

Murder Will Out

BY EMERSON BENNETT

[illustrated]

Some years ago, while out alone on a bear hunt, among the mountains of southwestern Arkansas, I was overtaken by a furious snow storm; and there being no human habitation to my knowledge, within the distance of several miles, I resolved to find some cave, in which to pass the coming night in safety.

I soon discovered an opening among the rocks, which I entered with caution, for these places were frequently the resort of bears, and I was not disposed to be taken at advantage by an animal whose warm embrace might result in death.

After advancing a short distance, and finding that the cave, whatever its size, was sufficiently large for my purpose, I returned to the open air, and proceeded to collect fuel enough to keep up a good fire for at least an entire day.

This proceeding occupied my whole attention for some two or three hours, by which time the snow had fallen to a considerable depth, and the shades of night were fast closing over the dreary scene. As I had sufficient bear meat to last me for several days, and a good stock of provisions in my wallet besides, I felt no concern about food; but the idea of being closed up in that gloomy place for any considerable time was not a pleasant one, and I already regretted not having set out for the nearest settlement on the first approach of the storm—though, as matters eventually turned out, I have reason to believe my steps were directed thither by the mysterious workings of an Overruling Providence.

Having kindled a fire near the mouth of the cave, I lighted a large pine knot, to serve me for a torch, and proceeded to explore the interior of my present prison, advancing with great caution, and keeping my rifle in such a position that I could bring it into effective use at any moment. The cave was not a large one, and in most places the roof was high enough to allow me to stand upright. At the far end was an angular corner, where the rocks came down very low, and which ran back some distance. If there were a bear in the cave, this would most likely be his place of retreat; and getting down on my hands and knees, and pointing my rifle before me, I worked my way forward with great caution, waving my torch above my head, and keeping the senses of seeing and hearing on the alert for danger.

In this manner I got near enough to the further part of the cave to see it contained no formidable beast; but my eyes now fell upon something else that sent a cold shiver through my veins. Before me, white and ghastly, with its hollow sockets and grinning teeth, was the skull of a human being, with garments worn in life, extended in form and rotting away from the skeleton bones, which were here and there visible—the whole, under the effects of the ruddy, flickering light, with its moving shadows giving it the appearance of motion, presenting such a horrid spectacle, that involuntarily I started back, with a cry of terror. It was some time before I could recover sufficient composure to advance and examine it minutely; and had I not felt the necessity of

doing so, by being shut up with the cave with it, I think I should have made a hasty retreat from the horrible scene, and the story I now have to relate would never have been told.

Here, then, in this cave, which was now my prison, had perished a human being, either naturally or by violence, and the fact, in either case, was not a pleasant one for me to consider under the circumstances. On creeping up to it, I discovered that the skull was fractured, as if from a blow, which led me to suspect, that the man had been murdered; and with a strange feeling of awe I was about to turn away and go back to the fire, to speculate upon the horrid supposition in a less gloomy locality, when my eye chanced upon a clasp-knife, with its blade open and somewhat rusty. I picked it up, and the thought instantly flashed upon me, that perhaps this might give a clue to the mystery. I do not know what suggested this idea, as there was certainly no reason in it. What could I learn from a mere knife, of a person of whom I knew nothing, and who had been dead for years? And yet, mark the sequel!

On more closely looking at the knife, I was startled at its resemblance to one I had owned when a boy. It was a common jack-knife, with a large blade and a wooden handle, the latter cracked on one side, just as I remembered mine to have been, and just, as a moment's reflection told me, ten thousand others might be.

“Pshaw!” muttered I; “how foolish to fancy any connection from so trifling a coincidence!”

And yet this coincidence brought up a curious recollection. It took me back to my school-boy days in Little Rock, and recalled the face of a playmate and friend to whom I had given the knife just prior to the departure of his parents and himself for a settlement in Texas, and his promise that he would keep the memento through life. Subsequently I had heard that he was doing well in his new home, and afterwards that he had entered into partnership with a man in that region, and was fast accumulating a fortune in raising sheep. Again, a few years later, the report had reached me that his parents had both died, and that he had sold out and gone abroad, since which time I had heard nothing of him.

“Suppose this skeleton here should prove to be the remains of my early friend? Pshaw! what a wild, chimerical idea! Why not suppose these the ones of my grandfather as well?”

Still, the knife looked like the one I had owned as a boy, and somehow I could not help thinking, supposing and speculating. Suddenly another recollection struck me. The larger piece of the broken piece of the handle had once come off, and, before getting it riveted on again, I had, in boyish idleness, scratched my name upon the inside. This would settle the matter at once; for, if the same knife, of course my name would still be there.

I now became more anxious to break open the knife than there could be any reason for. It seemed as if I was impelled to act by some strange influence—something beyond mere speculative curiosity—which I could not resist. In an excited and nervous manner I planted my torch in a crevice, took a small screw-driver and a pair of pincers from my wallet, (two implements I always carried with me when off on a hunt,) and in less than two minutes I had succeeded in forcing off the broken part of the handle, which fell to the ground before I could examine it. I picked it up, in a strange state of nervous excitement, and brought it close to the light.

