

A Flash of Lightning

I am not a detective by profession; indeed, I should not care to be one. I am simply a reporter for one of the New York Daily papers. But either by sheer chance or because of some especial mental gifts, I have been enabled several times to unearth the bottom facts in criminal cases which had sorely puzzled the members of the detective force. So that now, whenever a particularly interesting murder, robbery or disappearance takes place, it seems to have become a matter of course in the office that I should be the one detailed to write it up.

The west side affair, however, came into my hands by chance, pure and simple. My wife wanted to go to the theatre. It was a warm evening in June, and I was not anxious to go; but what my wife wills usually takes place, and we went. After the play I would have taken the nearest route to the Brooklyn ferry and home. For some reason, but known to herself, my wife preferred to return by the one elevated railroad which happened to be the furthest from the theatre, though distant growlings of thunder warned us of approaching storm, and we had no umbrella. I love peace even better than a dry coat, so we walked across town and took a train on that road. We were the only occupants of the rear car. She took a seat by an open window, while I busied myself with my note book.

The storm was coming on rapidly, the thunder growing louder and nearer, and the lightning flashes sharper and more frequent, but I paid little heed to them, until at last, as the train slowed down, while rounding a curve, one vivid, blinding flash filled the car, paling the lamp light, and I distinctly heard a shrill cry, drowned, however, quickly by a crash of thunder. My wife grasped my arm excitedly, her eyes staring.

“Great heavens!” she cried, “did you see that!”

“Yes, it was a sharp one.”

“No, no; I don’t mean the lightning, John. A woman is being murdered. I saw her by the flash. She’s hanging from a window close to the track and a man is pushing her off. Didn’t you hear her shriek?”

“Oh, nonsense!” I said. “You couldn’t have seen all that. Some one was frightened by the lightning and screamed—that’s all.”

“I tell you I did see it. She had hold of the window sill, and the man stood in the window above her, trying to wrench her hands from it, I saw his face plainly. He had a smooth face, and his head was bald—perfectly bald. I couldn’t be mistaken.

She was considerably agitated, and would have had me get out at the next station and go back to the spot; but it was now raining hard, and, feeling sure that her eyes had deceived her, I flatly refused to leave her to make her way home alone at such a time.

Still, a poor man cannot well neglect the smallest chance of a good item, and when I had seen her safely home I hurried back to New York and to the police station nearest the place, where I found, somewhat to my surprise, that some time before a young woman had indeed been carried there, unconscious and so terribly injured by falling from the window of a lodging house a few blocks away that she had died within a few minutes. Nothing was known of her but that she had hired a room in the house about a week earlier, giving the name of Smith and paying in advance. Her landlady had spoken of her as a quiet, ladylike person, who kept much by herself and received no callers; and, as her room door had been locked inside, it was supposed that she had lost her balance and fallen from the window while trying to close the shutters during the storm. I saw the body. It was that of a medium sized woman, 24 or 25 years of age, with features of the ordinary American type. Her light brown hair must have been hanging loosely down her back when she met her death. In life she might have been thought a rather attractive looking girl, despite an uncommon and unpleasant thinness of the lips, but, lying there cold and dead, the face was not an agreeable sight, and I gladly turned away.

There was nothing about her to show her identity, the loose wrapper which she wore having no pockets, while her underclothing was unmarked and she wore only one plain gold ring on her right hand; so, as I could gain no further information from the police and the lodging house was tightly closed for the night, I simply wrote out a few lines describing the occurrence as an accident, took them to the office and went to a neighboring hotel to sleep.

There was evidently something in my wife's story, after all, and I determined to look into it further while saying nothing to the police until I had some definite clue to work upon. In the morning, therefore, I took my way to the lodging house.

The landlady was a respectable Irish woman who readily answered my questions without, however, telling me much more than I already knew, and willingly offered to show me the girl's room.

"But it's nothing ye'll find," she said, as she led the way up stairs. "It's all just as she left it, poor thing; but there's never a letter or as much as a scrap of writing to tell where she came from or where her friends live."

It was a hall bedroom on the third floor, plainly furnished in the usual way, with a bed, washstand, bureau, small table and a single chair. The bureau stood between the window and the side wall of the house. At the corner nearest the street was a doorway into the next room. The door was closed. There was not the faintest sign of anything like a struggle. The water pitcher upon the washstand was filled to the brim. Upon the table stood an ink bottle and beside it lay, in order, some paper and envelopes and a pen. The few toilet articles on the washstand and bureau were neatly arranged, excepting a comb and brush, which lay apart and askew before the glass, among some scattered hairpins, and which, with the position of the chair before the bureau, suggested the idea of a woman interrupted while brushing her hair, and turning, perhaps, to talk to someone who had entered. On the foot of the bed, too, close by the chair, it was plain that a person sat. Otherwise that had not been disturbed.

