

The
Mystery
of
Essex Stairs

SIR GILBERT CAMPBELL

“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”

Period Short Stories of Mystery, Crime & Intrigue

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The “message scrawled in blood”—a perhaps too familiar device in crime fiction—is the pivotal clue in this 1891 yarn by Sir Gilbert Campbell (1833-99), an English translator and writer. Campbell penned several collections of stories dealing with mystery and the supernatural. Here, his sleuth is neither a professional nor amateur detective, per se, but a young barrister who perceives more in the case than either the police or the magistrate. Interestingly, much of the story is told in the format of courtroom testimony, giving the reader an excellent seat during the sensational proceedings.

—DEH

The Mystery of Essex Stairs

It was a bright moonlight night, the stars were shining clearly, and scarcely a breath of wind was stirring, as Police Constable X924 walked slowly down Essex Street, whistling to himself softly as he did so. His tour of duty was nearly over, and he was feeding his mind on the anticipations of a snug supper, with a comfortable pipe afterwards, when he heard a deep groan and a heavy fall, succeeded almost immediately by the rapid patter of footsteps, as though someone had made away at the top of his speed. These sounds appeared to come from the foot of the flight of stone steps, with which Essex Street terminates at one end. "There's something wrong there," muttered the constable, as he abruptly ceased his whistling and quickened his pace, descending the timeworn stairs with as much celerity as was compatible with safety.

When, however, he reached the bottom, he could not at first see anything to account for the sounds which had alarmed him, until glancing into the dark street on the right of the steps, he saw a shapeless mass extended on the pavement, whilst a smaller object close by was struggling with quick, uncertain movements. Just as the constable flashed his bull's-eye on the recumbent figure, and had discovered that the struggling creature was a black poodle, the creature, by a sudden exertion, succeeded in emancipating itself, and, with a bark of triumph, tore away round the corner and along the embankment in the direction of the Temple Station.

“It ain’t no good my following that cretur,” thought Constable X924; “there seems to me to be something more important here.”

The constable was right, for the recumbent form was that of a man lying with his face in a pool of blood, which was still flowing from a terrible wound in the neck.

Constable X924 was a prudent man, and had an intense horror of responsibility, and therefore the shrill notes of his whistle soon brought a couple of his comrades upon the scene.

They raised up the fallen man, who was still breathing, but it was evident to all the constables that the little life which still lingered in him would speedily have fled. There was a terrified look in his eyes, and his lips moved eagerly, though no sound issued from between them. Robbery had evidently been the object of the murder, for coat and waistcoat were torn open, and no sign of a watch-chain was visible.

“He’s going,” remarked one of the new arrivals. “Where’s the nearest doctor?”

“In Norfolk Street,” answered Constable X924; “if you fellows will stand by I will run and fetch him.”

“Stop!” exclaimed the third man, as the constable was about to make a start; “look here, the poor fellow has been trying to write something on the pavement in his blood.”

The light of the lantern showed the letters “J.A.” roughly scrawled in the crimson fluid, then came something like an incomplete half circle, and after that a dash, as if the writer’s strength had failed.

“Is that meant for the name of the fellow that hurt you?” demanded one of the constables, bending over the

wounded man, who made a movement of his hand, which might have been taken either for assent or negation, and then lapsed into a state of unconsciousness.

Police Constable X924 hurried off, but the medical man was unfortunately not at home, and the policeman was standing disconsolately on the embankment, wondering what he should do next, when he was startled by seeing the identical black poodle, which had escaped from the grasp of the injured man, jumping and whining round a figure seated upon one of the seats.

The constable at once walked up to the bench, and perceived that the person with whom the dog seemed to be on such intimate terms was a young man, with a fair moustache and a pleasant cast of features. He was very shabbily dressed, and had on a much worn light overcoat.

"That dog seems precious fond of you," remarked Constable X924, addressing the young man.

"He ought to be," was the reply, "for he has been with me five years, and shared good and evil fortune with me, principally the latter, during that period."

"Oh, and so the dog is yours, is he?" asked the constable, a little suspiciously.

"Of course he is," replied the young man; "but fool that I am, what am I thinking of? Besotted fool that I am, I have parted with him, and my curse upon the juggling fiend who tempted me. Scrub, where is your new master?"

