

The Child Witness

The Arnolds lived in an old brown house which you may yet notice at the right of the road just as you enter the village of L—, Pennsylvania, from the south. The house stands back about ten rods from the road, among peach and apple trees, and the little path running up from the gate is bordered with pinks and moss.

I should not speak so confidently; it is five years since I saw the village or the house, and perhaps the awful tragedy enacted under the moss covered roof one night may have kept the house tenantless and allowed time to tumble it down.

One day, in answer to a telegram sent from the nearest railroad station to L—, a matter of a dozen miles, I rode into the quaint old village on the top of the stage, and at once reported myself to the town authorities. Every inhabitant of the village, even to the ragged urchins sitting on the tavern porch, carried a grave face and talked in whispers. Had I not known a double murder had been committed the night before, I could have read some news almost as bad by glancing at the faces of the towns-people.

While I was eating my supper at the only hotel the town clerk and the president of the village sat opposite and told me the story. It seemed that Arnold, who was nearly 60 years old, had two sons in another part of the state, and, wishing to divide up his property before his death, had a few days before the murder disposed of a farm and some manufacturing interests in Pittsburgh, realizing several thousand dollars in cash. He intended visiting the sons and dividing the money between them, but had placed it in the village bank until he should be ready to go. Mrs. Arnold was old and gray-headed, and the couple would have been all alone had it not been for Little Jack, as he was called, a child four years old. The child had been abandoned by a woman passing through the village, and the Arnolds had taken it for company; in fact, had made provisions to adopt it.

The night before at 9 o'clock a citizen had seen Arnold at his gate, smoking a pipe. No one heard any alarm from the house during the night, but about sunrise little Jack crept down into the village, his nightgown red with blood, and told the first one he met, "Somebody had hit grandpa and grandma on the head with an ax."

There was an investigation, and the aged couple were found at the house dead and terribly mutilated. The old man's head was nearly split in two, and Mrs. Arnold had a horrible wound on the temple, which had caused death almost instantly. The child was not in the least injured, but seemed to have been badly frightened.

This was the gist of the story I got while eating, but I found that none of the sensational points had been overdrawn when I reached the house. The corpses had been the subject of inquest, and had been washed and placed in coffins, but the rooms had not been disturbed. A constable had been present there at the time to see that any clue that might have been left of the murder should not be erased by careless hands or feet.

The room where the tragedy occurred was a double bed room on the ground floor. It contained two beds, one of which was occupied by the old lady alone, and the other by the old man and little Jack. The murderer had come in by the back door, and brought along the axe from the wood-pile. He had passed into the bedroom, lighted a candle which stood on the stand, and had been some time in the room before using the weapon. I knew this because the top drawer of the old bureau was pulled out, its contents tumbled over, and there were no bloody finger marks on anything. The other drawers were daubed with blood, showing that he searched these after the murder.

Something had aroused the old man from his sleep. He had started to get out of bed when struck by an ax. The old lady had just heard the noise when the cruel implement descended on her head, the positions in which the bodies were found bearing out my theory. The night had been chilly, and Little Jack probably snuggled down under the quilt and had thus escaped harm, though, as afterward shown, he had been a silent witness of part of the proceedings.

The murderer made a thorough search of the house, taking his time about it. He had first felt under the old man's pillow after money, and then under Mrs. Arnold's, daubing his fingers with blood, and leaving his marks on the pillows. I counted five different places where he rested his left hand on the pillows while searching with his right, and in every case there were only four daubs or spots. There should have been five. He would not put down four fingers and hold up his thumb. No; the thumb on the left hand was missing—cut off at least at the first joint.

This was a clue and all my subsequent investigations proved that I was correct in believing so. There was another thing. The man had torn up the carpet of the bedroom in several places; had got out the Bible and looked between its covers; had taken down and searched the clothing in the closet; and had been so cool and thorough in his search that I knew he was no ordinary offender. A common thief would have fled after committing murder, or at most stopped only long enough to search the bureau. Whoever the man was, he had not secured a dollar in money. He had, however, taken away an old-fashioned gold watch belonging to Arnold, which was out of repair, and chiefly preserved as an heirloom. A dozen persons could identify the watch, if found, and here was something which might prove a good clue.

I did not expect to get much out of the boy, owing to his youth. Taking him on my knee I made his acquaintance, gave him some pennies, and then asked him what he saw.

“You see,” began the child very gravely, “I heard grandpa talking and getting up, and then I saw a big robber jump up and hit him with an axe. Then grandpa fell down, and the big man went over and struck grandma. Then he looked in the bureau, on the bed, in grandpa's box, in the closet, and then went off, and then I went to sleep.”

I dreaded to ask him how the man looked, for much depended on his answer. But he was ready with his reply, and all my cross-questioning could not alter his statement.

“Big man—red collar (necktie) on—great big breast pin—like Mr. Johnson there— shining ring on his finger—one eye almost shut up.”

I tried to make little Jack believe that the murderer had black hair, and was a little man, but he stuck to his story. Then one of the constables talked to him about something else for ten minutes, and then questioned him as to the appearance of the man; but the story was the same as he told me at first. Several of us wrote it down and I charged the child to remember it.

I was convinced that the murderer was a stranger in that part of the country. No one had seen him come or go; no one knew the hour of his arrival or departure, and he had left no clue behind—nothing but my theory that the thumb was missing from the left hand. I rode up to the toll gates but he had not been seen to pass. I questioned the stage drivers, but they could give no satisfaction. I went to the railroad station but no one could remember having remarked the presence of a stranger on that night. The murderer had arrived and departed like a bird.

