

The Alden Murder
by B.E. Tremain

“Then I suppose you’ll go, Jack?”

“Yes, I’ll go,” my friend replied slowly. “I’ll go, of course, though I hardly see what good I am going to do except to pocket the money. I’ll admit that to be a great consideration in these hard times, but I almost hate to take it, knowing how small the return is likely to be.”

“The return? Nonsense! You’ll clear up the mystery in no time, my boy, and return from Michigan with an additional success to help your already brilliant reputation.”

My friend smiled a little sadly.

“You are probably thinking of one of those alleged detective stories now,” he said, “where the detective always wins—right triumphs in the end and the curtain goes down with red fire and slow music.”

I brushed aside the smoke from my cigar and turned lazily in my chair to look at him. He was staring at vacancy and his handsome face wore an unusually grave expression.

“You are not generally so hopeless,” I said at last.

“I am not hopeless,” he replied quietly. “I shall go to Detroit and close up the case if possible. If I do not succeed I will at least try honestly. That is if—”

“Well?” I inquired, “if what?”

He started from his easy chair with unusual energy: “Fred, old boy,” he said almost sternly, “I may be wrong, but I somehow feel as if I had been employed by the wrong side, and I don’t like it. Mind,” he added, stopping in his rapid walk up and down the room, “it may be all right—if it ain’t I can drop it. But you mark my words—something will occur in connection with this case that will affect my life or reputation.”

I laughed softly. Jack Wilmarth was not generally superstitious. “What do you suspect?” I asked.

He dropped lazily back into this chair and his face resumed his usual impassive expression. “I suspect,” he replied coolly, “that I am employed in behalf of Charles Alden’s murderer.”

“Then why do you go?”

“A detective would be nothing without his curiosity,” he replied with a quiet laugh, ‘and I have got my blood up. I’m going to find out about it.”

“I wish ‘em luck with you,” I rejoined.

“Only don’t proceed to extremes, my dear boy. If you don’t take the case, I dare say they can find plenty who will, and I suppose the money is worth as much to you as it is to anyone else.”

“I suppose you would recommend me to accept it, right or wrong?” he inquired sarcastically.

I blew out a volume of smoke, but made no answer.

“Bah, you hypocrite,” he said indignantly. “You would as soon think of robbing the bank.”

I made no reply. Jack was always so terribly in earnest, and so, after a few bantering remarks, my friend set to work packing his satchel and left me alone.

We had been friends for many years, Jack Wilmarth and I, and our friendship had been cemented by many kindly acts and sacrifices in those old days when we were together striving for a foothold in the world. We had known poverty together, had Jack and I, and had met our share of heart-breaking disappointments. But we had stood together through it all, with a loving care for each other in sickness and sorrow. And now Jack Wilmarth was a famous detective, and I—well, I had plodded along until I had plodded my way from an insignificant clerkship to the post of cashier in “Our Bank.” It was not so many years after all, for we were both young men yet. But they had been busy years for both of us, so busy that we had never found time to fall in love with any but ourselves. And now we were likely to stay as we were, bachelors, both—too much in love with each other to care for other ties.

The case that provoked our present discussion was rather peculiar. Nearly a year before this a brutal murder had been perpetrated in one of our western cities. A young man, scarcely more than a boy, had been shot down at the door of his house. It was still early in the evening, and a crowd collected at once, but no clue had been found to convict the assassin. True, one man had been detained by the coroner, but he stood his examination well and was discharged. No cause for the murder had been found. Charles Alden, the murdered man, had been universally beloved, and, so far as known, had not an enemy in the world. The local police had done what little they could to unravel the crime. But they had only succeeded in adding to the fog of mystery that surrounded the case, and so, after a time, the excitement had died out, and the case was almost forgotten by the public.

And now, after a lapse of a year, my friend had been retained to solve the Alden mystery, if possible. First, he had received a letter inquiring if he was at liberty. Replying in the affirmative, he received a second letter, containing a large retaining fee, and requesting his immediate presence. With this came a bulky parcel containing clippings from the local papers, report of the coroner’s inquest, and a full description of all persons mentioned as connected in any way with the case. But—and here was the first mystery—both of the letters, and the check accompanying the second one, were in a woman’s hand-writing—rather pretty writing, too, it was.

