

The Second Sight

I am not superstitious; understand that before I begin. When a man's life, inner and outer, has been choked down for thirty-five years into the dog-eared leaves of a law book, you will find few grains of credulity or fancy in his nature. Beside, I don't think there ever were any in mine. Only the highest and lowest orders of intellect dare confess a belief in truths that underlie a science of common sense, and I belong to the massed middle mind of the world, to whom common sense is the highest natural good. Yet I have observed that almost every man, if you catch him in the right humor, has some old experience to relate which trenches on the supernatural. He sneers at it, as he tells you, yet secretly believes it. You bring up a parallel case, and he flouts it with an easy explanation. "Stuff! pah! Do you think he credits such old women's tales? That little matter he just spoke of was a mere nothing, of course; yet it *was* curious, eh?" More; I do confess that among the civil suits and criminal cases that have made up the dull routine of my own life, there have been one or two such odd incidents for which no natural hypothesis will account. I propose to give you the facts of one of them, assuring you that they are facts. Whatever may seem to you incredible in the story is the most true. I offer no explanation of the mystery; never explained it to myself; all that I know is that it actually occurred just as I tell it to you. The names are necessarily altered.

In 1820, I employed about my office in Richmond, a boy named Tom Sanders; an ugly, short, Dutch built fellow, whose only recommendation as to looks was a certain straight-forward honesty in his face. I liked Tom; kept him as errand boy for two or three years; his steady, solid-going habit gained trust and respect insensibly; whatever he had to do, whether it was to sort the papers, or eat his dinner, was sure to be slowly and thoroughly gone through with true German phlegm. One other German trait Tom had strongly developed; a quiet pertinacity in getting on and making money. He hoarded every minute of his off hours from work, just as he hoarded his pittance of wages; tried to study in these spare minutes to become a gymnast; cleaned his worn clothes with the same dogged persistence in every way to make the most of himself. I foresaw my office boy would grow, as a majority of his nation do, into a just, honest citizen, solid in pocket and integrity. Well, I had a fancy for Tom, as I said, and then it is human nature to help the successful. So, one spring morning, I took him out of the outer office, inside, and entered him as one of my regular law students, finding he had scraped into his slow brain almost enough of Latin and English requisite for a beginner. He read with me for five years, learning slowly; but there were no leaks in his brain, once in, an idea stayed there. How he lived I hardly know, he would accept no help. Flint, one of his fellow-students, told me he taught in the vacations, cooked for himself; starvation diet, Flint averred. Yet, beggarly as his situation was, and resolute as he continued in rejecting aid, even Pine, my black fellow, sneered at Mas'r Sanders' love of a dollar. A trait not easily forgiven by Virginia negroes, or Virginia masters; so it happened that with all of Sanders' sterling integrity, and warm, though slow feelings, he was unpopular with his fellow-students, a favorite with no one but myself. Some time in September, 1825, I received a letter from a friend in Randolph county, in which he incidentally mentioned that there was a good opening for a lawyer in that region. I called Flint out of the ante-room, and, reminding him that he would be admitted next term, proposed he should go out to Randolph and settle, stating that the region was a growing one, and that his practice would increase with the population. Flint stood aghast.

“The Cheat country!” he ejaculated.

I tried not to smile, glancing at his diamond shirt-buttons and white hands.

“Rather rough, the mountaineers,” I said. “You’ve been there?”

“Yes,” he replied, dryly. “I went down, sir, with Judge Clapp as a grand juror, last fall.”

There was a pause. At last Flint broke out briskly.

“Fact is, Mr. Page, I’m grateful to you for the plan. Fine opening, none better, I know—slow, but sure. But I’d like to look around me a bit, and I would like to give Tom Sanders a chance. Why not throw this his in way? The poor fellow can’t afford to wait long for briefs, and those Cheat River folks will suit him better than—”

“You; and he will suit them better,” I interposed. “You’re quite right, Flint. I wonder I did not think of it sooner. Only a thorough man could make his way out yonder, and Tom is that in muscle and brain both. Send him in here.”

