

Murder Will Out

On the night of the 4th of Aug, 1834, Mr. John Askern, a hosier, of Leicester, in England, was murdered under revolting circumstances. Mr. Askern was about forty years of age, married, and the father of a numerous family. His wife, two years previously, had eloped with a commercial traveler named Powell, and the two were supposed to be living together in London. Mr. Askern's sister was at the head of his domestic establishment, and he had just instituted proceedings to procure a divorce. He was a wealthy man, and resides in a well-appointed house on Belgrave Gate. In front of it was a garden which extended around one side to the rear. A high railing separated it from the street, and a wall, fully twenty feet high, protected it in the rear. On the left side of the door, on entering, was a room which Mr. Askern used as a library or private parlor. In front of it was a very large laburnum tree, which shaded all that side of the dwelling.

Separated from the back of the premises by the high wall mentioned, was the yard of an inn, and a shed for vehicles. About 9 o'clock in the evening of August 4th, one of Mr. Askern's servants ran into the kitchen from the back garden and exclaimed:

"I'm sure I saw the head of a man looking over the wall."

"Most likely it was a cat," was the reply, and nothing more was said on the subject.

Soon afterward the lights in the kitchen was extinguished, and the domestics retired to their rooms. It so happened that the cook had forgotten a pair of stockings which she had been darning for herself, and returned to the kitchen for them. A noise like the cracking of a branch attracted her attention, and she peered through the blind into the yard. She distinctly saw the head of a man above the wall. It disappeared; and she heard a noise as of some one dropping into the yard.

The cook proceeded to the study and informed her master what she had seen. Mr. Askern lighted a lamp, and taking a revolver in his hand, passed through the garden and examined every spot where a person could be harbored. Feeling satisfied that no one was around, he returned to the house, bade the cook to go to bed, and retired to his study.

The cook and the kitchen maid occupied a small room over the study, and, as the night was close, they left their window open. After they had retired to bed, the cook said:

"We had better close the window, for the wind is rising. Don't you hear the leaves of the laburnum shaking?"

The maid arose and went to close the window. She put her head out for a moment and then said:

"There's not a breath of air stirring. I'll leave the window open a little."

The she retired to bed, and the two women slept undisturbed until morning.

Shortly after five o'clock the coachman, who slept in the basement, arose and went to attend to some work in the front garden. He observed the window of Mr. Askern's study open and the curtains torn down. At first he thought that the servants might have had orders to renovate the room, but he remembered that he was the only person up in the house. He entered the dwelling by the rear door and proceeded to Mr. Askern's parlor. The door was unfastened and he entered. An awful spectacle met his view. Mr. Askern lay on the floor with his throat cut. He was dead. His bureau had been ransacked, and his watch and pocket book were gone. An alarm was given and the authorities were soon on the spot.

There were signs in the room of a desperate struggle. The carpet was ripped up in several places, chairs were upset, the curtains of the window were ripped down, and there were bloody finger marks on the wall. On the window sill were marks of dirty feet, and footsteps were plainly visible in the soft soil outside. One of the windows of the parlor on the opposite side of the hallway was found open, and there were evident signs of some one's having entered by that point. The marks of feet outside showed that the party had not quitted the house by that means of exit.

At the inquest which followed, the fact of the servants having seen a man climbing over the wall in the rear was brought out, and also the circumstance of Mr. Askern's having gone round the premises to search for intruders. The impression was that there had been two persons engaged in the crime, that they had entered the garden from the rear, and that they had concealed themselves in the foliage of the laburnum tree. Their presence there doubtless occasioned the shaking of the branches which the servants on retiring to rest supposed was caused by the wind.

The man who kept the inn in the rear of Mr. Askern's residence was examined. He was an old and respected resident, and his house was chiefly supported by gentlemen farmers who made it their headquarters on market days. The innkeeper testified that on the previous evening about nine o'clock two strangers entered the bar-room and called for beer. After sitting for a short time, one of them retired to the yard. The innkeeper's attention was called away, and he did not observe their movements. They disappeared, and he presumed they had quitted the inn. A very imperfect description of these men could be obtained. They were both clean shaved and wore slouch hats. That was about all the information that could be secured respecting them. The theory of the murder was that one man had entered by the parlor window on the right side of the main entrance and that the other had entered a moment or two afterward by the window of the study. Probably the latter window was open, and immediately as the first man entered the study from the hallway, the other sprang in at the study window. Then, as Mr. Askern faced the first man, he was assailed and probably clutched from behind by the other. The revolver which Mr. Askern had doubtless grasped as the first man entered, had been wrenched from his hand, for his fingers were torn and bloody. The victim had then been probably garroted, and in the struggle he had clutched at the curtains and torn them down. Then he had been overpowered, thrown down, and dispatched with a knife. No weapon was found in the room. A small clock which stood on the bureau was upset; and the hands pointed to ten minutes past twelve—the hour which the murder had been doubtlessly perpetrated. This circumstances, so trivial in itself, turned out to be of singular importance. The murderers, evidently quitted the premises by the front garden, for their footsteps were discernable close to the iron railings, and on the white stonework which supported them there was the mark of a bloody left hand, the fingers, thumb and ball of the hand being very

