

“The Elms”

A True Story

Among the verdant hills of Eastern Pennsylvania, near where the noble, winding, Susquehanna, coursing through the State, divides the Blue Ridge mountains, snugly nestles the little town, or rather village, of Linton—for it is so small it scarcely merits the appellation of town—and which, if it were not for the self-asserting dazzle of the guilt vane which surmounts the spire of the little moss-covered church in that place, would be lost to view even if its existence was not forgotten by the great, worrying, busy, outside world.

It was a picturesque little place; the great high mountains, their tops almost seeming to pierce the heavens, towering at its rear, the shimmering waters of the Susquehanna flowing at its feet, and the numerous shady trees casting their cooling umbrage over its dwellings and lawns, all conspired to make it one of the most delightful spots one could imagine; and one would scarcely believe it could be made the scene of a tragedy so heinous as that which was perpetrated in it during the latter part of the summer of 185—, and which, for the cold-bloodedness and ingenuity evinced in its consummation, has scarcely a parallel.

Mr. Edson, the victim of the tragedy, was a retired merchant, who resided with his family in an elegant villa situated on the outskirts of the town, and which, from the fact of its being surrounded by a shady grove of trees of that species, was known in Linton by the name of “The Elms.” The family consisted of only his wife and nephew, besides several domestics. His wife, Estelle, was of Southern origin, dark, imperious, beautiful as a Venus, of a very passionate disposition, and, if necessary, would not scruple to go any length to satisfy either her affections or her hate.

Rumor had it that her marriage with Mr. Edson was not free from the charge of mercenariness; for in no other way could the gossips account for the union of two persons whose ages exhibited such a great disparity; for Estelle had only passed her twenty-third year, while Mr. Edson was on the shady side of fifty when he brought home his dark-eyed houri as the mistress of “The Elms,” scarce one year before, and his appearance exaggerated his age. And it was no great wonder if the meddlesome threw out sundry invidious insinuations as to the propriety of allowing two such fine and comely persons as Randolph, Mr. Edson’s nephew, a handsome, broad-shouldered fellow of twenty-five, and Estelle, the pleasure of each other’s constant company, as must necessarily be the case from their present relations; and further, it was true that Randolph was somewhat of a wild fellow, which fact the gossips urged in support of their disinterested hints. The praters kept talking, and the inmates of “The Elms” remained in ignorance of their being the subjects of their idle comments, until one morning in August, Linton woke up and learned the news of the murder of Mr. Edson, which aroused it from its semi-apathectic state to renewed action; and many were the speculations that became rife in the village as to who committed the dastard act. Nor had they long to wait for a subject on which to vent their put-up garrulity; for suddenly another rumor was bruited abroad to the effect that Joe Smith, a rather hard character, and confirmed *habitué* of the village tavern, was discovered to have mysteriously disappeared simultaneously with the discovery of Mr. Edson’s assassination, and on him immediately fell the overwhelming weight of suspicion. He was not naturally a vicious character, for his vices were

only inebriety and shiftlessness, but he had a hard name, and suspicion did not stop to observe his few good qualities, in magnifying his bad ones.

Meanwhile, everything was confusion and excitement at “The Elms.” Estelle, apparently overcome by the sudden calamity, was prostrated on a bed of sickness, and would see no one except Randolph; and Randolph himself, although stronger, ill-bore his grief, for his uncle had been as a father to him. He had lived with him since he was very young. His parents, having died while he had scarce emerged from his infancy, had consigned him to the care of Mr. Edson, who had proved in every respect a father to him. A short time before the occurrence of the tragedy, a slight misunderstanding had existed between Randolph and his uncle on account of some indiscretion which he had been guilty of, but which they had compromised, and it was on that account that the appeared to feel more poignantly his loss. He wandered, pale and nervous, through the house, holding no communication with any one.

On the day prior to that on which the murder was discovered, Mr. Edson had completed the sale of a valuable farm, for which he had received also in payment a large sum of money. Having received it too late to bank it on that day, he secured it in a safe in his chamber, intending to deposit it in the bank on the morrow— But during the night an entrance had apparently been effected through one of the apartment [sic], which was situated on the second story, by means of scaling the verandah, which ran the width of the mansion, the roof of which was on a level with it. The safe was forced open, and Mr. Edson, probably aroused by the noise which attended its performance, while attempting to capture the intruders, was murdered, and the perpetrators of the foul crime decamped with their blood-bought booty.

But the most inexplicable part of the tragedy was the fact that notwithstanding the great noise which had to all appearances been made, none of the inmates of the house, though sleeping in close proximity to the scene of the hideous crime were disturbed during the night in question, except the coachman, who, being sensitive to such things, imagined he heard the rumbling of a carriage about midnight, but being in his first sleep, he had paid no attention to it, and on going to the stable on the following morning, the horses looked as though they had been driven during the night, which fact he found it impossible to account for.

Things were in this state of conjecture when the detective, a short, wiry, muscular looking fellow, named Boggs, arrived on the day following the tragedy. Shortly after his arrival Boggs made an examination of the apartment in which the murder transpired. Between its windows stood the safe, its heavy iron doors still ajar, and its contents strewn around the room in confusion, as was also the furniture. The detective took a survey of the apartment in a glance.

“So they don’t understand how they didn’t make any noise, do they?” soliloquized he, nodding knowingly. “Well, I do, and what’s more; I’ve found out before this that cats have velvety paws.” And with this sage reflection, the detective resumed his investigation.