They were all three signed “Claire Morton,” and there was no mention of any such person as being connected with the case.

Jack was puzzled. He went over the papers again and yet again, but the name was not mentioned, and it was with a feeling akin to anger that he started at last, but I could see a gleam in his dusky eyes when we parted that showed a determination to solve the mystery if possible, and I felt that the fair Claire was likely to get into trouble if she undertook to play with my friend Jack.

Jack was not given to writing much while on duty, so I was not disappointed in hearing nothing from him at first, but as the months went by, bringing me nothing but an occasional postal, assuring me that he was in good health, I began to feel uneasy, and for the first time I doubted the loyalty of his friendship.

It was six months after he left New York before I heard from him to my satisfaction, and then it was in his usual old way, for walking into our room one fine evening I found my friend Jack comfortably seated in this easy chair, with his feet on the window sill. He was smoking placidly and looked as unconcerned as if he had been gone but a week.

“Why, Jack, old man!” I exclaimed, “when did you come? How are you? Why didn’t you write to me?”

“One at a time, Fred, one at a time,” he laughed, shaking hands energetically. “I just got in. I’m hungry. And I didn’t write because I wanted to tell you all about it. And now, my dear boy, if there is anything eatable around just call it out, will you?”

We had a neat little cupboard in connection with our modest establishment, where we generally stored a few things suitable for a light lunch. I set out all I could find in it, and then turning on the gas and drawing the blinds close, I turned and watches him while he ate.

“That’s good,” he said at last pushing his chair back from the table and lighting a cigar. “And now, Fred, what have we to drink?”

“Nothing but whisky,” I replied. “I would have done better had I known you were coming, but then I can brew some punch.”

“Splendid for story-telling, punch is,” cried Jack, merrily. “Fix it up, Fred, and then sit down; I want to talk with you.”

I soon had a steaming jug on the table, and then lighting my pipe I sat down on the other side of the open fire and prepared to listen. But still Jack was silent. “Well?” I said at last, interrogatively.

He looked up thoughtfully and repeated the word, “Well?”

“What about the story?” said I; “did you solve the mystery?”

He nodded.

“Do you know who committed the murder?”

He nodded again and took a sip of punch. “Yes,” he said thoughtfully, “I know all about it, and I won’t keep you in suspense any longer.”

He puffed a moment at his cigar and took another pull at the punch, and then squared himself in front of me to tell the story.

“You remember, Fred,” he said, “that when I left here I was in some doubt as to which side had employed me? Probably you will remember my fear that I was to be employed to shield the assassin?”

I nodded.

“Well,” he continued, “that is just what I have done.”

I stared at him, but made no reply.

“Yes,” he repeated, “that is just what I have done. You see, on my arrival at Detroit, I called at once on Mrs. Morton. She is a widow, Fred, and just as—but pshaw, there is no use in trying to describe her. Anyway, I called on her, and found out why she had employed me.”

“You see,” he continued, “at the time of the murder a certain person—one Isaac Sharpley—was found bending over the body. He submitted to arrest and was detained until after the inquest. Claire—that is Mrs. Morton—remembered that a messenger had come from the station for her husband, and that Mr. Morton had called on Sharpley in his cell, but as they were well acquainted with both him and the murdered man, she paid no attention to it at the time.

“After her husband’s death, however, which occurred some months later, she found among her husband’s papers proof that Mr. Morton had paid this Sharpley \$10,000. This aroused her suspicion that all was not right, and without waiting to consult her friends, she had sent for me.

“I asked her if Mr. Morton had ever had business dealings with Sharpley.

“No,’ she was sure he had not.

“What had been Sharpley’s circumstances?

“‘Poor,’ she replied; ‘in fact he had hardly been able to support his family.’

“Was he still living near them?”

“No. He had left the city immediately after his discharge, and his family had followed him shortly after.’

