

A Fourfold Alibi

A city boarding house is proverbially addicted to gossip. When, therefore, the twenty-six boarders at Mrs. Burntash's family boarding-house learned that Mr. Anderson, the occupant of the two pair front, had been found dead on his bed with a dagger sticking in his heart, they felt that fortune had been kind to them in presenting them with a topic of inexhaustible merit.

For, in the first place, the question whether the dead man had been murdered or had committed suicide was one admitting of a vast deal of discussion. Then, supposing that he had committed suicide, the investigation of his motive would be a rich vein, in the working of which unimaginable scandal might be unearthed. If, on the other hand, he had been murdered, a wide field of conjecture as to the murderer would be at once opened. In whatever light the tragedy might be viewed, it was full of promise to the lover of gossip. So the twenty-six boarders at once fell upon it and discussed it all over the house with the utmost enthusiasm.

With, however, two or three exceptions. The wife of the dead man naturally did not join in the general conversational uproar, neither did his brother, who occupied the hall bedroom next to the room of Mr. Anderson, and who forgot his own grief in his tender sympathy with the greater loss of the wife. Then there was Mr. Banks, a gentleman who was on bad terms with the deceased, and who had quarreled publicly with him over a question of politics only the day before the tragedy. Mr. Banks said little about the matter, and his reticence was commended and imitated by Mrs. Stein, a fascinating and beautiful widow, who had been but three days at Mrs. Burntash's but was already the belle of the boarding-house.

Soon after Mrs. Anderson, entering their room, found her husband quite dead, Mr. James Anderson, his brother, informed the police, and a coroner's inquest was held the next day. A physician swore that the position in which the dagger was found was quite consistent with the theory of suicide. Mrs. Anderson testified that on the evening in question she had left her husband in their room in his usual health and spirits, at eight o'clock in the evening, in order to call on a friend living on the next floor. At half past nine she returned and found him dead. Symptoms of the *rigor mortis* were already apparent, showing that he had been dead for some time. She was sure of the exact time when she left him, and when she discovered his death, for on each occasion she had glanced at the clock in the room. She had lived happily with her husband, and could imagine no reason why he should have committed suicide. He had no enemies, so far as she was aware, although he was not on good terms with Mr. Banks, whom he disliked, and who, he said, had insulted him. The dagger was her husband's, and was habitually used by him as a paper-cutter. Mr. James Anderson testified that he knew nothing of the tragedy until Mrs. Anderson knocked at his door and cried out that her husband was dead. He had heard no noise whatever in the room of the deceased during the evening of his death. Mr. Banks admitted that he had quarreled with Mr. Anderson the day before his death, and might have said that he "would be even with him yet." If so, it was not a threat, but an idle remark that really meant nothing. He had heard of his death after the discovery had been made by Mrs. Anderson, though he could not remember the precise hours. He was in his room at the time, and hearing a noise in the hall, came out to see what was the matter. He met a servant who told him Mr. Anderson had been murdered. Mrs. Stein, the widow, who occupied the room adjoining the dead man's room in the rear, was the last witness, and her testimony was substantially the same as that

of Mr. Banks, with the addition that she was in the parlor with the latter gentleman from seven o'clock until after nine; thus establishing an alibi both for him and for herself. The jury found a verdict to the effect that Mr. Anderson came to his death by being stabbed with a dagger, but professed an inability to decide whether it was a case of suicide or murder. The dead man was duly buried, his will proved, and his property, the whole of which was left to his wife, taken in charge by his brother as executor, and both brother and widow remained at the boarding-house, and maintained every outward appearance of deep and sincere grief.

Thus the problem how Mr. Anderson came to this death seemed to be generally given up by every one as unsolvable. A week after the funeral, however, a new boarder made his appearance; a middle-aged man, apparently unmarried, with plenty of leisure on his hands, and with a genial hearty manner that made him universally popular. Mr. Pryor was not a detective, as the reader has possibly supposed, but simply an idle man with a passion for solving difficult puzzles. He had read the report of the coroner's inquest, and had made up his mind that he would yet discover what the jurymen admitted to be beyond their powers of divination. He therefore entered himself in the ranks of Mrs. Burntash's boarders, and immediately proceeded to work out the problem he had set himself to solve.

His first move was to make the acquaintance of the physician who had testified at the inquest. A slight cold, for which he consulted him, was sufficient for his purpose, and he easily led the conversation to the subject that occupied his thoughts. The physician described the position in which the dagger was found, and though he admitted the possibility of the theory of suicide, he evidently inclined to the opinion that the man was murdered. He could, however, give no reason for this, except that a man who committed suicide by stabbing would probably instinctively withdraw his weapon from the wound as soon as he felt the pain produced by it.

