

THE PORCELAIN BUTTON.

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A STORY OF CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE.
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BY A EX-DETECTIVE OFFICER.
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Many of our readers will doubtless remember the mysterious murder committed in Grand Street, Williamsburg, in the year 1836. The facts are simply these:

Mrs. Weldon, an old inhabitant of Williamsburgh, lived in a small frame house at the further end of Grand Street, at that time very sparsely built up. A niece and a servant girl were the only persons residing with her. The former appeared to be very much devoted to her aunt, and attended to her wants with filial assiduity. The domestic had lived with Mrs. Weldon for 5 years and was considered a good servant.

Mrs. Weldon was a widow lady of ample means in the shape of an annuity, which was paid to her quarterly, but which was to cease with her death. She was rather miserly in her disposition, and accustomed to hoard up money. Her husband at one time had lost a considerable amount by the breaking of a bank, and since then no one could persuade her to have anything to do with any bank. It is supposed that this hoarding propensity was known only to the niece, Miss Milwood, and the servant girl, Hannah.

One morning, in September, 1836, the inhabitants of Grand Street were electrified by the report that Mrs. Weldon had been discovered murdered in her bed; and that strong proof of guilt existed against the niece, Miss Milwood.

I read the account in the newspapers and supposed it was one of those plain cases which admit no doubt. The matter having occurred in Williamsburgh, it was out of my beat, and I thought no more about it.

The following morning, while at breakfast, my servant girl informed me that a gentleman wanted to see me. I told the girl to show him up, my time was precious, and I would converse with him while at breakfast.

Almost immediately afterwards a young man of very respectable appearance entered the room. I motioned him to a seat.

“Mr. Johnson,” he said, “I have come on a very painful business. I want your assistance.” He hesitated to proceed.

“What can I do for you, my dear sir?” I replied. “You may command me.”

“You have doubtless read about the murder committed in Williamsburgh, the day before yesterday. A young lady, Miss Emily Milwood, has been arrested on suspicion. Now, I know she is innocent, and I want your assistance to prove it.”

“I have read the particulars in the newspapers, and I must confess the evidence appeared to me to be overwhelming.”

“I know the evidence is strong against her,” he replied, “but if you knew Emily as well as I do, sir, you would be morally certain that she is incapable of this deed.”

The young man spoke with such warmth that I looked at him somewhat curiously.

“Are you related to Miss Milwood?” I asked.

“Mr. Johnson, I will tell you all; the truth is, we are engaged to be married. I have known her from a child. Her heart is pure and noble; she could not injure a worm, much less murder her aunt and benefactor.”

I began to feel interested in the case, and told him I would proceed at once to Williamsburgh and investigate the matter. He thanked me and bade me good morning, promising to call the following day to learn the result of my inquiries.

I hurried through my breakfast and proceeded at once to the scene of the tragedy. I found the room exactly in the same condition as it was when the murder was first discovered.

It was a front room in the second story. Mrs. Weldon must have been asleep when the deed was done. She was discovered hanging half out of bed with her throat cut in a frightful manner. The bed and carpet were stained with blood. And strange to say, the blood could be traced to the door where Miss Milwood slept, but no further.

It appeared that some persons in the street were alarmed early in the morning by the servant girl looking out of her mistress’s chamber window and calling “murder.” They immediately went to the front door, and found it fastened securely. The back door and windows were also fastened. Some watchmen were procured, and an examination was made of the premises. The strongest proofs were discovered that Miss Milwood was the perpetrator of the deed. The blood, as I have before said, was traced to her chamber. A considerable sum of money was found in her trunks, together with some old-fashioned jewelry, which was known to have belonged to the deceased. But, if this were not enough to convict her, there was still more damning evidence. Her bedroom window was found open, some drops of blood were on the windowsill, and underneath her window, in the long grass, was found the knife with which the deed had been committed. It was surmised that she had committed the deed, and, after having taken possession of the hoarded money and jewels, had gone to her own room and thrown the knife out of her window. She had then retired to bed, where she was discovered in the morning fast asleep.

