

The Tell-Tale Signature

A DETECTIVE STORY

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[From the Family Journal]

One day, while cozily sipping a cup of tea, and talking over our courting days with my wife, a loud ring at the bell informed me that a visitor wished to see me. The servant girl showed into the apartment a young lady of remarkable beauty, who stated that she wished to see me privately on very important business. My wife (God bless her!) who is by no means of a jealous disposition, discreetly withdrew and we were left alone. I offered the young lady a chair, and informed her that I was at her service. After a little hesitation natural to her years, she made a statement to me which I will condense as follows:

Charlotte Melvin (my fair visitor) was the only child of Reuben Melvin, Esq., who had resided on the banks of the Hudson river, about twenty miles from New York. Her father had been devotedly attached to her, and they had lived as happy as it was possible to live together. He had gratified every wish of hers, and for years not a single cloud obscured their calm and peaceful happiness. About a year ago Charlotte had been introduced to the son of a gentleman living in their neighborhood, and mutual love had sprung up between them. Her father had not opposed their union, as it was a very desirable match on all sides, and it was settled they should be married next spring. Things went on this way for some months. Leonard Appleby visited her father's house every night, and everything went as merry as a marriage bell. But suddenly their dream of happiness was dissipated, and that, too, by an extraordinary occurrence. Her betrothed was one morning found in the gardens attached to the house in a half-senseless condition, his clothes and hands bespattered with blood, and her father had mysteriously disappeared. Every search was made for him, but without any result, and her lover, Leonard Appleby had been arrested on the charge of having murdered him, and it was supposed that he had concealed the body somewhere. It was evident from the appearance of the place where Leonard had been found in the morning that a terrible struggle had taken place, the flowers and roots were torn up, the shrubbery broken, the ground in various places was covered with blood, and a knife, which was proved to have belonged to the prisoner, was also stained with the vital fluid. The most damning evidence, however, against the prisoner, was the fact that Mr. Melvin's watch and purse were found in his possession.

Leonard Appleby was removed to the county jail, where he was incarcerated at the time Miss Melvin called upon me; his case not having been investigated from the fact of the body of the man he was supposed to have murdered not having been discovered. But the strangest thing of all in this affair was that a week after the catastrophe a brother of Mr. Melvin's appeared and claimed his whole property by virtue of a will which he exhibited, and by which he was made sole heir to all his brother's property. There was no disputing the will, for it was unquestionably signed by the deceased, and Richard Melvin took possession of the whole of the property of his

late bother, and did not offer to expend one cent for the support of his niece Charlotte, who was thrown upon the world in an utterly destitute condition.

Such was the substance of the story told me by Miss Melvin; and she further added that three weeks had elapsed since her father's death, but that no satisfactory result had been obtained as to how or by what means he had come to his end, and that although she had employed almost every detective officer in New York, they had been unable to afford her any satisfaction.

"Miss Melvin," said I, as soon as she had finished, "is it not very strange that your father should have left your uncle all his property? From some hints you have let fall, I should judge they were not on very good terms with each other during your father's life."

"You are right, Mr. Barker," said Miss Melvin; "they had never spoken to each other for years. My poor father could never bear to hear the name of this brother Richard mentioned, and I heard him say frequently that he was a bad hearted man."

"Are you sure the signature to the will was really in your father's handwriting?"

"I am perfectly satisfied of it; so much so that when some of my friends advised me to contest the validity of the will, being firmly convinced that my father did sign it, I refused most positively. I care nothing about my father's wealth, and it is not to regain this that I ask your assistance, sir. My motive is to free Mr. Leonard Appleby from the imputation of a crime of which I am sure he is as innocent as I am."

"It does, indeed, seem perfectly preposterous that he should have committed the deed. There appears to be no possible motive for it."

"Ah! sir, if you only knew his heart as well as I do, you would be convinced that it is utterly impossible that he could have committed the fearful deed. My father loved him, and imposed no obstacle to our marriage."

I reflected a few minutes on this strange case, for, to tell the truth, at first glance I did not know what to make of it. The whole affair appeared to be involved in mystery. Of course I did not for a moment suppose that Leonard Appleby was really guilty of Mr. Melvin's death. The utter absence of motive, and the fact that he had everything to lose and nothing to gain by the death of the father of his betrothed, satisfied me that he could not be the guilty party. Then the thought naturally arose in my mind if Leonard was innocent, who was guilty? Here again I could come to no satisfactory conclusion. It is true, my suspicions pointed to Mr. Richard Melvin, but there was nothing I could gather from Miss Melvin's narrative which served to confirm a single one of them. As had been seen, she did not even deny the authenticity of the signature of the will.

