

LEAF THE FIRST

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*The Silver Pin*

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by a New York Detective

I had not been settled long in New York, before I was engaged in a large number of cases, and, fortunately for me, I was successful in by far the greater portion of them. I became very popular, and there was not a single case of importance in which there was any doubt, but what I was consulted in it.

One day I was walking at a rapid pace down Broadway when I suddenly felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I turned quickly round, and who should it prove to be but my old school-fellow, Harry Markham.

“Why, Harry, my boy,” said I, “how are you?”

“Why Jem,” he replied, shaking me cordially by the hand, “I little expected to find you in New York. I thought you were in Stansfield buried among your medical books.”

“I have left physic, and turned detective officer,” I returned, and then I told him in a few words what had passed. “But you, Harry, what are you doing?”

“I’m in luck,” he replied. “I have got a situation as a private secretary to a Mr. Percival, a gentleman of wealth, living near Washington. He gives me a thousand dollars a year, and my board and lodging. I am to take charge of his money matters. I think it is rather an easy place.”

I congratulated Markham on his good luck in having secured such a good situation. He was to leave for Washington the next day, and we agreed that we would meet again at five o’clock and dine together.

At the appointed hour we met at Delmonico’s, and had a capital dinner. We talked over old times, and passed in review all our schoolboy days, and really enjoyed ourselves very much. We did not separate until a late hour, and when we did so, we parted with mutual regret.

When I returned to my lodgings that night, I thought on all that had passed during the day. I had always liked Harry Markham, and at school had frequently been his champion. Harry, however, had not turned out as well as had been expected of him when he grew up to man’s estate. He had chosen surgery as his profession, but after having graduated he retired from the profession in disgust, and for a year or two had wandered about without aim or purpose. It was no wonder, then, that I felt pleased that he had obtained such an excellent situation, and hoped that it would prove a stepping stone to fortune.

A few days after our dinner, I received a letter from him, informing me of his safe arrival at his destination. He expressed himself as very much pleased with his situation, and alluded more than

once to Miss Amy Percival, the only daughter of his employer. I replied to his letter but he did not write again.

About a year afterwards, on a cold November morning, I got up, as the saying is, “wrong side foremost.” The fact is, I had been unsuccessful in unraveling a case in which great interests were involved, and was in no very amiable mood of mind. It was a miserable, wet day; the rain pattered against the window, and the street was a mass of slush and mud. To add to my annoyance, my breakfast was not ready when I came down stairs, and I walked to the window, and looked out into the cheerless thoroughfare. If it was disagreeable out of doors, it was comfortable enough within. A cheery coal fire burned in the grate, a snowy cloth was spread on the table, and a delicious scent of rashers of bacon saluted my nostrils. I had not waited very long, before my landlady, Mrs. Hobbs, brought in my breakfast. She just glanced at my face, and perceiving the scowl on it, did not utter a word, for she knew my humor. She placed the coffee, toast, bacon and boiled eggs on the table, and suddenly vanished, just deigning to say, as she slipped from the door, “Breakfast is ready, sir.”

I sat down to my breakfast, and began to eat mechanically. I tried at first to find fault with my fare, but could not in reason do so. The eggs were cooked just as I liked them; the bacon was done to a turn; the coffee was excellent. While discussing my breakfast, I thought over the matter I had in hand, and a sudden light gleamed upon me, and I saw a clue to all the difficulties that had bothered me so much before. In a moment my ill-temper vanished, and I became the amiable Jem Brampton, as my acquaintances called me.

When I was about half through my breakfast, my room door opened, and the form of my respectable landlady, Mrs. Hobbs, appeared on the threshold.

“Herald, sir,” said she, holding the newspaper in her hands.

I took it from her very graciously; she appeared to be surprised at my change of demeanor.

“Mrs. Hobbs,” said I, “this is very nice bacon.”

“I am glad you like it, sir,” said she, dropping a curtsey as she left the room.

