

The Victory

A Strange Crime and its Solution

The town of Doncaster, in England, is famous as being the scene from year to year of the celebrated St. Leger race. Ordinarily it is a staid, dull enough place, with its chief business on market days, when the neighboring farmers and families throng the town. During the race week, however, it presents a lively aspect being literally crowded with visitors from all parts of the world. The hotels and inns are filled, private boarding-houses find all the guests they can accommodate, and many families vacate their residences entirely, renting them for ten days or so to wealthy visitors who pay a large sum for their exclusive use. Among the visitors to the town during the races are multitudes of the criminal class, who flock thither from London, Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool, Leeds, Glasgow, Dublin and all the large centers, for the purpose of pursuing their nefarious calling. From all the places named likewise come a body of police detectives on purpose to take care of thieves and rogues with whom for the most part they are well acquainted.

In the first place, the railroad depots are watched, and all recognized criminals are captured there and returned by the next train to the place whence they came; but, in spite of this admirable scheme, thousands of them are smuggled into the town, some of them taking up their abode there long before the races open, and others landing at roadside stations a few miles distant, and proceeding to their destination by secret paths or by night. Many of them also adopt clever disguises, and thus evade the vigilance of the officer of the law.

During the race week persons residing in the suburbs and neighboring country are wont to retire to rest early, and to see that their dwellings are secure against the attack of midnight prowlers. The rural police are doubled, and every precaution is adopted to protect the inhabitants. In spite of all this, however, highway robbery, garroting and burglary are of frequent occurrence. In 1851 this was especially the case, and a remarkable crime perpetrated at that time is here to be narrated.

About half a mile out of the town, on the Thorne road, stood the spacious residence of a Mr. Duncomb. The house was about 100 yards from the road, from which it was separated by a high stone wall, with two iron gates. The house faced the river Don, a fine park, rich in trees stretching down to the water's brink. The rear of the dwelling was toward the Thorne road. Mr. Duncomb, formerly a widower, with one daughter, Mary, aged twenty, had recently married an individual who was for several years his first wife's maid. She was a large, handsome woman; with a most imperious manner, and she ruled her husband absolutely. After her father's imprudent marriage, the daughter quitted Doncaster and went to reside with an aunt at Harrogate. Long before the death of the first Mrs. Duncomb, there had been deep trouble between her and her husband on account of her waiting maid, and this had resulted in the latter's being discharged. Immediately after Mrs. Duncomb's death, the maid returned as housekeeper, at Mr. Duncomb's request, after an absence of over two years. Within a twelvemonth the new housekeeper became Mrs. Duncomb.

Early on the morning of Wednesday—that is, between 2 and 3 o'clock—the servants were aroused by the loud ringing of their mistress' bell. On hastening to the room, the door was found open, the metallic receptacle for the bolt of the lock having been wrenched off. Mrs. Duncomb was found lying full length on the floor, with the broken cord of the bell in her hand, and insensible. Mr. Duncomb lay across the bed, with his throat cut. The bureau was ransacked, and valuable jewelry and a large sum of money was missing. Mr. Duncomb was dead, though still warm. There were finger-marks on Mrs. Duncomb's throat, as though it had been garroted. A little cold water, however, soon revived her, and by the time a surgeon and the authorities arrived she was able to converse. At the inquest which followed next day, her testimony was as follows:

“My husband and I retired at about 10:30 o'clock on Tuesday night, and, so far as I know, we must have fallen asleep about the same time. I was awakened by the crash, and the first thing I know I was seized by the throat and choked. I struggled with my assailant, and rose up in bed. At this time I became conscious that there were three or four men in the room, and that one of them was grappling with my husband, who was trying to get out of bed. At this, I gave a cry and my assailant forced me down and sprang upon me. At the same moment, I heard a voice say:

‘Put the knife into him!’”

“A mist seemed to pass before me, and I became insensible. How long I remained so I cannot tell, but on coming to I crawled out of bed and moved toward the bell to give an alarm. Then for the first time, as I leaned on the mantelpiece, I glanced toward my husband. There was a light in the room as usual, and I saw him lying across the bed, drenched in blood. I grasped the bell-pull and fainted. That is all I know.”

The butler and servants testified that they found the front door open immediately after the discovery of the murder, and that the metallic receptacle for the bolt of the bed-room door lock was broken.

