

The Left Hand

The murder of Dr. Hunston, of Wisbeach, England, in 1823, presented some very unusual points of circumstantial evidence. Dr. Hunston was a physician and naturalist, and was wealthy. He lived alone, and was of somewhat miserly habits. He had an illegitimate son, whom he brought up with care, who was apparently a worthy youth. Dr. Hunston's house stood in the suburbs of the rural town, with trees around it. Very near to it was the residence of a lawyer named Terwit. Dr. Hunston was originally a very successful surgeon in London, but during an autopsy he cut his right hand with an operating knife, and to prevent fatal consequences immediately submitted to amputation of the arm. The dwelling occupied by the doctor had been purchased many years before the date of the crime to be narrated. From time to time he added to it until it was a peculiar structure. In a wing, reached by five steps from the parlor, was the doctor's bedroom; beyond that was his workshop, and beyond that again, in an odd angle, his study. Jammed into what appeared to be a passage just begun and left unfurnished, was the desk in which the doctor always kept a quantity of loose cash and some old jewels of great value, heirlooms of the Hunston family, from which he was descended. A coachman, a gardener, and a groom lived in the yard right below the windows of the doctor's apartments, and he was in the habit of saying that they gave ample protection to the dwelling in that direction. In his workshop

A LARGE BLOOD MASTIF

always slept, and the windows of the parlor were supplied with strong shutters carefully closed every night. When Lawyer Terwit joked with Dr. Hunston about his chances of being robbed, he was wont to laugh and say that it would require very expert thieves to get an entrance, or, having got an entrance, to get out again safe and sound.

It was the 15th of August, 1823. Young Hunston had returned from college and gone to London for a visit to friends. Lawyer Terwit had sat with the doctor until 9 o'clock. Then the latter saw that his servant closed up the house, and soon afterward retired. Dr. Hunston was an early riser, and when he failed to be stirring at 8 o'clock next morning, surprise was excited among the domestics. By 9 o'clock they were alarmed, and by 10 o'clock resolved to send for Lawyer Terwit and ask his advice. The lawyer suggested the forcing of the door leading from the parlor to the bedroom of the doctor. This was done, and the lawyer and the domestics entered.

A DREADFUL SEPCTACLE

was disclosed. Dr. Hunston lay on his bed in his night clothes. His arm was thrown out so as to hang out over the side of the bed. His head lay over the bolster, and his throat was cut from ear to ear. An ordinary kitchen knife, sharpened like a razor, lay on the left side of the bed, and in the bolster on the same side was a gash. The doors through the workroom into the doctor's room were open. The dog lay peacefully sleeping. The desk in the study had been

RANSACKED OF EVERYTHNG

of any value. There had been a difficulty in opening it, and the person forcing the lock had worked to the right side of the desk as it stood, for there were marks on the wall showing where he had rubbed off the whitewash. The windows of all the rooms were examined. All were

fastened except one in the workshop. Of this the cords had been broken, for when the sash was raised it fell with a crash.

Right below this window was a flower bed. In the soft mold there were prints of a man's knees and of his left hand. There were also marks as though his toes had struck the soil. The servant men who had slept near the spot heard no noise in the night except what sounded like the banging of a shutter, and as there was wind, they thought nothing of that.

Lawyer Terwit was a very shrewd man and a clever criminal expert. The authorities were duly notified of the dreadful crime which had been perpetrated, and measures were taken to find a clue to the guilty person or persons. The motive was clearly plunder. The perpetrator or perpetrators knew the doctor kept valuables in his apartments. It would also seem as though they knew where there was a defective window. The points presented in the case were numerous and pregnant:

THE POINT IN THE CASE.

