

Under the Shadow of Death

by Maro O. Rolfe

“ARE you a detective?”

“I am.”

“Your name?”

“John Sansom.”

“Ah! Come at once to No. 391 Scott street.”

“The residence of Mr. Abel Booker?”

“Yes.”

“What has occurred out of the usual order?”

“Mr. Broker is dead.”

“Dead?”

“Yes.”

“When did he die?”

“Last night—murdered!”

“Murdered?”

“Yes—shot through the head.”

“Heavens! Is any one suspected?”

“Yes; his nephew, Paul Rogers.”

“Impossible!”

“But true, nevertheless.”

“On what ground is he suspected?”

“Last week Abel Booker made a will in his nephew's favor.”

“Perfectly natural.”

“Yet some people think otherwise.”

“Who?”

“Other relatives.”

“Name them.”

“Simon H. Booker.”

“His brother?”

“Yes.”

“He is not finding fault with the will, though?”

“Yes, he is; and there are others, too, who find fault with it.”

“Name them.”

“Alfred Booker.”

“If I mistake not he is a son of the last mentioned.”

“Yes.”

“Any one else?”

“Yes; Henry Booker.”

“Another brother of the murdered man?”

“Yes.”

“And all these persons suspect that [P]aul Rogers killed their relative?”

“All have expressed such a suspicion.”

“All together?”

“No; separately.”

“Since when?”

“Since the body was found.”

“When was that?”

“Early this morning.”

“Where?”

“In Mr. Booker's own room.”

“Shot, did you say?”

“Yes; through the head, and stone dead.”

“Terrible! Might it not have been suicide?”

“There seemed to be nothing to indicate it.”

“I will go at once to the house.”

So saying, Sansom, the celebrated New York detective, beckoned to his visitor to follow him and left his office, going down the stairs two or three at a time, and never pausing until he hailed a Broadway stage.

“Come on,” he said, sententiously, as he entered the vehicle. “We have no time to lose. Now give me the particulars of the crime as far as you know them.”

His companion had told literally all he knew, and no amount of skillful pumping could elicit from him any further information.

In half an hour the train stood before the door of 391 Scott street, a stately residence to which they were soon admitted.

On the floor in his own room, evidently in exactly the same position in which he had fallen, lay the dead body of Abel Booker.

Near by stood the dead man's nephew—Paul Rogers.

This person was a man of twenty-five, with dark, expressive eyes and a manly face—such a young man as one instinctively warms up to, believes in, and wishes “God speed.”

Sansom accosted him.

“Your name, sir.”

The name was given.

“You are a nephew of the dead man's?”

“Yes.”

“And his expectant heir?”

The young man nodded his head.

“You were in high power with him, were you not?”

“Yes—I think so.”

“So I thought. And he was ever kind and indulgent to you?”

“In the extreme.”

“No doubt you appreciated him warmly?”

“No man ever loved a father better.”

“So I understood. Now, give me particulars—tell me concerning the murder.”

“I know little about it—nothing except what you know already.”

Sansom stooped and examined the body carefully.

“He was shot in the right temple,” he mused. “One fatal shot accomplished the assassin's purpose.”

He then again faced Paul Rogers and gazed searchingly into his eyes.

“The young man does not flinch,” he thought; “if he is a murderer he is a cool one, indeed.”

“Mr. Rogers,” he asked, “where were you when the murder was committed?”

“In my bed.”

“In this house?”

“Yes.”

“At what time was your uncle killed?”

“I do not know. Some time during the night.”

“You do not know the hour, then?”

“No; but we judge my uncle must have been killed late this morning, or, at least, not long before daylight. The body is even now scarcely cold.”

“No one in the house heard the report of the weapon, then?”

“No; and that is the strangest thing about it. My room is only separated from this by a partition and, as you can see, there is a communicating door.”

The detective made an examination of the two apartments and saw that what the young man said was true.

He could not repress an exclamation of surprise.

“Ah!” he thought. “It is impossible that this young man should not have heard the report of the weapon, if the murder was committed in this room and he was sleeping in the next one. If he did not himself commit the murder, or is not trying to shield the guilty parties, *Abel Booker was not killed in this room!*”

He studied Paul Rogers' face closely, as he asked:

“Was no weapon found?”

“Not yet.”

“How did the assassin gain entrance to the house, and how did he go out again?”

“I cannot even guess.”

Sansom quickly made an examination of the premises, but found no clue.

“I must look your room over, too, he said, as he pushed past Paul Rogers and walked into the latter's apartments. As he crossed the threshold, he uttered a cry of surprise.

Before him, on the floor, lay a revolver.

It was a small five-shooter, and one of its chambers had been recently emptied.

As the young man saw the weapon in the detective's hand, he cried out:

“Where did you get that?”

“Right here on the floor of your room,” said Sansom, sternly. “I see your initials are carved on the handle. Is this weapon yours?”

“It is; but I will swear it was not on the floor where you found it when I was last in this room.”

“When was that?”

“About two hours ago, say at seven o'clock. It was at that time that I heard the alarm of murder. I had just finished dressing, and was about to go down stairs for an early breakfast.”

“Where was this revolver at that time?”

“Locked up in that small box in the corner.”

“When did you last see it?”

“Late last night when I put it in the box.”

“Was this chamber then empty?”

“No; I loaded it only yesterday. Every chamber was full when I put it in the box; I am sure of that. I had been carrying the revolver for some time, and only last night decided to lay it aside and buy a different one when I went down town this morning,”

“Mr. Rogers,” went on Sansom, coldly; “when were you first aware that your uncle made a recent will in your favor?”

“I am not aware of it.”

