

A Detective's Story

I always had a hankering after a mystery, and this often served me a good turn in cases where all my skill as a detective was called in. I don't speak of my skill in a vain sense at all—but as a detective was reckoned a right smart chap. At the time when the mysterious murder of Mr. Loring occurred in the town of L—, which was my native place, I was down South engaged in an affair of much mystery, and requiring the utmost perseverance as well as delicacy, in its treatment. Well, we were successful, my partner and me, but it cost me the worst attack of chills and fever that I'd ever had. I was so bad I had to lay off from business for a while and go home to recruit.

When I got to L— I heard all the particulars about young Allan—Will Allan—having been arrested on suspicion of this murder, an' how that plucky little girl married him in prison, an' then set herself to find proofs of his innocence. I admired this little woman. I tell you, I felt like thanking Heaven for making such little ones, an' I'd just liked to have kissed her hand, if it hadn't been too great a privilege. Well, it was all over when I got home, the trial and all that. Will Allan was acquitted, an' the young couple were off on their wedding tour. But it turned out when Mr. Loring's will was read, that he had left a handsome sum of money to Mr. Allan. Well, this news had no sooner spread over L— than a lot of hateful folks began to say that Will had done the murder after all, and to show good reason for it in the money he had inherited. Of course they couldn't have him tried again, and his life was safe enough; but I knew right well how he'd feel, for I'd known the lad since he was knee-high to a duck, an' I could kinder understand how cut up that little wife of his would feel when she heard these new suspicions against her husband. So I wasn't a bit surprised when Sallie, my hired girl, one evening brought in a little piece of pasteboard with "Mrs. William Allan" printed on it. Of course I said that I would see the lady at once—it was just what I'd been wanting ever since I heard of her; and she was a sight for sore eyes when I did see her, I tell you. Pretty as a pink, white and rosy, with lovely eyes and beautiful hair, and something about her that made you think of pearls, there was such a glimmer about her face and dress and white hat. She came to the business of her business with just that directness you might expect from a little woman of her character.

"Mr. Burns," she said. "I have heard of your great cleverness in finding out criminals; I want to engage your skill in discovering the murderer of Mr. Loring—the rich banker who was murdered last summer. You will understand why my heart is set on this, when I tell you that notwithstanding that my husband was fully acquitted of the charge, since he inherited a good deal of money under Mr. Loring's will there are those who still suspect him of having committed the crime, and this suspicion has almost the bitterness of death to him and to me. There is only one way of entirely clearing his reputation in this matter, and that, as you perceive at once, is by discovering the real criminal."

I didn't interrupt her by a word—instead encouraged her to keep talking. It was rare pleasure to see her pretty face flush up and her sweet eyes sparkle and melt and then flush again when she talked; so, altogether I knew every circumstance in regard to the arrest, trail, and acquittal of Will Allan. I got her to go over the whole ground, and she told me how she had watched over the sick bed of Mrs. Havens, the daughter of the murdered man and the only living being who could absolutely prove Allan's innocence—how her patient's condition fluctuated for months, growing

better and then worse, and then better again, and finally how she entirely recovered and rewarded the young wife's devotion by giving testimony which, in the eye of the law, wholly cleared him from even the shadow of suspicion. Then she added:

“Mr. Burns, there is something also that I want to tell you, although it may not be of any such importance as I have thought it. One of the most mysterious things about the murder was the want of any real clue to the real murderer. It seemed absolutely a dread secret; but interested as I have been, both heart and hand, in this dreadful affair, I have naturally observed some things that to others would have no significance. In talking over all the possibilities in the case with Mrs. Havens, with whom I became intimately acquainted during her illness, I learned that Mr. Loring's chief objection to her marriage to Mr. Havens lay in the fact that he had promised her hand in marriage to Mr. Warfield, a junior member of the firm, admitted within the past two years, and then a stranger in L—. Mr. Warfield apparently had great influence with Mr. Loring, and was passionately in love with Mrs. Havens—then Miss Loring. The young lady was not only indifferent to the suitor selected by her father, but absolutely hated him, and took no pains to conceal the fact. Mr. Warfield persecuted her with his attentions, nevertheless; and on one occasion when she told him bitterly how disagreeable he was to her, he said he had ‘her father's consent, and that was better—for it is as much as his life was worth,’ said the persistent suitor, ‘for him to break faith with me—and you dare not disobey him.’

“It was immediately after this conversation that Miss Loring eloped and became the wife of Mr. Havens. Mr. Warfield behaved like a maniac on finding that he had lost his bride, and Mr. Loring was in despair over his daughter's elopement.”

I suppose my face showed my admiration of this little woman's shrewdness in seizing on all these facts and putting them together. She flushed up and said:

“Do you think there's anything in it, Mr. Burns?”

“Ma'am I think you would be a credit to the force if you would join us – but of course, that isn't in your line. But with your very valuable assistance, ma'am, I think I can work up this case in a way to satisfy you.”

“Oh, Mr. Burns! If you can do that I feel I will owe you more than my life, and you will see that I can be substantially grateful.”

“Not another word of that, ma'am—it'll be a pleasure to work for a lady like you. One or two questions if you please—this Warfield, I don't know him at all – has he left the place?”

“Oh, no; he is now the principal in the bank.”

“Ah! I thought so—shrewd. If he had left the place it would have occasioned remark, and perhaps suspicion.”