distinctly marked. As the murderers had evidently wiped their hands on the curtains before quitting the room, it was believed that one of them had wounded his left hand when in the act of cutting the throat of his victim, and hence the bloody imprint on the stone.

Measures were taken with all speed to track the perpetrators of the dreadful crime, but it was some time before any clue could be obtained. As to the motive of the crime, nothing could be arrived at. Robbery had been committed in conjunction with the crime, but it was not known that Mr. Askern kept any money in his study.

It was found that Mr. Askern had an insurance on his life, in favor of his wife, for £10,000, and in connection with that, important information it was procured. The insurance agent stated that about a week or ten days before the murder, a gentleman called on him and said that he had been recommended by Mr. Askern to apply to him for a policy on his life, adding that he had a life policy for a large amount in favor of his wife. The agent said that was the case, and thereupon the stranger observed that he considered it rather remarkable that Mr. Askern had not canceled the policy since his wife's misconduct. The agent replied that Mr. Askern intended to take out a new policy in favor of his children, and to cancel the other very shortly. The stranger then made some further inquiries respecting the policy for himself, and promised to call again. The day before the murder, the stranger again visited the insurance agent, and fixed a time for medical examination. He inquired casually whether Mr. Askern had arranged his wife's policy, and was informed that he had not. He said he was surprised at that, and departed.

In the meantime diligent search had been made after the murderers, but without result, and there was no doubt but that they had quitted the neighborhood. A celebrated detective was employed on the case, and all the facts were laid before him. He considered the statement of the insurance agent of very grave importance, as suggesting a motive for the crime, and the theory on which he began to work was based thereon. After some little difficulty he discovered Mrs. Askern was living with her paramour, and placed them under surveillance. The man Powell was living a profligate life, and supported himself and the woman who passed as his wife, by gambling and other disreputable acts. They were residing in Chapel street, Islington, and the detective secured a room in the house directly opposite, so as to observe their movements. Within a week of the murder the man's habits were fully ascertained. His favorite place of resort was in Lambeth, near the river, where seafaring men of all nationalities were accustomed to meet for an evening, and gamble away their hard-earned money. From the men who kept this hell the detective learned that Powell was absent on the night of August the 4th and that on the afternoon of the 5th he appeared there at an unusual hour in company with a man who was a stranger. For this man the officer was anxiously looking.

On the evening of August 13th Powell and Mrs. Askern went together to Saddler's Wells Theater, and the officer followed them. At 9 o'clock Powell quitted the theater and retired to a public house near by. There he was joined by a man of medium height, who looked like one who had followed the sea. The two sat together at a table and conversed in low tones. After an hour spent thus, they left the place, Powell returning toward the theater, and the other man going toward City Road, tracked by the detective. Once the man stopped and lighted his pipe. And the detective had a sudden fit of coughing which checked his progress. The two men moved on again

almost simultaneously. At the corner of the next street the man turned abruptly and faced the officer. "Do you know where Sloane street is?" he asked.

"It's about half a mile ahead," the officer replied. "I can see the red lamp at the druggist's on the corner."

"That's all right," the man said, and walked on.

At Sloane street the man entered a urinal, and the officer stepped aside into a doorway and watched. Ten minutes passes and the man did not come out. A quarter of an hour went by and he was not visible. During that time only one person left the place, and the man wore a cap and a full beard, whereas the man the officer wanted was clean shaved and wore a large felt hat. The officer went through the urinal, but it was empty. The man had eluded him, and without doubt he had gone into the place, changed his head gear, and put on a false beard for that purpose. The officer hastened in the direction in which the man with the cap and full beard went, but he had vanished. The officer acknowledged himself outwitted, and returned to his room in Chapel street.

