

Called to Account

A Detective's Story

Some years ago, when I was quite a young man, I was sent down to Evan's Corners, about a big robbery that had occurred, and while I was there, working the thing up, my attention was attracted by a pretty girl I used to see at the hotel where I stopped. Nobody could help noticing her, she was such a beauty. Her hair and eyes were very dark, but her skin was as fair as a lily, with just a dash of red that came and went in her cheeks. Her form was slender, but well rounded, and her hand was as white and finely formed as any lady's in the land. Her name was Rose Wynne, and of course she had plenty of admirers, but she coquetted with them all. However there were two who were a long way ahead of the others. I used to wonder which she liked the best, but I could never guess, for while she smiled sweetly on one, she would fling a merry word at the other, and so on. Both young men were good looking—one fair, the other dark—and both were carpenters. One was called Andrew Davis, and the other Mark Sheldon.

Sheldon was a jealous fellow, and showed it. Davis was jealous, too, but didn't show it so plain. Sheldon was always in a quarrel with her. Davis, I fancied, was angry enough at her coquetteries sometimes to eat her, but he never let on.

Rose Wynne knew I was a detective, and had a sort of awe and curiosity about me. Many a yarn I told her, some true, some not. It was so pretty to see her big eyes kindle and grow bigger.

I used to joke her sometimes and try and discover which she liked best, Davis or Sheldon. But she would never tell me.

"See here, Rose," I said to her one day when she had been playing those two chaps off against each other pretty lively, "you'll have those foolish fellows fighting about you if you're not careful."

"I'm much more afraid of one of them fighting me," she laughed.

"Which one?" I asked, laughing too; but I thought of Davis' glowering looks.

"Guess," she said.

"They've both got temper, too much of it."

"Andrew Davis hasn't much temper," she said.

"I shouldn't like to be in your skin if you ever jilt him for the other," I answered.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Never mind," I said; "but if you ever make up your mind to marry anybody beside Andy Davis, don't do it while he's around—that's all."

Rose glanced to where Davis was standing, at the other end of the verandah, watching us, though he pretended not. Then she looked back at me.

“Well, you’re solemn enough about it,” she said; “anyone would think you meant it.”

We both laughed, but I said, shaking my head:

“You know that I do mean every word.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Rose. “If any harm ever comes to me through either of them, I’ll promise to come to you, Mr. Sharpe, or send my ghost to tell you who did it. And you must hunt him down for it. Will you promise me that?”

“Yes, I will,” I said; “and there’s my hand upon it.”

And we shook hands, had a laugh over it, and thought that the last of it of course. Well, I went away soon after, and it was a year almost to a day before I ever saw the place again. Then I had almost forgotten there was such a person as Rose Wynne.

The case I was on was a very important one, and I didn’t want it known I was around at all. So I had disguised myself in a farmer kind of rig that I don’t believe my own mother would have known me in. I had stopped at a cheap lodging house at the end of the town, because I suspected some of the gang I was after frequented it.

I’d had my supper, and gone to my room to sit by the window and study a bit about the business in hand. I am positive I wasn’t thinking of Rose Wynne. I don’t believe I had thought of her since I got there, my head was so full of business.

My room was on the ground floor, and the window was open, it was growing dusk. It wasn’t a very nice part of the town—lots of roughs about, you know; so when I saw a woman standing all at once there under my window—alone too—I thought it was very queer; but when she looked up, and I saw it was Rose Wynne, I thought that was queerer yet.

She was all in black, even her head was wound about with thick folds of black, and never had I seen her so sad and solemn. She came close to the window and looked up at me.

“Mr. Sharpe?” she said.

I jumped; for you see I did not think any one would know me, fixed up as I was, and I said in a whisper:

“Is it really you, Rose? Don’t speak loud, please, for I don’t want to be known here.”

She went right on without seeming to have heard me.

“Harm has come to me,” she said, “and it was Andy Davis. Remember your promise.”

And then, all in a flash, she was gone, and I couldn’t have told where, up, down, or ’round the corner of the house; only she’d gone, and I hadn’t seen her go.

As I sat staring out, with her words going through and through my head, I began to feel kind of creepy and odd. Now, I don’t believe anyone who knows me would call me superstitious. But all at once, as I sat there, it came over me that maybe I had seen Rose Wynne’s ghost instead of herself. She had certainly spoken and looked very strangely for a living woman.

Then I laughed at myself for the fancy.

“Sharpe, old fellow,” said I, “you know there are no such things as ghosts. What in the name of common sense are you dreaming of?”

And I put on my coat and hat and went out into the town to see if I could learn anything about the business I had come down there upon.

Every now and then as I walked along in in the darkness the thought of Rose Wynne would come over me with a kind of thrill, and I seemed to hear her saying:

“Remember your promise.”

I tried to shake off the impression, but all to no purpose, and at last I stopped into a store and said to a clerk, a fellow whom I recognized as one of Rose’s old admirers:

“Is there a young girl living round here by the name of Rose Wynne? ’Cause I’ve got a letter for her.”

“Then you’ve got a letter for a dead woman,” he said. “Rose Wynne is dead; drowned in the river.”

“Who did it?” I asked, turning cold.

“Did it herself, I suppose. I never heard of anyone else being accused of it.”

“And why should she? Where is Andy Davis?” I blurted out, before I knew what I was about.

“Oh, Andy went away ever so long ago. I guess Rose and he were engaged. It was thought that they quarreled maybe, and that was why she drowned herself.”

I did not continue the conversation but left the store and went back to my room.