Flint laughed good-humoredly, too much rejoiced to escape banishment to care for reproof. He stopped on his way to the door.

“It’s not altogether selfishness on my part, Mr. Page. I do want Sanders to get on. He wants to marry old Jake Adams’ daughter, and he will never do it until he can play brag with the old hound with more dollars than he’s likely to make here.”

Tom Sanders in love! I could not comprehend it.

“She will be rich?” I asked. “An only child, is she not?”

“Yes, sir. Tom’ll make a good thing out of it at Adams’ death; but he’ll hold on these twenty years. I think Tom likes the girl for herself though. These quiet people are mostly in earnest.”

“Very well. Send him in.”

Sanders, I knew, occupied a room in Adams’ house, and it was there he had made the girl’s acquaintance, perhaps. Old Adams was one of the most disreputable men, free from the penitentiary in Richmond: miserly, a scoffer at everything good and pure, a slave-raiser, with a suspicion of having once been a slave-driver. He lived in a dilapidated old house at Rockets, a village a mile or so out of town, owned some bank-stock, and hired out some forty negroes. His daughter I had seen once, a thin, sorrowful-looking girl, who would have been pretty if she had not been half-starved.

When I proposed the Randolph county plan to Sanders, he asked a week for consideration, at the end of which time he gravely accepted it after many cautious queries. In November he would be admitted, and purposed to start for the Cheat country immediately. These preliminaries settled, I

ventured to allude to his marriage, hoping that my influences might remove any obstacle. I sincerely wished Tom well, and would have done much to aid him. The fellow's broad jaws grew pale as I spoke of it. It is not easy for men like him to talk of such things. Yet, I think, the ice once broken, he was glad of sympathy.

"I thank you," he said, with a grave nod. "But I've little hope of bringing it about now. Her father's against it, and she won't disobey him. She's a good girl, Jane."

"And if you marry now, you would lose all chance of the money."

He looked up hotly, seemed about to speak angrily, but checked himself. "Mr. Page," he then said, earnestly, "I like money, that's true. But a wife's a wife; and, another thing, Adams' money might rot with him if I had Jane. But she won't disobey him. It's not easy," he said, after a pause, "to see her going to the grave faster than he is, between starvation and ill-usage."

I offered gently to use my powers of inducement with the old man.

"It would do more harm than good," he said. "He'll never consent, he can make nothing by the transaction."

"He's a hard master with his servants, I've heard?" I said.

"Yes, and a harder father. But I'll pay him back, yet, I've a fancy I'll marry Jane before I go to the Cheat," he said, half to himself, the remembrance of some outrage on the old man's part making his face dark. We did not continue the subject, as I found I could not help him.

Two weeks after, I went down to Charleston, a little town on the Kanawha. Meanwhile, although Tom, I knew, was busily preparing for his examination and removal, I heard no more of the Adamses, father or daughter. I wish you to observe the statement I now make, as it is essential to the understanding of that part of my story which is mysterious, the fact that, indeed, makes it inexplicable. Charleston, the town where the court was held which I for the first time attended, could even now, with the facilities of railroad communication, not be reached from Richmond in a period of less than ten days; then, it was a journey of about three weeks. Telegraphs were unknown. The two points were, then, so far as *immediate* connecting is concerned, as widely separate as the poles. I went alone; not even attended by a body servant. No theory of explanation of what there transpired will suffice, then, which rests on the idea of a cognizance of parties in Charleston of events occurring in Richmond. Such cognizance being manifestly impossible.

I designed remaining in Charleston about a week. As is usual in Virginia, the sessions of court was the signal for even more unlimited hospitality than usual. I, with Judge Hepburn, and two other members of the Western bar, were the guests of one of the planters—a cousin of mine, in fact, Col. Page. I met Hepburn (Judge of the United States Court then) for the first time. He was a Louisianian by birth, driven by some strange chance into Western Virginia a few years before. The other lawyers, younger men, denominated him a dry old chip, and grew silent over their wine when he was present. One of your men who are born lawyers; a brain full of forms and

precedents unlimited; a small, sharp eye; a leathery face; a cool, sarcastic tongue; dressed like a Quaker, and as silent and watchful as one. Rollicking Col. Page, our host, lost the point out of his best stories when the Judge was present, and let them fall flat and tasteless; and if the young people were carrying on a sly flirtation in the drawing-room, they grew shy and grave when he came in; his very cold gravity conveyed somehow the impression of a sneer. The character of the man contributed to make the incident I relate more remarkable.