"Has the will been proved, Miss Melvin," I asked at last.

"Oh, yes," she replied; "uncle took possession of the property some weeks ago."

"And what have you been doing since?" I asked, more out of curiosity than anything else.

“I have obtained some music pupils, and I am doing very well; as I before said, I have no concern for myself. I wish you to prove that Mr. Leonard Appleby is innocent.”

“Have you a letter or any document with your father’s signature attached to it?”

“I have a number at home,” she replied; “bye-the-bye, I think I have a letter of his with me now, written to me some six years ago, when he was in Washington.”

So saying, she took from her reticule the letter in question, and handed it to me.

“Will you allow me to retain possession of this?” I asked.

“Certainly,” she replied; “but I can assure you again that if you suppose the will to be a forgery, you are mistaken. The will is undoubtedly genuine.”

“Well, my dear young lady,” I replied, “I do not doubt your word, but you may be mistaken; at all events, I should like to judge for myself.”

Making a few inquiries as to the exact position of her father’s house, and as to the means of reaching it, I bade her good morning, expressing a desire to see her again that day week.

When she had gone I immediately put on my hat and coat, and directed my steps to the recorder’s office, for the purpose of examining the will. Aided by the index, I soon found it, and commenced to read every word of it.

It was by no means a long document, but went on to state that he, Reuben Melvin, being of sane mind, did thereby bequeath unto his beloved brother, Richard Melvin, all his personal property real estate, etc. etc.. The document appeared to be drawn up in perfect legal form, and the most captious special pleader could take no exception to it whatever. At last I came to the signature. I took from my pocket the letter Miss Melvin had given me for the purpose of comparing the signatures. There could be no doubt whatever but the signature was genuine. The letters were formed exactly the same, and made evident xxxxxxxxxx. Still there was a marked difference between them. That attached to the letter was bold and firm—while that attached to the will was weak and tremulous.

This fact immediately roused my suspicions. A person’s signature rarely differs, except where the mind is influenced; but then again I reflected that time might impair a person’s writing, and I compared the date of the will with that of the letter. What was my astonishment to find that they were both dated on the same day, namely January 1st, 1840. I next held up the document to the light, for the purpose of seeing if there was a water mark on the paper. I found xxxxxxxx and the words “Connecticut Mills, 1843,” could be made out distinctly.

Here then was a will purporting to have been signed in New York on xxxxx 1st of January, 1840, by a man who was in Washington on that very day, and on paper that was made three years afterward. And yet there could be no disputing the fact that the signature was a genuine one.

The whole truth in a moment flashed across my mind, and I immediately set about unraveling the web. I went to work with a good heart, for I had but little doubt of success.

My first proceeding was to make inquiries as to the exact date of Mr. Melvin's disappearance. I discovered that it was on the 2nd of June, and that Richard Melvin had come to take possession of the property on the 18th. I also made inquiries as to the early life of the heir to the property and found that in Boston, from which town he came, he bore a very disreputable character, and that no one would trust or believe him.

My next proceeding was to visit Oak Leaf Manor—the estate in question. My purpose was to have an interview with the proprietor, so that I might observe him well, and perhaps gain a few points by my scrutiny. I soon reached the dwelling, and ringing boldly at the bell, demanded an interview with Mr. Richard Melvin. After some little delay, I was admitted into his presence. I found him to be a gentlemanly man enough, but with rather a forbidding cast of features. I noticed two things in particular about him; one was, that he had a club foot, and had a restless manner. I made some plausible excuse for my visit—I think it was that I had heard he wanted to sell his property, and I would like to purchase it if such was the case. He replied to me politely, stating of course, that the report was false, and I bade him good morning.

When I left the house, I determined to visit the stable for a reason the reader will discover by and by. I found two very fine horses, and the ostler, a good-humored Irishman, there.

“Fine horses, these,” said I, as I entered the door.

“Sure an' you may well say that,” replied the ostler, proud of my notice.

“You keep them well groomed, too.”

“Faith, an' it's but little grooming they want.”

“I suppose they can travel pretty fast?”

“You've just hit the nail on the head. You should just have seen them the day they came down here from New York; why, they didn't sweat a hair, and it's a good twenty miles, too.”

“Indeed! They did not belong to the late Mr. Melvin?”

“No, indeed. Sure, and Mr. Richard Melvin brought them down with him, when he came!”

“They were not at all distressed, you say?”

“Divil a bit; they looked as fresh as if they had just come out of the stable.”

