

The Laurieville Mystery

“You don’t say so!”

“Yes, it is too true, neighbor Harris; the squire is gone. We must all come to it, but this is dreadful!”

“Murdered in cold blood you say, Brown?”

“Such are the appearances.”

“And no clue to the murderer?”

“Not the slightest.”

This fragment of conversation I overheard as I came up to where my neighbors Brown and Harris were discussing the great local sensation of the village where we lived.

Brown and Harris were farmers, whose lands were only separated from each other by a small stream, not of sufficient importance to dignify with the name of river.

Laurieville was a small village, and boasted of one lawyer, from the place took its name—Seymour Laurie. He was an old, white-headed, stern-mannered gentleman, descended from the ancient Scottish heroes. He was an excellent lawyer, honest and reliable; and his advice was sought for by many far and near.

Squire Laurie had lost his wife, but there remained to him two daughters and two sons; all dutiful and well-behaved, save the younger son, Alfred, who often made his old father’s heart ache with his wild life and very reckless habits. Some thought the Squire had been too strict with his boy and others took another view of the subject.

One morning, by the dim rays of early daylight, Mr. Laurie, sr., was discovered, in the room which served as an office, study and library, lying prone on the floor, with numerous contusions about his face, and his skull fractured as by some heavy blunt instrument.

I was summoned at once, for though young (and it was many years after that that I entered my present position as police surgeon in New York,) I was in good practice in that region; but the old gentleman had long ceased to require a physician’s skill when I arrived.

The family were in deep distress. I said what I could to comfort them, and while waiting for the coroner to arrive, walked over to the next house, which happened to be Mr. Brown’s, and there heard the dialogue already given.

Mr. Brown was raking some hay from his mow for the cattle. I bade both gentlemen good morning, and they returned the salutation.

“This is a sad event that calls you to the farms this morning, doctor,” said Mr. Harris.

“Sad and mysterious,” I answered.

“It is, truly; and I for one cannot see the motive for the act,” said Mr. Brown.

As he uttered these words something heavy fell from the rakeful of hay to the floor, with a dull, leaden sound. It startled us all, as little things will at such times, and we hastened to ascertain what it could be.

We were not less startled to find under the fallen hay a heavy, triangular-shaped lump of lead, such as is sometimes used on fishing lines, but larger and heavier, covered with red stains of human blood, to which there clung long white hairs.

“It is the weapon with which the Squire was murdered!” I exclaimed.

“Impossible!” gasped poor Brown; “how could it have been found in my hay?”

“Easily enough,” I replied; “and the man who used it may be hidden there also.”

I seized a pitchfork and ran up a ladder to the top of the hay. Mr. Brown and Mr. Harris joined me there in an instant, but after a thorough search in every nook and corner, no trace of anything further could be found.

The coroner came at last, and an examination was made, which resulted in nothing but creating a suspicion—a dark, dreadful suspicion—against the wayward son, Alfred.

I did not share in this belief, which was becoming quite general; for, although circumstances pointed ominously to the young man, it appeared to me he did not possess the depraved nature attributed to him.

Finding the leaden weight was another link in the testimony against the young man, for he had been seen with something of this kind in his possession recently, attached to a fishing line.

I was riding from the darkened home of my friend, slowly and sorrowfully, thinking of his sudden fate, and the dark cloud of suspicion that hovered over his son, when my horse stopped so suddenly that I was nearly thrown from my seat.

“Hallo, doctor! In a brown study, ain’t ye?”

It was Hy Covell, who spoke from near my horse’s head, where he had arisen like an apparition.

Hy was one of your ne’er-do-wells, whose chief end appeared to be to smoke vile tobacco, and drink villainous alcohol preparations, without regard to their names. He might be designated as chief loafer of Laurieville, and in that character was ever at home.

Hy lived a kind of hermit's life, all by himself, in an old cabin in the woods; that is, when away from his favorite position, in a warm corner of the Laurieville hotel barroom.

"What is it, Hy? You quite startled me. I did not see any one before me," I said.

"S'pose ye didn't, cause ye wasn't lookin'" replied my interviewer, with a grim smile.

"Well, what do you want, my man? You haven't turned Hy-wayman, have you?"

Hy Covell laughed, as though that was the best joke of the season; but he appeared disturbed about something, and uneasily changed his quid of tobacco from one cheek to the other, finally stammering out:

"Doctor, ye can keep a secret, I guess, can't ye?"

"Why, yes, if it is a harmless one."

"Wal, I don't know so much about that; but there's a chap up in my cabin who is hurt—purty bad, too, I reckon; but he won't hear to my callin' anybody in to see him, and he says he will blow my brains out if I do. But I've done all I can for the critter, and don't want him to die on my hands; so I slipped out to call ye, as I seen ye comin' down the hill."

"Well, what is your secret, Hy?" I asked.

"Why, I don't want him to know I cum out arter ye; but if he thought ye just happened in like, to dun me or something, why maybe he would let ye examin' him and see what the matter is."