1. There was no possible means of access to the apartments of the doctor except by the window already spoken of. That this had been used was evident. It was twelve feet from the ground. There were marks of feet on the coping just below, as though some one had walked along it from the corner, clinging to the windows, on purpose to avoid leaving traces. Immediately below in the soil there were no marks of feet, and no impression of any sort other than those already mentioned, namely: the marks of the knees, the toes, and the left hand. These, it was very clear, had been made by a person in falling, and were turned away from the window, the toe marks being nearest and the hand marks furthest off. These impressions were evidently made by the murderer in his descent from the window. The bottom of the window sash showed stains of blood, with pieces of skin adhering. How had the blood and skin come there?
2. The throat of the doctor had been cut as the murderer stood at his left side. The knife was clearly drawn from right to left, and hence the gash in the bolster on the left side. The position of the knife on the left side of the bed, where the assassin had dropped it, also proved that he stood on that side when he perpetrated the deed.
3. On the soil outside the window there were impressions of his knees, two toes, and the left hand only. The person forcing the lock of the door had leaned against the right wall, and evidently worked with his left hand. The person who wielded the fatal knife had used the left hand, for the wound slanted upward from the edge, and was made from the left side. If made from the left side with the right hand it would either have been straight down or inclined from the entrance of the knife downward. A moment's thought will show the justness of this reasoning.
4. Was the perpetrator left-handed? He might have been; but in that case why did he not fall on his right hand as well as the left in descending, or rather falling, from the window?
5. Had the murderer only one hand, and that the left? That seemed to be the fact, and then the remarkable coincidence presented itself of a man with only the left arm being murdered by a man with only the left arm.

6. Were the dog and the murderer old friends? If they were the savage beast's quietness was accounted for.

THE SUSPECTED SAILOR

Wisbeach is on the Wash, a small arm of the sea, and does a small coast trade. Seafaring men live there. Half a mile from Dr. Hunston's resided one Joseph Harell, an old man-of-war's man. He had lost the right arm by the explosion of a gun when firing a salute, and had received his discharge. He was in middle life, and the head of a gang of smugglers who frequented the Norfolk coast. He was a pretty hard character. Suspicion of having killed Dr. Hunston fell on this man from the fact of his having only the left arm. He was actually arrested and examined as to his whereabouts on the night of the murder. It was so clearly proved that he was elsewhere that all suspicion faded away.

Lawyer Terwit found himself executor of the dead man's will, and went to work to settle the estate. All property, with the exception of a few trifling legacies, was bequeathed to James Hunston,

THE DOCTOR'S ILLEGITIMATE SON.

This young man was notified of his father's sudden end, and he hastened down to Wisbeach. He had recently had a fall from a horse and sprained his right hand, which he carried in a sling. He did not stay at his late uncle's residence, but at a hotel, and as soon as possible, settled all the affairs of the estate which needed his presence, and returned to London. He listened to all the theories as to the perpetration of the crime with deep attention, and only made one remark. When the circumstance of there having been marks of two knees and ten toes, and of only one hand, was mentioned, young Hunston said:

"Is it not just possible that those marks were made by my father himself? He might have fallen, for you know he was fond of going among the flower-beds and examining leaves and beetles and worms and such like."

This set Lawyer Terwit thinking. The doctor was a proverbially careless man in his attire, and if he had fallen on the damp soil, as suggested, his clothes would show it. They were examined, but there was nothing to indicate that such an accident had happened. But the lawyer had suddenly acquired a theory of his own, and he resolved to see whither it led.

WATCHED

When young Hunston quitted Wisbeach he went to Peterboro to await the London coach, for the time, be it remembered, was before railroads. The morning following the coach started, with Hunston on the box-seat near the driver. On one of the rear seats sat a well-to-do farmer, comfortably but plainly dressed. When the coach reached London, the farmer hurried away, but not far. Once outside the precincts of the old Bull and Mouth, on Holborn, where the coach stopped, he turned and posted himself in a doorway. Soon young Hunston came out, and was about to enter a cab which had been called for him. Suddenly a thought seemed to stir the farmer, and he moved toward the cab into which Hunston was in the act of stepping.

In those days the number was placed conspicuously on the outside with the license, and the farmer had no difficulty in ascertaining it. Then he inquired from the people in the hotel where the cab was usually found, and later in the day sought the stable. The driver's memory being aided by a donation, he told the farmer whither he had driven Hunston.

"Drive me there, too," the farmer said, and in a minute he was on his way to the famous hostelry, the Golden Cross, at Charing Cross.

A CONVERSATION

Once lodged there the farmer seemed to be comfortable. He made the acquaintance of the landlady in her quiet bar parlor, and in a few days was a favorite.

"That seems a nice, quiet youth," the farmer said, as Hunston passed the bar window.

"Yes, very," the landlady replied.

"Where does he keep his horses?" the farmer inquired.

"Horses?" the landlady replied; "I never knew he had any."

"Oh! I thought you said—or it might be somebody else—that he fell from his horse and sprained or broke his wrist," the farmer said.

