

THE "KENTUCKY TRAGEDY:" ROMANCE OR POLITICS

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At about 2 o'clock on the morning of November 7, 1825, Jereboam O. Beauchamp stabbed to death Colonel Solomon P. Sharp in the dining room of Sharp's home in Frankfort, Kentucky. This fact of the famous "Kentucky Tragedy" is just about the only one not shrouded in mystery or subject to conjecture.

Foremost among the many fascinating matters attending this bizarre crime is the question of motivation: Did Beauchamp strike his blows solely for personal revenge and in defense of his wife's honor or was he an instrument in the hands of warring political factions of that time in the history of Kentucky? Contingent upon this question is the even more fascinating one of whether indeed Ann Cook's honor had been violated by Colonel Sharp. That there had been some indiscretion there was a child to prove; but whose child? These and many more equally pertinent questions about this celebrated incident in American history can never be answered to the satisfaction of all. At the very least, even in these days when the "soap opera" is supreme, this story is an extraordinary innovation of the old triangle theme.

Miss Ann Cook, of Bowling Green, Kentucky, admitted in a letter to a friend in Maryland that she gave birth to an illegitimate child in June, 1820.¹ She declared that the father was Solomon P. Sharp, who at thirty-three had been a member of the Kentucky legislature, a United States Senator, was soon to be Attorney-General for the State of Kentucky, and at the time of his death five years later was a favorite son for the speakership of the Kentucky House of Representatives. The charge was held as incredible by Sharp's family and friends and they were "satisfied that he had been selected by an unprincipled and shameless woman, as one whose spotless character and high standing would afford

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¹*Letters of Ann Cook, Late Mrs. Beauchamp, to Her Friend in Maryland Containing Short History of the Life of that Remarkable Woman* (Washington, 1826), p. 61. (Hereafter referred to as *Letters*).

her some apology for the surrender of that virtue which . . . she had long ceased to possess."²

The child was still-born and shortly after the incident Ann Cook and her widowed mother retired to her family's farm in Simpson County, within a mile of the farm of the family of Jereboam O. Beauchamp. Although he was then eighteen and she was approximately thirty-four, Beauchamp determined to become acquainted with one he "had heard so much talk about,"³ but was at first rebuffed by Ann who had "sternly refused to make any acquaintances, or even to receive the society, or visits of her former acquaintances."⁴ He persisted in his objective, and finally in answer to his repeated solicitations of her hand in marriage she agreed with the prerequisite that "the hand which should receive hers, would have to avenge the injury a villain had done to her."⁵ By Beauchamp's own words no conditions, nor any earthly proposition she could have made him could have filled him with so much delight.

According to his *Confession*, Beauchamp went henceforth to Frankfort and sought out the villainous Colonel Sharp who was in that city for the opening of the 1821 session of the legislature. But Sharp would not fight him, claiming he could never "fight the friend of that worthy injured lady."⁶ Furious that he could not "with wings as swift/As meditation or the thoughts of love" sweep to his revenge, Beauchamp let him go, threatening to beat him daily in the streets with a horsewhip until he made Sharp fight him. Continuing his search the next day, Beauchamp was informed that Sharp had gone to Bowling Green to bring his family to Frankfort, and admitted to being "somewhat diverted at the trick which had been played upon him."⁷ The couple agreed to postpone marrying until Beauchamp could finish his study of law and "resolved to lie by, quite still . . . till Col. Sharp should at length venture down to Bowling Green, to settle up his business."⁸ He finished his studies and they were married in June, 1824, and although Sharp was expected in Bowling Green during the summer of 1824, he did not come.

It is impossible to say what would have come of the consuming spirit of revenge on the part of Beauchamp and his wife if nothing further had occurred. But it did. Shortly before the elections for the Kentucky legislature in 1825, Beauchamp received a letter informing him "of the reports and insinuations which Col. Sharp and his family had circulated that the child of [his] wife was a mulatto,"⁹ in order to do

² Leander J. Sharp, *Vindication of the Character of the Late Col. Solomon P. Sharp* (Frankfort: Amos Kendall and Company, 1827). Reprinted in Loren J. Kallsen, *The Kentucky Tragedy* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 335-336.

³ Jereboam O. Beauchamp, *The Confession of Jereboam O. Beauchamp* (Bloomfield, Ky., 1826), p. 13. (Hereafter referred to as *Confession*).

⁴ *Confession*, p. 13.

⁵ *Confession*, p. 15.

⁶ *Confession*, p. 17.

⁷ *Confession*, p. 19.