Having made the *amend honorable* to my worthy landlady, I drew my chair to the fire, and opening the paper, began to peruse it with the sense of satisfaction a man feels when he is surrounded by comforts. The very first paragraph that met my eyes absolutely took my breath. It ran as follows:

MYSTERIOUS DEATH—Yesterday morning Mr. Percival, of Washington, was found dead in bed. It appears that he retired to bed perfectly well the evening before. It is suspected that he came to his end by foul play, but the motive for anyone to commit the deed, and the mode of death are entirely wrapt up in mystery. There can be no doubt there will be the strictest investigation made into the affair.

I immediately thought of Harry Markham, and pitied the poor fellow that he would be so soon be deprived of his situation. But, selfish mortals that we are! my own business soon engrossed my attention, and I forgot all about the Percival affair and Harry Markham.

That same evening when I had got through my business for the day, and was enjoying a quiet cigar by my own fire-side, there was a violent peal at the bell. Almost immediately afterwards, Mrs. Hobbs came and informed me that two gentlemen wished to see me. I told my landlady to show them to my room. She returned in a few moments with a young man about twenty-five years of age, and one about ten years older.

They introduced themselves to me, the younger as Mr. Stephen Massett, the elder as Mr. Edward Morton.

“I believe I have the pleasure of speaking to Mr. James Brampton,” said Mr. Massett.

“That is my name,” I returned.

“Mr. Brampton,” continued the speaker, “I have heard of your skill as a detective officer, and I have come to consult you on a very delicate matter. A mysterious death has lately occurred in Washington and—”

“Do you allude to Mr. Percival?” I asked.

“What! Have you heard about it?” asked Mr. Massett in surprise.

“Nothing more than I read in the papers this morning.”

“I came from Washington yesterday, I am a nephew of the deceased, and I think the matter ought to be investigated. I want you to go to Washington tomorrow morning, and if, from the observations you make, you come to the conclusion that my uncle came to his death naturally, we shall be satisfied.”

“But,” said I, “why not let a surgeon make a *post mortem* examination?”

“Oh! That has been done,” replied Mr. Percival’s nephew.

“Well, what was the report?”

“Well, the doctors use so many scientific phrases, that it is hard to understand what they do mean, but from what I can make out, they say that he had some disease of the aorta.”

“But do they say he came to his death by foul means?”

“No they do not say that—on the other hand, they appear to imply that he died from natural causes.”

“Then, what the necessity for any investigation in the matter?”

“Well, his relatives are not satisfied, and would much prefer that you should investigate the matter. I believe I speak the wishes of Mr. Edward Morton, who is the deceased’s first cousin.”

“Certainly,” replied the elder of the two visitors.

“Well, gentleman, since you desire it, I will start tomorrow.”

“Here is a five hundred dollar note for your services,” said young Massett.

I made no scruple in taking the money, although it was a very liberal sum. After the conversation had been prolonged a little, my visitors left me.

Early next morning I started by the Camden and Amboy Railroad for Washington, at which place I arrived about seven o’clock in the evening.

My first proceeding was to ask for Mr. Harry Markham, and I was introduced to him in Mr. Percival’s study where he was engaged in writing.

“Why, Brampton,” said he in a rather flurried manner, the moment he saw me, at the same time rising from his chair—“is it possible it is you? Why, what in the name of all that is extraordinary, brings you down to this part of the country?”

“I am here on business, Harry,” I replied, and then I told him all that had transpired between Mr. Massett and myself.

“What egregious folly!” he exclaimed, when I had finished. “The physicians have distinctly stated that Mr. Percival died from aneurism of the aorta. You have better see them at once, and it will save you a world of trouble.”

I thought with Markham, that it the surgeon who made the *post mortem* examinations, really stated that the deceased had really died from aneurism, it was a waste of time to make any further investigation in the matter. But I had received my pay, and determined to do my duty.

“Mr. Percival’s death was very sudden, was it not?” I asked.