I was considerably discouraged in not striking his trail, but I was determined to pursue the case until I had found the criminal. Visiting Pittsburgh and Harrisburg I laid my plans to trap him if he tried to dispose of the watch. I wrote letters to various officials, and then I could do no more. For six months I had the case uppermost in my mind, while transacting other detective business, but I had failed to find the least clue. Then one day I got a trace.

I was riding on the cars of the Pennsylvania Central railroad, when I observed an old lady shaking a gold watch in her hand, and then holding it to her ear to see if it would run. Crossing over to her I asked to look at the watch and she handed it out without remark.

“It isn’t much good, but I don’t know as it ought to be. My husband only paid \$10 for it.”

I found out that her name was Allen; that she lived within a dozen miles of where the Arnolds had been murdered; that on the morning after the murder, as near as she could remember, her husband had purchased the watch of a traveler on the highway, who was looking for work and out of money. She remembered that the man was a large man, had red hair and full beard of the same color, but could not say that she had observed anything suspicious in his actions.

I found by questioning that the stranger had continued on the road to the west, and that if he had kept on he must have struck the railroad after an hour’s traveling. I am convinced that this was the murderer, and that he had made a long journey on the highway in order to baffle pursuit and hide his trail.

But it was little comfort to know it as so many months had passed that the man might now be in Europe or under ground. I took the lady’s address, allowed her to retain the watch I knew had belonged to the Arnolds, and again I lost the case for several months. I wrote over fifty letters, traveled three or four thousand miles on the lookout for a big man and nothing came of it. But one day when approaching the village of Dewfield N.Y., by stage, two suspicious looking chaps got onto the vehicle, and they were my only company. I knew them to be “flash” as soon as I set my eye on them, and their talk would prove it. I pretended to be very deaf as soon as they got in, not replying to any of their questions. I assumed the tone of voice generally used by the deaf, and moved over and expressed my regrets if I had offended them, saying that I could not even hear the rumble of the coach.

“Good!” exclaimed one of the men as I sat down at the other end of the vehicle. “Now you can go on with your yarn.”

But before proceeding, the other one called me an old fool, a thief, a robber and various other things, closely watching my countenance to see if I could hear his words.

“The old smooth bore is as deaf as a stone,” he remarked, having satisfied himself as to my deafness, and then he went on with a narrative which had been interrupted.

I soon ascertained that they were on their way to Penfield to rob a merchant. They had everything arranged to commit the crime the next night, and the one who had put up the plan gave all the details as to how the robbery was to be committed, where they would run to, and gave a guess as to each one’s share.

“What about Luke?” inquired the other, after the plot had been discussed.

“Oh, Luke will be there on time,” replied the man. “He has kept devilish shady since that business at L—, but now wants to make a haul and dig out for the far West. You needn’t fret—we can depend upon him.”

Before we got to the village the men tried me again, but I could not hear except when they shouted in my ear, and they were sure that the conversation had been strictly private. While they put up at the hotel, I went to the house of a Deputy Sheriff, intending to remain concealed all the next day. I had, of course, to state my business to the officer, as I must have his aid, and he, the simpleton that he was, related the whole story to his wife after they had retired. Thus it naturally came about that next day, while I was lying shady, but planning how to capture the burglars, the woman was retelling my plans to the neighborhood. When night came there were six of us ready to pounce upon the burglars, but there were no burglars to be found. The fellows had got wind of the affair and were off, and I had lost the second only reliable clew to the Arnold murder which I had ever been able to find. Sometime after this, while in the city of Rochester, I caught sight of a hand resting on the window-sill of a horse-car—a large red hand. The hand was nothing strange, but the thumb was missing.

I did not wait an instant to think. I leaped from the car, entered the other, and there sat my friends of the stagecoach on either side of the owner of the hand—“a big man with red hair and whiskers.” They all jumped up as I entered, but I hung fast to Luke, and soon had the bracelets on him, allowing the others to get away. He had no idea who I was, and I took care not to hint at the charge against him back at L—.

My arrival created much excitement, as pursuit of the murderer had from the first been deemed hopeless. Many contended that I had not secured the right man, and Luke professed never to have been to that part of the state before. The child was several miles away from the village, but I sent for him. It had been a year since the murder. Little Jack had almost forgotten the circumstances, and, of course, the murderer had changed some; but I had strong hopes that the child would be able to identify the man, and I was not disappointed.

Waiting until evening, I conducted Jack into a room where Luke and a dozen citizens were sitting. The little fellow had no knowledge of what we intended, and for some time did not see the murderer. When he did he uttered a loud shriek, ran to me, and exclaimed:

“There’s the big man who hit grandpa and grandma!”

Luke braved it out to the last; even when the purchaser of the watch testified to his identity he kept a bold face, and went to some pains to attempt to prove an alibi, but when convicted, mainly on the testimony of Little Jack, who shivered and trembled at the sight of the man, the prisoner knew he was done for, and cried out in anger.

“Well, I am the man! I saw the boy’s eyes looking at me after I had finished the old ’uns, but I had done enough, and could not kill him, curse the brat! I now regret nothing except that I did not split his head open!”

And standing on the gallows, about to be launched into eternity, the man used his last moment to curse the child witness who had convicted him of the awful crime.

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The Davenport [IA] Daily Gazette, May 22, 1880

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