"That is a question you will have to answer, as well as to account for those blood stains on the sleeve of your coat," replied the constable.

"So I will, whenever you like," returned the late master of Scrub, "but not now; any time after nine this morning

I will come where you like, but I have an appointment at that hour, and am only resting here because I have no money to pay for a bed."

"Gammon," replied the constable; "a fine chance I should have of meeting you again if I let you out of my sight. Come along," and he seized him roughly by the collar.

The young man made a violent resistance, but he was weak and unable to cope with the stalwart constable, and though Scrub utterly ruined Constable X924's pantaloons by a sudden attack on his rear, both he and his late master were eventually overpowered and marched off to the police station.

When the prisoner, who gave the name of John Maynard, was brought before the magistrate, the case seemed very black against him, and he was remanded for a week.

When he was brought up again, the coroner's inquest had delivered a verdict of wilful murder against him, and a well-known barrister had been instructed by the Treasury to prosecute.

The prisoner, John Maynard, who was in a terribly depressed state of mind, would have been without legal assistance had not a young barrister, who had become interested in the case, volunteered his services. Arthur Medlecott had been called to the bar about three years; he was a quiet, studious young man, and though he had not as yet received many briefs, had won golden opinions in those cases in which he had been engaged.

Something seemed to tell him that there was some mystery in this affair, and the further he went into it the deeper interest he felt. The unhappy man who had been

found at the foot of Essex Stairs, and who had died whilst being conveyed to the hospital, was identified as a certain Reuben Blatchley, a betting man, who bore rather an equivocal reputation. There was no money save a few coppers found on the body, though it was well known the deceased had been in possession of a comparatively large sum of money before his death.

Before obtaining the assistance of the young barrister, the prisoner had made a statement to the following effect. His name was John Maynard, aged twenty-eight, and he earned his living by exhibiting his trained dog, Scrub, at various music halls of inferior stamp. For the past two years his mother had been suffering from a painful and incurable disease, the expense of which took away every farthing he made. He had made an acquaintance with the dead man, Reuben Blatchley, who had for some months been desirous of purchasing the poodle Scrub. At length, crushed down by adverse circumstances, Maynard had consented to sell the faithful animal for ten pounds, which sum Blatchley had paid him at a public house on the night of the murder. He confessed that he had been very angry at the time, and had accused the deceased of putting pressure upon him, but he had no hand in his death. He had parted with him outside the door of the public house, and after placing Scrub's lead in his hand, had seen him turn toward the Temple, with the dog whining and struggling to get free. Police Constable James Morgan, X924, deposed to finding the dying man, and also to seeing the dog escape. He arrested the prisoner, who made considerable resistance.

Cross-examined by Mr. Medlecott. "Did he not say that he would come at ten o'clock and explain matters?"

Witness, smiling, "Yes, but I did not put any faith in him."

Inspector Frederick Hailes deposed that the prisoner had been brought to the police station, and that he noticed blood on his coat sleeves. Two five-pound notes were found in his pocket, each of which had two small punctures as though made by the point of a pin.

Question by counsel for the defence. "Did not the prisoner say that he was waiting for daylight in order to take the money, which was the price of his dog, to his mother?"

Answer. "He did make such a statement."

Gregory Marlton, publican, deposed that the prisoner and deceased were in his house on the night of the murder, and that prisoner was speaking very angrily to the dead man, but at the time he did not pay much attention, as he was accustomed to hear people quarrel. He heard deceased call the prisoner "Jack." Deceased had given him a fifty-pound note early in the day, requesting him to get it changed. He would swear to the notes found on the prisoner as forming a portion of the money he had handed to deceased, because he had pinned the notes together, and the holes were still apparent. Prisoner had a black poodle with him, and he and deceased left the house together.

By Mr. Medlecott. "Did you hear anything said about the sale of a dog?"

Witness: "No, I did not."

"Did deceased pay prisoner any money?"

"Not as far as I saw; he bundled the notes into his breast pocket and went on jawing. He was a little gone, I think."

"And you will swear that he and the prisoner went out together?"

“Yes, I will swear to that.”

