

A Strange Affair
by Emerson Bennett

At a wayside inn, on the old road that then ran between Philadelphia and C—, in the State of Pennsylvania, a very strange and curious affair occurred in the fall of 1797. One dark, rainy, disagreeable night, a mounted traveler, well muffled up in a great-coat, with its broad cape turned up over his head like a cowl, his chin and lower part of his face buried in a large bandana handkerchief, and with a broad, black patch over his right eye, rode up to the tavern, and called for his supper. At the large fire burning in the chimney of the barroom, he sat and warmed and dried himself, while his meal was being prepared, without removing any of his garments, not even so much as his hat; and when the landlord at length announced that his repast was ready, he simply remarked:

“I have a severe pain in my face—so you must excuse my going to the table as I am.”

He ate his supper in silence, showed no disposition for conversation, called for a strong glass of brandy and water, and soon after asked to be conducted to his room, adding that he was very much fatigued.

“By the way,” he said to the landlord, who in person lighted him to his bedroom, “I may as well leave my pocketbook and watch in your possession till morning;” at the same time handing these articles to the host, who took them with some reluctance, saying:

“I reckon they’d be quite as safe here with yourself—though I’ll keep them for you, if you wish me to!”

“You’ll oblige me by doing so!” rejoined the stranger.

“Well, then,” said the innkeeper, “I must know how much money you’ve got here, if I’ve got to be responsible for it.”

“Please open the pocketbook then and count for yourself,” returned the stranger.

The host did so, and said:

“I make it two hundred and fifteen dollars.”

“Right!” rejoined the traveler; “and while I’m about it, I may as well add this purse, which contains fifty-one dollars in specie.”

The landlord also counted the coin, part gold and part silver, and the amount was right, and went out, bidding the other good night.

About two o’clock in the morning, a neighbor, living within a stone’s throw of the tavern, and who chanced to be up with a sick child, fancied he heard above the roar of the storm, which had increased in violence, a wild shriek, followed by two cries of:

“Help! Murder!”

He was a rather timid man, and was much alarmed. He blew out his light, cautiously opened the door, looked out, and listened. The storm beat into his face and howled around his dwelling; but he could see nothing, not even a light at the inn, and he heard nothing more that sounded like a human voice. He shut the door and fastened it, and then woke up his wife and told her all. She happened to be a woman of unusual nerve and courage, and, after putting a few questions, replied with a yawn:

“Oh, Jim, it was only one of your fancies! You’re always hearing something that nobody else does! Just think how many times you’ve hunted the house over for robbers since I’ve lived with you! Just tend to Mary, will you, and let me have a little sleep! For you know I didn’t have any last night.”

“I know it wasn’t any fancy, but a real, human cry!” grumbled the man, as he walked away and allowed his drowsy spouse to return to her dreams.

The dull, leaden gray of morning was just beginning to dispel the inky blackness of the stormy night, when the landlord of the wayside inn was aroused by a series of thundering knocks upon the outer door of his habitation. He sprung out of bed, hastily drew on his trousers and boots, took his waistcoat in his hand, and hurried down to his supposed customers. On opening the door, he found himself confronted with two rough-looking men, well muffled against the storm, which as yet had scarcely abated in fury. Their horses panting, splashed with mud, with drooping heads, were hitched at the nearest post, and showed by their looks that they had been ridden fast and far.

“Did a mounted traveler stop at this in last night?” abruptly inquired one of the two strangers.

“Yes,” was the answer.

“Is he here still?”

“He is.”

Will you describe his appearance?”

“As well as I can,” said the wondering host, “for I didn’t get to see much of his face;” and he not only proceeded with a description of his person, but added all that the traveler had did and done, including the affair of the money.

“I think we’ve got him this time!” said the one who had addressed the landlord, turning to his companion.

“It looks like it,” was the reply; “but he’s no doubt a desperate fellow, and we’d better proceed with caution till we make sure!”

“Hark you, landlord!” said the first speaker, in a low tone; “a word in your private ear! We are officers of justice from Philadelphia, in pursuit of a bank robber, and we suspect your strange guest to be the man we seek! Here is the warrant for his arrest. Now conduct us to his room! And, if need be, assist us in securing him.”

“Certainly,” returned the host, turning somewhat pale, as it was afterward remembered, and seeming not a little agitated. “Walk in, gentlemen—this way gentlemen!”

He conducted them into the barroom and hurriedly struck a light, for it was yet too dark to see anything distinctly.

“I hope the fellow has not heard us!” said one of the officers, drawing a pistol, while the other produced a pair of hand-cuffs.

“I hope it won’t be necessary to shoot, gentlemen!” said the host, with increased agitation.

“We will all go up softly and try his door,” said the officer with the pistol, “and, if we find it fast, perhaps it will be better for us to remain on guard and wait till he comes out himself.”

The host, light in hand, led the way, though with seeming reluctance, as if not over courageous. On reaching the door, which the three parties had approached with light, stealthy steps, the landlord tried it very gently, and, finding it unfastened, slowly and softly pushed it open, and went in, followed by the officers. The next moment the innkeeper exclaimed, in a tone of alarm and agitation:

“Gracious Heaven! What’s the meaning of this?”