He had no doubt whatever that Powell and the other man were the murderers of Mr. Askern, and that Powell was the person that called on the insurance agent with respect to a life policy. In the officer's mind the whole thing was clear enough. Mr. Askern had been murdered to secure the £10,000 life policy for Mrs. Askern, whether with her assent or not was immaterial. Powell's expectation was to get possession of the money by marrying his paramour, if need be. The other man's services had been secured by Powell, and would probably be rewarded when the wife's policy was secured. The officer could have arrested Powell at once, but he was anxious to capture his confederate, and, therefore, refrained. Now, however, the men evidently suspected the detective and would recognize him again. Powell, too, would be put on his guard, and perhaps both men would succeed in eluding justice. The detective, therefore, resolved on a bold scheme.

The same afternoon it was announced in all the evening newspapers that the men who had murdered Mr. Askern had been arrested and were in jail. The next morning the report was confirmed, and the evidence fixing the crime on them was said to be most condemning. The evening after the announcement Powell did not leave home, but the next evening he went out about eight o'clock. He proceeded straight to the City Road and entered a basement where a cobbler was at work. The detective had to walk far into the roadway before he could see into the door. The cobbler sat with his back to the door, and Powell sat alongside. After a few minutes spent in conversation Powell arose and quitted the cobbler's shop.

"You are safe, my man," the detective said to himself; "I needn't follow you, for I know where to find you. This broad-shouldered fellow down here in this hole I must scrape an acquaintance with."

He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, and then gave a peculiar whistle. The next minute a policeman approached from the opposite side of the street, and the detective and he spoke together. The officer then took up a position almost in front of the cobbler's shop, and the

detective descended the steps leading toward it. He entered the door and entered. The cobbler glanced up and then went on with his work.

“Good evening,” the detective said.

“How are ye, how are ye?” was the response, “what can I do for you?”

The man’s arms were bared to the elbow, and were hard and sinewy. He had a shade over his eyes which concealed his features entirely.

“I want you to make me a pair of easy slippers,” the detective said, seating himself right in front of the cobbler.

The latter raised his head to look at his visitor, and his face was fully disclosed. That one glance was enough for the officer, who recognized in a moment the man who had met Powell in the public house near the Saddler’s Wells Theater, and whom he tracked down City Road and lost at Sloane street. Quicker than thought the detective thrust his right foot under the legs of the cobbler, and pushed him backward to the floor at the same instant springing on him and giving a shrill whistle. The policeman from without entered, and after a brief struggle the cobbler was handcuffed and helpless.

“We know all about it,” the detective said; “Powell to save his own neck has given you away. He came down here a few minutes ago on purpose to show us the way.”

“The dirty scoundrel!” the man exclaimed, grinding his teeth with rage; “and he was the man that planned the whole thing.”

The same night Powell was arrested and lodged in Newgate. His accomplice, who was known as Tom King had formerly been a sailor, though bred as a shoemaker. Latterly he had been a fence, and on several occasions had perpetrated daring burglaries in the country. He had always evaded justice, however, and for a year past had ostensibly carried on the business of shoemaking, only, however, to afford protection to a gang of counterfeiters, who worked their nefarious trade in the rear of the cobbler’s shop.

Powell was fully identified as the man who had called on the insurance agent, and both men were recognized by the innkeeper at Leicester as the two visitors of the night of the murder.

On the left hand of King was found a half-healed wound, and his hand corresponded exactly with the bloody marks on the stone of the railings. In Powell’s house was found a pair of boots which fitted the foot-prints outside the study window, and the boots King wore at the time of his capture corresponded with the other impressions. King produced a dozen witnesses who swore he was at work in his shop on the night of the murder, and Powell brought the captain and mate of a vessel to swear that he spent the night on board their brig off Woolwich. On the trial, however, it was proved that the brig sailed for Newcastle that very evening, and the innkeeper and his bar-tended and pot-boy swore positively to the identity of King.

But what settled this question effectually was a piece of unexpected evidence produced by the prosecution.

Dr. Richard Leamer deposed that he lived on the corner of Bellgrave gate, about a hundred yards from Mr. Askern's residence. On the night of August 4th he was out visiting a patient, and returned home about midnight. He went into his surgery, which was a front room at the corner of the building. His lamp had gone out, but the gas-light at the corner was shining into his room. He went to his window to get the full glare on his watch, as he wished to see the time. It was precisely seventeen minutes past twelve o'clock. As he stood he heard footsteps and two men drew near the lamp. One of them stood while the other wrapped a handkerchief around his left hand, which was bleeding. The latter then climbed the lamp-post and lit a cigar. The other stood looking up at him. The light was full in the faces of the men, and the doctor saw them distinctly for the space of a minute or more. These two men were the prisoners, Powell and King.

They were convicted and sentenced to be hanged, and the law was executed on them in the County jail at Leicester, Nov. 8th, 1834.

There was no evidence whatever to show that Mrs. Askern had even a suspicion of the crime perpetrated by her paramour and his confederate.

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