Mrs. Allan now arose, and I said nothing to detain her further, for I was already busying my brain with all she had told me, and, notwithstanding my admiration of her, my interest in her, I

was right glad to be alone. So I saw her to the front door, and promised to let her know as soon as I had intelligence worth talking of. By this time change of air and quinine had done a good deal for me, and I was feeling pretty hearty. By a series of inquiries, carried out in a slow and apparently aimless manner, I very soon learned where Mr. Warfield lived, and all about the internal economy of his household. He was still unmarried, and kept a bachelor establishment, superintended by a young and good-looking housekeeper—the only one of the servants who seemed a fixture in the house; for the under domestics never stayed more than a month, and it was easy to understand why the housekeeper held her place, for it was currently reported that she hoped to become the wife of her master. I had one of my little plans on hand, and, as soon as I learned that a kind of gardener and general male servant was required in the Warfield house, I introduced myself to Mrs. Clemens, the housekeeper, and pleased her so well that I was the next day installed. I knew lots of gardening, having been bred up to it long before I was a detective; and I gave satisfaction in my new capacity. As soon as I had been in my new situation long enough to win a certain amount of confidence from Mrs. Clemens, I turned my attention toward making myself especially useful to Mr. Warfield. I must not omit to state that the moment I laid my eyes on that man something told me he was the murderer; and I felt as sure of it as if I had seen him commit the deed. In my way of life, you see, we get to have a great knowledge of the faces, and there's something in the look of a murderer that's unmistakable to the practiced eye. Now, the thing was to prove to others what required no further proof to myself, so I began to develop my plan. It was simple—so very simple that anyone new in our business would never have thought of using it; but I had been catching criminals so long that I had seen how easy it was to trap 'em. They are so mighty keen to look out for all the clever traps that they walk right into the simplest ones without ever seeing them. I saw from a look of strong restraint that had become fixed on Mr. Warfield's face that he was most crazy from fright and remorse—accordingly, I concluded he was the kind of man to be scared into exposing his own guilt. I had a little bottle filled with red fluid which made a stain so like blood that the quickest eye might easily be deceived by it; but the principal thing about it was that upon being exposed to air it speedily faded away, leaving no sign. I had more than once been called to assist Mr. Warfield with matters of the toilet, and in that way I had gradually come to have the run of his room; and all such matters as bringing up his linen, shaving-water, and the like, were soon considered as part of my work. One night Mr. Warfield complained of illness, and retired to his room at an early hour. I was called to wait on him for something, and while in his dressing-room I dipped a pen in my red stuff and wrote on the pillows of his bed a large "W.R.L." They were the initials of Mr. Loring's name, imitated so well from his hand-writing, procured for me by little Mrs. Allan, that they might have passed anywhere for his own writing. I had just finished and turned away when Mr. Warfield, in his dressing-wrapper, returned and sat down on the bed, his glance falling instantly on my work. He gave a sharp scream and bounded to his feet, but his eyes glared on those red letters.

"Thomas!" he shrieked, "what is that on the pillow?"

"On the pillow, sir," says I, "why nothing to be sure."

"But there is, man—I tell you I see letters in blood written there."

“O! no, sir,” I returned, looking at the place, and, indeed, as we both gazed, the writing faded away. He passed his hand across his eyes and looked again, fearfully, and then with a groan, said:

“You are right, Thomas, there is nothing. I fear I am very nervous.”

That night, when, at a late hour, I passed his room on the way to my own, I heard pitiful moaning and deep groans from Mr. Warfield’s room, and, to tell the truth, my heart was sore for him. But, Lord bless you! The detective police can’t afford to encourage such feelings, for if they did, guilty people would often go free—oftener than they do. So I hardened my heart, and says I to myself, “I must keep it up, and either this man will go mad, or else fear and remorse will drive him to confession.”

Next morning the laundress gave me some linen handkerchiefs to carry to Mr. Warfield. I wrote across the upper one “W.R. Loring,” and gave it to him while the color was fresh. He read it and gave me an awful look.

“Thomas,” he said, “what does this mean?”

“What do you mean?” I asked, looking at him, while he kept his eyes away and held the handkerchief from him, as if he was afraid it would blind him.

“Who gave you this handkerchief?” he asked sternly.

“The laundress, sir—Bridget.”

“Call her to come here this instant.”

Of course I took care that Bridget didn’t come too soon; and when Mr. Warfield thrust the handkerchief before her and demanded to know why it was written on, she stared as if he had told her it was a rattle-snake. Sure enough, there was nothing to see, for the writing had all faded away. Mr. Warfield presently perceived this, and uttered some feeble words of apology, but he was white as death and his eyes looked wild and fierce.

Well, I didn’t repeat all of things of this sort that I did, but I kept it up for weeks, till at last everything in his room—every bit of linen he wore used to bear that terrible writing. I saw that he was breaking up fast, and I knew a crisis was approaching. He never spoke now when he saw these signs, but he still grew pale as a corpse and spasms of pain contorted his face. One night, when I had left a good deal of writing about his room – on the pillows, on his counterpane, on his handkerchief, I was a good deal surprised to notice that he observed it all calmly, and instead of the customary horror and terror that his face showed, a sad but calm smile rested about his lips. I was troubled about this change, and asked myself: “Does he at the least suspect me?” But he dismissed me and bade me good night, as usual, and I had no excuse for lingering, but I saw his light burning till very late, and though I passed the door often I heard no sound of distress.

“He suspects me?” I thought “and means to make his escape.” So I watched his room all night. But the poor man escaped me after all. In the morning he was found dead, looking very quiet and peaceful; and on a little sheet of tinted note-paper, folded in two and laid upon his heart, was his confession:

“I killed Mr. Loring—his death was accidental and not premeditated murder. We quarreled on the subject of his daughter, whom I adored and of whom I thought myself basely cheated. In the heat of passion I struck him a blow which caused his death. From my heart and soul I ask forgiveness from him and from his family, and voluntarily give up my life as a forfeit for his.”

That was all. I felt kind of sorry, but it’s my business to detect criminals, and I must take such means as come to my hand. Will Allan was cleared of the last suspicion, and his sweet clever little wife was properly grateful.

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