“Of course it was—death by aneurism always is; the moment the sac bursts death ensues, but I forgot you have perhaps forgotten your medical studies. Let me explain. Aneurism of an artery is the rupture of one of the internal coats. A sac is formed, which gradually increases until the remaining coats of the artery give way; death is then instantaneous.”

I thanked him for his information, and after some further conversation with him, I asked to see the body. He immediately took up a lamp, and led the way to the chamber where the dead body lay. It was a gloomy chamber, being hung with heavy curtains and a grave-like odor pervaded

the room. The coffin was placed beside the bed, but the body had not yet been placed in it, but lay on the bed.

He must have been a strong, hearty man when alive. I brought the lamp to bear on his face, but saw nothing there but the ordinary face of a corpse. I then opened the night-dress and examined the region of the heart. At first I saw nothing, but on examining more closely, I discovered a little blue mark, not much larger than the head of a pin, exactly over the space where the heart was.

“What a curious mark,” said I, pointing it out to Harry. “Where?” said Markham.

“There,” I returned, bringing the lamp to bear upon it.

“That is only a mark of decomposition,” said Harry.

I thought such might be the case, and said no more about it. I made a careful examination of everything in the apartment, but it amounted to nothing. I went to see the surgeon who had made the *post mortem* examination, and he assured me in a very pompous tone that there could be no doubt as to the cause of his death.

“It was a very peculiar case of aneurism,” said he. “Scarpa, you know, made a distinction between dilation and aneurism, applying the former name to the expansion of the whole of the arterial coats for a limited extent, the latter to an expansion of the exterior coat, occurring in consequence of a solution of continuity of the inner and middle. But in this particular case there was a rupture without any evidence of a solution of continuity having existed before, or even a dilation. A very peculiar case, sir—a very peculiar case, indeed.”

“But doctor,” said I, without the faintest idea what he meant by a solution of continuity, “did Mr. Percival die from what is commonly known as a natural cause?”

“Certainly, my dear sir, certainly; but still it was a very peculiar case, sir—very peculiar, indeed. I intend to write a history of it for a medical journal.”

I next interrogated the servants, but discovered nothing to raise the slightest suspicion. It is true, I discovered that Mr. Percival had given more than once given utterance to his disapprobation of the intimacy existing between his daughter Ada and his secretary, but as he was a fretful faultfinder, but little notice was paid to it. I also found that all his large wealth was left to Ada during her life, with an exception of a legacy of five thousand dollars to young Massett; if she married, it was settled on her children; if she had no issue, she was at liberty to will it to whom she pleased.

There was nothing left for me now but to return to New York, which I did the next morning. Mr. Massett called on me, and I entered into full particulars as to the result of my inquiries. He appeared perfectly satisfied and left me.

Four months passed away, and I had forgotten the whole circumstance, when one morning I received by post an embossed envelope, containing wedding cards, with the names of Mr. and

Mrs. Harry Markham engraved on them. In the corner of the lady's card, was Miss Ada Percival. The address given was No. 121 State street, Boston. From what I had heard of the relations existing between Miss Percival and Markham, this marriage did not surprise me, but I thought their haste was very unseemly.

Six months had now elapsed, and I had heard and seen nothing of Markham. I had written a letter of congratulation to him, and our correspondence had ceased. One morning, however, just as I was about to leave the house, who should come to the door but Harry Markham. I was struck with the great change that had taken place in his appearance. His once handsome face was bloated and blotched from the effects of strong potations, his hands trembled, and he looked a wreck of his former self. Still he addressed me in the friendly tones of other days, I asked him in, and I found that he lived very unhappily with his wife. He had evidently taken to drinking, and what was still worse, gambling. He stayed with me three or four days—but his visit was anything but an agreeable one; I did not ask him to prolong it, and he returned home.

About eight weeks after this, I one morning received another visit from Mr. Stephen Massett.

“Mr. Brampton,” he said, as soon as he entered, “you may remember about a year ago, I asked you to investigate the cause of my uncle's, Mr. Percival's, death. I have now come to you on a similar errand.”