When I heard all this, I was far from being satisfied. It seemed to me if she had any intelligence at all she would have taken more pains to conceal her guilt, and I made up my mind that if she were guilty, she must be one of those stupid, clumsy people we sometimes meet with in the world.

I next proceeded to examine the chamber where the deed had been committed, very minutely. I had not been five minutes in the apartment before I was satisfied that *Miss Milwood was innocent*.

My reasons for these conclusions were these: The wound inflicted on the deceased was [too] deep and extensive to have been made by a woman's hand. The murderer, whoever he was, was left handed. While searching the room I found on the floor a vest button; it was rather peculiar, being made of blue porcelain. I put it in my pocket.

My next proceeding was to visit the young lady in custody. My profession procured me an order instantly, and I was shown into her presence.

I explained my business to her, and stated who had engaged me. When I mentioned her lover's name tears filled her eyes. She was a very pretty girl, the epitome of female modesty and delicacy.

"Dear Henry," she exclaimed, "how noble he is! Thank God, he at least does not believe me guilty."

She could constrain herself no longer but wept bitterly.

"I have been in prison for two days," she continued after a pause, "and yet I cannot realize the fact. It appears like a hideous dream to me. I repeat to myself the question, can it be possible? I am arrested for the *murder* of my aunt—my benefactress? No, no, it cannot be!"

"Miss Milwood," I returned, "unless we can set aside the evidence, I know not what we must do; it is fearfully strong against you."

"You surely do not believe me guilty of this fearful crime?" she replied, her face flushing with indignation.

"I do not, but it may be different with a jury. Let me hear your statement."

"I have no statement to make. My aunt retired early to rest that night. I had a headache, and about ten o'clock took a cup of tea. I then grew very sleepy and went to bed. I slept all night through without waking. In fact, I was asleep when the officers of justice entered my room."

"Did you sleep more soundly than usual?"

"Now, you remind me of it, I did indeed. I scarcely ever remember to have slept so soundly before, and even awakened I was unaccountably drowsy."

"Who gave you the tea you took the night before?"

"The servant, Hannah."

“Do you suspect she could have committed the deed?”

“Impossible, a better servant, or one more kind to my aunt could not be found than she is.”

After a little more conversation, I took my leave.

When I was outside the prison wall I must confess I was at a loss. My opinion as to Miss Milwood’s innocence was confirmed, it is true, but I was no nearer discovering the real murderer. I next determined to visit the servant Hannah. She was confined as a witness.

I found a good looking girl, about twenty-two years of age. The countenance was an open one, but there was an expression of deceit about her lips which I did not like. I have not much faith in physiognomy, so I put it down for as much as it was worth.

Hannah’s story was satisfactory enough. She stated that on the night of the murder she had retired to bed about eleven o’clock, and heard no noise in the night. She got up early in the morning, as was customary with her, and on entering her mistress’s bedchamber had discovered the fearful tragedy. She at once opened the window and screamed out “murder.”—She testified to the great affection Miss Milwood entertained for her aunt, and it was her opinion that the latter *was entirely guiltless of the crime imputed to her.*

I soon found this Hannah was what is called a *smart* girl. She gave her answers readily and without hesitation—almost too much so to please my fastidious taste.

I have already said that it was no woman who committed this deed—this of course precluded the possibility of Hannah being the guilty party. The question then arose, if [neither] of the women committed the deed, who was the murderer? Here, I must acknowledge, I was completely at fault. All the doors and windows being fastened inside, precluded the idea of the house having been entered from without.

I felt annoyed and baffled, and started to walk to the ferry, as night was fast approaching. I had not proceeded many steps down Grand Street, when my eyes were attracted by the glaring show bottles of a drug store. A sudden thought came into my head and I entered the shop.

Two or three persons were inside imbibing soda water; I was very thirsty and waited my turn. The owner of the store and a customer were conversing about the recent murder.

“There can be little doubt about Miss Milwood’s guilt,” said the druggist, “but Lord! I should have thought she would have been the last person in the world to have done such a deed as that; she is such a nice spoken young lady.”

