

Saved by a Cipher—A Detective's Story

CHAPTER I.

I have worked up many hard cases and have cornered many notorious criminals, but never before or since have I been engaged in a case so complicated, or one which was so hard to clear up as that Stuart-Firststone murder case.

You know that the Stuarts were very wealthy, and the old man had only two sons, Cecil and Gilbert; outlandish names they had, to be sure, but they were very proud of them, at least the younger one. As I said, he had only two to bother him, and to these of course he gave the bulk of his property. Cecil was a cripple, the result of being dropped by a careless nurse in infancy.

Gilbert, the younger of the two, was early known to all the sports as a jolly good fellow, partly because he would always stand treat, and would play billiards and such games; and yet he was never known to win them when playing for a wager. In this manner he sustained his reputation of being a free-and-easy fellow. But in the mean time his property was steadily decreasing until, at last, his share—which, in the first place, would have been more than enough for men like you and me—dwindled down in an insignificant sum, and he had to look in some other direction for money to pay his gaming debts. He had often applied to his brother for aid, and had often obtained it, together with good advice, which he promised to heed, but never did.

Cecil was always very studious, and had surrounded himself with all the old-fashioned books that he could hear of or obtain. And on account of his lameness this kind of company had a charm for him that we in good health would not feel.

Cecil was always very lenient toward his erring brother but at last, hearing from every source of his scrapes, he was compelled, by a sense of duty, to resolve to refuse his application for aid. And it was not long before he had to test his resolutions, for Gilbert, after an "all night" of it in a gambling saloon, came to him and begged for more money. Cecil reasoned with him, and with tears in his eyes begged that he would quit his wild habits. But all was of no avail and he was compelled, much against his brotherly feelings, to refuse him the aid he sought. At this Gilbert flew into a frenzy of rage and left the house, swearing that he would get the money in some manner.

As he was walking homeward, feeling anything but pleasant, he saw his deadliest enemy riding with a young lady to whom he had been paying attention for some time, but who now gave him the "cut direct." Maddened at this, he rushed into a saloon near by, and calling for whiskey, he swallowed a glassful in an instant, then went home, and called his bosom friend and counsellor to him.

Albert Firststone, the friend, was a broken-down gambler—a man who had spent a fortune on the turn, and was now nominally acting as a jockey for Gilbert Stuart, but was in reality his confederate in schemes of robbery, and, as the sequel will show, of murder. These two friends were closeted together for a long while, and time showed the result of their conference, though I would not spoil my story by revealing too soon their nefarious designs.

Of course you remember the excitement in the up-town circles when the news of Cecil Stuart's murder was circulated and the astonishment of every one when it was known that his body had been found in the coal-cellar of Roger Lyon's brown-stone palace. Astonishment was increased manifold by the intelligence that Roger Lyon was arrested and charged with the crime of murder.

Although but a few were intimately acquainted with Cecil Stuart, and a scarcely large circle barely knew him as a very eccentric man, yet the crime being committed at the very door of their mansion, made it seem the most startling one in the records of our city; and as there were many influential persons who loved Roger Lyon better than all their friends beside, and many a poor washerwoman who blessed the day that he saved her bit of ground from the auctioneer's hammer—to have him, the people's favorite, charged with such a deed, seemed to be an outrage upon all classes of our citizens.

I well remember when Lansing, Lyon's lawyer, called upon me and begged me to try my best to clear up the mystery. At this time I had been in the detective force for nearly four years, and, of course, knew the ropes pretty well. But for a month I confess that at times I was nearly baffled.

But I will come directly to my story. As a first step, I went to the cellar where the body was found, and, as I had ordered it to be left there after the inquest till I could examine everything myself, it still remained there. Being something of a doctor, I naturally examined the wounds, and was satisfied that they would not cause instant death. But I did not rely on my own medical skill in this, but sent for a physician. He came—a sharp fellow by the name of Denning—and probed the wounds. One of the wounds went close to the heart, but the other two were in the lungs, evidently intended to cause hemorrhage, which had followed, but sufficient to cause death immediately.

Roger Lyon's knife, with which the deed had evidently been committed, a silver-mounted affair—a present from some one—lay near the wall.

The doctor soon finished his work, and giving me a look that I interpreted instantly, went out, taking Lansing with him, to whom he communicated the result of his examination. When they had gone I walked over to the wall that appeared to have been made by a sharp instrument of some kind. While I was examining these Gilbert Stuart and Albert Firestone entered. I was about to call their attention to the marks when a sudden thought caused me to close my mouth upon the words that were on my tongue's end.

After obtaining permission they took the body over to his late residence.

As soon as they were gone I again examined the marks, and I found that they were a combination of letters and figures arranged like this:

S—1225—D.

I copied then upon paper, and then, taking the knife with me, went to my office, down town, to study out, if possible, the cipher I had discovered. I had no doubt that it was made by Cecil,

probably after he had been stabbed; and I was convinced that the cause of its being in cipher was, that no one would be apt to notice it enough to obliterate it. But by what means could I obtain a key was now the puzzle.

Acting according to a suggestion of Lansing, I went [to] the public library, and for a week I rummaged its shelves for any work that mentioned cipher-writing. I continued bringing home books until my den looked more like a reading-room than a detective's office, while in their midst sat Lansing, searching every page, and occasionally jotting down something in a book by his side.