“Indeed,” I returned, “who is dead?”

“My cousin.”

“What cousin?”

“You remember Mr. Percival's daughter, do you not?”

“What? Mrs. Harry Markham?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, she is dead.”

“Dead!” I exclaimed, scarcely able to believe the statement. “Impossible?”

“It is true. She died yesterday, and under circumstances just as mysterious as her father. I want you to investigate the matter thoroughly, for I am satisfied there is some foul play in the matter.”

“Is any one suspected?” I asked.

“No one. In fact, I believe the surgeon who made the *post mortem* examination, gives it as his opinion that she died of some peculiar kind of aneurism.”

“The same disease her father died of then?”

“Yes, the same.”

“I will leave for Boston at once. I agree with you now, that this matter requires the fullest investigation.”

Mr. Stephen Massett left me, and I immediately made preparations for my journey. I must confess that I was at first amazed beyond expression at what I had heard. The thought struck my mind that Henry Markham might—but I did not allow myself even to finish the thought.

In a few hours, I was at Markham’s house in State street, Boston. I frankly told him my business. He appeared to be plunged in the deepest grief, and expressed himself as very anxious to have every investigation made. My first proceeding was to make inquiries as to when Mrs. Markham died, &c. The particulars I gained amounted to substantially as follows:

Mrs. Markham had retired to bed at night in perfect health. She and her husband had occupied separate rooms for several months—but within the last two weeks a species of reconciliation had sprung up between them, but not sufficient to cause them to change their mode of living apart. The house-maid had gone to Mrs. Markham’s chamber, and, as was usually the case, found it locked. She knocked, and she knocked again and received no answer. She became alarmed, and summoning her master, whom she found fast asleep, she told him of the condition of things. He immediately got up, and finding that knocking did not really succeed in awaking his wife, he procured the assistance of a neighbor or two, and they broke open the door. *The key was found inside the lock.* When they entered the bed-chamber they discovered Mrs. Markham lying in bed, stone dead. Death appeared to have been very sudden, for the clothes were not in the least disturbed. Nor was there the slightest mark of violence apparent on the body. Mr. Markham, when he saw the dead body of his wife, appeared to suffer the most terrible agony. He threw himself on the body, and wept and cried like a child. He was obliged to be removed from the apartment at last by gentle force. A coroner’s inquest was summoned, as is usual in the case of sudden death, a *post mortem* examination was made, and the verdict given was “died by the visitation of God.”

Such was the statement made to me, and it was my duty now to see if it were correct. I visited the chamber of death, and, first of all, examined the apartment narrowly. It was evident that the door had been fastened on the inside, thus precluding the idea of any one entering the room by that means. I next went to the window, and it looked out on the back of the house. The room itself was in the third story, and there were roofs of back buildings that came exactly under the window. Hanging from the roof a short distance from the window was a broken lightning rod, much thicker than usual. But the end of it appeared to be such a long distance from the roof underneath, that it entirely precluded the possibility of any one *entering* the apartment by that means.

I now proceeded to examine the body of the deceased; the face was perfectly natural, and except it being very livid, she might have been supposed to have been asleep. I do not know what impelled me, but it appeared to be almost an instinct, I opened the night-shirt of the deceased.

The moment I did so I started back, and would have uttered a cry had I not exercised the most determined self-command.

