

Who Was Guilty

“It was never fully cleared up,” said the old detective. “Among those who remember the circumstances, there are two, if not three, theories still extant.

“It was a gala night at one of our fashionable city mansions. The wealthy host and hostess had spared no pains for the entertainment of their guests.

The occasion had proved a great success, till, at length, the hour came for the crowning event of the night, the performance of a drama, for which such elaborate preparations had been made that the expectation of all was on tiptoe.

“Never was play better received. Every act and scene, down to the last, had been applauded to the echo, and deservedly so.

“Two of the young amateurs, Charles Ellery and Kate Manning, to whom it had been assigned to represent a pair of devoted lovers, acquitted themselves with especial credit.

“How well they do it!” was whispered comment of more than one .

“Little wonder,” others said; “it’s more in earnest than in play they are, or many are mistaken.”

“I doubt that,” returned one of the less good natured sort. “Kate is a confirmed flirt. They say, that having sufficiently amused herself with Charles Ellery, she has turned her attention to Jules Carsen of late, who is foolish enough to fancy himself engaged to her. The empressement with which she had played Charley’s sweetheart tonight is doubtless a ruse to torment Jules’ jealousy.”

“At last the grand denouement was reached. It was a scene in which Jules Carsen, in the character of an assassin, was to attempt the life of Charles Ellery, whilst it was Kate Manning’s part, at the critical moment to rush between them and [receive] in her own breast the murderous missile intended for her lover.

“Nothing could have been truer to life than the acting with which the scene proceeded. The wild fury of the mimic assassin’s eye, and the look of cool revenge with which it was encountered—the piercing shriek with which Kate sprang forward to protect her lover’s life, were all startlingly natural. Terribly natural, indeed, was the cry which arose above the report of the assassin’s pistol; and when Kate tottered and fell between the two men, her acting was no longer life-like; it was death-like.

Instead of springing over the girl’s body at the villain’s throat, as the stage directions indicated, Charles Ellery, who had cast a quick glance downward, staggered back, trembling and aghast. A little stream of blood trickled from Kate’s breast, and her features were convulsed with an agony which was too plainly that of death!

“In an instant the two men knelt by the wounded girl, and supported her in their arms; and as the last sigh escaped her, softly laid her down, and rising, faced each other.

“Murderer!” hissed Ellery, through his clenched teeth.

“It is the name that befits you!” hurled back the other, his eyes glistening, “It was you who charged the pistol.”

“And it has since remained in your possession,” Ellery retorted; adding, with a bitter sneer: “You have had ample time to tamper with it.”

“It was a scene not unlike that between Hamlet and Laertes at Ophelia’s grave. Indeed, there is no telling to what pitch of violence the excited pair might have been carried, had not friends interposed.

“It is impossible to describe the consternation and confusion which followed. Was it an accident or was it murder? was the question wildly put on every side, and if a crime had been committed, who was the criminal?

“No arrests were made immediately. Those between whom the question of guilt lay, were not likely to condemn themselves by present flight. For the time being it was deemed sufficient to keep them under su[r]veillance.

“But few were inclined to suspect Charles Ellery. He was of a nature so frank and open, that a deed so dastardly and treacherous seemed every way abhorrent to his character.

“When examined before the coroner, he freely admitted having charged the pistol, an office which, he said, he had taken upon himself in order to make sure that there should be no possibility of an accident.

“He swore positively that he had loaded the pistol with powder only, and then delivered it to Jules Carsen, after which he had not again seen it till the happening of the sad occurrence.

“Carsen acknowledged having received the pistol from Ellery more than an hour before the accident, but denied vehemently that he had tampered with the loading. He further recalled the fact—which it should be mentioned he had omitted to state in the confusion of the terrible night—that for half an hour, while engaged in one of the earlier scenes, he had left the pistol on a table in a small chamber which had been used by the players as a dressing room.

“The case was a perplexing one. Jules Carsen was an impulsive youth, having in his veins the hot blood of Southern France. He was known to have fallen desperately in love with Kate Manning, and to have been madly jealous of Charles Ellery. It might well be that the warmth with which Charles and Kate had played at love-making that night had inflamed his passion beyond control. At any rate, it was his hand that had been the instrument of the horrible tragedy, and under the coroner’s instruction, the jury rendered a verdict which held Jules Carsen to answer the charge of willful murder.

“Another tragedy soon followed. Thekla Dale, a dark-eyed maiden of wayward temper, was found dead in her chamber one morning, evidently the victim of poison self-administered.

“Clutched in her fingers was a scrap of paper bearing these words:

“I loved Jules Carsen better than my own soul. He had plighted me his troth, but Kate Manning came between us. I found the pistol on the table where Jules left it. It was I who put in the ball. I swear it was done without his knowledge. My motive was revenge. I had no thought that Kate Manning’s death would be laid to other cause than accident; but now Jules Carsen’s life is in peril, and I must protect it at the cost of my own.

THEKLA DALE.”

“After this the case against Jules Carsen was not pressed, though many believed that Thekla Dale had invented her story to shield a lover for whom she was ready to die in spite of his perfidy.

“Stranger things have been true.”

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