That night I dreamed that Rose came to my bedside, and stood looking at me just as she had under my window, and said:

“It was Andy Davis; remember your promise.”

Well, I made some more inquiries round and I found the general impression was that Rose had drowned herself, just as the clerk had told me. The body had never been found, but she was missing, and her handkerchief and gloves, and the hat she wore the night she disappeared, were picked up on the river bank. The water was very swift here and it was generally believed the body had drifted out to the lake.

Well, I had some pretty curious thoughts. Was Rose dead or wasn't she? At all events there was a mystery, and I was just the fellow to ferret it out. The first thing was to find Andy Davis. So, just as soon as I had got through the business I was on, I started on his track.

I was obliged to hunt for him much longer than I expected; but I found him at last. The longer I looked for him the more I suspected he had something ugly on his mind. People with clear consciences ain't, as a general thing, so hard to find. Well, as I said, I found him at last, working on a farm, and a carpenter by trade. He was a good two hundred miles from Evan's Corners, and he'd got a new name besides that.

He called himself Thompson, but he couldn't Thompson me. I knew him the minute I put my eyes on him. He was at supper with the man he was working for and the other farm hands, and I stood and watched him through the kitchen window some minutes. He'd changed a good deal, got thin and yellow, and had a sort of hunted look in his eyes, that settled his case for me then and there. I never saw that look in an innocent man's face.

The kitchen door stood open, and I walked in without any ceremony, and going directly up to him I laid my hand on his shoulder.

“How do you do Mr. Davis?” said I. You should have seen him. I've had some experience with frightened men, but I can safely say with truth, that I never saw one so scared as he was. I never in my life saw a face turn so white as his did. First he jumped up and looked round as if he was going to run, then he sat down again and set his teeth hard. You see, he recognized me and knew that I was a detective.

“My name ain't Davis,” said he, glowering at me with eyes like coals. “I don't know you, sir.”

“Your name is Davis, and I know you if you don't know me.” I answered in a low voice. “Who do you suppose sent me here after you?”

His eyes almost jumped out of his head, and his teeth would chatter in spite of himself.

“Rose Wynne sent me,” I went on; “you know what for.”

When I said that, the wretch fell on his knees and fairly howled for mercy.

“I'll confess,” he shrieked, “I killed her, I did. I'd sworn Sheldon shouldn't have her, and I killed

her to keep her from marrying him. She said she'd hunt me for it. She said she'd come out of her grave to hang me, and she has kept her vow."

I took him back to Evans Corners as fast as we could travel, and lodged him in the prison there.

The trial came off in due time. There wasn't one atom of evidence that he did the deed, except his own confession to me. He hadn't opened his lips to anyone since; and when he was called upon to plead "Guilty, or not guilty," the villain answered, "Not guilty," after all.

As he said the words, there was a slight stir among the crowd behind him. He looked round, and something he saw there turned his face chalky.

He gave a sort of gasp, staggered upon his feet, and fairly screamed out "Guilty!" and fell down in a fit.

They carried him out writhing and foaming at the mouth, and as they did so, a woman dressed in black came forward and threw back her veil. It was Rose Wynne alive and standing before us more beautiful than ever.

"He tried to kill me," she said. "It was not his fault that he did not succeed. I had been engaged to marry Mr. Sheldon a long time, but because my father was opposed to him and favored Mr. Davis, we had kept the engagement a secret from everyone. I had gone out that night, by appointment, to meet my promised husband, and as I was crossing on the railroad bridge, over the river, Andrew Davis came from the other side and met me. He told me if I did not promise to marry him then and there he'd throw me over the bridge into the water. I was always afraid of him; he had such a savage look in his eyes sometimes, and I knew him to be terribly jealous of Mark Sheldon. But I would not promise him anything of the kind. I could not believe he would really carry out his threat, and I expected Mark would come every minute.

"When he took hold of me, and I saw he was in earnest, and really intended to drown me, I struggled with him, and told him if he did harm me, I'd have him hung for it, if I had to come out of my grave to do it. And I also told him I was going to marry Mark Sheldon, and that I had come out there to meet him. For I thought perhaps it would scare him if he thought Mark was anywhere around. But he suddenly snatched my shawl off me and wound it round my head to keep my screams from being heard, and the next moment he lifted me in his arms and threw me over into the river. He did not know that I was an expert swimmer; but before I could free myself from the folds of the shawl I had gone under the water twice. The second time I rose to the surface I swam toward the bank, but the current was so swift I would inevitably have been drowned if Mark had not come just then, in time to save me. Davis had run away as fast as he could, and he did not know that he had failed in killing me, after all. The shock was a dreadful one to me, and my fear of Andy Davis was so great that I begged Mark to hide me from him, and from every one, and let it be supposed that I was dead. So then we were married, and went away from this part of the country for several months, till we heard that Davis had gone away, when we returned. But I kept close, and let no one but my own folks know I was alive, for I was determined that Davis should be punished in some manner. So I never went out without a thick double veil over my face, for I was afraid of Davis yet.

“Then, one evening, I was riding along in a carriage, with my husband, when I saw Mr. Sharpe sitting at a window. He was disguised, but I recognized him, and I remembered that he had once promised to help me if I ever needed his services. So I went up to the window quietly, and spoke to him, and told him about Davis, and that is all. I didn’t want the man hung, of course; but I hope he won’t be allowed to murder me, as I am sure he will want to when he finds I am not dead.”

But Davis was past doing any one any further injury. The wretch went from one fit into another, and finally died, literally frightened to death. And so his sin had certainly found him out.

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