

[Smith, Silas Clark]

MURDER AT MIDDLEVILLE

Prof. S. Clark Smith, of Fairfield, Shot and Instantly Killed by  
Dr. Moritz R. Richter, of Middleville—Details of the Horrible Crime—  
Sketch of the Lives of the Parties

Another of those inexcusable, cold-blooded murders, for which Herkimer county is rapidly gaining a most unenviable reputation, was committed at Middleville last Saturday afternoon, when Dr. Moritz R. Richter shot and killed S. Clark Smith, of Fairfield. The crime seems to have been committed in the heat of passion and so far as can be gathered from the details published, there was less provocation in this case than in any of its sickening predecessors. The excitement at Middleville immediately following the crime, was most intense, and threats of lynching were freely made. Fortunately, wiser Councils [counsels] prevailed and no effort was made to carry out these threats.

The following particulars are given by the Herkimer correspondent of the *Utica Herald* who visited the scene of the murder Saturday evening.

In a conversation with Dr. R. I learned the following facts: Dr. Richter is a native of Germany; he was born in the city of Bischofswerda, kingdom of Saxony, November 17, 1825, and will be 60 years old next November. He was educated in the old country, studied medicine and graduated from the university of Leipsic [Leipzig]. He came to this country in 1854 and located at Middleville, where he has ever since resided. He was naturalized September 18, 1859, and for 15 or 20 years had a large and lucrative practice in the northern part of the county. He was commonly known as the "Dutch [for "Deutsch": German] doctor" and many of his patients had great faith in his skill. He owned a small place, one and a third acres, in the village of Middleville on the field road just above and opposite the school house. Here he has a small story and a half house and a small office adjoining it. The office is not kept open in the winter, the doctor treating his patients in the house, where he has his office. Until 1876 he lived alone, taking his meals with a neighbor, Mrs. Laura Harter. In the centennial year he became engaged to and married Miss Eliza Ward, a daughter of the late Sidney D. Ward, who resided on a farm near the village of Eatonville, in the town of Little Falls. This marriage took place without the consent and as I judge from the doctor's statement, without the knowledge of Miss Ward's parents, the doctor telling me this morning that when his wife informed her parents of the marriage, the old gentleman was much surprised and said he would as soon thought of being struck on the head with an ax as to hear of his daughter's marriage with Richter. As far as known the doctor and his wife lived happily together until about a year ago, then according to the doctor's statement, after returning home from a few days' absence, his wife

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acted strangely. One of the pupils of her eyes was enlarged, and from this the doctor thought that she was partially insane. In February, 1884 he took her to her father's home, where she has since resided. She left with the doctor her clothing, jewelry, furs, etc. This brings us down to the scene of the tragedy, and with a few words of explanation, I will go on with the doctor's statement. S. Clark Smith came to Middleville yesterday forenoon, with a bill of sale signed by Mrs. Richter, for \$200, selling to Smith all of her personal property. Smith applied to Dr. (Hartlin?), who is a justice of the peace, for replevin papers, but not obtaining them went to Newport, where the papers were obtained.

### THE DIFFICULTIES BROUGHT TO A HEAD

In company with Mr. [Melvin] Getman, his brother-in-law, Smith went to Richter's residence at 11 A.M., Saturday. From this point the doctor's version of the affair is as follows. "Smith came in with his brother-in-law. I was glad to see them and asked them to take a seat. Smith said he had come after my wife's clothing and showed me the bill of sale. He said, 'I will tell you what I will do, Clark. I will send her trunk, in which her clothing, her valuable mink furs, shoes and other articles of clothing, if you will take them and be satisfied until I can see my wife or if she refuses to see me, until I can take counsel.' He said 'Very well, I suppose I shall have to.' We went upstairs and I tied up the boxes and he and I carried down the trunk, setting it in the front door, and from there it was taken out and put in the sleigh. A short time after, a patient called to have his leg dressed, and while he was the Smith and Getman came back again, and Smith wanted to know if I would give up my wife's mortgages which she held on the place, amounting to \$725. 'Could I,' I said, 'wait until I see my wife and have counsel.' He went away but came the third time between 4 and 5 P.M., in company with Constable Charles Taber and his brother John Taber. I explained matters to the constable, and told Clark I considered my wife partly insane and not competent to transact business, and if you take anything else away you do it at the risk of your lives. They showed me the bill of sale for \$200. The goods were worth at least (\$900?)."

The statement made by Dr. Richter does not differ materially from that of officer Taber.