Finding that he had been tied down closely to business for several years, and that he had never visited Richmond, I persuaded him to return with me for the purpose of recreation, to which he finally consented. Some two or three days before the time appointed for our departure, Col. Page requested me to look into the details of an interminable law-suit he had kept for years as a hobby. He brought the papers to the library in the evening of a dull, rainy day. Judge Hepburn lounged in presently, and, after listening for a time, took up a newspaper, and dozed over it, rousing now and then to help himself to a glass of wine from the table. At last, tired of our monotonous voices, he leaned back in his arm chair, and fell asleep altogether, snoring occasionally so as to provoke a smile from Page, and a quizzical glance to the open, bony mouth and yellow face, to which sleep certainly lent no charms. We worked on at the papers for an hour, too busy to heed the uneasy breathing of the sleeper, until Page, turning, exclaimed,

“Hepburn’s asleep with his eyes open! Nightmare, I believe. Here! Judge, wake up!” shaking him tolerably roughly.

The man’s eyes were stretched open with the peculiar glassy stare of a somnambulist; big drops of sweat had started out over his forehead; and when, after repeated shakings, he woke, it was with a violent fit of trembling and chattering of teeth. Page glanced significantly at the empty decanter, and then at Hepburn, whose whole appearance had altered as if under the influence of some powerful excitement.

“The night’s foul fiend has got a grip of you, eh, Judge? Take some water.”

Hepburn poured the water in his hand, and wet his face. “It was horrible!” he muttered.

“Bad dreams, hey?” said Page, turning to the table again, while the judge sat down, trying to bring himself back to his customary quiet. Looking up, after a while, and catching my eye, he got up and shook himself, as if ashamed of the agitation he could not throw off. The man was totally unlike himself.

“I tell you,” he said, with a nervous laugh, “if that was a dream, God preserve me from reality! I cannot convince myself that what I saw did not actually occur, at the instant just past. I act like an idiot. Look, how my hand shakes!” he sneered at himself in the old way. “One would think I believed in our old nurse’s tale, that the gift of second sight lay in our family, and that I had seen a vision.”

We passed it off with a jest, seeing how annoyed he was that we had seen his agitation; but an hour after, Page asked, carelessly,

“What was your dream, by the way, judge?”

I thought the other was glad to tell it. He found himself, he said, on a muddy road leading by a canal, a place he had never seen before, yet which he could not but feel existed somewhere. A man going before him was the only object in view—a most diabolically faced old wretch, whom he would hang, he added, with a laugh, on no evidence but his jaw and eyes. A heavy rain began to fall. Besides this, there was a vague, unclean odor from the mud-banks of the canal. The old man stopped, apparently waiting for someone, and was presently joined by a woman, whose face was hidden, but whose figure and step showed her to be lithe and young. While they talked together, a young, stout-built man came softly up from behind a heap of lumber, armed with a knife.

Page and I could not but smile at the earnestness with which the man told the story. Its reality had taken a strange hold of him. Even yet, in his secret heart, he believed it, laugh as he might.

“He killed him,” he went on, shuddering. “I saw him strike the old man here, under the fifth rib, from behind. The woman hid her face till it was done. The man touched her when the other was dead, pulled her shawl, and said, ‘now you’re free.’ It was horrible! The blood stained everything; her dress was spotted; some of the drops reached me.” He looked involuntarily down at his coat.

“Well?” said Col. Page, hiding a smile.