Not much was to be gained from this quarter, and the amateur solver of criminal puzzles set himself to watch the inmates of his boarding-house. He soon decided that if murder or suicide had been committed, one of the four witnesses at the inquest who resided in the house ought to be able to throw more light upon the matter. As for the rest of the boarders, he was convinced that none of them had any possible connection, however remote, with the tragedy. Being an intelligent, unmarried and unbelieving person, he naturally decided that the apparently disconsolate widow was the most probably culprit, if Mr. Anderson's death was the fault of any one but himself. He therefore made her the first subject of his investigations.

Mrs. Anderson was not over twenty-three years of age, and was undeniably a very pretty woman. She had been married about two years when her husband died, and in the opinion of all their acquaintances at Mrs. Burntash's where they had resided ever since their marriage, was exceedingly devoted to him, while he was passionately fond of her. They had no children, and Mr. Anderson was evidently in the possession of a considerable fortune (his will showed that it amounted to some eighty thousand dollars.) Everybody spoke well of Mrs. Anderson as a quiet, well-bred woman, of rather strict, but scarcely puritanic principles. Could this woman have stabbed her husband?

Mr. Pryor soon satisfied himself that she had not directly driven the dagger into his heart, for he found no reason to doubt the alibi which she had proved at the inquest. Had she employed or

instigated some one to perpetrate the crime? There was no motive perceptible which could have led her to play so infamous and hazardous a game as that of hiring assassins. Her husband treated her with all the devotion that a woman could desire, and his death could in no apparent way improve her position. Had she a lover, and was his the hand that carried out her secret murderous desire? Not a breath of scandal attached to her name even in a large boarding house. She knew but a few gentlemen, and never went out except in company with her husband or his brother. Mr. Pryor sadly relinquished his hope that this exemplary woman might be the murderess, and contented himself with classing her under the head of “factors eliminated from the problem.”

Next he turned his attention to Mr. Banks, the man who had quarreled with Mr. Anderson. He was a young broker, quite a handsome and elegant young fellow, engaged in a profitable business, and a general favorite among women. He was a hot-tempered man, and was fond of billiards and champagne. He could hardly be called a dissipated man, though he was not by any means a “serious-minded” person. A very little study of this easily-gauged character convinced Mr. Pryor that he was not the sort of stuff of which murderers are made, and he was about to class him also as an eliminated quantity when he accidentally learned from a communicative chambermaid that he was not in the parlor at the time of Mr. Anderson’s death, in spite of the testimony of Mrs. Stein to that effect. The chambermaid had entered the parlor that evening to search for something she had mislaid, and found it unoccupied. She told this, not with the slightest idea of casting suspicion upon the young man, but out of dislike to Mrs. Stein, whom the servants agreed in cordially hating, chiefly because of her persistence in demanding a pitcher of ice-water every evening.

Here was certainly a clue at last. A witness at the inquest had committed perjury. What could be more suspicious? She evidently had some powerful motive in proving an alibi either for herself or for Mr. Banks. In either case there was reason to suspect that one or the other was in some way concerned in the tragedy—or murder, as the amateur detective was now ready to call it. Greatly encouraged by his first apparent trace of the criminal or criminals, he immediately took pains to convert his slight acquaintance with Mrs. Stein into terms of as close intimacy as possible.

She was a handsome, accomplished woman of the world, anywhere from twenty-eight to thirty-five years of age. She had no relations that ever made themselves visible, and was apparently quite alone in the world. It was not long before Mr. Pryor came to the opinion that she was a woman of unusual coolness and nerve; precisely the sort of person to play a dangerous and difficult game to a successful end. He grew very much interested in her as a curious study, and while nothing was further from his thoughts than the least idea of sentiment in connection with her, he paid her such close attention that the boarders one and all settled into a conviction that he was desperately in love. She often showed a rare ability in conversational fencing, and could ward off a subject which she did not wish to discuss with infinite skill. Yet she never showed the slightest hesitation in talking of Mr. Anderson’s mysterious death, and she did not hesitate to express her opinion that he had been murdered. This rather puzzled Mr. Pryor. Had she any guilty knowledge of the affair, as her deliberate perjury would seem to indicate, she would naturally be averse to discussing it, and would, at all events, endeavor to foster the idea that it was a case of suicide. With all his efforts he could draw nothing from her which in any way aided him in the task he had assumed when he entered the house. By closely watching her he

had, however, learned something of her capacities as an intriguer. Latterly he had been attacked, so he announced, with *insomnia*, and in his restlessness frequently took a turn up and down the hall at all hours of the night. These midnight walks had not been altogether fruitless, and when after three weeks of careful intimacy with Mrs. Stein he found that he had not advanced his purpose a single step thereby, he determined to try the worth of a weapon that he had hitherto held in reserve.