On pegs behind the door hung a hat and two neat, dark gowns. The pockets were empty. The bureau was fairly filled with plain underclothing, and in the upper drawer was a box containing a few sober colored ribbons and neckties, two or three little cheap trinkets and a purse with a small sum of money. But no where in the room could I find a card, or note, or address. Plainly the woman had taken great pains to conceal her identity—or some one else had done so for her.

While I was noting these particulars my landlady chattered unceasingly. I learned that she had spent the whole of the preceding evening, up to the time of the accident, in the parlor, in a position to command a view of the staircase, and that no stranger could have gone up it without her knowledge; also that the room next to the one in which we stood was occupied by a quiet, middle aged gentleman who had been there but a few days, and who was so sound a sleeper that he had heard none of the confusion, and had not know of the accident until she told him that morning as he went out to breakfast. According to her account, too, no one had since been in the hall room except a police officer, herself and the locksmith whom she had called in to open the door.

Reminded by this of the communicating door between the rooms. I stepped carelessly along and glanced over it. It was locked and the key hole was empty. There was a bolt as well as the ordinary lock, but it was not shot, and the part which would have fitted into the socket, had evidently been lately painted. Then by a little judicious questioning I ascertained that the landlady always kept possession of the key and that she had not used it for months past, and that the painting had not been done a week before. So, within a week, that door had been unbolted, by the dead girl, or, at least, by some one in her room.

It was not much of a clue to found a theory upon—still it was something, and I felt encouraged. Search as I would, however, through the room, I could discover nothing else to aid me, until I picked up, mechanically, a pair of well worn kid shoes which stood beside the bureau, and shook them out over my hand.

To my surprise, from one of them dropped a gold sleeve button. I closed my hand upon it instantly, and dropped it into a side pocket without attracting the woman's notice, and, then, throwing the shoes down, "well," I said, "I must not keep you any longer; I can write my report now," and thanking her for the trouble she had taken, left the house, passing on the front steps a small swarthy man, with bushy black hair and beard, who was coming up. He eyed me rather sharply, but I paid little heed at the time. I was thinking of my find, and once in the street, I examined it. I could not at once determine whether it had belonged to a man or a woman, but it was evidently not such an ornament as would have been worn by a person in the circumstances of the dead woman. It was a solid gold horseshoe of moderate size, but very heavy, set with a handsome diamond, a sapphire and a ruby—a showy and costly thing, such as I had never seen before. The shank was badly bent, as if it had been violently wrenched from the cuff.

How had it found its way into that shoe? And where was its mate now? Certainly the case was growing interesting, but I began to feel the need of help with it. Now, I have an old friend who happens to be a clever detective employed by one of the private offices, and him I decided to consult. I found, however, that he had been sent out of town a month or so before, and had

written that he would not return for a day or two yet. There was nothing for it then but to rely upon my own wits for the present, calling in the aid of the police, perhaps, as a last resort.

My wife is accustomed to sudden flights upon my part, so I merely sent a boy for my valise, with a short message; held a brief interview with the landlady of the lodging house, and in the evening found myself the occupant of the little bedroom which I had visited that morning. Two days passed. A coroner's jury had sat upon the body of the dead Miss Smith and had brought in a verdict of accidental death, and she had been buried by the county. I had managed to obtain a sight of all the lodgers in the house and learn something of their occupations and habits, and as yet had found no good reason to suspect any one of them of knowing aught of the affair. My next door neighbor proved to be the dark, bearded man whom I have mentioned. It was through his room I had convinced myself that the murderer, if there had been a murderer, must have escaped, and upon him I kept as close a watch as could be done without exciting his suspicions. He confined himself, however, closely to his room, only leaving the house to take his meals at a little restaurant near by, until the afternoon of the second day, when he went out so quietly that, had I not been at the window and seen him cross the street, I should not have known it.

I followed him, kept him in sight until he turned into the Havana steamship office, and later learned there that he had taken passage by the boat sailing next day, under the name of Robinson. It was the same name by which he was known in the house, and there was really nothing suspicious in the fact that a man of whose business I knew nothing contemplated a trip to Cuba, still, I didn't like it.

I called again at the detective office and this time, fortunately, found my friend. I wished to waste no time, and plunged at once into my story.

He was a very cool hand, this Frank Rice. I had seldom, if ever, seen him show emotion or even surprise. Nor did he say much now. But at sight of the gold horseshoe, which I handed to him as I finished my tale, he flushed slowly to the roots of his hair, and his eyes opened wide.

"This man, whom your wife thought she saw in the window," he said, after a pause, "he was smooth faced and bald, you say? Hum—and the woman?—wait, look at this," and he took a photograph from his pocket and held it out to me.

"Why, it is she! How on earth—?" for it was in truth a very good likeness of the girl whom I had seen lying dead in the — precinct station house two nights before.