“They took off the old man’s coat and jacket, and rolled it in a bundle, with his pocket-book, and a woman’s shawl, and the coat of the murderer, after trying to wash the stains out of it. The body they threw into the canal. I saw them go along the road, seeing as I went, how soon the rain effaced all marks from the clay, carrying off the blood. About half a mile back from the canal stood an old mill, partly torn down. They buried the bundle of clothes in there—hid it under a board of the floor, nailing the floor down again. Part of a sign hung on the mill I noticed. *Bryson Brothers* was on it—the remainder broken off.”

I started. Such a mill, with its broken sign, stood on the canal road, near Richmond.

“Did you say you were never east of the Blue Ridge, Judge?” I asked.

“Never,” said Page. “I can answer for him. Known him, man and boy, in Louisiana and here, these fifty years.”

I said nothing of the odd coincidence, but it fastened the judge’s dream on my mind. I glanced at my watch; it was past eleven. Afterward I remembered the time; the day was the thirtieth of October.

Three months after this Judge Hepburn started with me to Richmond, taking the journey leisurely, as it was an open month for both of us. Crossing the Ohio, we spent a week loitering, gunning and fishing, so that it was about ten days before we arrived at Wheeling, and put up at the Virginia House.

“John Page, of Richmond?” said the clerk, inquiringly. “A gentleman here, sir, asking if you’ve arrived. In No. 46; name of Flint. Leaves in the evening boat. Sam, see if No. 46 has gone.”

I followed Sam hastily, a little excited. What could have driven Flint in search of me? Letters were carried irregularly, then, and if any sudden emergency had arisen, Flint had probably thought it surer to come than to write. I found him leaving his room.

“This is luck,” he said eagerly. “I was just starting for Charleston, and would have missed you. Come in.”

“What has happened?” I asked, as he shut the door. “What is wrong?”

“The matter’s bad enough, Mr. Page,” he said, drawing a chair for me to the fire. “Old Jake Adams is dead.”

I drew a long breath—of relief—I am sorry to say.

“Is that all?”

“Not at all,” he said with a half smile. “No mourners for that death but Jake himself, I fear. But he was murdered,” growing grave again.

The horrible truth struck me as he spoke. “Go on,” I said, gulping down the fear. “Who is accused?”

“Tom Sanders,” said Flint, wiping his forehead.

“Before God, George Flint, he never did it!” I sprang to my feet.

“I do not believe he did,” said Flint. (The boy had grown thinner since I saw him; he was a good-hearted fellow, Flint.) As I paced the floor, he entered into details. Sanders was not arrested as yet, though secretly watched; did not know, in fact, how heavily suspicion rested on him. Flint, being entrusted with the facts, had set off instantly in search of me, as Tom’s friend, and being the person most likely to sift the matter thoroughly. His story was briefly as follows:

Tom Sanders and himself had passed their examination successfully, and been admitted to the bar. Sanders, as time drew near for his departure to the Cheat, became visibly irritable and moody. One or two quarrels had taken place between him and old Adams, in consequence of the cruelty which the old man practiced on his daughter. Sanders, after one of these quarrels, had been heard to threaten that he would be revenged, that it was better the old brute should go to his own place, than live to torture the girl—words which might have been uttered in the heat of passion, but to which the subsequent event gave terrible significance. Two days after this threat, Adams was missing. It was supposed that he had gone down the country unexpectedly, and no search was made. The Sunday following his body was discovered in the canal, bearing a wound made under the fifth rib. The police were set to work, and suspicion, as I said, was slowly fastening on Sanders.

“He never did it!” I repeated, pacing the floor. “I’d risk my life on that boy’s integrity. What is he doing, Flint?”

“That is another thing against him, sir. He is making arrangements for marrying the girl immediately. He says she is helpless, friendless—that he is her natural protector. True enough; yet it looks suspicious to the police. Unfortunately, too, you know, he lodged in Adams’ house, so cannot prove an alibi. He says the old man went out after dark, and never returned.”

A long silence followed. What drove the judge’s dream into my head just then?

“Flint, I said, “where was the body found?”

“In the canal.”

“Where was Adams last seen?”

“I forgot to mention that. On the canal-road, just after dark. Two men passed him. Tom’s story and theirs agree in that point.”

“What night was that?”

“The thirteenth of October.”

