

Betrayed by a Button

by Caroline Conrad

There had been a murder done at Todd's Corners—a most extraordinary thing, and the more so, that it seemed absolutely without motive, the victim being a poor, old woman, who had no enemies, so far as was known, and possessed neither money nor valuables of any kind to tempt any one.

Todd's Corners was a sort of country settlement, consisting of some dozen scattered houses, a post-office and store in one, and a blacksmith's shop.

Grandma Wagner, as the murdered woman was called, lived in an old house next to the store. She had no relatives except one granddaughter, who lived with her, and supported them both by going out to sew by the day.

This girl usually slept at home, but chanced not to do so this time, being detained by an extra job of work, which kept her too late to come home after it was done, and she did not return until the following day at night.

The murder had not been discovered until then, when the granddaughter, going in, found her aged relative stiff and cold in her bed, with blood all about her.

Lucy Wagner was terribly frightened, but she did not go into hysterics or faint, as some girls would have done.

She ran out of the house and into the store next door, startling the group lounging there—for it was still early evening—with the announcement:

“Someone has killed my grandmother! My grandmother has been murdered. Oh! what shall I do?”

There was a general rush to the spot where the poor, old woman lay with her skull crushed in, her soft, white hair and the pillow on which she lay soaked in blood. A very large, tall, old-fashioned clock stood in the room. The pendulum of this had been unhooked from its rod, and used by the assassin to give the fatal blow. It lay on the floor near the bed, with a lock of bloody, white hair still clinging to it.

Lucy Wagner had not shed a tear yet. She was a tall, slim girl, with dark, bright eyes, and a handsome face. Her grandmother and she were known to have been most tenderly attached.

The girl stood like a statue of despair, staring down at that still form with dry and stony eyes, while the rest made the usual excited exclamation and comment,

The first words she said were:

“I wish I knew who did it.”

One of the men showed her the gory pendulum upon the floor. The unhappy girl stared a moment, with her eyes almost starting from her head. Then she fell upon her knees with a wild burst of weeping that rent every heart there.

“Oh, grandma, grandma!” she cried out, “he shall hang for this, whoever he is! I’ll never rest till I find him!”

Further investigation developed these facts: The clock already mentioned was large enough for a man to stand upright inside the case. The house occupied by Mrs. Wagner and Lucy was separated from the store only by a wall and had originally belonged to it, the store having been built at first for a dwelling. A door led from the house into the store and was bolted on the store side usually. It was discovered now to be *unbolted*.

The old-fashioned clock stood against this door on the Wagner side.

The inference was that the assassin had unbolted the door in the daytime, and then concealed himself in the clock during some temporary absence of Mrs. Wagner, meaning to rob the store when night came.

Thus much was conjectured and discovered, mainly through Lucy Wagner herself.

“He killed grandma for fear she should wake and call someone,” said Lucy, “and he shall hang for it, if I can find him; and I’ll never stop trying till I do.”

But the store had not been robbed. If these conjectures were correct, the villain’s heart must have failed him with fear at sight of his murdered victim, or else he had been unable to move the clock, which was very heavy.

Then it began to be inquired who had been in the store the day before the murder, and it was discovered that most of the Todd’s Corners people, as well as the farmers near, had visited the store that day, owing to the fact that it was an election day, and the store was a favorite lounging-place.

But Lucy Wagner shook her head.

“It was none of the people who came to vote,” she said. “It was some one who is in the store every day, and knows our house well, too. And he knew I was away that night.”

The girl was terribly changed since her grandmother’s death. She never smiled, she scarcely ate or slept, and she would not quit her residence in the house where the awful deed had been done.

“No,” she said; “we were so happy here, she and I. I won’t leave it till I’ve found *him*. Perhaps he’ll come and try again. He won’t find a feeble old woman asleep in her bed this time, if he does.”

The girl had grown haggard with grief and watching.

The minister went and talked with her repeatedly of the unchristian nature of her feelings, but he could not move her.

