

The Unknown Death

A Detective's Story

Murder had been done in Philadelphia—or at least, it was supposed—and the papers were full of it. The journals were divided in opinion about the matter, some maintaining that it was a case of simple suicide, others inclining to the belief that there had been foul play, and still others arguing in favor of death from natural though unknown causes. Indeed, it would appear, at first sight, as if the latter were the true supposition, and the majority of superficial readers and thinkers who talked over the matter at home or in the streets the next day, seemed to have very little trouble in arriving at a like conclusion.

All that was known was this: An esteemed citizen—a man of wealth and high standing—had retired to rest the night before apparently in sound health and good spirits, and at two o'clock the following morning had been found dead in bed, without one visible mark of violence upon his person. His son, who had returned from a pleasure party at that hour, had entered his father's chamber to deposit the front door key there, and had made the horrible discovery. This young man, a steady, reliable, and devout church-member and Sabbath-school teacher, had then aroused the house, and communicated the ill tidings to the terror-stricken family.

At the Coroner's inquest I was present, and there the son, after repeating substantially what has been said above, called the attention of the jury to the following additional and important facts: That on entering the chamber he had found everything undisturbed and as usual, that the bed-clothes were not rumpled, and that the position of the deceased, as he lay, was so natural and easy that was not until he had noticed the absence of deep and regular breathing of the sleeper that he suspected for an instant, that anything was wrong.

I was not on the jury, but was there at the request of the family, in my official capacity of murder-detective, and it is needless to say that I subjected the body and its surroundings to the closest scrutiny. I could discover nothing, however, that appeared in the least suspicious, or to warrant a supposition of foul play. The post-mortem examination failed equally to satisfy, and developed no indications of poisons in the system; but one thing it did develop; and that was, that up to the time of the death the internal organs of the deceased had all been in a state of healthy and vigorous action.

For once in my life I was at fault, and must confess that I did not know how to proceed; but still, for all the absence of proof, and the seeming regularity of things, I felt in me a deep mistrust that murder had been done in the premises and by no unskillful hand.

While I was deliberating how to act, the son came over, and began a conversation. He talked on the all-absorbing topic of the moment, and was as nervous, restless, and agitated as a man could be. We were walking rapidly up and down the chamber where lay the corpse, still fresh from the searching hands of the coroner's physician, and as we paused now and then to gaze in its pale, inanimate face, I remarked that my companion shook with a slight and well-defined tremor. I made a mental note of this, but at the same time did not attach much importance to it, as I considered it but the natural effect of the trying and painful scenes through which the son so

recently passed, and whose recollection was refreshed by the momentary views of the dead. I do not, of course, for one moment imagine that the man at my elbow was a patricide, but a murder detective, from habit, is always on the alert, and as I had no clue whatever to follow in this matter, I was merely searching for one anywhere—that was all.

We continued our walk about the room.

“This affair passes my comprehension,” said I.

“And mine also,” said the son.

I was about taking my leave when a small piece of red rag on the floor, just under the edge of the bed, attracted my attention, and I stooped and picked it up.

The son observed my motions, and said:

“I wonder how that got there? I have the rest of that article in my drawer—it belongs to me!”

“Do you want the piece?” I asked.

“Not at all,” he replied; but if *you* would like to have the remainder, I will get it for you.”

He left without waiting for any reply, and quickly returned with the rest of the handkerchief. He handed it to me and said as he did so:

“I am at a loss to conjecture who could have torn that handkerchief, for I thought it was safe in my apartment when I went out early in the evening.”

I put the piece he gave me with the other I already had, and took my leave.