The most expert detectives in Europe were in Doncaster at the time, and they made a careful examination of the premises and their surroundings. No footsteps could be found that served as a clew; but they brought to light several highly important facts:

1. There was no sign that the front door lock had been picked.
2. The butler, when he closed the door on the night of the crime, drew two huge bolts and slung a two-inch iron bar across the front door.
3. The key of the bed-room door was found in the lock outside.
4. Mrs. Duncomb testified that she first saw the bloody corpse of her husband as she leaned on the mantelpiece, and was about to ring the bell. The bed as an old-fashioned four-poster, and the silken curtains at the foot were drawn when Mrs. Duncomb was discovered lying on the floor, and the curtains, thus drawn, shut off any view of the bed from that part of the room where Mrs. Duncomb must have been when, according to her account, she first saw the corpse of her husband.

5. Mr. Duncomb, two weeks after his marriage to his second wife, made a will in her favor, leaving her three-fourths of his large fortune.

6. The blood from the wound in Mr. Duncomb's throat had spurted over the bed, and the sheets and pillows on Mrs. Duncomb's side were spotted with it, but there was no stain of blood on Mrs. Duncomb's night-clothes. Moreover, the stains were on the bottom sheet on Mrs. Duncomb's side, and on the inside of the top sheet, but none on the coverlet—a proof that she could not have been in the bed when the wound was inflicted, but that the clothes on her side were turned down.

These facts were not laid before the authorities, and further inquiries were made quietly by the detectives which resulted in the information to be recorded.

The Rev. Dr. Lane, incumbent of the Episcopal Church, testified that he met Mr. Duncomb on the Tuesday morning, and that his conversation struck him as evincing nervous depression. After endeavoring to cheer him, Mr. Duncomb said that he had received an anonymous letter the day before, informing him that his second wife during her two years' absence from his service had led a disreputable life, and that he had been directed to make inquiries at a certain place to find confirmation of his informant's statements. Dr. Lane advised him to keep the matter to himself, and arranged to meet him at the Rectory the next day to speak further on the subject. Mr. Duncomb said that he had destroyed the letter, but would be able to remember the place mentioned in it.

Thomas Glover, a helper in Mr. Duncomb's stables, testified that he had been in the habit of setting night lines to catch pike in the Don contrary to his master's orders, and that on the Tuesday night of the murder he was proceeding cautiously from the stable, over which he slept, to the river, when he saw a flickering light in the hall of the dwelling. He stopped behind a pillar and glanced in at the narrow panes of glass on each side of the entrance. He saw a woman wrapped in a shawl, and holding a small Roman lamp in her hand, approaching the door from the front of the stairs. She laid the lamp on the hall table, and the witness heard bolts drawn and the door unlocked. He thought that it was a servant affording means of ready entrance to a favored lover.

There was only one lamp in the dwelling such as Glover saw in the hand of the figure, and that was always kept in Mr. Duncomb's bedroom, and was found there when the murder was first discovered.

Search was made for any memorandum among Mr. Duncomb's papers that might indicate any part of the contents of the anonymous letter, but in vain. On the study table lay a number of Blackwood, with a paper knife, indicating the place where Mr. Duncomb had last read. On turning over the leaves, the following pencil marks were found in the white space at the head of the article:

23 L. T., Gt. Q. St., L. I. F.

After a long and patient pondering over these characters, Lambert the great London detective, interpreted them thus:

23 Little Turnstile. Great Queen street, Lincoln's Inn Fields.

In a few minutes by the aid of the telegraph, that place in London was under police surveillance. It was an ordinary looking building inhabited by two families, one of them a widow and her three children, and the other a tailor and his wife and five grown up children, three sons and two daughters.

In the meantime the local authorities of Doncaster had captured four men whom they found lurking near the residence of Sir William Brooke, about a mile from the residence of Mr. Duncomb. They were identified as notorious London cracksmen, and the belief of the authorities was that they were the murderers of Mr. Duncomb. Their rendezvous was discovered and on searching the place several articles of jewelry belonging to Mrs. Duncomb, were discovered. This seemed to place the guilt of the four men beyond doubt, and they were committed for trial on a capital charge.

In the meantime a detective and his wife had taken lodgings immediately opposite the house No. 23 Little Turnstile, Great Queen street, Lincoln's Inn Fields and had carefully watched the actions of the inmates. Detective Lambert, who had charge of the matter, was not satisfied that the four men captured in Doncaster were the parties engaged in the crime at Mr. Duncomb's residence, for reasons already known to the reader, and he was impressed with the feeling that the clew to the murder was to be found at "No. 23."

Careful inquiries showed that the tailor and his family had resided there for years, and that, though poor, they were of good character. As to the widow, she had lived there over a year, and her neighbors spoke of her as a woman of very industrial habits. She was accustomed, almost daily, to leave her children in the care of the tailor's wife and go out to wash. She paid her rent regularly, and her grocer and baker gave her a good name.