"All right, Hy, I'll do as you wish, I have a call to make on the Widow Grey, and after that will come to your house."

Hy shuffled off toward his woodland haunt, and I started my Rosinante into a trot toward Mrs. Grey's with something new to reflect upon.

"How is your rheumatism this morning, Mrs. Grey?"

"Thank you, Doctor, it's only tolerable; but rheumatism isn't the worst thing people has to endure."

"Very true. You have heard of the terrible news about Squire Laurie, I suppose?"

"Yes, doctor; it is dreadful! But who did it, what did it? Perhaps you can tell?"

Her questions were anxious and hurried, as though much depended on my reply.

I told her how little was known or could be surmised upon the subject, and she grew more calm.

“My Joseph has been with some pretty wild fellows lately, and that has given me considerable anxiety. Only last night he had a young man home with him, whose looks I did not like at all, and they were at work with their fishing lines until late at night, and then Joseph must go with him to the tavern, and I have not seen him since.”

“Did you say that they were talking of fishing lines?” I asked.

“Yes, they had lines, and sinkers, and leather straps of all sizes. I happened to mention that one of the sinkers was too large and heavy, when this stranger says:

“The old woman doesn’t know what kind of fish we’re goin’ for Jo.” My boy was not brought up to be so ill-mannered, and I don’t want him to associate with such. Joseph merely answered, in a respectful manner, that the lead was one Al Laurie had given him some days before, and that he had used it many times.

The garrulous old lady’s conversation, which I had thought tiresome, was getting interesting.

Could it be that here was a key which might aid in unlocking an entrance to the great mystery of Laurieville?

I obtained a minute description of her son’s companion, who was called Joel Green, left Mrs. Grey some words of comfort and some medicine, and started to keep my appointment with Hy Covell.

Leaving my horse a short distance from the house, I walked quietly to the door and entered without rapping.

He sat by the chimney fire smoking, and in one corner of the room a dark object lay on some buffalo robes.

I pretended not to notice the latter, but engaged in conversation with Covell. All at once a deep groan came from the sufferer, as if pent up nature could not be restrained.

“Ah! what have you here?” I asked, in pretended astonishment.

“Nothing much,” muttered Hy, uneasily.

“There is no use, doctor; I’ll die if you don’t help me!” groaned a pitiful voice from the corner.

“No use of what?” I asked, coming up to where the sufferer lay.

“Oh, nothing. I hurt myself, and tried to keep anybody from knowing it; but it is no use.”

Hy Covell helped me move the man into a better light, and there I beheld the person [Mrs.] Grey had described so minutely.

In a moment I comprehended the whole story and read the Laurieville mystery as from an open book.

“Oh, this is Joel Green,” I said carelessly.

He looked up with a startled expression, but said nothing. He had a low brow, black hair and a most wicked facial expression.

“You were out fishing, last night, with young Grey,” I continued.

“No I wasn’t,” he snapped out.

Without paying any attention to the denial, I went on to say:

“You went from Mrs. Grey’s house to the hotel; from there you went to Squire Laurie’s home, and—I can tell you the rest of the story if you wish to hear it.”

“Hold on! You are not a doctor, but a devil—a witch! Who told you that? But it is all a lie, every word of it, and I can prove it by Hy Covell. Can’t I, Hy?”

“Don’t get me mixed into your villainies. I don’t know nothin’ about ye, only as ye cum early this mornin’ a cripple, and I did what I could for ye.”

The man groaned in anguish, and for a time forgot his physical agony.

He actually fainted from terror, and then I examined his condition, and found a dislocation at the hip-joint and a fractured clavicle. He must have suffered intensely.

When he became conscious again I reduced the dislocation, with the aid of Hy, and gave the clavicle as much attention as was possible under the circumstances.

Evil-doers are always cowards when attacked by disease, and this case was not an exception.

“Am I much hurt, doctor? Is it dangerous, I mean?” he asked in a whining tone.

I shook my head, and told him I feared it was, and that he had better confess his crime at once, and atone for it as far as possible.

“I didn’t do it! I haven’t done anything!” he hurriedly replied.

“You wish me to continue my story, I see!” said I. “Well, you went from the poor Squire’s where you expected to find a large sum of money, but was disappointed—to Mr. Brown’s barn, where you left in the hay left the leaden weight with which you struck the old man down, and that I have with me.”

“Enough—enough, doctor. I am helpless, and can't suffer more than now, whatever they do to me. I confess it all. I fell from the hayloft and dragged myself here.”

The poor wretch dictated a confession, and I wrote it out.

Joel Green was never sentenced at an earthly tribunal, because he was, not long after his arrest, called to a higher judgment bar.

The excitement attending this capture and the clearing of Alfred Laurie's name was very great and quite gratifying to me.

It appeared that the Widow Grey's son was not a party to the murder, although Green had been his companion for a few days.

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