“God has appointed me to bring that wretch to his punishment,” she said, “and I’ll never rest till I have done it.”

The change in Lucy Wagner affected her even towards her lover, a handsome young farmer, to whom she had been expecting to be married soon, at the time of the murder. But the marriage was postponed indefinitely now, and when her lover came to see her she would talk of nothing but the one dreadful subject which was most distasteful to him.

Robert Hall had been one of the visitors at the store that day before the murder, and Lucy questioned him over and again as to whom he had seen there, and whether he suspected any one.

But Robert was most unsatisfactory in his answers, and showed such a reluctance to talk about the murder that Lucy at last reproached him for his unwillingness.

“I don’t like to talk about it, that’s a fact,” the young fellow admitted. “What good can I do? Whoever did it, is sorry enough, I’ll be bound, and wretched enough to satisfy even you. Why can’t you leave him to God’s vengeance Lucy? It’s sure to find him in time.”

“Because I can’t,” returned the girl, with dark and angry looks. “Perhaps you are personally interested in having him escape, Robert Hall.”

Robert colored painfully; then he rose to go.

“I don’t think I had better stay any longer now, Lucy,” he said; “you are not yourself, and never will be while you persist in brooding over this thing. You can’t bring your grandmother back by it, and you may wish you had let him alone when you find out who it was.”

He went away, and Lucy let him go without a word. He had planted dark and awful thoughts in the girl’s shaken soul—thoughts too formless to be called suspicions, but dreadful enough to make her wish she might die sooner than see them take shape.

As Robert went away, a young fellow who was lounging on the store-steps looked after him scowlingly a moment, and then rising, with his hat slouched over his eyes, walked slowly to Lucy Wagner’s door, and knocked.

Lucy opened it, but frowned when she saw who was there.

“I don’t want to see *you* of all others, Dick Vanness,” she said—“I’m miserable enough without that.”

“Why should seeing me add to your misery, Lucy?” he asked in a soft, low voice, advancing into the room and shutting the door.

“You *know*. Because she wanted me to marry you, and I couldn’t and wouldn’t, and the sight of you now makes me think of the only thing I ever refused to please her about. Oh! grandma, grandma!”

Dick Vanness sat down, with his hat on, in the very chair Robert Hall had left just before.

He had a singularly handsome face, fair as a woman’s, with large, blue eyes. But it was a weak face, the chin round and slightly retreating, the mouth too full and red.

“Perhaps if you had married me,” he said, turning very pale, “this would never have happened.”

“I wish you wouldn’t say such things,” Lucy cried, angrily.

“You might marry me yet, if you’re so sorry you didn’t do it when she wanted you.”

“I didn’t say I was sorry. I’m sorry to have crossed her even that once. But I’m not sorry I didn’t marry *you*. Besides, I’m not in a marrying mood at present. I wish we were all dead with her!” Lucy cried out, passionately.

“Will you marry me, if I’ll find the man who killed her?” Dick asked, without looking that way.

“*You*? Do you know who it was? If you do, you ought to be ashamed of yourself for not telling before.”

“Will you marry me if I show you the man?”

“Find me the man first and trust my gratitude for your reward.”

“I’m not so sure you’ll be grateful when you know who it was.”

“Why not?”—shivering.

“Because,”—he leaned towards her, whispering—“*it was Robert Hall.*”

The girl was deadly pale, but at this putting of her own dreadful thoughts into words, her fears fled like shadows at the approach of daylight.

“*Liar!*” she said; “you *know* you are lying.”

Dick Vanness shrugged his shoulders.

“I knew you would not believe it.”

“Believe it?” Lucy returned, contemptuously; “if you had accused *yourself*, I should have believed you a great deal sooner. It is impossible that it could have been Robert Hall.”

Vanness was silent. He sat with his elbow upon his knee, his chin in his hand, gazing down at the floor. She could not see his face.

