

# Aurora's Famous Lodge Case

By FRANK LOVELL NELSON

## Master Mind Solves One of the Queerest of Crimes.

Doctor Slain at Initiation by Substitution of Gunpowder for Fake Explosive—Carleton Clark to the Aid of Chicago Newspaper Reporter in Solving Mystery.

**E**VERY man who has been a newspaper reporter and survives has one case which he gives the post of honor in memory. This is the story of the assignment I like best to remember, not only because it resulted in the solution of one of the most mysterious cases that ever arose in Illinois, but rather for the reason that it marked my first meeting with Carleton Clark.

It was in the summer of 1896 that the word came to the office of the Chicago morning paper with which I was then connected that the police of the little city of Aurora were struggling with a case which seemed destined to prove one of the greatest mysteries of the day. As I had met with considerable success in criminal cases, the managing editor lost no time in hustling me off by the first train to the scene of action.

The brief account in the first paper I picked up, stripped of its glaring headlines, was as follows:

Early this morning a very mysterious tragedy occurred in the hall of the Ancient Order of Persian Knights, a local secret society, which resulted in the almost instant death of Dr. Arthur W. Williams, a prominent physician of this city. The initiation of Dr. Williams was in progress at the time. In one portion of the ceremony the candidate, having been condemned to death for invading the sacred domain of the shah, is ordered to load an old fashioned dueling pistol with powder and ball which are furnished him. He is then placed against the wall and the pistol is fired point blank at him by a member of the lodge holding the office of royal executioner. The powder provided the candidate has always been a clever counterfeit made of pulverized anthracite coal, and the only climax to the thrilling ceremony, heretofore, has been the flash of the percussion cap and the shouts of laughter of the lodge members. Dr. Williams was an old hand at lodge work. As a consequence, none of the efforts of the Persian Knights to break down his nerve or self-possession had been successful. When he had loaded the pistol he faced Dr. Homer Smith, whose duty it was to fire the shot, and gazed into his eyes without a visible tremor. Suddenly the members of the lodge, about 200 of whom were present, were startled by a loud explosion. Dr. Williams fell forward with blood gushing from a wound in his forehead. Among the first to reach the stricken man was Dr. Smith, who had fired the fatal shot. He tried to stanch the blood, but the bullet had penetrated the brain and Dr. Williams died in his arms without speaking. Chief of Police Darling, who is a prominent member of the order, holding the office of royal astrologer, at once thought to secure the cup from which the powder had been poured. A few grains remained. He tasted them. It was unmistakably black gunpowder. No arrests have been made and no one seems willing to take the responsibility of saying that the tragedy was anything more than an accident due to the carelessness of someone in getting the counterfeit powder mixed with the real article.

"Oh, those country correspondents!" I fairly groaned. There was so much I wanted to know. Who had handled the supposed counterfeit powder? What was the customary source from which the lodge procured it? What were the relations of the two physicians toward each other?

"It all depends upon the history of the powder," I said to myself as I stuffed the papers into my pocket.

"You are right, sir. It all depends upon the history of the powder."

I turned around half in anger at this unlooked-for interruption to my train of thought. Whatever emotion I may have felt was instantly lost in interest in the face before me. It was a face I should have singled out among a thousand. Clean shaven, the firmly moulded chin showed by its slight tinge of blue that the beard, had it been allowed to grow, would have been black. The nose was aquiline and of perfect proportions. The intelligent eyes were dark almost to blackness. The complexion was swarthy, but suffused with the glow of health. The hair was of that distinctive combination of colors, black, shading almost to white on the temples and over the forehead. An American, evidently, but inheriting through several generations of New World ancestors the markings of southern Europe. His height I should have estimated at six feet. Carleton Clark really lacks three-quarters of an inch of the mark.

"Then you are a sort of Sherlock Holmes?" I ventured.

"Sherlock Holmes is an impossibility," he said.

Further conversation was interrupted by our arrival before the little art-

ficial stone building which serves for a railway station at Aurora. The evident topic of conversation on all sides was the tragedy of the night before. I scorned unofficial information until I had exhausted the official. However, I could not resist turning to one of the groups on the platform and asking:

"What is the latest in the Williams case?"

"Doc. Smith gave himself up about two hours ago," was the answer.

When we reached police headquarters we found Chief Darling in his office and at leisure. As we entered my companion slipped me his card with an apology for having omitted the formality on the train. The name I read was "Mr. Carleton Clark."

Chief Darling was willing to talk, but protested that he had no knowledge which was not already public property in the city. He had arrested Dr. Smith upon his own request and after a conference with the state's attorney. The most damaging evidence against him, aside from the known details of the tragedy, was a powerful motive. The prisoner had every reason in the world to be the enemy of the dead physician, although there had never been an open rupture and they met as friends in society and lodge work. When Dr. Williams came to Aurora Dr. Smith had a flourishing practice. Within the two years his practice had dwindled to practically nothing, most of his wealthiest patients having fallen under the spell of Dr. Williams' engaging personality.

