothes crimsoned with blood, and with the hilt of a knife protruding from a wound in his breast.

“Scarcely knowing what I did, I knelt down, and drew the knife from the wound. As I did so, my poor uncle gave a groan, shuddered convulsively, and died. I was still bending over his body when the servants rushed in. At first, when they seized me and charged me with the murder, I was stupefied, and for a long time could not credit my senses; but soon I became more collected, and protested my innocence. That is all I know.”

“Who was present during your quarrel with your uncle?” asked I, after a pause of a few moments.

“No one but cousin Ralph,” answered he; “but I suppose the servants heard it, for we both spoke in loud tones.”

“Has there been any unpleasantness between your uncle and your cousin, lately?”

“Yes; on several occasions, recently, my uncle has severely reproved Ralph for his extravagance and dissipated habits; and, but a few days since, he threatened that unless he immediately reformed, he would disinherit him.”

“Have you engaged anyone to look after your interests in this affair?” inquired I.

“Not yet,” he replied; “but I was in hopes that I could engage you; for I know that if any one can find out the truth of the matter, you can.”

“I will do my best in your service,” I replied; “and now, Charlie, keep a good heart, and I am sure that the mystery which now enshrouds the whole affair, will soon be swept away, and the real murderer brought to justice.”

I then bade Charles farewell, and leaving the jail, at once went to the residence of the murdered gentleman. The blinds were all down, and a policeman was stationed in the hall. I told him that I was counsel for the accused, and desired to see the corpse, and the room in which the murder was committed. He informed me that the body had not been disturbed, and that the room and everything in it remained just as it was when the murder was first discovered.

I then proceeded to the chamber, accompanied by the policeman. It was in a state of indescribable confusion. The bedclothes were twisted, and thrown in every direction, the chairs were overturned, and the carpet was in several places completely saturated with blood, and everything showed how desperately the old man had fought for his life.

His body, cold and rigid, was lying on the floor, and a more shocking spectacle it has never yet been my lot to witness. His pale features were distorted as in the agonies of death; his eyes were glazed, his hands tightly clenched, and his thin, gray hair fell in blood-matted masses over his forehead.

I immediately proceed to examine the room carefully, determined to find, if possible, some clue by which the real murderer could be discovered.

While turning over the bedclothes, I found a lock of jet black hair, which had evidently been evidently torn up by the roots. I turned to the officer and held the hair out to him, saying:

“Charles Mason’s hair is not black; neither is Mr. Seymour’s.”

He gazed for a moment, and a light broke over his countenance.

“By George!” he cried; “you are right! Charley Mason’s hair is light-brown, and Mr. Seymour’s is gray.”

I said no more, but continued my investigations. On examining the corpse, I found in his clenched hand a button of a man’s vest, with a small piece of cloth adhering to it, evidently torn out in his death struggle with his assassin. These two articles were all that I could find; but they were enough to justify me in my suspicions, and I at once desired the officer to show me to Ralph Darwin’s room. He said nothing, but led the way in silence; though from the expression of his countenance, I knew that he guessed my suspicions.

On reaching Darwin’s chamber, we found the door locked, but with a smile, the officer drew from his pocket a set of skeleton keys, and in a few moments it was open. I made a thorough search of the room, and soon my pains were rewarded by finding concealed between the bed and the mattress, a white shirt, the arms and sleeves of which were stained with blood.

I could scarcely repress the cry of exultation that arose from my lips on seeing this evidence of the guilt of Ralph Darwin. From the very first, I had thought him guilty, and now I had proof. The policeman was scarcely less effected than myself, and clasping my hand, he exclaimed:

“I was almost sure that Charley Mason never took the life of his poor old uncle. I know him too well for that.”

Folding the shirt into the smallest compass I could, I put it into my pocket, and then we left the room together, which the officer locked again, and together we went down stairs to the hall where we met Ralph Darwin, who was entering the house.

He was very pale, and his eyes gleamed like coals of fire. He started on seeing me, and in answer to his look of astonishment, I said:

“How are you, Mr. Darwin? I have been making an investigation of your uncle’s chamber in order to find, if possible, some clue to the real murderer, for I am certain your cousin is not guilty.”

While I was speaking my eyes wandered over his person. He had on a black vest from which the third button was missing, and a small piece of cloth exactly the size of the piece attached to the button I had found was torn from the place to which it had been sewn.

“I do not know,” answered he, slowly. “It is hard to believe my cousin guilty; but the circumstances against him are very strong; and I myself know that he was greatly excited during the quarrel, and, I fear—I, greatly fear—that, carried away by passion, he has, in a momentary fit of madness, taken the life of my poor uncle. But,” he added, “have you found anything calculated to throw suspicion upon anyone else?”

My blood boiled at hearing the villain utter these hypocritical words; but, by a strong effort, I managed to curb my emotion, and fixing my eye keenly upon him, as I spoke, I said:

“Yes, I have found a clue, which proves the innocence of your cousin, and I have also discovered the real murderer of your uncle!”

He flushed deeply red, and then turned deathly pale.

“Who—who—is—it?” stammered he.

“You!” I cried. “You are the murderer of your uncle, and, in the name of the Commonwealth, I arrest you for that crime.”

The officer stepped forward, and placed his hand upon his shoulder, saying:

“You are my prisoner, sir.”

Ralph Darwin stood for a moment, as if petrified, then, recovering in some degree, his self-possession, he put on a bold face and said:

“I murder my uncle? Surely, you are jesting, Mr. Heywood. Where are your proofs?”

“Here they are,” said I, drawing from my pocket, the lock of hair, and the button; “here are my proofs. See, here is a lock of your hair, which I found on your uncle’s bed, and here is a button torn from your vest during the struggle, which I found in his clenched hand. And, furthermore,” added I, producing the shirt, “here is the shirt which you wore when you committed the murder, and, see, it is yet stained with your uncle’s blood.”

“My God!” he cried, “my crime has found me out!” and then, before either of us could divine his intention, he drew from his breast a small pocket-pistol, placed the muzzle against his temple, there was a flash, a sharp report, and Ralph Darwin lay dead at our feet.

The servants rushed in, on hearing the report, and the lifeless body was borne to a room while the officer and I hurried to the mayor, and told him of the occurrence.

Charles Mason was, of course, honorably discharged, and in a few months, was married to Mary Barton, and, as Mr. Seymour had left no will, all his property became theirs.

Ralph Darwin's reasons for murdering his uncle were never known; but, it was generally supposed that he feared he would disinherit him; and, in order to prevent him from doing so, he resolved to kill him, contrive to fix the guilt upon Charles, and thus become the sole possessor of the wealth.

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