The bed was tumbled, but vacant—no traveler was there—and the sheets and pillowcases were stained with blood!

The officers looked meaningfully at each other, and then at the host, who, pale and trembling, sunk half fainting upon the nearest seat. For a few moments there was a deep and ominous silence; and then one of the officers said, slowly and with pointed emphasis:

“Landlord, this is very strange!”

“The strangest thing I ever knew!” fairly gasped the innkeeper, glancing around him in frightened bewilderment. “Where can the man have gone to?”

“And this blood, too!” sternly chimed in the other officer; “what does this mean, if not some foul play?”

“Oh, gentlemen,” said the host, in a low, tremulous tone, “I hope you don’t suspect me, for I’m as innocent as child unborn! And now I remember, too, when I went to the door to let you in, I found it wasn’t fastened, and I’m right sure I fastened it myself before I went to bed!”

“We certainly do suspect you, sir!” said the other officer; “for how can we help it? Since the man is gone, and you, as you have confessed, have his money in your possession?”

“But he gave me the money to keep for him,” cried the frightened host, “and I’ve got it yet.”

“Undoubtedly you have; but that, you see, so far from proving you know nothing of the affair, only tends to make matters worse for you!”

“Perhaps he’s about here yet somewhere,” suggested the innkeeper. “If he’s a bank-robber, and heard your knocks, he’d be quite likely to hide himself, or run away, I should think.”

The idea was worthy of attention, and a search for the missing man was forthwith begun. On looking under the bed, blood was discovered on the floor; and the trail of this was found to lead out of the room, down the stairs, and out of the front door—showing that the object of search, either living or dead, had gone out of the house. Beyond the building there were no traces, for the storm had obliterated them. The hostler, was called, the only other man about the house; but he appeared to be a kind of stupid fellow, and evidently knew nothing of the matter; and a look in the barn showed the stranger’s horse still there.

About an hour later the neighbor mentioned came to the inn, in great agitation and alarm, said there was a body of a murdered man lying by the roadside, and also stated what he had heard during the night.

All hurried to the scene of the tragedy, and there beheld the body of a coarse-featured man of forty, which the officers believed, from its general appearance, to be that of the villain they were seeking; but whether that of the stranger, who had lodged at the tavern, no one could tell. The body was covered with blood, and the man had evidently died from knife wounds in the breast.

Throughout that thinly-populated section the news spread rapidly, and before night a large number of excited spectators, including the sheriff, coroner, and two magistrates, had collected at the inn. An inquest was held, and a verdict rendered in accordance with the facts; and though there was no direct evidence against the landlord, yet suspicion so strangely pointed to him as the murderer, that he was taken into custody and committed for trial.

In due time the trial came on; but the jury could not agree, and were finally discharged. A second trial resulted like the first; and the innkeeper, whose name was Williams, was kept in prison over a year.

How the affair would have eventually terminated, had the mystery not been cleared up in an unexpected manner, it is impossible to say; but ere the time fixed for the third trial arrived, a stranger appeared before a magistrate of the county, and deposed that he himself was the

individual who had lodged at the inn on the night of the murder, and for taking whose life the landlord was still in prison.

In the course of his evidence, he stated that he had been a merchant in Philadelphia, who, finding himself on the eve of failure, had collected a large amount of money and run away; and that all trace of himself might be lost, and his death expected, he had adopted the plan of putting a small part of his money in the hands of the innkeeper, ostensibly for safe-keeping, and secretly departing at night on foot, not supposing anything very serious would result to the landlord from this course of action. On getting up somewhere about midnight, his nose had set to bleeding, which would explain the traces of blood he had left behind him. He had made his way to Baltimore, and thence had sailed to Havana, where he had been so fortunate in his speculations as to find himself in a condition to return and settle honorably with all his creditors. On coming home and giving an account of his adventures to a friend, he had for the first time learned with horror of the almost fatal consequences to the innkeeper of his unjustifiable disappearance, and had hastened to make what reparation lay in his power. His testimony was subsequently corroborated on all important points, and the innkeeper was honorably discharged, to the great relief and joy of his sympathizing friends. As a partial recompense for what he had suffered on his account, the merchant made him a present of the horse and money he left with him, and two thousand dollars besides.

But the clearing up of one part of this strange affair only seemed to involve the other in still deeper mystery. A murder had surely been committed: but by whom? And who was the unfortunate victim?

Even this, in course of time, was also made manifest. Some years after a villain, under sentence of death, confessed that he was a partner of the bank robber; and that, having made an equal division of the spoil, they had agreed to leave the city by different routes, and meet at an appointed place; that, eager to secure the whole of the booty, he had secretly taken his partner's road instead of the one agreed upon, and had waylaid and murdered him within a few rods of the tavern kept by Williams, who, by being arrested for the crime, had drawn off all suspicion from himself.

Thus were these recoded deeds of that tempestuous night eventually brought to light, and the innocent cleared and rewarded, and the guilty detected and punished.

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