Going to the safe, he scrutinized it closely for some minutes, worked the lock, looked at the interior, after which he proceeded to pick up the scattered papers and other contents, and replaced them in the rake. In bending to reach some which had fallen beneath it, he caught a glimpse of something lodged behind, the corner of which was suspended beneath the safe.—

With the indifference which characterizes his profession, he drew it from its hiding place. It proved to be a lady's cambric handkerchief, in which was enveloped a small pointless dagger, scarcely larger than a pocket-knife, richly ornamented. Both were stained with blood, now dry and crusted, and upon the corner of the handkerchief was embroidered the initials "E. R." The murderers in their haste, had hid them in that spot, fearing detection did they allow that evidence of their guilt to remain unconcealed, and were probably prevented by some circumstance from concealing it more effectually.

After this discovery the detective closely examined the windows and the doors, and then seemingly satisfied with his examination, quitted the room.

In passing through the hall he met Randolph, who was just issuing from the library, where he had been pacing excitedly during the time the detective was prosecuting his investigation.

"Did you discover any clue which will lead to the discovery of the murder?" inquired Randolph, searchingly.

"Yes, that there were two implicated in it."

Randolph started and shifted nervously. The detective bent his keen glance piercingly on him.

"Why do you think there were more than one concerned?"

"Because the indications are what we generally go by, and they look very much as though there would have been a hard time for one," replied the detective.

"And did you discover nothing further?" questioned Randolph, in suspense.

"No!" He uttered this lie, most deliberately. "I never met with a case as has been done so cleverly before—done everything as clean as a new pin," he added, in an admiring tone.

Randolph breathed easier.

"I suppose his wife takes it hard, this circumstance," suggested Boggs. "Sick abed, ain't she?"

"Yes," shortly replied Randolph.

Boggs nodded his head approvingly, and went out.

During the morning an inquest was held, where a verdict was rendered in accordance with the facts as before stated. The physician, in his post-mortem examination, in probing, extracted a piece of steel which proved to be the point of a small dagger, the same which the detective had discovered.

Boggs remained a few days in the neighborhood, quietly observing every circumstance, and then

suddenly disappeared, and in about a fortnight, as suddenly turned up again, with Joe Smith in his custody, who was immediately lodged in jail.

One day, after he had been in jail about a week, Boggs entered his cell and exclaimed pleasantly:

“One night more and you are a free man!”

“Well, I’m glad of it,” replied Joe, for I’m beginning to feel sick of this sport. It isn’t enough to be knocked on the head, and then confined in a lunatic asylum, and after I’m fortunate enough to get out, I get arrested on a charge of murder, which I didn’t know anything of until my arrest,” added he good-humoredly.

“You ought to thank your lucky stars you got out so safe. You came within an ace of being sent to “that bourne from which no traveler returns,” replied the detective, laughingly.

“Have you all the proofs of their guilt?” inquired Smith.

“Leave that to me,” returned Boggs, with evident satisfaction, turning to leave the prison.

On the next day, Boggs, in company with a constable, was seen going in the direction of “The Elms.” Pulling the bell, he was soon admitted, and shown to the sitting room, where Randolph and Mrs. Edson were engaged in low conversation.

“How d’ye do?” exclaimed Boggs, entering without any preliminary knocking, accompanied by his companion.

Randolph and his companion started as if struck by lightning, but recovering their self-possession, found tongue to answer him.

“I beg your pardon for coming in in this way, but you see business is business,” explained Boggs, blandly.

Randolph merely inclined his head.

“Would it be asking too much to inquire what your maiden name was?” asked Boggs, suddenly addressing himself to Mrs. Edson.

She looked at him inquiringly, and the muscles about her mouth worked nervously.

“Rauno,” replied she.

“Ah, yes. Well, there is one little circumstance about this case that I’d like to inquire about. I suppose you didn’t hear any carriage or anything stop before the house on the night of the murder, did you?” queried Boggs.

“We stated once before that we did not,” interposed Randolph, with a malignant glitter beaming in his eyes.

“Well, you see, I didn’t know but that you’d forgotten it. People is likely to forget such little things when they get excited, you know.”

“Is that all your business with us?” asked Randolph.

“There’s one thing more I’d like to ask,” returned Boggs. “Did you ever see these things before?”

The detective suddenly produced the articles he found in his examination on his arrival.

Had a cannon ball passed through the apartment at that instant, it could not have produced a greater effect than that action.

“Where did you get them?” almost shrieked the woman, her face of a livid hue.

“Where you hid them after you had murdered your husband,” calmly replied the detective.

Her eyes suddenly gleamed like burning coals when she found herself betrayed. She moved her hand nervously in the direction of her bosom, and before Boggs had either time to divine her intention or arrest her, there was a sharp report of a pistol, a puff of smoke, and the foiled murderess fell to the floor a corpse.

In the meantime, Randolph had furtively moved in the direction of the door, but the constable had anticipated him, and he was forthwith arrested, tried for complicity in the murder of his uncle, and the proof being so conclusive, he was found guilty, and eventually expiated his crime on the scaffold.

Little more remains to be told.

On the night of the murder, Joe Smith in returning to the tavern, on arriving at a spot on the road where a clump of trees cast a shadow across the path, was knocked over the head, but not before he recognized the features of Randolph, and on regaining his consciousness, found himself an inmate of a lunatic asylum, from whence he was taken by the detective.

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