William Hallock was next sworn. He said that he was at the “Bunch of Grapes” on the night in question, and heard the prisoner call deceased a mean-spirited devil, who would take advantage of a man’s necessities, and that he would repent of it sooner than he fancied. Prisoner’s manner was threatening, but deceased was conciliatory, and called him “Jack, old fellow”, offering to stand him a drink. He saw deceased receive money from the landlord. He left the house before deceased or prisoner. He had no acquaintance with either of them.

By Mr. Medlecott. “What is your business?”

Witness. “I haven’t any. I do odd jobs.”

“Have you ever been in trouble?”

“I got into a mess a year ago about a gentleman’s watch, but it was all a mistake.”

“However, mistake or not, you got six months’ hard labour.”

“Yes; the witnesses were all prejudiced; it was a cruel shame.”

“You were drinking in the ‘Bunch of Grapes’; where did you get your money from?”

The witness, insolently. “I don’t see that I have any call to tell you that, gov’nor.”

“When the clerk gave you the testament you put out your wrong hand; are you left-handed?”

“There is no harm if I am, is there?”

“I ask you again if you are left-handed?”

Witness. “Well, for the matter of that, I am.”

Police constable Robert Dicker, Z834, who had been summoned to the spot, deposed that he had discovered the handwriting on the flagstone, and that the facsimile of it produced in court was perfectly correct.

By Mr. Medlecott. "You assisted in placing the deceased on the ambulance for conveyance to the hospital?"

Answer. "I did."

"Did you notice his hands?"

Witness. "I do not understand what you mean."

Mr. Medlecott. "Were there any bloodstains upon them?"

Witness. "No, they were perfectly clean."

Mr. Medlecott. "If there was no stain on his fingers how do you account for his having written the letters 'J.A.' in his blood?"

Witness, hesitatingly. "I cannot account for it at all."

Dr. Andrew Macalister, MD, was then called, and deposed that he was house-surgeon at St. Gengulphus' Hospital, and that the deceased when brought in was quite dead. The witness then proceeded to state that death had been caused by an incised wound in the throat, and that it could not have been self-inflicted.

By Mr. Medlecott. "Would it have been possible for the deceased to have written the letters which have been produced in court after having received a mortal wound?"

Dr. Macalister. "Quite possible, though I do not think, after such a shock to the system as deceased received, he would have had sufficient presence of mind to have given such a clue to his murderer."

No further evidence was brought forward on behalf of the prosecution, and the magistrate was about to commit the prisoner for trial at the approaching sessions, when Mr. Medlecott interposed, saying that he had further evidence which he wished to bring forward for the defence.

Peter Romney, of Beech Place, Peckham, deposed that he was well acquainted with the deceased, and acted as his "penciller" at all race meetings.

The magistrate. "What do you mean by 'penciller'?"

The witness. "His clerk, your worship. I entered the bets he made, and kept his accounts generally. He had plenty of money, but used to drink a bit, at times."

The magistrate. "Really, Mr. Medlecott, I cannot see that this evidence has any bearing on the case."

Mr. Medlecott. "One moment, sir, and I think you will see that I am not wasting the time of the court."

To the witness. "Had you any particular reason for acting as clerk to the murdered man?"

Witness, with a laugh. "He had a precious good reason for engaging me, for if it had been to save his life, he couldn't have written a single letter of the alphabet."

Sensation in the court.

Mr. Medlecott. "Thank you, that will do. Please call Mr. Erasmus Urswick."

Erasmus Urswick stepped into the witness box, and made the following statement: "I am a professional expert in handwriting, and I have examined the facsimile of the marks made in blood on the flagstone, which were supplied to me by the police authorities. The letters 'J.A.', and the unfinished semicircle, have certainly been traced by someone using their left hand; of this there can be no doubt—"

The magistrate. "I should really be unwilling, Mr. Urswick, to challenge the professional opinion of a gentleman who has now such a reputation as you have, but do you not think that you are going a little too far?"

Mr. Urswick. "In what way, your worship?"

The magistrate. "In so decidedly stating that the writing must have been executed with the left hand."

