

[From the Philadelphia Sunday Mercury]

The Murder at the St. Charles

—
by C.M.
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The inmates of the aristocratic St. Charles Hotel were, one morning, aroused from their slumbers by the dreadful intelligence that murder had been among them. Mr. Austin, a wealthy, retired merchant, had been found strangled in his bed. No evidence of robbery appeared; not an article had been disturbed; there was no signs of house-breaking; nothing to betoken violence but the horrible disfigured face. Shrewd detectives were immediately set to work to elucidate the mystery. Their practiced eyes soon concluded that no outside agency had been at work, but that it was the deed of some interested inmate of the hotel. But whoever it was, his track was well hidden. Their first hasty investigation criminated no one, but convinced them that the only party that could be benefitted by the deed was Charles Austin, the nephew of the deceased.

At this junction, Mrs. Austin, who had been absent, returned, accompanied by Mr. Smith, a close friend of the family. The poor lady's grief was inconsolable on finding a realization of the terrible news she had heard. Mr. Smith, on being questioned by the officers, at first could think of none on whom suspicion could rest, but at last concluded with them that Charles Austin might have entertained hopes of an inheritance.

“But see here!” he exclaimed; “there is something clasped in the hand of the corpse.”

After striving for an instant to open the rigidly-closed hand, the officers watching with much interest, he handed the detective a coat-button, which seemed to have been torn off by main force. It was closely examined by all present.

“This is a most important matter,” remarked one of the officers, a tall, handsome man; “and may lead to a conviction of the murderer. Have either of you an idea to whom this button belongs?”

The lady looked at it with tearful eyes, and replied:

“It pains me to say that it closely resembles the buttons on a coat worn by Charles Austin.”

“Ah!” exclaimed the detective; “this becomes interesting. That young gentleman requires watching. I will have to take boarding here for a few days as a private gentleman, to inquire into this business. I must request you to preserve my incognito, and advance my purpose as much as possible.”

“We will do so,” they replied.

“Meanwhile, Mr. Smith,” he continued, “find an opportunity to examine the coat in question, and see if our suspicions are correct.”

The next day a new boarder took quarters at the St. Charles. This was none other than our gentlemanly detective, whose good address well hid his assumed character. He devoted himself particularly to Charles Austin; and having an engaging address that pleased that gentleman—a somewhat wild, but seemingly good dispositioned young man—they soon became intimate. The murder was still the all-absorbing topic, and Charles expressed a very natural horror at the deed; or, as the detective remarked to Mr. Smith, it might have been remorse.

Certainly proofs seemed accumulating. That very day Smith brought him a coat, which Mrs. Austin immediately recognized as belonging to her nephew.

“And look here,” remarked Smith, pointing to the row of buttons, from which, indeed, one was missing, apparently having been torn off.

“Ha!” exclaimed the officer, snatching the garment and fitting the button to the cavity. It exactly fitted, and matched the others.

“This is a fearful proof,” he continued.

“I could never have believed it,” said Mrs. Austin. “Charles always was of so excellent a disposition, and so devoted to his uncle.”

“Ah, my dear madam,” replied Mr. Smith, “you always let your good heart run away with you. But, in a case like this, even pity is misplaced. Hypocrisy may put on any garb, and we must depend on proof alone, though against all our former convictions.”

“But do you know any other circumstance bearing against the young man?” asked the officer.

“I have knowledge of one circumstance that might be important,” answered Mr. Smith; “but I do not wish to injure the youth.”

“Justice requires that you submit all proof,” said the officer. “What was the circumstance?”

“About eleven o’clock, on the evening of the murder,” began Smith, “as I was on the point of retiring, Charles Austin passed me on the stairs. He walked unsteadily, and seemed greatly agitated. He was deadly pale, and started at the slightest noise. This discomposure, so different from his ordinary self-possession, naturally surprised me, and, when the next morning revealed the murder, I could not help connecting the two events.”

“Proofs are certainly accumulating,” remarked the officer. “I have no doubt we shall [be] able to trace the bloody deed to its author.”

“And yet I am sure you must be mistaken in your suspicions,” said the lady.

“Proofs are stronger than impressions, madam,” remarked the detective, “but let our suspicions be kept secret for a few days. I will, meanwhile, attach myself to the young man, and have no doubt but that I can unmask him.”

“Would it not be better to arrest him at once?” asked Mr. Smith.

“No, sir,” was the reply; “we have not yet sufficient evidence.”

The disguised officer soon so won on young Austin, by his engaging address, that they became inseparable, and the young man, with great apparent frankness, opened himself freely to his companion, seeming to not dream of the terrible use that might be made of his remarks.

To the questions of Smith and the lady, the officer replied that proof was accumulating in his hands, and that he had no doubt of convicting the offender.

Meanwhile, as if to give color to their suspicions and afford a motive for the deed, the will of Mr. Austin was read, which, while leaving the bulk of his property to his wife, left his nephew a considerable legacy, and, as said nephew was somewhat extravagant, with but little means of supporting it, a knowledge of this legacy might have urged him to the murder.