One evening, when he was sitting alone with her on the little balcony upon which the parlor window opened, he led the conversation to the subject of sleeplessness, and mentioned his habit of nocturnal prowling.

“It has led me,” he continued, “into several curious situations. What do you say to my having been met in a dark hall long after midnight by a beautiful woman, who, mistaking me for ‘darling Harry,’ embraced me and told me that I had left my watch in her room? I have never yet decided whether I ought to have undeceived her or not.”

He looked straight into her beautiful eyes as he told this story, and she returned his gaze steadily and without changing color. When he had finished, she said:

“That is hardly a fit story to tell to a lady, and I think you owe me an apology for venturing to tell it.”

Her wonderful coolness astonished even him, who had already learned to admire the perfect command in which she held her nerves. He was not, however, the man to permit the aesthetic to interfere with the practical; so he drew a handsome watch from his pocket and replied:

“I certainly apologize if I have unintentionally offended you, and likewise apologize for having so long retained the watch. Shall I return it to you or to Mr. Harry Banks?”

She knew now that she was in his power, and surrendered with the same coolness with which she had fought.

“You have my secret,” she said coldly, “though I cannot compliment you on the means by which you discovered it. May I ask what use you intend to make of it? You are capable, I presume, of trading on a woman’s indiscretion.”

“Let me ask you a question before I answer yours. Was it merely an indiscretion which you committed when you swore that Mr. Banks and yourself were in the parlor on the night of the murder? I know, quite as well as you do, that the parlor was empty all that evening.”

“So you have been playing spy in this house! You are, I suppose, that honorable creature, a detective.”

“Mrs. Stein, you are a very clever and very bold woman. Upon my word, I infinitely admire your steadiness of nerve. There is no need whatever that we should quarrel and I only ask you to be as frank as I am. I am not, as you suppose, a professional detective. I have, I acknowledge, watched

you somewhat closely, because I wished to learn your motive for the mistake which you made in your testimony.”

“I may as well tell you the truth now, or you will accuse me of worse errors than I have committed. I was examined at the inquest before Mr. Banks was called, and knowing that he would be anxious to prove that he was not concerned in the murder, I feared that he might mention a little matter, innocent enough in itself, but quite sure to compromise me. So, to avoid the possibility and at the same time to prove what you call, I believe, an alibi for him, I said we were in the parlor together. I felt quite sure he would not contradict me. May I ask you now if you have any further questions?”

Mr. Pryor was thoroughly disappointed. He saw no reason to doubt the explanation which Mrs. Stein gave him, and he was compelled to relinquish his cherished conviction that she had some guilty knowledge of the murder. He had been following a wrong scent after all. He had mistaken a commonplace intrigue for a murderous conspiracy. Certainly it was discouraging. In his disappointment he actually confided to the woman the object he had had in view; begged her pardon for his inquisitive watch upon her, and assured her that her secret was safe with him. It will hardly be credited, but they actually parted on apparently friendly terms. Mrs. Stein was too astute to quarrel with a man who could do her an injury, and his cynical admiration for her cool intrepidity made him careless of her utter indifference to morality.

There remained one more person against whom his suspicions were now directed. Mr. James Anderson had sworn that he was in his own room at the time of his brother's death, and no one yet had expressed the least suspicion that he was in any way connected with it. Mr. Pryor, however, noted his exceedingly devoted attentions to his brother's wife, and accepted as a possibility the theory that he had killed the husband in order to marry the wife. The fact that the will of the deceased left the entire fortune to his wife, strengthened this theory. Then, too, the brother occupied a room adjoining that in which the tragedy occurred. Was there a door between these two rooms? This was a matter to be settled first of all.

Mrs. Anderson never left her room without locking the door, and as her meals were sent up to her, she rarely left the house. Mr. Pryor wasted some time before he had an opportunity to make his desired investigation. At last, however, Mrs. Anderson and her brother-in-law went out together to church one Sunday evening, and Mr. Pryor, provided with a skeleton key, promptly entered the room and gave it a thorough examination.

