

A Mysterious Murder
by James Maitland

Chicago has always been notorious for its criminals. Other cities can boast of desperate thieves, thugs and murderers, but for ingenious rascality and blood-curdling scoundrelism, the outlaws of the Garden City carry off the palm. No satisfactory explanation of our excessive criminality has ever been given, and it is not my purpose to attempt one. It may be that the lax administration of justice in the city encourages the thief and midnight assassin; it may be that our citizens have learned to look upon preeminence in vice and wickedness as an additional feather in the cap of the Northwestern metropolis; it may be that our unchecked gambling dens and our unbridled saloons have had the effect of making our criminals more reckless and daring than the same class in other cities. Whatever the cause, such is the fact.

But it is not alone in the lower and brutal grades of crime that Chicago stands preeminent. A certain looseness of morals exists which has no parallel in any other city in the world. The divorce courts are blocked with business, and the deadly canker of domestic infelicity is daily destroying thousands of homes which should be temples of love and joy and peace.

Strange and horrible crimes often spring from this domestic discord. This leaf will reveal one of many features of horror and painful sadness. It will show to what extent misguided passion will lead its victims—to what extreme a deceived woman will go for revenge.

In the spring of 1873 the community was shocked by the murder of a prominent citizen in one of the best known and most splendidly appointed of our hotels. A number of mysterious circumstances surrounded the case. The man—a large and prosperous merchant—had visited the hotel alone early in the evening, and registering “Jas. Russell, Cleveland, Ohio,” engaged a room for the night. He told the clerk that his wife, who was visiting friends at Evanston, would arrive at the hotel within an hour or two, and he gave instructions that she should be shown up to his apartment. In the meantime he would lie down and rest, as he felt somewhat sick.

About half-past nine, a lady closely veiled but answering the description given, inquired for Mr. James Russell, and was shown to the room. The lights were burning very low, and the gentleman was apparently asleep on the couch. The lady sat down by his side and stroked his head caressingly, but did not wake him. This much the attendant saw before closing the door.

Mr. Russell had requested to be called at eight the next morning. At that hour a domestic rapped at the door, but getting no response, she knocked and knocked again, and, receiving no answer, turned the handle. To her surprise the door was not locked. She opened it and looking into the apartment saw Russell was lying on the couch. She approached with the intention of arousing him, but started back in horror when she saw a bullet wound in his forehead, and a pool of blood on the floor.

The rest of the house was speedily aroused, and a scene of the wildest excitement ensued. Messengers were hurriedly dispatched to the police head-quarters, and the office of the coroner. There was great commotion and consternation among the guests. Doctors were summoned, and declared that Mr. Russell had been dead a number of hours. Search was made for the weapon,

but none was found. No one remembered the lady leaving the house. No one could give an intelligent description of her appearance. She was a stranger to the neighborhood.

The position of the wound, as well as the course of the bullet, precluded the idea of suicide. It was evident that Russell had been murdered, and that the assassin was the lady with whom he had an appointment the night before.

These, in brief, were the facts which came out on the inquest. Detective skill was employed to ferret out the murderess. Days, weeks, and months passed, but the crime remained shrouded in mystery. The house suffered greatly. It was, although not one of the largest, yet one of the finest in the city, and patronized by high class customers, who preferred its quiet elegance and home comforts to the more pretentious glitter of the great hotels. But from this time its decay was rapid, and it has never recovered from the shock.

Mr. Russell was a married man, as well as a member of one of the fashionable churches, and his sudden and horrible death was a great shock to those who knew him. For weeks the matter was discussed in social circles, and expressions of horror were heard on all sides.

The domestic relationships of the murdered man had always seemed calm and felicitous. His wife was a pretty, well-formed brunette, of rare intelligence and accomplishments. She was devoted to her husband, who in turn appeared to lose no opportunity of paying her attentions generally deemed outside the regulation duty of a well-established spouse.

Their residence on Michigan avenue was a model of comfort and refinement. Each season small parties had been given by Mr. and Mrs. Russell, which were famed in social circles for good taste and pleasurable success.

At the inquest, and for several months afterwards, the widow was bowed down with grief. She testified always to the deep affection which her husband had shown since marriage, and tears coursed down her cheeks when she related the many acts of love and kindness he had performed. She was heart-broken at the manner of his death, and any allusion thereto caused her to break down in a painful fit of weeping.

Six months after the tragedy, still the same sorrowing, grief-stricken woman, Mrs. Russell broke up her establishment and went East. For some time her most intimate friends lost sight of her.