“Do you not know that, and are you not also aware of the fact that strong influence was being brought to bear upon him to induce him to leave the bulk of his property to Simon H. Booker and Henry Booker, his brothers?”

“I know nothing about it. I never conversed with my uncle or any one else on the subject of his will.”

“You are strangely ignorant upon a subject of so great importance to you. Now tell me how any one but you could have opened that box and taken the revolver out of it?”

The young man grew slightly pale.

“Ah!” thought the detective. “He is either beginning to be influenced by guilty fear, or he now for the first time realizes what inferences may be drawn from the circumstances as he states them.”

“The box was locked,” said the young man slowly. “I had and still have the key in my pocket. I am sure no one was in my room until after I left this morning.”

“Let me take the key,” said Sansom.

The young man did as directed, and the detective opened the box and began to examine its contents.

“Show me where you laid the revolver?”

“Right here, in this little compartment of the tray which forms the upper portion of the box.”

“What is under the tray?”

“Some papers, jewelry and other articles of value which I have placed here for safe-keeping. Look and see.”

Sansom lifted the tray and emptied the contents of the box on the dressing case.

“What paper is this?” asked the detective, as he selected one of peculiar appearance from among several others and held it up to the young man's view.

“I don't know. I never saw it before.”

“Did you not put it here?”

“No.”

“It is your uncle's will, bequeathing to you all of his property,” said the detective, as he hastily examined the paper. “I will take it and this revolver along. This all has a very bad look for you, young man.”

“You don't mean—”

“I mean that there is enough circumstantial evidence against you to hang you!” said Sansom. “Don't leave my sight without permission.”

“Am I then under arrest?”

“Not exactly, only under my eye,” said the detective. “Please send for a surgeon.”

Paul Rogers obeyed. Upon his arrival the surgeon was directed to probe the wound in the dead man's head and extract the ball if possible, a task in which he was successful.

The missile was identical in size and make with the four remaining in the five-shooter Sansom

had found on the floor of Paul Rogers' room, and which the young man had acknowledged as his own!

“Mr. Rogers,” said Sansom, “you may now consider yourself under arrest. The case against you seems almost complete, and I assure you it is a most dangerous one.”

“Then you think I killed my uncle?”

“I don't say that; but I am afraid an average jury would so decide.”

“I am innocent.”

That was Paul Rogers' plea on the day his trial began. That was what he said when, three days later, he was asked to state why sentence of death should not be pronounced upon him. That was what he said on the morning of the day appointed for his execution. He made no explanation—attempted none—seemed dazed and sometimes almost heedless of what was passing around him, and of the exciting scenes in which he was the central figure, but always said, calmly:

“I am innocent.”

The ghastly preparations for his execution were completed, and the select few who were permitted to witness his death at the hands of the hangman were gathered in that part of the “Tombs” prison set apart for that event, awaiting his appearance. Suddenly a startling announcement was made:

“The condemned man has been reprieved.”

“Reprieved!”

With what a start Paul Rogers, then just about to set out on the march to death, heard this word.

He was aged perceptibly. His once round face was thin and haggard, his eyes were sunken and full of a wild luster, and his brown hair was streaked with gray. He trembled violently, then calmed himself with an evident effort.

“Why have they prolonged my agony?” he asked of the man of God who stood at his side. “I had thought it was almost over.”

At that moment his attorney entered, accompanied by Sansom.

With two or three deft movements the detective severed the cords with which Paul Rogers had been bound for the gallows, saying eagerly:

“It was I who put these bonds upon you, I take to myself much joy in removing them. I wish I could as readily clear away all memory of the unmerited affliction you have endured. You will soon be free.”

“Yet I passed what I believed was my last night on earth. Am I indeed to be proven innocent?”

“Your innocence is already established,” said his attorney. “Read this.”

As he spoke he placed a letter in the young man's hand. It was a hasty scrawl, which ran as follows:

“To whom it may concern:

“I, Simon H. Booker, brother of the late Abel Booker, induced Abel Booker to meet me in a retired spot very early on the morning of his death. I made a false representation. What it was it matters not. Failing to induce him to make a will in my favor, superseding that in favor of Paul Rogers which he had on his person, I shot him with a revolver exactly like Paul Rogers', and then conveyed his body to his room, gaining admission to the house by means of a latch-key which I found in my dead brother's pocket. After Paul Rogers left his room that morning I managed to unlock the box and put the will in it. As I did so I found the young man's revolver unexpectedly and withdrew one of the cartridges, afterward dropping the revolver on the door to strengthen the chain of circumstantial evidence which has now brought young Rogers to the eve of the day appointed for his legal murder. By means of a forged will I hoped to get possession of my brother's estate after the execution of Paul Rogers. Since that day my life has been a living hell of fear, anxiety, remorse and despair. When I have finished writing this I shall take my life, and may God have mercy on my soul. I trust this may be the means of averting the awful doom my crime has brought on Paul Rogers who never injured me by word or deed. This is true, as God is my judge.

“SIMON H. BOOKER.”

“And is Simon Booker dead?” asked Paul.

“Yes; he died a horrible death from poison. This letter was found clutched in his hand.”

In an hour Paul Rogers was free to go where he listed. He was also, by virtue of his late uncle's will, a very rich man. Life was full of brightness to him as it is to all such favored ones, but he was a gray, prematurely old young man, who seldom smiled even when his companions laughed loudest. Looking at Paul Rogers one day as he dashed past him on his blooded steed en route for Central Park for an hour's ride, John Sansom the detective muttered:

“The sight of that man always makes me ashamed of myself. The thought of the awful fate to which I was instrumental in dooming him makes me shudder. But it makes me careful. A detective is just as apt to be a fool as any other man, and I believe half the fools want to be detectives!”

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