

Alice Jenner's Murder
by Amy Randolph

“By all odds the prettiest girl in the village, and the sweetest, too. I declare to you, Mr. Romer, if the earth had opened and swallowed her up, her fate could scarcely have been more mysterious or more unexplained!”

“Murder will out, they say,” said the slender, handsome-looking young man who sat on the railing of the inn piazza, carelessly swinging his leg, and eying the blue wreaths of cigar smoke that circled round his head.

“I don’t believe in that axiom,” said Paul Dyott, shortly. “Murder does not always ‘out,’ and this is one of the cases where an inexplicable mystery surrounds the whole thing.”

Mr. Romer yawned—apparently he was not particularly interested in the affair. At all events, he asked no questions. Paul Dyott hesitated a moment, and then talked on, too full of his subject to maintain silence.

“Here’s the way it stands. Alice Jenner was murdered the evening of the 24th of April—“

“You told me this before.”

“I know I did. At five o’clock she left her uncle’s house to go up to Squire Dellon’s, at eight o’clock I went down through the little patch of woods below the saw mill, and came across her dead body, half hidden by a fallen tree, among the bushes and dry leaves.”

“Drowned?” asked Romer, indifferently.

“No—with an ugly wound in her throat. The jugular artery was completely severed. That was three months ago, and from that moment to this we have never been able to obtain the least clue to her murderer.”

“Why don’t they send for a few sharp-eyed New York police?”

“They did. Mr. Jenner had vowed he will never rest until he has obtained vengeance on his niece’s murderer. Every assistance has been obtained.”

“Don’t they suspect any body?”

“No—not fairly to suspect. There was a strange young woman hanging round for a few days, and they arrested her on suspicion, but it came out that she was only a girl Jenner had promised to marry before he became acquainted with his present wife. She had nothing against poor Alice, proved an alibi, I believe, and was let off.”

“Was this girl—this Alice, I mean—pleased with the idea of her uncle’s marriage?”

“For all I know she was. She had no reason to be otherwise—she was very fond of Miss Bryan.”

“Miss Bryan?”

“That was Mrs. Jenner’s name then; the marriage did not take place until a month after Alice’s death. Poor Sallie Bryan—she cried her eyes out over the girl’s untimely fate.”

“And who else came under the ban?”

“There was young Tyson, who was engaged to Alice; they had had one or two lovers’ quarrels, but nothing that amounted to anything serious, I believe.”

“Well,” remarked Romer, with calm placidity, “it’s rather a mysterious complication, to be sure, but then, you know, murders are happening every day. I think I shall go down to the river to have a bathe, before I turn in tonight.”

“Hush,” said Dyott in a whisper, “here comes Mr. Jenner now.”

Romer drew back into the deep shadow of the twilight piazza, and watched the tall, spare Squire with a critical eye as he passed into the house.

“Rather a good-looking man,” he said, when the door was closed. “So he’s married a young wife, eh?”

And Chase Romer strolled down to the river side, whistling under his breath as he went.

As he plunged into the green willow shadows that veiled the banks, his whole aspect changed as entirely as if a mask had dropped from his face. The careless blue eyes beamed with sharp, eager light, the lips became compressed, the brows contracted.

“Well?”

A figure started out from the overhanging shadows as Romer strolled along the banks—a figure with a wan, anxious face.

“Good evening, Mr. Tyson,” said the detective, quietly.

Roger Tyson paid no heed to the salutation, but questioned eagerly.

“Have you gained any new information?”

“Nothing of importance. Poor Dyott! How obliging he was in volunteering news that I knew perfectly well before. He fancies me a very verdant animal from the suburban districts.”

“Shall we never arrive at the root of this mystery?”

“Be patient, Mr. Tyson,” said Romer. “You are too premature. I think I am on the right track, but great caution is necessary—caution and secrecy.”

“But surely you can give me a hint?”

“I can give you nothing of the kind, Mr. Tyson. I have undertaken to arrest the real murderer of Alice Jenner on your behalf, but I must do it in my own way. Good evening, sir.”

And Roger Tyson was left alone by the quiet river side.

The next morning Romer strolled leisurely down into the copse of woods where pretty Alice Jenner had met her death, his hands behind him, and the everlasting cigar breathing its track of perfume on his path.

“I must leave the village tonight, come what may,” pondered Chris Romer. “But I’ll take one more look at the theatre of action. Here’s the clearing, and the sassafras tree, and the old fallen trunk, half buried in ferns and mosses, and here it was that the deed was done!”

He dropped his cigar as he stood looking around with an eye that took in every detail of the surrounding scenery—a faint, sweet fragrance came up from the blossoming ferns as he pushed them aside and recovered the weed, quite extinguished by its fall.

“And I haven’t a match about me—how provoking!”