Mysterious Providence! Who can describe my feelings as I beheld my own name, George Clayborne, exactly as I had scratched it there with a sharp piece of glass twenty-one years before! I was so astounded, so overwhelmed with a rush and whirl of thought, that for several minutes I sat clasping my temples with my hands, and experiencing the strange bewilderment of one beginning to awake from a horrid dream.

Were these the bones of my playmate, James Ridgely? How could I doubt it! I had not heard of him for many years, he had then gone abroad, I had no evidence that he was now living, and this was certainly the knife that he had promised to retain till death. But how came he here? and how had he died? I now felt as if Providence had sent me here for a purpose, and that it was my solemn duty to investigate the mystery.

I need not detail my proceedings. Suffice it to say, that I found evidence which convinced me that he had been murdered—that he had been struck a violent blow on the back of the head, and afterwards been dragged back to the place where the skeleton now lay, and where it had lain undisturbed for many long years. But who was the murderer? This was what I now resolved to find out, if within the scope of human possibility.

I remained in the cave till the storm was over; and then, as a thick crust had formed on the top of the snow, I easily made my way back to a settlement, but said nothing of what I had seen. Subsequently I returned to my native place, arranged my affairs for a long absence, and then set off on a journey to Texas.

In due time I reached the settlement where Ridgely had formerly lived, and thence traced him to a locality where he had been engaged in raising sheep. I here learned that he had sold out to his partner, one Ralph Simons, and was supposed to have left the country, though no one could be found to say which way he had gone or where; that in the course of two or three months after his departure, Simons had also sold out and left that region, and it was reported he had gone to Galveston and engaged in the liquor trade. My further inquiries revealed the fact that Simons was an unpopular, disagreeable sort of a personage, and my suspicions finally settled upon him as the murderer. But granting this, and that I should be so fortunate to find him, what evidence had I to act upon? Ridgely had been gone nine years, and nine years was a long time through which to retrace and fasten a crime upon a man against whom there might be no direct proof. I felt, however, that Providence was directing me in its own mysterious way, and that it was my duty to pursue the investigation, leaving the result to a Higher Power.

Having procured all the information that I considered had any bearing on the subject, I set off for Galveston. On reaching that city, I made inquiries among the liquor dealers for a man named Ralph Simons, and was at length directed to his place of business. As soon as I saw him, I felt more than certain that I was on the right track—that he indeed was the man, probably the only man in the world, who could reveal the particulars of the dark deed. He was a tall, dark-visaged individual, with black hair and whiskers, strongly marked features, had rather small, restless eyes, and appeared to be of a very nervous, irritable temperament. I noticed that he did not look any one straight in the face, and his whole appearance to me was that of a man laboring under a weight of guilt. I represented myself as a respectable dealer from up the country, tasted his

different liquors, inquired the price, informed him that I would soon call again with my partner, and went away.

I next repaired to a prominent magistrate, asked for a private interview, laid the whole facts before him, procured a warrant, and requested that the officer to be sent with me might be a shrewd detective, with instructions to allow me to conduct the affair in my own way.

On returning to Simons, I introduced the officer as my partner, and asked him to grant us a private interview, as there were some matters connected with our business which I wished to state to him alone. He hesitated, and I fancied glanced at us suspiciously, but finally invited us into his counting-room and closed the door. Now was the all-important moment, and I found it required all my nerve to proceed as I had intended.

“Mr. Simons,” said I, as the officer and myself both took seats directly facing him, so that not a single expression of his features could escape us, “I am about to ask you a very important question, and I shall feel obliged to you if you will cast your memory back to a period a little over nine years ago.

I observed that he started and turned somewhat pale, though he answered in a tolerably firm and quiet tone:

“Well, sir, proceed!”

“The question,” I pursued, fixing my eyes upon him so as if possible to read his very soul, “is simply this: *At the time, you struck James Ridgley that fatal blow, in the cave, among the mountains of Arkansas, had he, or had he not, this knife open in his hand?*” and with the last word, I produced the knife and held it up before him.

I never saw, before nor since, a face express so much terrified amazement as his did at that moment. All color forsook it, every lineament quivered, and, clutching his throat convulsively, he rather gulped out than articulated:

“My God! what do you know of that horrid affair?”

“You see, we know all except some minor details,” said the officer, “and these you had better relate at once.”

“And what are you going to do with me?” gasped the wretch.

“Hang you at once, unless you confess!” cried I, fiercely. “Quick! out with the whole particulars.”

The guilty man, taken so completely by surprise, and terrified beyond reason, at once dropped down on his knees, begged us, for God’s sake, to spare his life, and proceeded to make a clean breast of it.

To tell the story in brief, he had decoyed his partner off on a hunt among the mountains of Arkansas, had murdered him one night in a cave, with the view of getting his share of the property, and, after his own return, had made the statement that Ridgley had sold out to him and gone abroad.

We lodged the wretch in prison, where he subsequently denied his whole confession; but with a full knowledge of the truth, we now proceeded to collect such an amount of direct and circumstantial evidence, that his conviction would have been almost certain to follow, had he not suddenly put an end to his wicked career by a dose of poison.

I had the remains of my early friend brought to Little Rock and given Christian burial, and great was the concourse of people that attended them to their last home.

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