In due time the daily press dropped the sensation. It ran the usual course. Other horrors intervened, and the interest in the Russell murder was swamped.

While working up the case I became acquainted with a young detective named Harris. He was an enthusiast in his profession, and naturally took a great interest in this mysterious affair. Every now and then he would advance a theory directly opposed to the popular one, and I would as frequently pooh-pooh him into silence. But Harris kept on in his course of investigation, and had great hopes of pocketing the \$1,000 reward offered by the widow for the apprehension and conviction of the murderess.

In justice to the detective profession, without going into details I may state that Harris' theory did not turn out correct.

Its elaboration, however, resulted in the unravelment of the crime, and the motives which prompted it. Harris was as much shocked at the denouement as the writer was, and as the reader undoubtedly will be.

One evening in the autumn of 1875 Harris called upon me in the office, and said he had something of unusual importance for my private ear. I dispatched my work as rapidly as possible, and we repaired to an out-of-the-way beer saloon, where we could talk with freedom.

The story which Harris unfolded was deeply interesting. I will give it, as near as possible, in his own words:

"You remember the Russell murder, Frank? I have got the right scent at last. Don't laugh until you hear what I have to say. I've said little about the matter lately, but I have been working unceasingly on the case. I have discovered the murderess!"

I suppose I looked incredulous, for Harris continued, in a nettled tone, "Now, don't make a fool of yourself until you hear the facts. You must promise me faithfully that you will keep the thing quiet until I give you permission to publish."

Newspaper men are often called upon to give pledges of this character, and I had no hesitation in passing my word that nothing should be revealed until Harris was ready.

"You remember," resumed the young detective, "my old theory. I never told the circumstances upon which it was based, but I must communicate them now for you to properly understand what I am going to tell you. You remember that the servant who ushered the strange lady into the room where Russell was resting on the couch, told of her caressingly stroking the victim's head. I need not tell you that it is almost impossible for a woman to be so near a man and leave no trace of her presence. I am a married man and have often felt sheepish when my wife has picked a long hair from my coat, although I could take an oath that I had been up to nothing wrong. Well, I carefully examined Russell's coat collar, and was rewarded by finding a hair six inches in length. It is here."

Harris pulled out his pocket-book and produced a yellow hair, carefully wrapped in tissue paper. I examined it, but could not see that it differed from other yellow hairs. The detective must have noticed this from the expression of my face, since he proceeded with his yarn with a smile indicative of superior wisdom.

"When I secured this prize, I knew I had a clue which might lead to the detection of the murderess. I jumped to the conclusion that the man had been killed by a blonde, and for weeks I tried to discover who the fair fiend was. My first step was to find out whether Russell had been in the habit of 'going around.' Careful inquiries revealed the fact that, like some other married men, he was not averse to forbidden fruit. But all my efforts to connect him with a fair-haired woman were fruitless. He seemed to have had a special liking for dark beauties.

“I pumped the widow to ascertain whether she knew aught of her husband’s public habits, but she persisted in the statement that Mr. Russell acted in every respect like a model husband. The servants could give me no satisfaction with regard to quarrels or jealous outbursts. Had it not been for the knowledge I gained outside, I should have been forced to the conclusion that the murdered merchant’s character was of the most correct and exemplary kind.

“While musing over the case in a country hotel, one day, I happened to pick up an old and tattered copy of a Chicago daily. My eye came across the following ‘personal’:

BEAUTIFUL BLONDE.—Will the lady who recognized the gentleman at the corner of State and Madison, yesterday, send her address, in confidence, to R., Box 595, Post Office.

“It may have been the word ‘blonde,’ jumping with the subject uppermost in my mind, or it may have been some kind of magnetic inspiration, but a queer sort of sensation ran through my system, and I felt that I had struck another link in the chain of evidence, which would lead up to the detection and punishment of the assassin. I looked at the heading of the paper. It was dated six days before the murder. I seized a time table and found that a train left for Chicago in fifteen minutes. To settle my bill and leave my job in the hands of an assistant, was the work of but a few moments, and I was soon speeding towards Chicago.

“On arriving, I took a carriage and drove at once to the post office. My suspicion was confirmed. Box 595, at the time of the murder, was held by Russell!

“I at once sought a consultation with my chief. He was almost as excited as myself. ‘Harry, my boy,’ he said, ‘you have struck it; go ahead.’ We agreed upon a plan of operations, but I need not bore you with its details.

“I hunted up the domestic who accompanied the strange lady to the room of Mr. R. She repeated the story of the female visitor on the fatal night being closely veiled, and added that her voice was soft and bell-like, and she had yellow hair.