There was a door leading to the brother's room, but in front of it stood a huge clothes-press. This must have been in the same position at the time of the murder, for there was no other place in the room for it. The clothes-press annoyed him, for it seemed out of the question that the door against which it stood could have been used by a stealthy assassin. However, he undertook to move it, and to his surprise found that it glided easily and noiselessly on its well-oiled rollers. The door behind it was locked, but yielded to the skeleton key, and moved as noiselessly as the most careful criminal could desire. Here was the path which a murderer could have safely used, provided that his victim lay, as the murdered man doubtless had lain, in a quiet sleep. A single dark spot on the sill of the door caught his attention. He stopped down and examined it. Some one had evidently tried to scrape the place with a knife, but the stain was in too deep to be

removed. Was it blood? Could the murderer, retreating to his own room, have dropped this trace of his crime, and been unable to obliterate it?

Mr. Pryor felt a conviction that he was right at last. He cared to make no further search. Replacing the clothes-press, he left the room, and went to his own room to ponder the discovery which he had made. Was this cold, respectable and pious brother a fratricide? If not, who oiled the hinges and rollers so that noiseless access could be had from his room to that of the murdered man? He did not intend to be led away a second time by a single suspicious circumstance, but this time he could hardly doubt that he had discovered the murderer.

Unfortunately he could not see his way to his next step in the matter. With neither the brother nor the still disconsolate widow could he hope to establish anything like an intimate acquaintance. He could not listen at their keyhole without the certainty of detection, a fact which he greatly regretted; for, like most men with a hobby, he acted upon the theory that all means were justifiable that contributed to the success of his plans. He debated as to his proper course for a day or two, and then decided that he would confide his suspicions at once to the police, and content himself with the honor of having put the officers on the right track.

The superintendent heard him attentively, and then summoning his best detective asked Mr. Pryor to repeat his information. The detective, who, unlike most of his profession, was really a man capable of drawing intelligent inferences, was inclined to take Mr. Pryor's view of the matter, and recommended the arrest of Mr. James Anderson. The superintendent concurred with him, and the proper steps to procure a warrant were taken. Mr. Pryor went home much elated with the knowledge that the suspected murderer would be arrested in the course of the ensuing evening. The man was so thoroughly under the domination of his one passion, the solution of intricate criminal puzzles, that he was heedless of the pain and shame that were to be inflicted through his agency.

Mr. James Anderson was duly arrested, and exhibited a coolness which astonished Mr. Pryor. He requested that the matter be kept a secret from his sister-in-law if possible until the next day, and then went quietly to the police station. Here he asked to see the superintendent, as he had a communication of the utmost importance to make to him. From an ordinary prisoner such a request would have been treated with no attention; but the manner of Mr. James Anderson so impressed the captain in charge of the station, that he consented to send word to his superior. The latter soon made his appearance, and was closeted for a few moments with the prisoner. Next, to the astonishment of everybody, the two drove together to the house of the magistrate who granted the warrant of arrest. Another conference followed, and at its end, to the unqualified anger and disappointment of Mr. Pryor, the prisoner was released and sent home in the superintendent's own carriage.

How had he secured his release? By simply showing to the superintendent; who was an old acquaintance of the dead man, and was perfectly familiar with his handwriting, a letter which Mr. Anderson had written a few moments before his death, and the existence of which his brother, out of regard to his memory and the feelings of his wife, had hitherto concealed. It ran as follows:

“Friday Night, 8:30.

“Dear James:—Forgive me, and keep my secret from my poor wife. Mrs. Stein, the woman who came to this house three days ago, I married when I was a boy. I thought she had been dead for years. She is utterly bad and perfectly unscrupulous. She has recognized me, and at any moment may tell Nellie that I am a bigamist, and that the man whom she believes to be her husband has never been lawfully married to her. I cannot live under this torture. Take care of Nellie, and if possible never let her know the truth. Let her think I have been murdered. For though I point the knife to my heart, it is the fiend whom I married long ago who drives it home.

“HENRY.”

The superintendent sent for Mr. Pryor the next day and told him that Mr. James Anderson had conclusively proved his innocence. “Let me advise you,” he continued, “to leave your present boarding-house at once. You are liable to arrest for breaking into other people’s rooms; and if you ever breathe another suspicion against anybody in connection with Mr. Anderson’s death, I will have you arrested at once for burglary. If you have any business of your own, attend to it, and leave eavesdropping and spying to men who are paid for such dirty work.”

So far, Mr. Pryor had followed the superintendent’s advice. Had he read the suicide’s letter, he would, however, never have rested till he had found out why Mrs. Stein did not establish her right to be called Mrs. Anderson and to inherit Mr. Anderson’s property. Why she remained silent must be left to conjecture. As to the suspicious oiling of hinges and rollers in Mrs. Anderson’s room, her acquaintances were well aware that she had a peculiar detestation of the noise made by chafing hinges, and always guarded against it, wherever she lived, by a lavish use of oil.—*The Galaxy*.

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