I restrained an exclamation with difficulty, but I did restrain it.

We started for Richmond, going post. Judge Hepburn was too used to the exigencies of a lawyer’s life to be surprised or disturbed. It was late when we reached Richmond, on a Saturday evening. Committing my guest to my housekeeper’s care, I drove immediately to the magistrate in whose hands the proofs against Sanders lay.

“I have waited for you anxiously Mr. Page,” he said, after giving the details more formally than Flint had done. “I do not see how I can longer defer giving young Sanders into custody. Fortunately he has made no attempt to escape; is ignorant, I believe, that suspicion rests on him. The proofs are strong, Mr. Page.”

“Not to me,” I answered. “Take care what you do. You throw a stigma on the man that may ruin his life. Defer the arrest until Monday noon. I have a clue, I think.”

The magistrate was curious, but I kept my clue to myself.

“By Monday morning you will have the guilty party in your power,” I said, confidently; “and that party will not be Sanders.”

How little confidence I felt! My clue, I am almost ashamed to acknowledge, was Judge Hepburn's dream. What a broken straw that was, men can understand who despise all superstition as I did!

It was a wretched night. I had not known how deeply I was attached to Tom; one minute my hopes strengthening belief, I would persuade myself that, by means of that supernatural aid, the true murderers might be discovered; the next, I cursed my own folly at such hope. Again, did not the evidence of the dream even point against Sanders? A short, stout man, he described the murderer. I offer no apology for the importance I attached to this dream. I believe, under the circumstances, and the same excited feelings, any man would have done the same.

I left my room early on Sunday morning, a day heavy with the fate of poor Tom. I had planned my work carefully during the night. My first care was to call Pine, my valet, and question him as to the whereabouts of the slaves owned by Adams. All, he informed me, but two employed by his daughter, were in one of the slave houses ready for hire, their term of service with the planter who employed them having expired.

"Did Adams keep any of the servants in the house?" I asked.

"Only Sue, mas'r," he said. "Her's wife to White Joe down't Grimbsy's." (White Joe was a light mulatto employed at a restaurant in town, a hardened villain, I knew.)

"Adams' people weren't fond of him, Pine?"

He shrugged a violent dissent. "Drefful wretch, Mas'r John! Good riddance, I guess."

"Where does White Joe, as you call him, stay, now?" I asked.

"Goes out mos'ly to see Sue on Sundays, sah."

I dispatched Pine with a note to Sanders. He came, delighted to see me again, showing more feeling than I thought was in the fellow's nature, looking happier, more cheerful than ever before. He could not be expected to mourn for old Adams' death, and the future was bright before him. No suspicion of the dreadful doubt hanging over him had dawned upon him. I kept him to breakfast and walked out with him, and did all I could to show him how entirely I trusted and respected him. Trifles all, yet I could note how even Flint shrunk vaguely from him doubtfully. The reputation he had for love of money told against him now.

"After all," I overheard Flint say to one of the men in the secret, "it is a good thing for Sanders; and he might have thought Adams only like vermin well out of the way—God knows!"

It was a cold, clear morning. As the time drew near the final trial, I became nervous as a woman; however, I did not hesitate in my plan. Judge Hepburn had not yet risen, breakfasted in his room with Louisianian indolence. When he sauntered slowly down, Sanders was gone, to return in the evening.

“For church?” said the judge, yawning. Life and death came before the “assembling of ourselves together” in my creed.

“What say you to a drive?” I suggested.

Hepburn’s eyes brightened, and in half an hour we were bowling away into the country, the high back of the gig preventing my companion from perceiving how closely we were followed by three horsemen—Flint and two detectives from the police force.

It was a pleasant enough drive. The judge was talkative, for a wonder—and, being so, did not notice how difficult it was for me to command my laugh or reply at the right time. We passed down the hill and reached the canal at last, creeping slow between muddy banks. Would he recognize it? I glanced at him askance.

“A disagreeable road,” he said, indifferently. “Would not the other be pleasanter?”