“I searched the files of the daily paper in which the advertisement appeared, but could find no other ‘personal’ which seemed to bear on the case. Two things were certain: that Mr. Russell had sought an appointment with a blonde lady, and that the mysterious visitor at the — hotel had yellow hair.

“But what motive could a strange woman have in murdering Russell? Plunder was not the object, since his gold watch, money and other valuables were left untouched on his person. There was no evidence pointing towards a quarrel. The position of the dead body clearly indicated that the man was lying peacefully on the couch when the fatal shot was fired.

“I tried every means known to the profession, to discover whether Russell had received a letter from the blonde. No papers of any consequence were found in the pockets of the murdered man. From a former clerk in Russell’s office, I learned that the second day after the appearance of the advertisement, among the letters was one addressed simply with an initial and the number of the

post office box. This the merchant read first, and thrust into the rear pocket of his pants. Two days afterwards another letter in the same handwriting, but fully addressed, came, and was torn up after being read by Mr. Russell.

“I sought an interview with the widow. She told me, through her sobs, that her husband had stated he would not be home early, on the evening of the murder. He gave no reason and she did not ask one.

“This last remark struck me as rather singular. Was he in the habit of staying out late without tendering a reason or excuse? No, she had never known it to happen before.

“This, also, struck me as singular. The most exemplary husbands stay out now and then, and I thought Mrs. Russell, instead of trying to aid me in the search for the assassin, was knowingly keeping back necessary information.

“I left the widow, after making arrangements for another interview. To my astonishment the next day her residence was advertised for immediate sale, the furniture to be auctioned the following day.

“I attended the sale. The goods were sold at an immense sacrifice, and a chum of mine took advantage of the opportunity to purchase a bureau for his bedroom. Mrs. Russell had taken up temporary quarters at the Palmer House.

“On getting the bureau to his lodgings, my friend began to dust out the drawers. On opening one he found an old yellow wig, done up in a fashionable shape. He mentioned the circumstance to me, and I persuaded him to give me the wig, on the ground that it would be useful in my professional pursuits.

“I lost no time in taking my treasure to the office. I compared the hair of the wig with the one I picked from off Russell’s coat collar. They were exactly alike in color and texture. I procured a strong microscope and by the aid of its piercing vision found similarities which could not be seen by the naked eye. I went in search of all the yellow wigs in the city. With none did the hair correspond in every particular as with the wig found in the bureau.

“I became convinced that the person who shot Russell wore that old yellow wig!

“But to make assurance doubly sure, I consulted an able scientist—a gentleman who has rendered valuable services in numerous intricate murder cases. I entrusted the single hair to his hands, with a request that he should make a report as to its peculiarities, if it possessed any. In two weeks’ time I received his report. It was, of course, full of technicalities and scientific jargon, but the pith was that the hair had not fallen from the head of a living person!

“His reasons for this opinion were abstruse, but were none the less convincing. He pointed out certain peculiarities about the roots of human hair which he failed to find in the one I had submitted for his inspection. This, he was prepared to prove by scientific reasoning, was cut from a woman’s head.

“I next took him the yellow wig, and after a few moments of comparison, he positively declared that the hair which I had taken from the coat collar dropped therefrom!”

Harris paused at this juncture. He evidently expected me to make some remark, and I asked if he had imparted to me the full extent of his researches.

“Yes,” he replied, emphatically; “But I can lay my finger on the murderess at any moment!”

“Who in the world is she?” I inquired, half expecting what his answer would be.

“Mrs. Russell,” was the rejoinder, given in a stage whisper.

“But the finding of this wig in a bureau which formerly belonged to her is not conclusive proof that she committed the horrible crime,” I reasoned.

“Perhaps not to the reportorial mind, but it is to mine. Listen. The stories the widow has told about their happy marital relations are all bosh. My theory now is, that she loved Russell to distraction. His peccadilloes became known to her, and she was fired with jealousy. She saw this ‘personal’ I have spoken of. She answered it, appointing a time and place of meeting. Her whole moral nature revolted at this last evidence of her husband’s infidelity. She worked herself up to a frenzy of passion. She determined to keep the appointment, perhaps at first with the hope that she might win Russell back to a life of rectitude. She disguised herself in the old wig, the better to carry out her plans. She entered the room and found her recreant spouse sleeping calmly while awaiting the coming of another. The demon of revenge and hatred got possession of her. She fired the fatal shot and sent the guilty soul of her husband into eternity! Then she hurried from the house. I am ready to stake my professional reputation on the correctness of this theory.”

I muttered something about its being strange that none of the inmates of the house heard the report of the pistol.