"My dear John," said my friend slowly, "I think you have done it this time. I fancy you will have something to scribble about before many hours. Now tell me where I can see your dark complexioned, bushy whiskered, black haired friend: I may not know him, but I should like to gaze upon him." And he calmly pocketed the sleeve button.

It was drawing near to the hour at which Mr. Robinson dined. I took Rice to the little restaurant near my lodgings, when after a few words with the proprietor we were allowed to take our stand in the kitchen, near a window in the partition which commanded a view of the dining room.

As I expected, Mr. Robinson came. In a few minutes Rice laid his hand upon my shoulder, and we left by the back door. "Now take me to your house," he said quickly, "he is safe enough at present."

"Are you satisfied?" I asked. "Is he the man you wanted? And who is he, anyway?" But Rice merely smiled, and would tell me nothing.

"Be patient," he said, calmly, "I've no time to waste now," and strolled rapidly along.

Once in my room he locked the door and threw the window open.

"Now watch here," he said, "and when you see our man coming, warn me at once."

With that he proceeded in the most matter of fact way to pick the lock of the door opening into the next room, took off his shoes, and slipped noiselessly in.

It was still daylight, and I stuck closely to my post at the window. A quarter of an hour, twenty minutes, went by. Then my neighbor's familiar form turned the corner. At almost the same moment Rice rejoined me and relocked the door.

"Is he in sight?" he whispered.

"Yes, coming in."

He patted my back cheerfully and grinned. "It's all right," he whispered again; "but keep quiet and give me your latchkey," and no sooner had Robinson entered his room than my friend was gone. When he reappeared later it was in company with a heavily built man, whom I recognized as one of the ward detectives, and, with a nod to me, he at once knocked at the next door. The key turned and it was opened cautiously a few inches, when both men suddenly threw themselves against it and pushed into the room.

"Good evening, Dr. Raymond," I heard Rice say. "Sorry must trouble you to come with me."

Then crack! crack! Sounded two pistol shots in quick succession, and the ward detective staggered back into the hall.

I jumped to the door. Rice had closed with the man and held his pistol arm. I at once seized him also, but he fought like a madman, and it was not until after a hard struggle that he was disarmed and handcuffed. Then, quick as a flash, my friend plucked from the fellow's head a wig and from his chin the great beard which I had so admired. His head was bald as a billiard ball and his face smooth. Rice cast a meaning look at me and I nodded. I began to understand. Meanwhile, the ward detective, nursing his wounded shoulder, had sidled back into the room and Rice stepped back.

“Look here, doctor,” he said, “you’d better come quietly now. You are wanted in Cleveland. Just take that package out of your pillow and come along, or shall I—” and with that he ripped open one of the pillows on the bed and drew out a package covered with brown paper.

The prisoner’s face worked, but he didn’t utter a word.

Then Rice moved close to him and held before his eyes the photograph which I had seen.

“You are wanted for that, too,” he said.

The man fainted and fell upon the floor.

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I have now told you all the circumstances of my own connections with this west side affair. All but the fact that the story I wrote of it gave me not a little glory and gold; and you have yet to hear the part that Rice played, a part that brought him great prestige and \$3,000. I can tell it you briefly, for after all, when the denouement of a story is reached a retrospect is a bore—at least it is to me. The facts are simply these:

A man named George Brant entered the office of Rice’s employers about a month before the woman’s death and asked for the services of a skillful detective. His case was this: A wealthy aunt living in Cleveland, from whom Brant had great expectations, died suddenly, without leaving him a penny; died, indeed, leaving no tangible property whatever. All he could learn was that she had been actively engaged for months previous to her death in converting all her wealth into coupon bonds. When he reached Cleveland he found her and some residence mortgaged and only a few hundred dollars deposited in the local banks in her name. Brant suspected evil and wanted a detective to work out the case. He offered 5 per cent of the money recovered to the man who would undertake it.

Rice eagerly seized the opportunity and went to Cleveland. He was not long in ferreting out the truth. A Dr. Raymond had been the old lady’s physician, and, with her maid, Ella Jones, a young girl of prepossessing appearance, virtually the only persons with whom she had recently come in contact. Raymond bore the reputation of a gambler and a rake. People had talked of the intimacy that seemed to exist between him and the maid.

This was enough for Rice. He had the body of Mrs. Brant disinterred, and an autopsy showed that she had died, not from heart disease, as Raymond had certified, but from arsenical poisoning.

The rest is plain. The girl and the arch fiend fled to New York, intending to sail to some foreign country and enjoy their spoils together. But Raymond grew tired of his mate. He lingered in Gotham long enough to see if any suspicion of the crime would arise in Cleveland and whether it was that he had heard of Rice’s activity or completely wearied of his companion and fearful of the possibility of her tongue, he finally decided to divorce himself from her society.

And he savagely did it on that murky night, pitilessly hurling her from the window just as the elevated train rushed round the corner, and the murderer's face stood revealed in that flash of lightening. He was never hanged. He went mad after his conviction, and now raves in an asylum.

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