“You know her then?” asked the customer.

“Certainly, I knew them all. Why, only the very evening of the murder, the servant girl, Hannah, was in my store.”

I pricked up my ears, but no further conversation passed between them. The customers were all served, and I was the only one left.

“You stated just now that Mrs. Weldon’s servant girl, Hannah, was in your store on the night of the murder. May I ask what she bought?”

“Let me see,” returned the druggist, “it was morphine—she stated she had a toothache.”

I said no more, but left the store. I had now the first clue—it was a faint one, to be sure, but I felt certain Hannah knew more about the murder than anybody else. I remembered Miss Milwood’s extraordinary drowsiness on the night in question, and to this I added the fact, she had partaken of a cup of tea prepared by Hannah, and that the latter had purchased morphine that same evening at the drug store. But then my first conviction pushed in my mind, *no woman had committed the deed*. The first link of the chain was found, however, and I was now hopeful. I resumed my walk toward the ferry, determined to sleep upon it.

During that memorable walk down Grand Street, something also immediately attracted my attention. It was a tailor’s shop, outside of which, various garments were exposed for sale. Amongst them were some vests, the buttons of which immediately struck me *they were made of blue porcelain*.

I began to examine the things as if I wanted to purchase. An obliging shop-man came outside to try to sell.

“What do you ask for one of these vests?” I demanded.

“Two dollars,” was the reply.

“They are something new, are [they] not?” I inquired.

“Quite new; we have not sold more than two or three of them. We have not had them in the shop more than three or four days.”

“I saw a man with one on yesterday,” I said.

“You mean Bill Holsley, ostler at the George Inn.”

“Yes, that was the man,” I returned. “Good evening, I don’t think I will buy one tonight.”

To make my way to the George Inn was the work of a very few minutes. I asked to see the ostler, and was directed to the stable.

I approached it with a cautious step and peeped in the door. The ostler was cleaning down a horse *with his left hand*. By-and-bye he turned, and he wore the famous vest, *with the middle blue porcelain button wanting*. I knew I stood in the presence of the murderer!

I determined on practicing a *ruse*. I suddenly advanced, and seizing him by the arm, exclaimed:

“William Holsley, I arrest you for the willful murder of Mrs. Weldon. Your confederate, Hannah, has made a full confession.”

The murderer turned deadly pale; his limbs shook, and his countenance betrayed the most abject fear.

“I will confess all,” he exclaimed.

He was immediately removed to jail, and that night made a full confession, which amounted to this:

He had been engaged to be married to Hannah, and was only waiting until he had earned enough money to support a wife. Hannah, who, it seems, was a thoroughly bad woman, was tired of the delay, and proposed to him that they should rob her mistress. It was finally agreed that Hannah should drug Miss Milwood’s tea with a powerful opiate, and after she was asleep she let in Holsley. They then decided it would be better “to put the old woman out of the way,” and throw the guilt on the niece. Holsley committed the deed, and, after having robbed their victim, they proceeded to Miss Milwood’s chamber, and placed a portion of the money in her trunk. The knife was then thrown out of her window. Holsley left the house, and Hannah fastened the door after him. The deed was skillfully planned, and had Hannah been only concerned, a guiltless party might have suffered. But Holsley was by no means a courageous man, and wanted presence of mind.

They were both tried, found guilty, and in two months from the committal of the deed they were hanged.

Six months after this occurrence, I one day received an invitation to a wedding. It was that of Emily Milwood and her faithful lover. I have seen them quite lately; they are as happy as it is possible to be, and have two fine children to add to their felicity.

The Schenectady Reflector, February 25, 1859

Brooklyn Times Union, March 23, 1859

Orleans Independent Standard [Irasburgh, VT], April 29, 1859

The Fox Lake [WI] Gazette, May 12, 1859

The Union Democrat [Manchester, NH], May 31, 1859

Lowell [MA] Daily Citizen and News, Friday, June 24, 1859 (part 2)

This story was later reprinted as part of the Introduction to *Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B.* Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865.