One day I entered with my arms full of book. I noticed a look akin to triumph on his face as his pencil flew over the paper. In answer to my inquiry he handed me a slip of paper, upon which he had copied a table, giving the relative number of each letter that is used in common English words. I looked it over and waited for him to speak. In a moment he looked up and said:

“You see the table gives ‘e’ the prominence over all others; call ‘e’ one. Then see ‘t’ is the second best; call ‘t’ two. Then run your eyes up to the fifth importance, and we have ‘d’ and ‘l.’ Take last number five, and the figures, with the addition of the two letters that were expressed, read ‘settl’d.’ [So] you see I have translated the cipher one way.”

I admitted that it was a very ingenious translation, and was very much encouraged by it, although the word “settled” might not have any special relation to the case in hand. But I did not doubt that it was nearer the true rendering than any we had reached yet, and it convinced me that the figures were to be changed in some way to letters before the cryptogram could be entirely solved.

About a week after this Lansing was called out of the city by the sickness of his mother. As I parted with him at the depot I told him to keep up his courage and to write out his defence, while I would attend to the remainder.

During all this time the opposing counsel were striving in every possible manner to make an adamant chain of evidence that should immediately condemn the prisoner beyond any shadow of a doubt.

CHAPTER II.

In this way nearly three weeks had passed since the murder, when I received a telegram from Lansing informing me of his return to the city. All this time I had been shut up in my office, working—it must be confessed with little hope of success.

The day that I had expected Lansing's return I went to the place where the body had been found, and examined carefully the marks on the wall, but I could find none other than the ones I had seen before so I concluded that those were the only ones. As I stood looking at them, however, I saw what seemed to be a piece of stone lying on the floor of the cellar. As a detective sees a clue in everything, I picked it up, and found, to my surprise, that it was a piece of putty. As soon as I

discovered this I searched the whole wall to find where the piece came from and at last I discovered that some marks near the others were filled with putty. I scraped the putty away, and the whole cryptogram appeared as follows:

S T—1225—D
124
A First one.

(The letters and figures in italics had been concealed by putty.)

I took another copy and went back to my retreat, leaving orders for no one to be admitted to the cellar.

Here, now, was another mystery; and from revelation which I had just received I was astonished into the belief that Albert Firstone had something to do with the crime. But yet the cipher was still a mystery.

While I was studying these new developments, Lansing came in. I grasped his hand with a pressure that made him wince, as I showed him the other letters I had found. He looked at them a moment, and then, springing from his chair, fairly shouted:

“Firstone is the murderer, and his name is the key to the cipher!”

And he showed me that the word “Firstone” in my copy was separated into two words, and that the line read: “A First one.” By this key the figures read, “a b b e,” and the cipher, with the addition of the part deciphered, read:

Stabbed
by
A. Firestone.

We did not either of us shout “Eureka!” or anything else. But I looked at Lansing, who was trembling like a leaf, and said, “You ought to have been a detective.”

Having written out the cipher according to his translation, and being convinced that I had been outwitted, or something of that sort, by a lawyer, I leaned back in my chair, and, I can’t tell why, but I burst out into a hearty laugh, which Lansing soon joined.

After my risible powers were exhausted I rang the bell for the errand-boy, and sent a note like this to Denning:

“Come up to my den this afternoon and bring some handy instrument for the detection of foreign substances, such as pieces of stone in blood.”

After sending this I prevailed upon Lansing to go with me to luncheon. In an hour we returned, and found Denning with a large microscope and several small vials. I immediately went to my

desk, took out Roger Lyon's knife, and handed it to him, asking him to see if there were any pieces of stone in the blood-stains which still showed on the knife. He knew my meaning in an instant, and, taking a vial, he carefully rinsed a portion of the stains with its contents, letting the liquid run upon a glass slide which he had placed in the sun's rays.

Impatiently he watched and waited for the evaporation of the liquid. It was soon all gone, when he placed the slide in the microscope and turned the powerful sun-glass upon it. On looking in the lens, minute particles of stone, some stained with blood, were plainly visible, thus proving that the knife had been used to cut the stone of the cellar after the blood and stained it.

"This is the result you wanted to reach, is it not?" asked Denning, as he looked me in the face.

"Yes," I answered.

Then, taking a piece of paper, I wrote for a moment, and then handed him what I had written, with a request that he would sign it, which he did. It was an affidavit certifying that, according to the best medical knowledge, the deceased must have lived some time after the fatal blow was received; and that from minute particles of stone which adhered to the blade it must have been used by some one, probably the deceased, to cut stone with after the blood stains were on it.

Here, then, was the evidence needed to prove the innocence of the prisoner. I could not resist the temptation to reveal it to Dr. Denning, and a happier trio could hardly be found than were assembled in that little down-town office.

The trial was commenced in about a week, and, of course, we were impatient for the time to pass.

At last the day arrived. The court-room was crowded, and many of the detective force were present. After some other business, our case was called up. The judge asked:

"Guilty or not guilty?"

Lansing, in behalf of the prisoner, broke the silence with the words:

"Not guilty," and added, "I would accuse Albert Firstone of the crime charged upon my client."

I sat next to the criminal when the announcement was made, and as the eyes of the court were turned upon him his self-possession left him. And when Lansing asked that he should be taken into custody the poor fellow fell over in a fit, and was taken out by a policeman.

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