"That is the first word I have heard about it," the landlady answered. "Still, it may be so, for he was absent for a day or two, and returned with his hand in a sling, as you see."

"It must be painful and awkward for a young fellow like that to have to go around in that way," the farmer remarked.

"It is better than having to lose the hand," the landlady replied; "at one time Dr. Ardoble thought amputation would be necessary, as many of the small bones were broken."

"Clever man, Dr. Ardoble?" the farmer asked.

"So they say," was the reply.

"You see," the farmer said, "I've got a little trouble I want to consult a doctor about, and I would as life go to him as another."

"Here is his address," the landlady said, handing the farmer a slip of paper.

An hour later the farmer was at Dr. Ardoble's residence, and

CLOSETED WITH THAT GENTLEMAN

"I am executor of the will of Hunston's father," the farmer said, after some introductory matters, "and wish to know beyond doubt whether you can save the young man's hand."

“I’ve little doubt of it now,” the doctor replied; “though at one time I was in fear.”

“Have you any idea how he injured it?” the farmer inquired.

“None at all,” was the answer; “he did not say and I did not care to ask. Evidently some great weight has fallen on it and crushed it.”

“Such as a heavy, old-fashioned window sash?” the farmer asked.

“That is the very kind of thing that would do it,” the farmer said.

When Lawyer Terwit—for he will be recognized as the farmer—got outside, he looked up to the sky and gave a great sigh and sob.

“My God!” he exclaimed, half loud, “to think that the bastard he had tended so lovingly should have done it!”

When the farmer returned to the Golden Cross he was accompanied by two strong men. They stayed below and chewed straws while he went up stairs and spoke to the landlady.

“Madam,” he said, “my name is Terwit, and I’m a lawyer. I came here to find the murderer of my friend and neighbor, Dr. Hunston, the father of the young man whom you know. I have found him.”

“Gracious goodness!” the landlady exclaimed, “you have found him!—and who is he?”

ARRESTED

“Send for Mr. Hunston,” the farmer said, “and I will announce it in his presence.”

Hunston speedily attended the summons, and found himself confronted by the farmer and two men chewing straws.

“Mr. Hunston,” said the farmer, “if you look nearer I think you will know me, though my side whickers have been shaved off.”

“Why I declare,” Hunston said, “it’s Mr. Terwit!”

Hunston held out his left hand, but Lawyer Terwit pushed it aside, saying:

“No, sir, you are charged with the murder of your father, and these men are here to arrest you.”

Hunston’s face changed to purple, and he endeavored to draw a pistol from his breast pocket. Having only his left hand he was not strong enough to do what he purposed, and in an instant he was in the grasp of the officers.

The young man's guilt was not all too apparent. He resolutely denied everything. In the first place it was proved he had lived extravagantly at Cambridge, and run into debt. He had kept a mistress who had drawn largely on his resources, and his gambling proclivities had drawn him into other difficulties.

IDENTIFIED

It was shown that on the morning of August 18, a person answering his description, though evidently disguised, had come down to Norwich by the London coach. A blacksmith, whose forge was about half a mile from Dr. Hunston's residence, saw a young man pass his place about 9 o'clock in the evening. On the blacksmith and the driver of the Norwich coach comparing notes, no doubt was left that the man who came down from London and the man seen by the blacksmith were identical. Then there was the wounded hand. When it came to be a question of importance, Hunston refused to say how he injured his hand. It was clear, however, that on opening the sash—from which he had probably removed the catch a month before when meditating the crime—he placed his right hand on the sill. The sash fell and hence the injured hand. In spite of his frightful wound, however, he went on with the bloody work. No doubt he tied up the hand and worked with the left. This

CLEARED UP THE DIFFICULTY,

and accounted for the left hand being used to cut the throat and open the lock, and also for the impression of only the left hand in the soil outside the window. The voice of the young Hunston had probably pacified the dog before the window fell. He and the dog had been playmates for years, and the dog was not given to suspect wrong when his old friend was about. To complete the chain of circumstantial evidence, some of the missing jewelry was found in possession of a young man to whom young Hunston sold it.

Hunston swore positively that his father gave him the jewelry on his last visit home, but Terwit swore with equal clearness that he saw it in the doctor's hands the very day before the murder when he was searching his desk for a fruit knife.

Hunston was convicted of the murder, and hanged at Norwich.

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