

Baiting a Trap

Judge Clark

“What was my first case?” said Jubal Sleuth, echoing the question of an inky-fingered youth evidently in search of stuff for a paragraph.

“Yes, Mr. Sleuth, I should like to hear it, if you don’t mind.”

“Well, I *don’t* mind, for once,” returned the old detective, his sharp features relaxing into a smile—“with the distinct understanding, however, that this compliance is not, as the lawyers say, to be ‘drawn into precedent.’[”]

The item-hunter’s protestation that none but the discreetest use should be made of any information condescended, changed Mr. Sleuth’s smile into an incredulous laugh.

“Don’t imagine for a moment,” he said, “I’d be fool enough to tell you anything I wasn’t willing all the world should know. But the facts I’m going to relate occurred so long ago, and were so widely published at the time, that no harm can come of their repetition.

“I had gone, full of hope and ambition, to seek my fortune in one of those new-fledged Western cities which have sprung up, as if by magic, in the wilderness. But soon finding that governorships and senatorships, no more there than elsewhere, grew on trees, I was fain to accept, at a moderate salary, a place on the local detective force then just organizing.

“One morning our chief announced the mysterious disappearance of Mark Annan, a well-known citizen of reputed wealth and rather eccentric habits. Mr. Annan was a bachelor whose household consisted of himself and an old man who did duty as cook, housekeeper, and general servant. The latter’s name was Nathan Kent, and his habits were as eccentric as his master’s.

“We were instructed to give our attention to unravelling the case, the facts of which, so far as yet developed, were few and meagre.

“Mr. Annan had left his house one evening, saying he would return in an hour. But days elapsed without his reappearance. His absence excited no remark, for his life was so secluded that none kept note of his movements. Months, indeed, might have passed without his being missed, had not Nathan Kent, seemingly in great alarm, laid the facts before the authorities.

“Mr. Annan had been supposed to be without relatives, but after an account of his disappearance had been published, a respectable-looking gentleman, giving his name as Willett Beazley and claiming to be Mr. Annan’s first cousin and nearest blood relation, presented himself, and became quite active in pressing every possible inquiry touching his kinsman’s fate.

“Mr. Beazley’s theory from the start was that foul play had been practiced; and with a zeal which every one commended, he offered a handsome reward for the arrest and conviction of anyone implicated in the crime.

“Not many days after, our chief rushed into the private office where some of us were comparing notes.

“‘I have it!’ he cried exultantly.

“‘What do you think I’ve discovered?’ he continued, in answer to our questioning looks.—‘Why, that old rascal, Nathan Kent, whose pretended distress I never more than half believed in, took out an insurance on his master’s life the very day before the latter’s disappearance!’

“‘But is that sufficient proof to convict of murder?’ I ventured to ask.

“‘What more would you have?’ demanded the chief with heat. ‘A servant insures his master’s life. The master disappears suddenly. The servant gives no notice of the circumstance till several days have passed, and conceals the fact of the insurance. I tell you it’s enough to hang a dozen men!’

“I was silenced if not convinced, and when ordered to accompany those deputed to arrest Nathan Kent, I obeyed without remark.

“The old man completely broke down in the face of the terrible charge. It was some minutes before he could speak. His terror, by most of those present, was taken as evidence of guilt. But his explanation of the insurance, when he could command words to give it, was so natural and plausible as more than ever to excite my distrust of the accusation. He had no resources but his wages, and from these he had been able to lay up but little. If his master died, he would be destitute, and to provide against such a contingency, he had taken out the policy in question. As to the delay in informing the authorities, he explained it by his fear of offending Mr. Annan, who would strongly have resented anything like prying into his movements or affairs.

“Still, it could not be denied that the circumstances warranted the prisoner’s detention for the present, and Nathan Kent was accordingly locked up in prison.

“The next day I undertook to search a piece of woodland near the town. It was a wild place, and I had somehow learned that Mr. Annan occasionally made it the scene of his lonesome walks.

“Near a path which lay through the heart of the woods, I came upon what seemed to be the traces of a recent struggle. Over an area of several yards the ground was trampled as if by men in violent conflict, while some dead leaves were plentifully stained with blood.

“It was then that one of those bright thoughts flashed upon me which seem almost like inspirations.

“At once desisting from my search, I lost no time getting clear of the wood, carefully watching to see that my motions were not observed.

“Next morning the following appeared in the principal newspaper of the town; how it got there, I leave you to conjecture:

“‘It is now given out that among Mr. Annan’s peculiarities was the habit of carrying constantly about him a large sum of money sewed into the lining of his coat. Should this prove correct it may afford a better clew to the motive and the author of his taking off than any yet discovered.’

“A fine passion our chief was in when he read that item.

“‘Confound the newspapers!’ was his comment. ‘Why can’t they mind their own business? Of course it’s all a piece of bosh manufactured in the interest of that villain Kent, and with a design to cheat me out of the reward.’

“Long before nightfall, myself and a trusty friend crouched in a hiding-place which commanded a complete view of the path already mentioned.

“After a long and patient watch, protracted into the night, a sound of stealthy steps broke the stillness; and soon the dimly outlined figure of a man passed. He walked by the spot marked by blood and footprints without stopping.

“With noiseless tread we followed just closely enough to keep our man in sight. It was not long till he turned aside and entered a dense thicket of undergrowth, which he was only able to do by pushing aside the bushes with his hands.

“Suddenly a light gleamed through the tangled branches coming from a small lantern which the man had lighted and placed upon the ground. Then stooping on his knees he reached forward and dragged some heavy object into a comparatively clear space.

“It was with difficulty my friend and I repressed an exclamation of horror as the flickering light revealed the ghastly features of a corpse!

“The object of our watch did not long remain idle. With eager hands he almost tore from the body the coat in which it was clad, and then with his pocketknife, began to rip up the garment which was soon reduced to shreds.

“Rising with a muttered curse of disappointment he turned and confronted two strong men, in whose hands he was speedily a prisoner.

“Judge of our surprise to find in our captive no less a person than Willett Beazley, whose cupidity, tempted by the item in the morning paper, had decoyed him into a trap whose exit was the gallows.

“The body was identified as that of Mark Annan, and Beazley was hanged on his own confession.”

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