“Let us try it for a little while,” I forced myself to say. There was no recognition in his face. The same story went on for another mile of the famous New Orleans Grimes suit. I never hear it mentioned without a recurrence of the dreary disappointment with which I listened that day.

At last, however, there was a sudden pause in his narration, a quick, uncertain glance on the stubble fields, the yellow, slimy stream, and the dull road.

“What is it?” I demanded, eagerly.

“Nothing,” he replied, rallying, and went on—“Scoresby Grimes, as I said—”

But before long he stopped again, uneasily, and remained silent. I did not speak, but drove on more quickly. I saw the doubt gather on his face, blank amazement, something akin to terror.

At last he caught my hand.

“In God’s name, what is this? This is the place of my dream. The old man was murdered there,” pointing to a shelving part of the bank, which was, as I had been told by the police, the place where Adams had been murdered.

I thrust the reins into his hands. “Go on—the mill! There’s a life on this!”

He might have thought me mad, only his own senses were bewildered. “There the woman met him,” he continued, “they stood here—the young man came from yonder pile of lumber. He dropped his hat. It fell on that pile of gypsum weeds.” He pointed with his whip.

A signal brought the police to our side. One of them stooped and disengaged a felt hat from the mud. *Not Sanders’ hat!*

I thanked God, covering my face with my hands.

Judge Hepburn did not seem to heed the unexpected arrival of the police. He sprang out of the gig and hurried up the road on foot.

“This way!” he cried, eagerly. “What can this mean?”

We hurried after. Crossing the fields with a sure familiar step, he led the way, until we came in sight of the ruined mill. The sign, broken, hung swaying in the wind. *Bryson Brothers* on it. He glanced up, growing paler as the reality became more sure, then entered and walked straight to a plank more securely fastened than the others. “Do not touch it, judge,” I hastened to interpose, “that is the office of these gentlemen.”

The plank was soon torn up by the help of an axe, and underneath was found the coat and jacket of the murdered man, stained with blood, a woman’s shawl, a smaller coat, and a long Bowie knife, rusted with gore. There was a name scratched on the hilt. The policeman reading it looked up “White Joe, Mr. Page. He’s the man.”

We turned to the city. I had a fancy to test the truth of the dream yet farther; so, after a whispered word to the officers, led the way to Adams’ house. Several men, black and mulattoes, were lounging on the fence corner. Judge Hepburn scanned them as we came up. “There is the murderer!” he said, quickly, pointing to one who slouched out of view.

I have but little more to tell. On Monday morning, White Joe was fully committed for trial, and the next term was tried, condemned, and executed, sufficient proof being established against him by the confession of an accomplice, a white man. It was their intention to escape, with the money they had obtained from Adams’ person, to Ohio. I doubt, however, if the deed would have been committed, but for the cruelty practiced by the old man on the wife of this “White Joe,” the negress Sue, who was the woman present at the murder.

Judge Hepburn, singularly enough, never alluded to the dream after that day, only evincing by his intense interest in the progress of the trial how deeply the matter had touched him. Some whispers of the story leaked out, however, and buzzed through their nine days of wonder.

To this day Tom Sanders does not know of his escape. There was a wedding the next week, where an honest-hearted fellow, and a good, loving girl were made happy, and I, for the first time in my life, gave away the bride.

Two years ago, traveling in the West, I came to a homestead in one of the Cheat valleys, where, I remembered a long-standing invitation gave me the right to call myself at home. A heavily wooded plantation, a large, but cozy house, troops of well-fed servants—every sign of content and plenty.

I hardly dared to call the portly-looking host, whose face flashed welcome, “Tom, my boy,” but I did, and I kissed the fair, rosy matron with a will, who came down the steps so joyfully to meet me.

“Tell this gentleman your name, sir,” said Tom, to a young mountaineer, the oldest of a half-dozen.

“John Page,” was the answer, as the boy lifted his cap.

People have a fancy for calling their sons for me—I don’t know why—there’s nothing in the name I can see.

I looked about me.

“And this is the end of Judge Hepburn’s dream!” I said to Tom.

“What did you say, sir?” said my namesake.

“Nothing, my son,” I answered.

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