Mr. Urswick. "The caligraphy of the right hand differs in the most wonderful and marked manner, and there are very few persons whose handwritings are alike; but in the course of my experience, I have invariably found that the writing executed by the left hand has almost invariably the same characteristics. I produce, for the inspection of the court, a sheet of paper, upon which I have obtained a dozen copies of the letters 'J.A.' Not copies, for they have not seen the facsimiles in the hands of the police. They were all effected in the same manner—by dipping the forefinger in blacking—and your worship will observe the marked resemblance between the various attempts. I am now going to make a further statement, which may seem even more incredible than my first one, and that is, that if the letters were written with the left hand, they were never written by the dead man."

The magistrate. "That is a bold assertion, Mr. Urswick, and I shall be glad to hear how you will prove it."

"I was brought up, your worship, for the medical profession, and took my degree in due course, but I, after a time, abandoned it—I am sure Dr. Macalister will pardon me—for a less precarious position. I examined the left hand of the murdered man, and I find that the middle finger is wanting, doubtless the result of some accident, and the forefinger and the one next to it are stiff and unbendable, so that by no possibility could they have been used to inscribe the letters 'J.A.' I appeal to Dr. Macalister to know whether I am, or am not, right."

Dr. Macalister, rising and bowing. "You are perfectly right, Mr. Urswick."

Renewed sensation in the court.

The magistrate. "Then what is your argument, Mr. Medlecott?"

Mr. Medlecott. "That it would be absurd to suppose that my client would have inscribed the two first letters of his Christian name had he been the actual murderer, and that 'J.A.' was written by the real criminal in order to throw the blame upon an innocent party."

"You forget the blood upon the coat, and the two five-pound notes, which have been identified as having been in possession of the deceased on the night of the murder, and which were found upon the prisoner."

"The notes, my client has asserted, were given him in payment for the poodle, which the police constable, who discovered the body, saw escaping from the dying man's grasp; and the blood is easily accounted for by a wound which the dog received when the murderer made his first attack, and with which he would have stained his master's coat in his joy at finding him again."

"Let the dog be brought into court," said the magistrate; "I should like to examine the wound myself."

Within five minutes after this order had been given, a sudden tumult arose at the door of the court. The barking and snarling of a dog was mingled with the oaths and vociferations of a man, and a confused murmur from the officials.

Above it all rose the tones of a man, pronouncing these words, clearly and distinctly: "You infernal brute, are you not content with having bitten my leg nearly through for the accidental slash I gave you at the foot of Essex Street, but you must make for me again."

"There is the end of my case for the defence, your worship," remarked Mr. Medlecott. "Scrub, the poodle,

has put in the finishing link of evidence, and if you want the real murderer, why, there he stands, self-confessed, in the person of William Hallock, the left-handed villain who, with his fingers dipped in the victim's blood, traced the lying letters which have almost thrust an innocent man's neck into the hangman's noose."

Taken by surprise, and feeling that there was no retracting the admission he had made, Hallock sulkily confessed his crime. The remainder of the stolen notes were found in the lining of his coat, and Scrub's mark was visible on the calf of his leg. He confessed that he had seen the notes handed over to Blatchley and heard the quarrel between the two men. The idea of the crime had flashed suddenly upon him, and waiting outside, he had dogged the betting man, after he had parted with Maynard, until a convenient spot was reached, when, springing upon him, he had cut his throat with a razor which he had in his pocket. The dog had received a chance cut in the struggle, and had retaliated after the manner of his kind with his teeth. He had then robbed the dying man, and traced the letters 'J.A.' on the flagstone near, as if the expiring efforts of the victim had been to give a clue to his murderer. He had then run off at full speed and hurled the bloodstained weapon into the Thames.

In due time William Hallock expiated his crime on the gallows, whilst John Maynard, whom Scrub had quietly followed out of court, was lucky enough to obtain a good engagement for his canine protégé at one of the leading music halls, where his sensational story became known through the medium of the press, and so to supply his mother in her last days with every comfort.

—*SIR GILBERT CAMPBELL*

Dabbling in Mystery. . . .

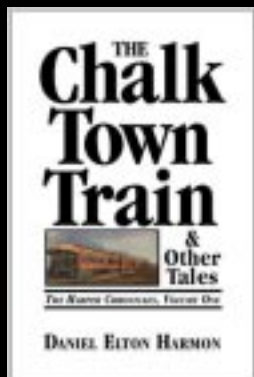
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