### THE SHOOTING

Smith and officer Taber went upstairs, and were followed by Richter. John Taber remained below. Smith pointed out a chamber set [bed and bedding] which the officer was to take, and while standing with his back to Richter, the latter shot him in the back. Taber quickly turned, when the doctor fired another shot. Smith having partly turned around, this ball entered under the left arm. Smith staggered toward the head of the stairs,

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saying, "My God, I am shot!" Officer Taber then advanced toward Richter, who, he says, pointed the pistol at him. He grasped [grappled] with him, but the doctor was the stronger of the two and threw Taber on the bed. John Taber then came in, grasped Richter around the body and wrenched the pistol from his hand. Richter was at once handcuffed and taken to Dr. Hamlin's office [there being no jail in Middleville], where I found him. Mr. Smith staggered down stairs and out to the road, a distance of about 25 feet, and fell dead in the snow. The pistol with which the shooting was done is a small four [chambered] shooter of the Elliott make, ring lock, carrying a 38 caliber ball. When taken from Richter it had in it two empty and two loaded cartridges. The pistol is now in possession of Coroner Brown. The post mortem examination revealed the fact that either one of the shots would have proved fatal. Only one of the balls was found. This one entered the back at the right of the spinal column between the fifth and sixth ribs, carrying with it a small piece of the sixth rib, into the right lung, and lodging subcutaneously at the right of the sternum at the seventh rib. The other ball entered at the inner border of the left armpit, passing through the pectoral muscles at the third rib, downward and forward through the left lung, and hence through the right ventricle of the heart, and lodging in the thoracic cavity.

#### THE MURDERED MAN

S. Clark Smith was 27 years of age and the only son of Hubbard H. Smith, a veteran of the late [Civil] war, and now a well to do and respected farmer of this town. Mr. Smith received a good common school education and was then sent to the Fairfield seminary, from which he graduated some six years ago. He taught school in the "Pine Grove," "Fiddlerstown," and Schell's Bush districts in this town. He was married about five years ago to Miss May Getman, who is a niece of Mrs. Dr. Richter. He and his wife were both employed as teachers at Salisbury for two years, he as the principal of the school there. From Salisbury Mr. Smith moved to Fairfield, where he was living at the time of his death. He was principal of the village school at Fairfield and also had charge of the commercial department of Fairfield seminary. He was a bright, intelligent young man, took a leading part in educational matters and was an active leader in the teachers' institute. Both he and his wife are members of the Universalist church of this village, and the pastor, Rev. Dr. Powell, will officiate at the funeral [on March 5].

Mr. Smith's wife was at her home in Fairfield when the shooting occurred. She was informed that her husband had been hurt, but it was some time after her arrival in Middleville before the sad news was imparted to her. The young wife was nearly heart broken, and the meeting of Mrs. Smith's father,

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who arrived soon after, and his widowed daughter was painful in the extreme.

Coroner A. J. Browne, of Newport, arrived soon after the shooting and by his direction the body was removed to the undertaking rooms of A. S. Coe, and Drs. C. W. Hamlin, of Middleville, and I. O. Nellis, of Herkimer, made a post mortem examination. A large crowd gathered about the hotel where the prisoner was, in charge of officers Taber and Jenkins, and while they were excitedly discussing the matter, the officers quietly passed their prisoner through a side door, and drove with him to Herkimer, and lodged him in the county jail. Hon. Geo. W. Smith has been retained as counsel for the prisoner.

Coroner Brown summoned the following jury: W. W. Mosher, foreman, Dwight Kelsey, Aldis Ford, J. S. Lambertson, Henry Post, Cornelius Crist, Alphonso Petrie, D. J. Jenkins, J. M. Smith, Dennis McCarthy, S. B. Hawkins, Anson Wiseman. After attending to the necessary preliminaries the inquest was adjourned until 10 o'clock Monday morning.

[Details of the long, detailed inquest that follow are omitted except for the following remark of Richter that "he had disliked Smith ever since he married that girl." No reason was given, but likely it was because of her relationship to Richter's wife, who had left him. The jury later found Richter guilty of murder in the first degree. Sentencing him to life in prison at hard labor, the presiding justice noted: "If the most astute, the most careful, the most upright counsel, had directed his every act that day, I do not see how he could have acted more wisely and discreetly than he did...He seems concededly to have conducted himself with the strictest propriety..." Richter died just 24 months later in Auburn Prison.]

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[The *Albany Evening Times* of 2 Mar 1885 notes that Richter had a brother in Zwickan and a sister in Voigtland, both in the Kingdom of Saxony. The *Daily Times* of Troy on the same day notes that Smith's mother had died only three weeks earlier.]

Transcribed on 9 Jan 2015 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY