

THE AUTHENTIC WILLIAM JAMES

Excerpt

It didn't take a detective to see that the man in the Capitol Hotel had been shot in the head, from behind, and at close range. He was seated at a writing-desk in his room, facing the wall. All the signs were that he'd had no warning. His reaction had propelled the chair back a few inches as he'd slammed face-down onto the blotter. Now his arms were hanging almost to the floor.

Taking care to touch nothing at first, Sebastian Becker inspected the body from every angle. He saw a man in his forties, clean-shaven, wearing a brown worsted suit with a waistcoat and necktie. The suit jacket was off, and slung over the back of the chair. Peering more closely, Sebastian observed matted red-brown hair marking the site of an entrance wound. Soot and unburned powder were scorched into the shirt collar below. On the wall above the desk there was a red sunburst of blood and darker matter, propelled with enough force to destroy wallpaper and plaster at its center.

There was one certain way to identify William James. Sebastian lifted one of the arms and, with care, drew back the shirt cuff to expose the hand. It only took him a moment to be satisfied, and then he restored everything as before.

A pen lay on the floor. He left it there. Whatever piece of writing the victim had been working on, his body was covering it. Sebastian would have to wait for the Sheriff or the County Physician to find out anything more.

Retreating to the door, he tested floorboards for creaks and noises.

A last look around the room. Shaving kit on the washstand, a carpet-bag stowed underneath it. William James was a practiced and lifelong traveller. A pair of brown shoes, nicely polished, was lined up at the foot of the bed. The corpse was in his stockinged feet.

Sebastian pulled the door closed on the scene, and went down to the Capitol's lobby.

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The clerk looked up from his bookkeeping as Sebastian descended the stairway. The young man gave a pleasant smile and said, "Did you find him?"

"I did," Sebastian said. "Were you aware that he'd been shot?"

"Say again?"

"Your guest is dead."

It took a moment for the words to register, and a few more for their significance to follow. Without taking his eyes off Sebastian, uncertain as to whether the stranger's words might represent a prank or even a threat, the clerk reached for the house phone.

"Mister Quick?" he said into the receiver after a few moments. "Could you come to the front desk, please?"

And then he hung up the phone, still watching Sebastian, never blinking once.

"I didn't shoot him," Sebastian said, which seemed to offer the young man no reassurance.

Two well-heeled couples came in from the street and headed for seats in the lobby. They were too busy chatting to notice either of the men standing at the counter. The twenty-roomed Capitol was considered to be the finest hotel in this small Pennsylvania town, boasting the usual register of eminent one-time guests from Mark Twain to Theodore Roosevelt. The lobby was a dress-up affair, all brass and brocade with a moose head and a parlor grand, Victorian elegance from its hardwood floor to its hammered tin ceiling. A set of doors connected it to the hotel's saloon, which stood quiet at this early hour of the day.

Orville Quick, proprietor and manager, appeared within the minute. Something in the clerk's tone had alerted him.

"Is there a problem?" he said, while taking stock of the stranger before him. He was assessing Sebastian for attitude, gauging the likely extent of the trouble.

Mindful of the guests within earshot, Sebastian said, "I came here to see the man in room seven."

"And...?"

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The clerk mouthed, Dead.

Quick was unfazed. "You're sure about this?"

"By another's hand," Sebastian said.

Quick glanced across the lobby. "Please don't say anything more," he said, and moved to the stairway.

"You should know," Sebastian said, "it's not a pleasant sight."

With a brief nod, the manager continued up the stairs.

"I'll be outside," Sebastian told the clerk.

He crossed the lobby and went out through the doors. The town had been ripping up the old wooden boardwalks and replacing them with cement, and this stretch of the main street had been among the first to be renewed. He walked a dozen yards and stood on the adjacent bridge, hands on the rail, looking out over the creek that ran beside the hotel.

There he took a breath, squared himself, and composed his mind. There would be questions that he'd have to answer as best he could. The tragic history of William James would have repercussions beyond his demise. Much would depend on the information that Sebastian was about to give.

At a sound, he turned and looked back. The prosperous-looking couples from the lobby had made their plans and were now leaving; the women deep in conversation and the men strolling behind them, all unaware of the unfolding situation on the upper floor of the hotel. They moved off down the sidewalk, one of the women popping a parasol against the August sunshine.

The stores all had their canvas awnings out, and the busy side of the street was lined with automobiles. Main Street itself was wide and, as yet, unpaved. Every feed barn in the nation might be turning to autolivery, but the car was not yet king; on his walk up from the train station Sebastian had been engulfed by the dust of one mule-team after another. He wondered if the wheels, hooves and whipcracks could have made enough of a racket to cover the sound of a single gunshot inside a quiet hotel.

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Now two men were heading this way on foot. They'd come from the courthouse, one block down. One was tall, the other shorter and struggling to keep up. Both wore brown suits and derby hats. They reached the hotel just as a truck pulled in and a rancher type alighted and joined them. Moments after they'd gone inside, a new-looking Ford runabout—brass radiator, high running boards, whitewall tires—drew in behind the truck. The driver was inexperienced, and mistimed his declutch so the vehicle lurched forward a foot or two before he'd killed the engine. Then he jumped out, grabbed a doctor's bag, and followed the others in.

A man had died, and the forces of justice were gathering. Such as they were in this small Pennsylvania tank town, late in the summer of 1913.

Sebastian didn't wait to be called, but made his way back toward the Capitol's lobby.