“It was evident that she suspected Sharpley, and it became my first duty to find him. Luckily the police had kept some track of him, and from them I learned that he had purchased a ticket for

Chicago. I went there at once and commenced my search, but without avail, and I had at last become convinced that he had not gone to Chicago at all. Returning to Detroit, I took a fresh start. This time I undertook to follow his family. After considerable trouble I found that they had left Detroit for Saginaw, and as they had taken some of their household goods with them, I thought it pretty sure that they could be easily found.

“Before starting after them, however, I had another interview with Claire—with Mrs. Morton I mean.”

Jack flushed a little at this point! He soon recovered himself, however, and continued as steadily as before:

“I told her,” he said, “that I must know more about her late husband. Had he been good to her?”

“She looked at me tearfully. ‘Can’t you do without this?’ she asked softly; ‘he is dead now.’”

“I hated myself for persisting, but my theory of the case was formed, and I could not help it. So after some trouble I found out that her late husband had been very unkind to her at times. She is very beautiful, and he was jealous—not of any one person, but of every one that came near her. Even members of her own family were not exempt. He had been passionate and unreasonable, but still very very fond of her, and was liberal in everything that pertained directly to her.

“With additional information I started for Saginaw, and without difficulty located my man in a little town near by. It was another case of a ‘beggar on horseback,’ for I found Sharpley in the last stages of drunkenness.

“He was in a delirium when I got there, and it required time and some skill to open his mouth. Probably I should not have succeeded at all if he had not met with an accident. For it was only when he knew that he could not live that I could induce him to talk. Then I found that my theory was the right one.

“This man had witnessed the murder of Charles Alden, and had been willing—for a consideration—to throw the officers from the scent.

“He had been lying under a tree on the opposite side of the street, waiting till the cool air of the evening should sober him up before he went home. Alden was standing at his door, bare-headed and with slippers on his feet, when a man came down the sidewalk and spoke to him. At first they seemed to converse pleasantly together; then they spoke with greater excitement, until at last he heard Alden call the man a brute. Then there was a flash and the report of a pistol, and young Alden sank to the sidewalk a corpse.

“Understanding the situation, Sharpley had rushed across the street, and so was found over the body when the crowd gathered. At first, it appears, he had intended to denounce the assassin, but second thoughts showed him how he could turn the knowledge to profit himself, and so he kept silent.

“This much I got him to tell me, but no more. He would not divulge the name of the assassin. I did not tell him that it was unnecessary, but I left the house knowing as well as he did the name of the man who killed Charles Alden.”

“It was Morton, of course?” I hazarded.

“Yes,” said Jack slowly, “it was Morton, of course.”

“Well,” I said, after a slight pause, “go on old man—tell the rest of it.”

“There is not much more to tell,” replied Jack quietly. “Morton had killed the boy in a fit of unreasoning jealousy.”

“Perhaps he had some cause,” said I cynically.

“No,” replied my friend in the same even tones. “He had no cause, the boy was simply kind to an unhappy woman—that was all.”

“How do you know that?” I demanded.

Jack looked up at me from the other side of the fireplace, and answered simply, “she told me so.”

Completely stunned by this reply from my clever friend, I remained silent. Is it possible that this is the usually incredulous Jack Wilmarth? I thought in a daze.

There was silence for some time. At last I said almost angrily: “Well, what did you do then?”

“Nothing much. I returned to Detroit and threw up my job.”

“Without exposing the murderer?” I demanded.

Jack nodded without looking up.

I arose and paced the floor impatiently. This was not like my friend—and it hurt me. “Why did you do it, Jack?” I cried at last. “Why did you not tell me all you knew?”

“What for?” demanded Jack in return. “The boy was dead, and there was none of his family that could profit from the knowledge. The man who had profited by his guilty knowledge—was dead—his death was miserable enough. The man who committed the murder was dead, and his widow—”

“Well, his widow?” I cried impatiently as he paused.

He arose and stood facing me, with his back to the fire, and his handsome face in the full light of the gas.

“I am going to marry his widow,” he said quietly. “So I thought it best to say nothing to her about it.”

The Atlanta [GA] Constitution, May 16, 1886

Wood County Reporter [Grand Rapids, WI], July 8, 1886