

A QUEER CLUE.

There are certain buildings which reveal you, just as there are certain people. Martin Swift's wholesale liquor store was one of the worst dingy, unclean and out of place among its betters. As a newspaper man I passed it a day for nine years and never caught sight of the proprietor. True, the door stood open in summer, as do the doors of other business houses, but I never saw the man to be seen. In the right hand window was a pyramid of jugs and demijohns, in the left a pyramid of brandy and bottles.

I repeat, nine years passed away, and I never entered the store or saw the proprietor. Then one day I made a sudden resolve. I would walk right into the place and see and hear all that I could. This was in November, and the doors were shut. I got up from my work, took a street car, and walked into the liquor store as if I had legitimate business. There was an aisle 10 feet wide down the center of the store, and on each side were rows of kegs and barrels. Near the rear end was the stove, but it was cold. Close to the stove was an old desk, with papers scattered over it. I went to the desk and found a note pinned to it. It was a flight of stairs led to the second story. The interior of the building was about what I had pictured it through all those long years. I stood looking around a minute and then picked up the paper and rapped on the stove. Mr. Swift could not be away, or the front door would have been locked. My alarm would bring him down. As time passed I rapped again and again, but I seemed to be always in vain. The first idea was to abandon my quest. The door might have been left unlocked by accident, and Mr. Swift might not return for hours. I had started to go out when I suddenly remembered that there were blinds to the window of the second story and that I had never seen them open. I went back to the stove. Mr. Swift had rooms up there. The blinds never being opened, I had deduced that he was a single man and eccentric in his habits. I went to the window to see the upstairs part, but as I stood at the foot of the stairs it occurred to me that the old man might be lying in his bed up there too. I went to the door and found the second story divided off by a plank partition. The west wall was devoted to empty kegs and cases, while the east half, which looked down on the street, was divided into two rooms—a sitting room and a bedroom. Each room had a window looking out on the sitting room was open, and I got a glance into the bedroom of Martin Swift. There was a gas jet burning at full heat, and I could see the bed. A second glance told me that the man had been murdered. It would have been the right thing in me to rush downstairs and out and give the neighbors the alarm, but I did not do so. I leaned against the door casing and carefully took note of everything.

Yes, Martin Swift was an old man—old and gray and wrinkled, as I had pictured him. Some of his front teeth were gone, and on the floor beside him lay a pair of slippers. The room was not only plainly furnished, but the dust and cobwebs and general slovenly look proved that he was not in the habit of cleaning the place. In the other room and took notice that it had not been slept in the night before. I took out my watch and carefully jotted down the position of the body—the position of two chairs at an old table in the center of the room, a pipe lying on the floor, a stove, a window and a dozen other things.

Mr. Swift had a visitor the night before, and that visitor had murdered him and left the store in a state of confusion. That was why I found the front door unlocked. Who was the visitor? I knew the sex before I entered the room. The man's hair had not been swept for weeks. In the dust on its surface was the print of a woman's shoe—No. 2 shoe. She had found the old man in the store below and come up with him. The two had sat down facing each other beside the table. When I inspected the table, I discovered in the dust on its surface a square representing the bottom of a box. No shoe was to be found. The two had sat down to overhaul the contents of a box of papers. In front of the woman were the imprints of her feet again.

The old man had been killed by a bullet through the heart. On the hearth of the stove was a little heap of tobacco ashes. As they sat talking he was smoking. Having finished his pipe, he reached out his right hand and knocked out the ashes. That brought his left side to her, and as she fired a pipe rolled out of his chair. She picked it up and away. One leg had been drawn up and one hand clinched, but he had died almost instantly. I wandered about the sitting room and in the bedroom, but nothing seemed to have been disturbed. On the shelf in the bedroom was a tin box containing over \$500 in cash. By the light of a match I looked at it and it had not been moved. His trunk had not been opened, and hanging from a nail was his gold watch. His murderer had come for money.

Had anything been left behind which could be made use of as a clue to unravel this mysterious murder? The chair in which the man sat was an old-fashioned splint bottom. Clinging to the splints I found a few threads of blue dress goods. That only corroborated the footprints I had seen. I looked down on hands and knees, crept back and forth across the floor, and under a stove I made a singular discovery. I found what I at first took for a piece of toy, but which I soon figured out was a golden crown or cap for a human tooth. It had been made to slip over a tooth and be kept in place by a spring. It could not have belonged to the old man, but did it belong to the woman who had called? Such things are not easily lost, but it would be strange enough if she lost that crown there. As she near as I could figure, she had simply taken the box and walked out and downstairs as soon as she was satisfied that he was dead. She had then returned to the room. She had gone no farther than the table.

I was investigating for at least an hour before ready to give up and start for my soft coal. The fire was all out, but the room was not yet cold. The body of the old man was cold and rigid, and I might figure that he had been dead since 10 o'clock of the night before. He did not cook up there, and it was for me to find out where he boarded. In a three cheap restaurants in a row, and within an hour I had learned that I had taken his meals in one of them for the past five years; yes, he was there a supper time the night of the 6th. He always closed his store at 6. At 10 o'clock he had finished his dinner and was ready to return to the store. He would reach there at 7.15 or 7.30, and the woman must have been waiting for him. As he did not smoke on the street, he must have lighted his pipe in the room upstairs. Eight o'clock would be close to the hour of his killing.

Did I give the alarm? No, I said not a word. I passed down and out into the street in broad daylight. I carried my gun with me. I had a second chance. As Martin Swift had been my mystery in life, so now he should be my mystery in death. I was that someone had been told to do as you wish, and I might never to have promised such a thing. Oh, forgive me, for give me—and forget it.

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