*There was a distinct blue spot, the size of a pin, exactly over the region of the heart.*

This could not be a coincidence; this same mark could not occur in both father and daughter exactly in the same spot, without having been caused by something. I hastily closed the night-dress, and turned the sheet back again. I did not know what to think or what to do. As was my usual custom whenever in perplexity, I determined to think over the matter an hour or two before I made another move. I left the chamber and proceeded to a room which served as a library and study. I sat down at the table, and leaning my head on my hands tried to study out the case, as I called it. But it was to no purpose, I could make nothing out of it, and upon reflection, I was compelled to admit the only suspicious thing about the whole affair was the blue mark over the region of the heart. I knew some little about medical matters, and this, after all, might be natural. At all events, I determined I would consult the surgeon about it, and I rose from my seat for that purpose. I was about leaving the room when I saw lying on one of the shelves a French medical journal. I took it up mechanically, and turned over the pages. The book opened of itself in one particular place. I can read French well. The reader may imagine my astonishment and horror when my eyes fell on the following paragraph:

“PAINLESS EXTINCTION. Monsieur Velpeau on Wednesday last read a very interesting paper before ‘*L’Academie de Medecin*’ on painless extinction. He states that if a silver pin be placed exactly over the arch of the aorta, and then be suddenly driven in, death ensues instantaneously. There is not the slightest disfiguration of the body, nothing being apparent after death than a little blue spot, the size of a pin’s head. Monsieur Velpeau suggests that this method of taking away human life should be used on criminals condemned to public execution instead of the guillotine.”

I no sooner read this paragraph than I saw the whole affair in a moment. In two minutes, more I was in Harry Markham’s chamber. I found him plunged in the deepest grief.

“My dear friend,” said he, holding out his hand, which I did not take; “have you finished your investigations?”

“I have,” said I.

“I am very glad to hear it. I suppose you have come to the conclusion that the surgeon was right as to the cause of it?”

“No I have not.”

“Why, what do you mean?” said Markham, turning almost as pale as the corpse up stairs.

“What I mean is that your wife was murdered!” I replied, looking him sternly in the face.

“Murdered!” he exclaimed, “impossible!”



“It is true,” I replied. “Come, Markham, I have got a painful duty to perform, and I must do it. Give me that ‘Silver Pin,’ with which *you* committed the deed.”

I shall never forget the expression of Markham’s face when I uttered these words. His features were actually convulsed. It was the most fearful sight I think I ever beheld. I saw him instinctively put his hand on his coat pocket. I knew that I was sure of my man—for he had the instrument with which he committed the deed in that pocket. He appeared to reflect a moment, and then his countenance assumed a calmer expression.

“Brampton,” said he, “I see it is no use denying the charge, by extraordinary means you have found out how the deeds were done. I say deeds, because Mr. Percival was killed by the same means. A few words will explain everything to you. You never knew my true character—under a calm exterior and genial manners, I possess the heart of a demon. When I went to Mr. Percival’s I immediately fell in love with Ada. Mr. Percival discovered our liaison, and calling me into his study, told me I must leave next morning. That night I killed him by means of a Silver Pin—”

“As recommended by Velpeau,” I interrupted.

“Ah! I see how you have discovered it, but no matter. Ada, of course, knew nothing of the crime. Four months after her father’s death I persuaded her to marry me. But, as you know, we lived very unhappily together. My crime prayed on my mind. I took to drink and gaming for pure distraction. At last the breach between my wife and myself grew so wide that we lived entirely separated. All my wife’s property was settled on herself by her father’s will. I made an effort to be reconciled, and so far succeeded, that she made a will in my favor, in case she should die without leaving children. I then made my preparations to kill her. Two weeks after she had signed the will I concealed myself in her bed-room, and as soon as she was asleep, I drove the fatal pin into the arch of the aorta; and then escaped from the window of the chamber by means of the broken lightning-rod on the roofs of the back buildings. I felt so certain that my crime would not be detected that I courted inquiry, by Man proposes and God disposes. I have nothing more to say. I am determined, however, that I will not suffer an ignominious death—”

And before I could utter a word, he drew from his waistcoat pocket, a long and slender silver pin, fixed in a short handle; he placed it against his chest, over his heart, and leaning forward, pressed the handle against the edge of the table. It entered his flesh, and he fell dead to the ground without uttering a single groan.

I summoned assistance immediately, but the vital spark had fled. The whole matter was thoroughly investigated, and the coroner’s jury brought in a verdict in accordance with the facts

*Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865. (pages 9-15)