After several days had elapsed the detective suggested that his wife should call on the widow after she returned in the evening, on pretense of employing her to do some light washing, but in reality to look around and note anything that was unusual in her abode. The officer's wife acted on this suggestion, and on her return brought with her what proved a very important piece of information. It was this:

The widow, when the officer's wife entered, was cooking ham for supper, and the ham lay on the table, resting on the part of a newspaper, which bore the words, "Doncaster Gazette."

To describe the delight of the detective when he received this news would be impossible. When the widow departed for her day's work next morning she was tracked by the officer. He followed her to Holborn, thence down Chancery lane, and thence to Newcastle street, in the Strand. There she entered a low pawnbroker's shop, and remained until late in the afternoon.

That same evening the officer knocked at the door of the widow's apartments, and asked for Mrs. Prosser.

"That's me, sir," said the woman.

"You were recommended to me," the officer said, "as a person whom I could trust to take charge of my house during my absence."

"I hope I'm an honest woman, sir," the widow said with a curtsy.

"I shall be absent three or four months, as I am going to settle up the affairs of an uncle, Mr. Duncomb, who was recently murdered in Doncaster."

The officer was looking directly at Mrs. Prosser, and, as he uttered these words, she gave a gasp and caught at the table. Her face was deadly white, and her limbs quaked.

"What's the matter?" the officer asked.

"I'm sick," the widow said, dropping into a chair.

"Mrs. Duncomb may come to stay at my house during my absence," the officer said calmly, with his eyes on Mrs. Prosser, "and you would have to see that she had everything she desired."

"No, no, no! for God's sake, no!" the woman cried, putting her hands to her face, and beginning to sob wildly.

"There is a mystery here," the officer said: "do you know Mrs. Duncomb?"

"Yes, I do," the widow sobbed; "when she was lady's maid at Mr. Duncomb's I was laundry woman. When she left there she came to live with me, and had a child by her master's hostler. Soon afterward she took up with a thief named 'Jemmy the Jew,' and lived with him until she returned to Mr. Duncomb's. The very day she left she disclosed his whereabouts to the police and he was arrested and tried for burglary. What became of him I do not know."

"Had you heard of Mr. Duncomb's murder before I mentioned it?" the officer asked.

"Yes; newspapers were sent to me from Doncaster with the account of the murder in them. They were directed in the hand-writing of Mrs. Duncomb."

"I'll see you again, Mrs. Prosser," the officer said and departed.

"Jemmy the Jew," referred to above, was a notorious criminal, and only escaped conviction at the time he was betrayed by his mistress, as stated above, whereby the death of the only witness who could identify him as one of the three who perpetrated a robbery at Peckham Rye. He had been at liberty ever since. During the race at Doncaster he disappeared from London, but he had not been seen by the police in Doncaster. Two hours after the officer communicated the above

facts to Detective Lambert, “Jemmy the Jew” was in custody. Immediately after his capture two officers were dispatched to Doncaster, and Mrs. Duncomb was placed under arrest. Before next morning three of Jemmy’s favorite chums were arrested, and Detective Lambert felt sure that he had the four men who murdered Mr. Duncomb, and the woman who aided them in their horrible deed.

Mrs. Duncomb poisoned herself the night of her arrest, and confessed with her last breath that she instigated Jemmy to the murder of her husband. The Saturday night before the races, she said, Jemmy sent a message to her insisting on seeing her. She met him in the park, and he told her that he had had his revenge on her, for that say he had disclosed to her husband her true character. Afterward he admitted that he had only written the letter and not sent it. Then he threatened her as to what he would do if she did not supply him with money and submit to his caresses.

She did both, and in a moment of madness suggested the murder of Mr. Duncomb and the consequent enrichment of herself [and] her lover. Then the plan was arranged. She unfastened the front door to admit the assassins. After locking the bed-room door, she thrust the key under it for the murderers to use. She stood by and saw the accursed deed, and smashed the lock receptacle with the poker, to give the door the appearance of having been burst open[.]

“Jemmy the Jew” maintained his innocence, but the four men already under arrest in Doncaster testified that Jemmy brought the plunder to their quarters for safekeeping, and subsequently left them as a present the few articles of jewelry found at their rendezvous. Some of the rest of the plunder was traced through half a score of parties back to Jemmy, and his guilt was pretty clearly established. The connection of his companions with the murder was less capable of proof, and they were discharged.

“Jemmy the Jew,” whose real name was Jacob Isaacs, was tried, convicted and sentenced to be hanged, and the law was executed upon him in Wakefield jail in due course.

Sioux County Herald [Orange City, IA], June 8, 1876