The next instant he stooped suddenly and picked up something athwart which the red morning sunshine glanced luridly among the ferns; it was a small, rusty penknife, with a discolored ivory handle.

One moment he looked at it with eyes of keen, blue fire—and then he pocketed it, with a quiet nod.

“It will help me—it will help me more than a little,” was his unspoken comment. “In all the months of search and suspense, how did it happen that this mute witness lay there, unsuspected, among the ferns and dead leaves? What was it yonder idiot was repeating last night—‘murder will out’? Well, we shall see. Of one thing I am certain—upon the man who really did the black deed the shadow of suspicion has never fallen. I am not sure—not entirely sure as yet—but I think I know who murdered Alice Jenner!”

“Why Mark, what’s the matter? How you started!”

“Started? Did I? Well, I didn’t sleep very well last night, and very likely I am a little nervous this morning. But did not I hear a strange voice in the sitting room?”

“It’s only a peddler, Mark—I know you don’t like these wandering merchants, but really he has some of the prettiest French trimmings I ever saw, and I’m sure you won’t object to my purchasing a few?”

“Object? Why should I object to my little pussy pleasing herself? Of course I don’t object,” said Mr. Jenner, looking fondly down on his young wife. “Buy as many French folderols as you like, Sallie.”

“You’ll come in and help me choose between the green and the stone colors?” she coaxed.

“Why, I’m hardly a judge of such things, Sallie; but if it will please you—“

And Squire Jenner came into the sitting-room, with his arm carelessly thrown round his wife’s thin waist.

“So, young man,” he said, addressing the peddler, who stood before the table with his pack opened, and a variety of pretty trifles spread out around, “you’re tempting my wife to spend her money, eh?”

“Perhaps I could tempt you, too, sir,” said the itinerant merchant, opening a small japanned box. “I have some nice pocket cutlery here.”

Squire Jenner bent down to glimpse at the glittering array. The peddler drew the box away suddenly, and substituted another in its place.

“What do you think of *this* knife, sir?”

A low cry broke from Mark Jenner’s lips, his face grew pale as ashes, and he started back, unconsciously tugging at his neck-cloth with both hands.

“It is not mine—it never was mine!” he exclaimed, grasping the rusty knife.

But Chase Romer stepped back, and uttered a low whistle.

“Gently, Squire Jenner, gently. I do not part with this portion of my stock in trade just yet. Come in men! Mark Jenner, I arrest you, in the name of the United States Government, for the murder of Alice Jenner, your niece!”

“For murder! My husband arrested for *murder!*” gasped Mrs. Jenner, clinging to his arm. “Oh, surely there is some mistake—some misunderstanding. How dare you accuse Mark Jenner of such a crime as this?”

“Hush, Sallie,” interrupted Mark, sinking down on a chair, with one hand clasped over his breast. “I *did commit* the murder. Oh, I thought it would have eaten my heart out before now; it is a relief to have no secret to keep. Aye, shrink away from me, Sallie—that’s right. I’m not worthy of you, girl, although I did it for your sake.”

“You murdered Alice for my sake? Oh, Mark, Mark, you are not in your right mind! Gentlemen,” she explained, turning eagerly to the detective and his companions, “you hear how wildly he talks! Surely! Surely, he is insane.

“I am *not* insane,” said Squire Jenner, almost petulantly. “Let me confess—let me get this load of blood off my lips, if I cannot get it off my heart! Yes I did murder Alice! It was in a moment of blind passion, and I scarcely knew what I was doing. Lora Green had appealed to Alice; it was true that I had promised to marry Lora, and I hadn’t behaved rightly by the girl. Alice threatened to tell Sallie Bryan; and she would have done it, too. She vowed to go straight to Sallie; and while we were talking down in the woods below the saw-mill, I heard Sallie’s voice upon the roadside above, singing as she walked along; and I knew that if I didn’t silence the girl, Sallie Bryan never would be my wife. Alice raised her voice and called ‘Sallie!’ and before I knew what I was doing, she was down among the dead leaves, with blood streaming from her throat. I had the pen-knife open in my hand; I had been paring my nails; and then I went down through the wood’s home. Nobody met me; nobody knew I had ever left the house. Who dreamed of suspecting *me*? Oh, God! I have never had one happy moment since! Sometimes I’ve thought I would confess; but I remembered Sallie and choked back the words that were almost on my lips! Gentlemen, I think my wife has fainted!”

He was right—the poor, young creature had sunk, white and silent, on the floor, overcome by horror and fright at the terrible recital she had heard.

Mark Jenner never lived to meet the punishment adjudged to him by the law of the land; he dies in prison, just one week after the pronouncement of his sentence, of rapid consumption, brought on by the months of mental agony he had been forced to endure in silence.

And Roger Tyson was contented now—for Alice Jenner, sleeping peacefully in her bloody grave, was avenged at last.

The New York Ledger, May 26, 1866