But it was over an affair of the heart that the most serious clash in their fortunes had occurred. Dr. Smith for years had been "keeping company" with pretty Lucile Burton. Everybody in the city believed them to be tacitly engaged. The society sensation therefore was sprung when the cards came out about a year before announcing the marriage of Dr. Williams and Lucile Burton.

"Now, Mr. Darling," continued Clarke, "you have of course investigated fully the history of the powder?"

"That was the first move I made, and that's one thing that makes it look bad for Doc. The fake stuff never left his hands from the time it was ground until the shot was fired. The lodge has been getting its imitation made at Burpee's drug store, where a clerk by the name of Wilbur Paget, who is a member of the lodge, grinds it up on the quiet as we need it. On the afternoon of the initiation he had made up a quantity. Doc. Smith dropped into the store about half-past five, and Paget gave him the powder wrapped up in a package. As far as I can find out nobody but Paget and Doc. handled it or saw it."

"Don't you suppose the clandestine meeting he had with Mrs. Williams this morning had something to do with it?"

"Now look here, who has leaked?" angrily exclaimed Darling.

"You have leaked, my dear Mr. Darling," answered Clarke. "It was a chance card and I'm surprised that an old hand like you should have taken the bait. But you may rely upon my discretion, and I trust you will pardon my lucky stroke and give us your full confidence."

Clarke's good humor seemed partially to mollify the angry officer, but I could see that the shot rankled.

When we entered his cell Dr. Smith was seated upon the board which did duty as a bed. He was quite my ideal type of a typical physician.

During the conversation I could see the eyes of the doctor constantly reverting to those of Clarke as if he found there some irresistible fascination. Then Clarke suddenly broke in:

"Whom are you shielding?" he cried.

"No one," fairly shouted the doctor. "Who are you that you should come here to catechise me?"

"We have all the information we shall get here," said Clarke as he took my arm and beckoned to the chief who had watched the interview through the small glass-covered aperture in the door.

The drug clerk, Wilbur Paget, corroborated all the chief had said regarding the fake powder, but by far the most important piece of information which he was able to give us was that on the afternoon he gave the package to Dr. Smith he had also handed the doctor a small purchase which

Mrs. Williams had ordered by telephone, asking him to leave it at Dr. Williams' home, which he must pass on the way to his own.

"Well, Mr. Clarke, what do you think by this time?" I ventured.

"Here is the case, Dr. Smith did not commit that murder. There was no more surprised person in the lodge room when the pistol went off. He gave himself up for two reasons. First to shield the woman he loves and whom he believes to be guilty. Second, he feels that he is technically guilty because his hand did the act, and his mind has exulted over it."

"Wilbur Paget, the drug clerk, might have committed the murder. He has for several years been desperately and hopelessly in love with Mrs. Williams, and has cherished a secret hatred for her husband. Thus the motive was there. The only reason he is not guilty is that the idea did not occur to him. I will show you the opportunity later. Her motive was a double one. She suffered in silence the constant abuse of a drunken husband. She loved another. Thus she had the strongest motive which can actuate a woman to murder, the desire to rid herself of a man who was ruining her life and to be free to marry a man she loved."

"Now for the opportunity which you doubt. When Dr. Smith stopped at the Williams' home to deliver the package from the drug store Dr. Williams was out. Common courtesy demanded that the wife ask Dr. Smith into the house, even had her heart not prompted her to snatch every moment with him that she could."

"Now for the opportunity. When Dr. Smith left the house he did not take the powder with him. Whether it was connivance, intent, or merely absent-mindedness I cannot say, but I incline toward the latter. At any rate, the imitation powder was in the possession of Mrs. Williams for some little time. She knew its purpose."

"No, no, you are all wrong," I exclaimed. "I would have to lose all my faith in womankind before I could credit it. I would rather believe it of the doctor."

After breakfasting the next morning Clarke and I set out to fulfill our tentative appointment with Mrs. Williams.

"Mrs. Williams," he began in his whirlwind fashion, "I will ask you what passed between yourself and Dr. Smith at the early morning meeting you had with him yesterday. Wait a minute. Is it not a fact that Dr. Smith called you to the back door before the neighbors were up and while the watchers were all in the front part of the house with the body, and confessed to you that he had executed the fatal change in the powders?"

"Did Dr. Smith tell you that?" she asked in a tense voice, while she convulsively clasped and unclasped her hands.

"Dr. Smith has told me nothing. It is a fact, is it not?"

"Yes."

"But despite his confession to you and the fact that he gave himself up to the police, you believe him to be innocent?"

"O, sir, I more than believe. I know he is innocent."

"How do you know it?" snapped Clarke, with his eyes riveted upon the frail bit of femininity before him.

"I know it—because—because I changed the powders."

"Mrs. Williams, why do you, who are not of a caste given to falsehood, deliberately tell me what I know to be untrue? Dr. Smith would not ask this sacrifice at your hands. He is innocent, and his innocence alone will save him."

