

The Echo of a Crime

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

I am indebted for the following story to the editor of a well-known London paper who, in relating the incident, admitted that although not in the least of a nervous temperament, he considers it, in the light of subsequent events, a very curious one.

“Last year,” he said, “I went down to Rugeley, in Staffordshire, to look at some rooms in the town, with the idea of spending a holiday in a beautiful district of which I had seen little since my boyhood.

“I put up at a certain hotel which I had known all my life, and, after looking at several places, being very tired, I dined and went to bed early. I remember it was about ten. I was awakened by hearing extraordinary sounds, apparently in the room. They appeared to be creakings or tickings and, since one end of the room was obviously a wooden partition papered over, I at first explained them to myself as the creakings of the boards of which it was composed. But the sounds came from all quarters, and I was much puzzled and rather annoyed. I got out of bed, but there was no need to get a light, since the room was fairly well illuminated by a big lamp outside, and then I looked round. The sounds ceased at once and, although rather mystified, I returned to bed and fell asleep. I was again awakened two or three times, but each time dropped off to sleep. Presently I was once more awakened by a sound which I can only describe as that of two or three excited children rushing upstairs past my door preceded by a dog. The door was not locked. I heard distinctly the pit-pat of the dog’s feet. A moment after the cavalcade passed my door, I heard a door in the distance bang loudly. It was then twelve o’clock exactly, for a church clock outside struck the hour. I realized that the sounds were somehow different from those that would be made by real people and a real dog; their footsteps were not real footsteps. There was a difference which I cannot describe. I looked out on to the landing, perambulated it and the corridor down which the feet had hurried. There was not a sound and the house was in darkness. Much puzzled, I returned to bed and soon dropped asleep, but several times more I heard the creakings and tickings. In fact it was a distinctly uncomfortable night. I was in no way frightened or alarmed, and have often thought that I should again like to sleep in the same room by way of experiment.

“About a week later I was talking to a lady I who knows Rugeley extremely well, and in the course of conversation I told her about my night at the hotel. She seemed very much interested, and when I had finished said, ‘It is very curious. Please describe the situation of the room.’

“I did so, and then she replied, “Why, that is the room in which Palmer poisoned Cooke!”

“ ‘Impossible!’ I said, ‘because the crime took place in another house altogether—the Talbot. I have known Rugeley since I was a boy and feel quite sure it was called the Talbot! Besides, one of the houses I looked at in Rugeley had originally been an inn called ‘The Talbot,’ and when I was going over it, I said to the lady who was living there, ‘Palmer kept his racing stud here, I believe, didn’t he?’ and she replied, ‘Yes—those stables you see in the yard.’

“My friend’s father had sat on the coroner’s jury who inquired into the death of Cooke, and he confirmed her belief without the slightest hesitation, having a clear recollection of every detail of the trial, and having known the hotel intimately all his life.

“Now this puzzled me very much, because I remembered the Talbot Hotel at Rugeley, when I was a boy, and always hearing that Palmer had kept his racing stud in its stables. Upon inquiring I found that there had been two distinct Talbots—‘The Talbot Arms’ and ‘The Talbot Inn.’ The ‘Talbot Inn’ was disestablished not so very long ago and turned into the house I had looked over, and the name of the other inn had been changed when, subsequently to Palmer’s crimes, Earl Talbot proved his title to the Earldom of Shrewsbury. Therefore it *was* in the hotel in which I had slept that Palmer had poisoned Cooke and my friend’s father was perfectly right. Of this I knew absolutely nothing.

“But still there was a further complication as to the size of the room. In the reports of the trial, which I looked up, Cooke’s room was described as a very large one, with a fireplace. My room was rather small and had no fireplace, unless concealed behind a great wardrobe, so I again concluded that my informant must have been mistaken. Further inquiry showed that, as a matter of fact, the room was the one in which the crime had been committed, but that it had since been divided into two. The window of it looked right across the street into another house, which is now altered or pulled down.

“The odd part of the affair was that, when I slept in the room I had been quite convinced that the crime had taken place in a totally different inn, so had no predisposition to see or hear anything. I saw nothing, it is true, but I heard and experienced quite enough to convince me that there was something decidedly uncanny about the room.”