“What makes you think it was Robert Hall? Because you hate him?”

“Hall was here that night; I saw him leave the house,” Dick answered, sullenly.

“Where were you?”

“I had stayed out late with some fellows.”

“What fellows?”

“What difference does that make? I was going by here about twelve o’clock, and I saw him come out of that door and run up the street.”

“Was any one with you?”

“No one.”

Lucy Wagner came towards him.

“Look up,” she said. “Look me in the face, and tell me you believe Robert Hall did that awful thing, Dick Vanness. *You can’t do it.*”

Vanness hesitated a moment longer, and then lifted his weak, handsome face, chalky white, the pale, blue eyes wavering away from the girl’s steadfast gaze in spite of him.

“Why, you look as if you might have done it yourself,” she cried in amazement.

Dick rose angrily to his feet.

“Find it out for yourself,” he said; “I’m not going to stay here to be insulted.”

“Wait a minute,” Lucy said, coming close to him and bending down to examine his coat. “How did you lose that button?” pointing to where one was off.

“I don’t know how I lost it,” he answered shortly, reaching for the door.

But Lucy darted between him and the door, and faced him with blazing eyes.

“*I do!*” she cried out, shrilly. “*I know where you lost it, you villain, you murderer! You don’t leave this house till you’ve owned it either.*” She locked the door and took out the key.

“There! I *know* it was you. You’re just the coward to do it, and I’ve got that button that is gone from your coat. I picked it up in *her* room and saved it, without a thought of what it could tell me. I thought some of the men who were in dropped it; but it was you. Oh, you wretch, you bad man! Dick Vanness, how could you?”

And then, just as the day she found her poor, old, murdered grandmother, she burst into loud weeping.

Dick Vanness stood, looking more like a corpse than a living man, some awful moments. Then he suddenly fell on his knees at her feet.

“I did it, Lucy, but I never meant to kill her. I knew there was money in the store that night, and I thought if I could get it, it would start me in some good business, and maybe you would marry me then. I hid in the clock and waited till I thought she was asleep, but as soon as I stirred she began to move. I seized the pendulum off the rod, only meaning to threaten her with it, never thinking she would know me in the dim room; I had a dark lantern, and it was almost shut. But she knew me, and called my name, and told me I was a thief, and she was glad you had refused to marry me. Then I struck her, and when I saw what I had done I snatched my lantern and ran. I’ve been the unhappiest man that ever lived every moment since. Oh! Lucy, Lucy!”

Lucy had stopped crying, and was looking at him.

“Get up,” she said.

“Don’t have me hung, Lucy,” he whined, crawling abjectly after her, as she moved away from him, and catching at her dress. She snatched it from him.

“You were just contriving to have another man hung,” she answered. “How dare you ask me to spare *you?*”

“But you will. I didn’t mean to kill her; I’m telling you the truth. It’s an awful thing to be hung, Lucy.”

“It is no worse for you than it would have been for Robert Hall. Get up this instant, and go in yonder. I shall send for Robert and tell him all, and let him do as he likes about sparing you.”

Dick Vanness got upon his feet, with his teeth chattering. He shuddered as she motioned him to towards that room (the only other one the house contained) in which the woman he had killed had lain. Then remembering something else, he went and opened the door with hands that shook so they could hardly perform their office, and went in slowly. Lucy shut the door.

Ten minutes afterwards, as Lucy was waiting for Robert to come, having sent for him at once, there came an awful crash.

She rushed into the room. Vanness lay upon the floor, dead.

He had gone in there, hoping to escape by the door which was behind the clock, and which he knew was not locked, because it was under repair. In trying to move the old clock, he had pulled it over upon him. Curiously enough, some wheel or bit of iron had struck him in almost the same place he had struck poor, old Grandma Wagner.

“I suspected it was he,” Robert Hall said; “but I knew your grandmother had been fond of him, and I thought it would hurt you more to know it was he, than to remain in ignorance who it was.”

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