She cried, appealingly:

"O, I will save him! You shall not prevent me! Even though he be guilty I will save him. Mine was the first guilt. Prove that he is innocent, and I will thank you with my whole life. If you cannot, do not stand in my way, for I am the guilty one and on my head alone should the punishment fall. You have dragged out my secret and made me lay my heart open before you who are strangers. Do not betray me but let me work this problem out in my own way, I beg of you, gentlemen."

Just then the telephone bell rang violently.

"Answer it, if you please, Mr. Sexton," said the woman, who seemed too weak to rise.

I went to the telephone. "Coroner has arrived. Inquest is beginning. Mrs. Williams wanted at once at the court house."

I turned and gave the message verbatim.

With a hurried promise to keep our counsel, let Mrs. Williams take her own course, but to do all in our power "What do you think of it, Clarke?" I asked.



"I WISH TO PUT THIS BOY IN EVIDENCE."

"I don't know what to think. They're both innocent. She told the truth. You noticed how I led her into it. She has a remarkably psychic mind, and I knew the storm was coming before it broke."

"She is innocent, but I have my doubts about the doctor. He confessed his guilt to her. He wouldn't have done that if he were innocent."

When I reached the courthouse the proceedings already had commenced.

The first evidence of real importance was that of the drug clerk, who swore to the facts he had told Clarke and myself. Chief Darling's policeman swore to the early morning meeting and the effect seemed to be to turn the tide of sentiment decidedly against Dr. Smith, who was preserving his composure admirably during the trying ordeal.

"Now, Mrs. Williams," continued the coroner, after a few formal questions, "I want you to tell the jury what passed between you and Dr. Smith when you met early yesterday morning."

"Dr. Smith simply came to ask me if there was any assistance he could render in my trouble. I expected no less of one I have known since childhood."

"Why did he come to the back door?" asked the coroner.

"After his close connection with my husband's death I suppose he wished to avoid publicity."

"Did Dr. Smith offer you any explanation as to the cause of the tragedy?"

Mrs. Williams hesitated and looked appealingly at me.

I endeavored to instill strength into her wavering courage with all the power of my eyes, but the poor, haggard little woman was unequal to the strain of the ordeal. And perhaps to

her mind it seemed that she was being led on to give incriminating evidence against the man she loved. With a pathetic out-throwing of her hands toward her inquisitor she rose to her feet. "No! No!" she cried in a pitifully shrill voice. "He had no explanation to offer. I alone know who killed Dr. Williams. It was I who—"

"Stop!" commanded a voice at the back of the hall.

"Mr. Coroner," said Clarke, on reaching the railing with his prisoner, "I wish to put this boy in evidence before Mrs. Williams finishes her testimony. Here is the instrument of Dr. Williams' death."

Everybody in the hall was on his feet, and there was a great craning of necks to see Clarke's captive.

"Mrs. Williams is excused for the present. You will be sworn, Mr. —"

"Carleton Clarke," answered my companion, taking the oath.

"Now," said Clarke, "this boy is in no condition of mind to be examined, but when he sees that he has not committed a crime, and that no harm will come to him, he will corroborate what I have to say. I found him in the farthest corner of Dr. Smith's hay loft praying for dear life. He is the boy that Dr. Smith sent after the package of imitation powder which he had left at Mrs. Williams' house when he called there the afternoon previous to the tragedy to deliver another package at the request of the drug clerk, Paget. This boy intended going rabbit hunting the next day, and on his way to Mrs. Williams' he stopped at Toby's gun store and bought a nickel's worth of gunpowder. This he slipped into his left pocket. When Mrs. Williams gave him the package Dr. Smith had left her put it in his right pocket. Being an absent-minded

youth, he had forgotten all about his errand when he returned to Dr. Smith's house. The doctor asked him suddenly for the package, and being left-handed, as may be proved, he reached for his left pocket. The next morning when he heard of Dr. Williams' death and found what he had done, he hid the other package in the hay, where I found it. He has been in a condition of absolute terror and in hiding in the hay ever since. Isn't that so, Timothy Dolan?"

"Y-y-yes, thir," sobbed the boy.

Then the court room broke into cheers, and whatever formalities the court took to free Dr. Smith were lost in the excitement.

As Clarke and I watched the spires of Aurora fading in the distance that evening, I could not help wondering if Dr. Smith greatly regretted the mistake of his greckled stable boy.

More than a year after the events recorded in the foregoing narrative Clarke and I were idling in our rooms one morning when the mail brought a square envelope addressed to Clarke.

"Here," he said, as he tossed the card over to me. "This will recall to your mind the mystery of the famous Aurora Lodge case."

It was an announcement of the marriage of Mrs. Lucile Williams to Dr. Homer Smith.

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**Will Fish for Sponges.**

A company has been organized by a New Orleans business man to engage in the sponge fishery off the coast of Yucatan, near the islands of Mujeres and Cozumel. The necessary concessions have already been secured and appliances with diving crews are on the way.