Smith, all this time, was ingratiating himself with the widow, probably thinking a pretty wife and a large fortune something well worth winning.

A few days after, as they all sat in the parlor conversing, Mrs. Austin casually alluded to a card-party, in which they had been engaged, on the evening preceding the day of the murder.

“By the way,” she continued, “that was my first initiation in the ancient mysteries of gambling. Mr. Austin insisted on putting up a stake, and we fell into the whim with all the excitement of old gamblers.”

“And you, as usual, had the luck to win [everything],” said Smith.

“Not so,” she replied; “you pocketed some of the winnings. I remember your winning a silver dollar, on which Mr. Austin had scratched the representation of an eagle, calling it a double-eagle.”

“You are mistaken,” answered he; “Charles here won the eagle.”

“Not I,” answered Charles; “I do not remember the circumstance. It must have occurred after I left.”

“Exactly,” replied Mrs. Austin; “Mr. Smith was undoubtedly the lucky man. Pray, sir, what did you do with the prize? You promised to keep it.”

“Then I have broken my promise,” he replied; “for I certainly have no such article at present. In fact, I had forgotten the circumstance.”

“I am ashamed of you,” said she, playfully; “is it thus you keep your promises?”

“The next I make you will I be more careful to keep,” he answered, with a meaning in his voice that called a slight color to the lady’s cheeks.

At this juncture Wilson, the detective, rose and left the room. Shortly after, he re-entered, while they were still conversing on the murder, and wondering how the culprit had been able so completely to hide his track.

“Do not imagine so,” said he; “justice is not so blind as she is painted.”

Opening the door, he called in a brother officer, and, exhibiting a warrant, bade him to arrest his man. At this there was a violent start of surprise among those present, while their eyes went from one to another, in amazement at the thought that the murderer was among them. Those in the secret bent their eyes on Charles, who sat in perfect composure, with a smile on his lips.

The officer, however, walked by him, and deliberately laid his hand on the shoulder of Smith. That worthy started as if a serpent had stung him.

“Take off your hand, fellow,” he cried; “there is your man.”

“No, you are my man,” replied the other, “eh, Jack?”

“You have struck the right game,” said Wilson.

At this assertion, Smith became pale as death, and strove, by a series of indignant remonstrances and threats, to escape from the stolid officer. Mrs. Austin beheld all this with complete amazement. So unexpected a denouement entirely overpowered her.

“What means all this?” she exclaimed, at length; “why do you accuse Mr. Smith of this horrible deed? On what grounds can you base such an unlooked-for accusation?”

“No doubt, Mrs. Austin,” replied Charles, “that hypocrite has succeeded in deceiving you, but our friend here was something too sharp for him. It was a keen game of his, to attempt to lay his own crimes on me, and to bring skillfully arranged proofs to bear against me. But such a game, when discovered, immediately becomes transparent, and his schemes have returned on his own head.”

“It is a base conspiracy,” exclaimed Smith, with the appearance of violent indignation. “What one suspicious circumstance can you bring against me? Has not proof after proof been collected against him? Was not his button found in the dead man’s hand?”

“I can only say,” replied Wilson, “that that part of your scheme has failed. There was no button there.”

“What!” cried Mrs. Austin, “I saw it taken from his hand.”

“And I saw it put there,” returned Wilson. “Mr. Smith held the button in his own hand, merely pretending to take it from that of the dead man, as I and my friend here can testify. It was evidently his aim to direct suspicion against Charles Austin, and, if possible, commit a second murder to hide his first. So his well framed remarks about meeting him on the night of the murder were manufactured for the same purpose, for Mr. Austin can prove a complete alibi. Are you acquainted with this article, Mrs. Austin?” and he took a silver dollar from his pocket and handed it to the lady.

Smith grew paler than ever at the sight of this, and bent forward in trembling attention.

“Why this is the very dollar that was scratched by Mr. Austin,” replied she; “the one that he called a double-eagle, and that Mr. Smith won.”

“Are you sure of all this?” asked Wilson.

“Perfectly,” she replied.

“I found this on the floor of the murdered man’s chamber,” said he. “Remove your prisoner, sir.”

Smith, struck dumb by this concentration of proof where he believed his track to be completely hidden, suffered himself to be quietly removed, leaving all behind in a state of the utmost astonishment.

“What possible motive could he have for such a deed?” exclaimed Mrs. Austin at length.

“Shall I tell it?” asked Wilson.

“Yes, yes!” she cried.

“To inherit his wife and his property,” replied the officer, as he walked out.

A few words will finish this account. Smith crawled through some loop-hole of the law, out of the hangman’s reach, but he deemed it advisable to disappear from that region, as public sentiment was decidedly against him, and so relieved the community of a member that the community could well spare. As for Mrs. Austin, she never ceased to congratulate herself on her escape from wedding her husband’s murderer.

Cincinnati Daily Press, September 08, 1861