Once at home and in the solitude of my chamber, I sat down at my table and, with my face buried in both hands, fell to thinking and reasoning. I thought of the scene I had just left, and could not doubt that the verdict of the coroner’s jury would be “death from causes unknown.” I thought of the son and his torn handkerchief, and spread out the latter before me on the table, and fitted it to the portion I had found wet and limp under the bed of the deceased. Then I took the wet piece in my fingers and felt and looked at it. It did not seem to have been steeped in water, and to the touch it was just in the slightest way sticky. I further remarked that it had a very faint white tinge in spots, as if some kind of foam had recently been upon it. Just at that instant I caught of a paragraph in a daily paper lying in front of me, and mechanically read it.

The paragraph was as follows:

“A ghastly scientific discovery is reported from Turin, where Professor Casturini, the celebrated oculist, has found a way of killing animals by forcing air into their eyes for a few seconds, and almost without causing pain. Experiments were recently made at the Royal Veterinary School, and it is said that they have fully proved the truth of the Professor’s invention. Within the space

of a few minutes four rabbits, three dogs and a goat were killed in this manner. The most remarkable fact is that the operation leaves no outward trace.”

I started up instantly after having read this, and began rapidly to walk the room. I was flushed and agitated. Perhaps I had the key to the mystery I was searching to solve!

“Gracious!” I thought, “if this paragraph be true, might not the method of destruction be applied as fatally to man as to the inferior animals?”

I hurriedly returned to the house of death and rang the bell.

The son answered the summons in person.

He looked not a little surprised at my sudden return.

“What is the matter?” he demanded.

“Nothing,” said I—I was quite cool and collected by this time—“I merely wish to make another examination of the chamber of the deceased.”

He led me to it at once.

I again scrutinized the body, this time paying more attention to the face and head of the dead man.

There was absolutely nothing to be seen there that I had not seen before. I then pressed open the mouth slightly with my fingers, and, as I did so, felt, or fancied I felt, the same slight stickiness I had detected in the limp piece of handkerchief. I looked into the mouth, and nearly trembled for joy to see there the clearly-defined white tinge of dried foam!

For a moment I could hardly contain myself, and my heart beat so loudly that I was almost afraid my companion would hear it and grow alarmed.

However, I did control myself, and as soon as I could trust my voice, said:

“Is there no way by which this house might be entered except by the first story?”

“Oh, yes,” returned the son, as composed as ever, “there is a door in an apartment opening on an old, unused portico, but that has been locked and double-bolted all winter.”

This observation was just what I wanted, for it pointed out to me a way to obtain a view of this man’s private room, and that, too, without exciting the least suspicion.

“Will you let me see the door?” I asked.

“With the greatest pleasure,” said he; “I have already examined it myself, and found it as secure as of old—but perhaps your more experienced eye may detect some sign there that has escaped me.”

I followed him, and without the slightest hesitation he led me to his bed-chamber.

There was the door fastened as he had said, and I made a show of looking at it—but that was not what fascinated me and riveted my attention at once!

The walls were full of shelves, and the shelves were crowded with philosophical instruments!

I left the portico door finally, and as I was going, carelessly remarked:

“You seem to take an interest in science?”

“Why, yes,” he said, smiling, “I do, and I flatter myself that few men here or elsewhere have a larger or better collection of apparatus than I have.”

I touched him on his particular vanity, and knew now that I might search unmolested, and not only that but with his own proper aid, for the instrument of death.

I turned back, as I spoke, and picked up a pamphlet from the study-table in the centre of the room.

The book was written in the Italian language.

I have some slight knowledge of the tongue of modern opera, and I read on the title page that the work was one on the various modes of destruction of animal life, and that it was by Casturini.

And Casturini was the name of the Professor spoken of in the newspaper paragraph.

I felt that I was working on the right track.

I laid down the volume and gradually turned the conversation to the subject of pneumatics, in the course of which I asked if my companion had Casturini’s air pump. He told me no, but he had his air-syringe.

I asked to look at it.

For the first time man turned on me a hurried glance of alarm.

But I managed to appear as if I suspected nothing—as if nothing more dangerous than love of science actuated me in my investigations.

And my companion was satisfied, for he at once produced the air-syringe.