“Oh,” said Harris, “there is nothing peculiar about that. You know the racket that is often kicked up in the parlors of hotels. My explanation is, that there was a boisterous party in the house at the time, and the noise of the shot escaped attention amid the general confusion.”

“Well, what do you propose to do?” was my next query.

“Do?” he rejoined, with a glitter of excitement in his eyes, “I am going to frighten her into a confession. If I can bring this case to a successful end, I am made for life. It’s too good a chance for a young fellow to miss.”

He then told me that Mrs. Russell was in Boston living quietly with some relatives. Next day he was to start East to put his plan into execution. I was to be prepared to write up the sensation big on the receipt of telegraphic intimation of his success. In the meantime I was to keep my own counsel.

The following day I was surprised by another visit from the detective. There was a troubled, disappointed look on his face, and I at once thought that his pet theory had collapsed in some way or other. He did not wait for questions, but in a sepulchral tone exclaimed:

“It’s all over. Mrs. Russell is dead!”

After recovering from my astonishment, I asked eagerly for particulars.

“Read these,” he replied, thrusting two letters into my hands.

The first contained a simple announcement that Mrs. Russell had died very suddenly, and that among her papers the second letter was found securely sealed, with an indorsement that it should be sent to Harris immediately after the writer’s death.

It is necessary for the purposes of this narrative that the sealed letter should be given in full. It was as follows:

“To MR. H. HARRIS,
“—’s Detective Agency, Chicago.

“MY DEAR FRIEND—I feel that my life is fast ebbing away. Before I die I wish to make a confession which perhaps interests you now more than anyone else. It is hard to do so, but I feel I must. The shocking truth must come out.

“My husband met his death at my hands!

“I know this horrible revelation will shock you deeply, but I make it so that you need not look any further for the murderer.

“I was driven to the deed by jealousy. I loved my husband dearly—so dearly that I preferred his death to dishonor,—for is it not dishonorable to leave a lawful, loving wife for the embraces of lewd and mercenary women?

“The appointment at the —Hotel was made with me. I saw a ‘personal’ in a morning paper and answered it under a false name. The burning words of love with which my husband replied made me wild. I could think of nothing but my discarded affection. I could not keep down the mad promptings of revenge.

“I visited the house, disguised in a blonde wig which I had often used in private theatricals. My husband was asleep on the couch. For a moment my resolution staggered. I stroked his head gently, and had thoughts of falling at his feet and beseeching him to give me back his love. He muttered a name in his sleep, which froze my good resolve.

“I sprang from his side. A paroxysm of rage and jealousy seized me. I raised a pistol and fired! The bullet did its work only too well. My husband neither moved nor groaned. I saw the blood ooze from his temple and knew that I had killed him! I rushed from the house. The shot had not

been heard, for the sound of the piano and of conversation and merry laughter still came from the parlor.

“I went home. My absence had not been noticed. I was possessed with a stony calmness. I undressed and went to bed as usual, and, strange to say, I slept.

“No sooner had I awoke in the morning than the terrible crime flashed upon me in all its naked horror. I thought of giving myself up to justice, but eventually decided that enough misery had been imposed on our families by my rash deed. I nerved myself up to act the part which you witnessed.

“All the time my heart was breaking. Oh! the pangs of remorse I suffered!

“I tried to ease my conscience by telling of my husband love and devoted attention. But the experiment only imposed upon me two-fold misery. At last I was compelled to leave the scene of my crime.

“But travel did not cure the canker of remorse. Wherever I went I saw the dead body of my husband, with the blood oozing out of his ghastly forehead.

“I came to my relatives here. I knew I had not long to live. The excitement of the previous year had undermined a constitution never strong. I write now with the cold sweat of death on my hands.

“I make this confession to you freely. You deserve as much from my hands, since you have spent many weary hours in unraveling what is no longer a mystery to you.

“Do with this what you please. I have no request to make. But oh! remember that you have in your keeping the horrible secret of a woman, soon to be cold in death, who was driven to crime by an unrequited passion.

“Farewell! God bless you!
ADA RUSSELL.”

I must say that the pathos of these dying words of a wretched woman affected me deeply. Harris seemed also very much cut up. We consulted as to the advisability of publishing full particulars of the crime. Harris, however, sank all feelings of personal ambition, and declared against publication on the ground that it could do no possible good. Although such a splendid “scoop” would have added vastly to my reputation, out of feelings of humanity I agreed to suppress the sensation.

Maitland, James. *Suppressed Sensations, or Leaves from the Note Book of a Chicago Reporter*
1882