“Did Mr. Melvin arrive here in the daytime or night time?”

“It was dark night.”

“I see you come from the old country; here’s a quarter to drink my health—good day!”

“Good day, and God bless you, sir! And may the holy saints preserve you!”

My next proceeding was to visit several houses in the neighborhood, and inquire if there was an inn anywhere in the neighborhood, but all my inquiries were without any result. I then set myself resolutely to work to search for myself, for I was perfectly satisfied there must be some place in the vicinity.

For a day or two my efforts were entirely unsuccessful; but one morning, while wandering by the side of the river I noticed the marks of horses’ hoofs, as if coming directly *from the river*. I immediately procured a boat and rowed directly across—the river was not very broad there. I then skirted the opposite bank, until I should come to another landing place. After I had proceeded a quarter of a mile I reached a spot where again the marks of horses’ hoofs were plainly to be traced; this time, however, the direction was *towards the river*. The impression was plain, the horses at this point had embarked on a boat or raft, and had been conveyed to the other side at the point from which I had started.

I made my boat fast, and looked about me. I found that I was on a small island, which was so thickly studded with green trees that I could see but very little in advance of me. Taking, however, the horses’ hoofs as my guide I came upon an old, dilapidated stone building, which had evidently been built long anterior to the revolution. It seemed to be entirely unoccupied, for all the shutters were closed, and thick grass and weeds grew in profusion.

I first directed my steps to a sort of outhouse, and here I was rewarded by a sight which made my blood tingle in my veins, being nothing more than the impression on the gravel of a club foot. These impressions were very frequent, and my conclusion was that Mr. Richard Melvin paid frequent visits to this uninhabitable dwelling. I next proceeded to try all the doors and windows, and found them all fastened down. I however soon effected an entrance by means of one of the windows. The first thing that met my gaze was a long candle and a box of Lucifer matches. These were placed in a small recess. Although it was daylight, I lighted the candle and began to explore the house. I first of all examined the upper portion, but found nothing. I then examined the ground floor, with the same success. I did not feel discouraged, for I felt almost satisfied, from the fact of the candle being there, that such would be the result. I next proceeded to examine the cellar, and had not descended half a dozen steps before I heard a faint groan. I rushed forward and entered a spacious vault, supported by massive pillars. In the corner of this damp, dark and dismal dungeon, reclining on a heap of straw, with manacles on his wrists and ankles, I saw an old man, with a long, flowing, white beard, who, I was satisfied, was Mr. Reuben Melvin. I held the candle over his head, and saw that he was sleeping. At that moment I heard the sound of footsteps behind me, and turning round, saw that it was Mr. Richard Melvin advancing towards me with the ferocity of a tiger.

A terrible struggle ensued, but I was the younger of the two, and finally succeeded in overpowering, and affixing the manacles, with which he had loaded his poor brother, on his wrists and feet.

The joy of the poor old man, at his release, knew no bounds. In a very few words, he informed me of all that had passed. On the night of his disappearance, he was seized by his brother and a confederate, and conveyed to this prison without being able to give the slightest alarm. While there, he had been compelled, under threats of instant death, to sign a document, the purport of which he did not know. His brother had visited him every day bringing him a supply of food, but he could not have lasted much longer, as he was getting weaker and weaker daily.

Everything had turned out exactly as I had expected. The trembling characters of the signature to the will, and that fact that it had been ante-dated, convinced me that it had been obtained by force. I then argued that the chances were that Mr. Reuben Melvin was not dead, but in some place of confinement. This place, I was satisfied, must be near Oak Leaf Manor, as it would be impossible to convey him any long distance without detection. I was also satisfied that Richard Melvin must have been in the neighborhood long before the time he was supposed to have come from New York, and it was to discover if my opinion was just, that I paid a visit to the stables.

The poor old gentleman was conveyed back to his residence, and was soon gratified with his daughter's presence. Young Appleby was immediately released from confinement. It appeared, by his statement, that, on the evening of the old gentleman's disappearance, while crossing the garden, he had been assailed by two men, and had received a wound on the arm, and had fainted from loss of blood; when he recovered it was morning, and that very moment he was arrested on the charge of having murdered Mr. Reuben Melvin, and the watch and purse belonging to the supposed deceased, and placed in his pocket by Richard Melvin, served to give some coloring to the charge.

I may add that, in a month or two, Charlotte Melvin and Leonard Appleby were married. Richard Melvin died, after two years' confinement in the State prison, where he had been condemned for life. He died, however, without revealing the name of his accomplice, and he has never been discovered.

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