It was a strange instrument; in shape it was like an ordinary syringe, such as is daily employed in medicine, only larger, perhaps twice as large as any of that kind I had ever seen. It was mounted on a stand of polished walnut, like an electric machine, and, indeed looked like one—that is, a cylindrical one. It was furnished with a crank, by which it worked, and two large, funnel-shaped mouthpieces. These latter were not stationary, but could be moved—brought nearer together or more widely separated, as circumstances required.

This, then, was the instrument of death, and it performed its dread work silently and surely, and left no external trace.

I touched it with a feeling akin to horror, and asked:

“Has this no other use than to deprive animals of life?”

“None,” was the smiling response.

“Can you operate it?”

“Better than any I ever met.”

I was standing facing this man as he made this boast.

I laid my hand on his shoulder.

He started and seemed not to know what to make of my conduct.

“Your crime is discovered, sir!” said I, sternly, “You are a patricide, and I arrest you for the murder of the man who lies in the other chamber!”

His face turned fairly purple with rage and fear, and then grew inky black.

He sat down in the chair without another word.

His courage, and above all things, his incomparable audacity, had altogether abandoned him at this terrible crisis.

I spoke to him again several times, but could get no answer.

Then I rang the bell and sent for the coroner’s physician.

He came, looked at the man still sitting on the chair, speechless and black in the face, and shook his head.

“This man has lost his reason!” were his fearful words. “What has caused it?”

I told him, and showed him Casturini’s air syringe.

We took our prisoner into custody and conveyed him in a close carriage to the police station.

The ride somewhat restored him, but he was still altogether overwhelmed and crushed.

We left him in a cell and went our various ways.

In the morning I was the first to call and see him.

The officer in charge told me he had been up the greater part of the night, and was then sleeping.

I waited half an hour, and then, in company with the doctor, who had by that time arrived, went to the cell.

The man was there on the bed, lying in his shirt and pantaloons, with his face downward, and motionless.

The doctor touched him—he was cold and stiff. The patricide was dead.

By his side lay a paper, crushed and rumped, as if in his last agonies he had endeavored to tear it up.

I took it and read, written in lead pencil, the following:

“The shrewdness of the detective has been too much for me. It was night when I did it, and I fancied the means used put it beyond reach of discovery. I was mistaken, and I pay the penalty of that mistake freely now. The doctor is a shrewd practitioner. A man does not counterfeit madness with him with impunity. Had he been as wise in his way as the detective was in his, the law would not have been cheated of its prey. I had my reasons for the deed, fully as potent as those I have for this.”

Here followed the signature of the suicide, traced in a full, bold hand.

I turned to the physician and officer who were with me, and had read the letter over my shoulder.

I must confess that I think my face showed triumph—triumph at having succeeded in tracking and taking a criminal so adroit and calculating—and possibly I had some good ground for being elated.

I did not ask the family of the murdered man for a reward, but I carried away the air syringe, and I have it to this day. I have made repeated experiments with it since it came in my possession, and each succeeding one but convinces me the more of its deadly and dangerous character.

There is another thing that I must say before I close, and that is this: I have solved the mystery of that limp piece of handkerchief I found on the day I undertook the investigation of the affair I have just been speaking of: it was employed by the murderer to repress and keep back the slight

foam that always flies from the mouth of the subject whenever submitted to the action of the syringe.

I look back upon this adventure now as one of the most important events in my career, and I take pride in telling over and over again. It shows what science is connected with the detection of crime, and it also shows from what a slight link a massive chain of conclusive evidence may be forged. I say I look back to it with pride, and I can only hope that an intelligent public will hear and approve my recital—the story of the UNKNOWN DEATH.

The Lake Village Times, April 25, 1874

Essex County Herald [Guildhall, VT], May 2, 1874

The Orangeburg [SC] News, May 30, 1874

The Newberry [SC] Herald, August 19, 1874

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