⁸ *Confession*, p. 21.

⁹ *Confession*, p. 23.

away with the charge against the Colonel for seduction which, it was alleged, had been made by his opponents' forces. This incident settled Beauchamp's purpose, "that if Col. Sharp did not very soon come into Bowling Green," he "would seek him in whatever corner of the world he might be hid."¹⁰

Knowing that Sharp would be in Frankfort for the opening of the legislature, to which he had been elected, Beauchamp journeyed there and arrived on Sunday, November 6, 1825. Ascertaining exactly where Sharp's bedroom lay in his home, he succeeded by a ruse in getting him to answer a side door in the dead of night and with the words "die you villain" he "plunged his dagger to [Sharp's] heart."¹¹

Although he admitted in his *Confession* that "it was impossible to avoid being arrested for the murder,"¹² Beauchamp succeeded in leaving Frankfort. He had set up rather elaborate plans for escaping into Missouri, but several days following the murder he was apprehended at his home in Bowling Green. On May 19, 1826, after a sensational trial, he was convicted and sentenced to hang on June 26. He asked for a stay of execution "in order to write something concerning his death, for the benefit of those whom he valued more than his own life,"¹³ and the court appointed for his execution the "7th day of July next, between the hours of 12 and 3 o'clock."¹⁴

Ann, who was acquitted of being an accessory before the fact, lodged with her convicted husband in his cell and there on the day before the date of his execution they attempted suicide by taking laudanum; and when that failed, by stabbing themselves with a case knife which Ann had hidden in her clothing. Ann's wounds were mortal, but his, while painful, were not, and she died as he was being led by the beat of the muffled drum to the scaffold. In accordance with their last request, they were buried in each other's arms in one grave, under an epitaph in verse which Ann had written.

This, then, in essence, is the story of the "Kentucky Tragedy" as it has been repeated with some variations for over a century by many of America's literary figures, including a play by Edgar Allan Poe and a novel by Robert Penn Warren. But is it really the literarily perfect melodrama that many would have it? Did this upright leader of his party, married not quite one year to a young attractive wife, succumb to whatever wiles the thirty-four-year-old Ann Cook might have used to ensnare him, or was her illegitimate child someone else's?

¹⁰ *Confession*, p. 24.

¹¹ *Confession*, p. 32.

¹² *Confession*, p. 25.

¹³ J. G. Dana and R. S. Thomas, *Beauchamp's Trial. A Report of the Trial of Jereboam O. Beauchamp, before The Franklin Circuit Court in May, 1826. . . For the Murder of Col. Solomon P. Sharp* (Frankfort, 1826), p. 152. (Hereafter referred to as *Trial*.)

¹⁴ *Trial*, p. 152.

The first thing that is apparent as regards the alleged seduction of Ann Cook by Solomon P. Sharp is that there is not general agreement among the points of view from which it is told. Ann's account does not coincide with Beauchamp's and both of them differ from the account by Sharp's brother, Leander J. Sharp, in his *Vindication of the Character of the Late Col. Solomon P. Sharp* (1827).

Although Beauchamp "long admired the cultivation"¹⁵ of his wife's mind and "the proud dignity and elevation"¹⁶ of her soul, there is no question that Ann Cook was the victim of a highly romanticized view of life and an overriding determination to effect justice with her own hands. In her letters to "Ellen" in Maryland she many times confides that her "feelings are acute and tremblingly alive to every thing like insult and neglect. My passions have always been strong and wayward, and susceptible of being easily aroused by injuries or indignities, whether *real or imaginary*."¹⁷ [*Italics mine.*] She admits that her favorite poem was the Epistle of Heloisa to Abeillard [Alexander Pope, "Eloisa to Abelard" (1717)]¹⁸ and thought that there was some affinity between her and the poem's heroine. "I think I could love as ardently, and sacrifice myself as readily as she did, had I an object worthy of my attachment."¹⁹ By her own admission "the picture of Christianity is indeed most glowing and beautiful, and might have operated on my mind had it not been directed into another channel, by the perusal of the sceptical works of Hume, Voltaire, and Paine . . . and the poison and novelty of which, from the want of early religious instruction, I was but too much inclined to relish."²⁰ But perhaps Beauchamp saw something other than religious training and belief in her dignified and elevated soul.

Other references from these letters are particularly interesting, especially if one keeps in mind Ann's part in the assassination and the way in which Sharp was killed. When Ann was eighteen, her sister Mary, one year younger, was seduced and betrayed and Ann took upon herself the role of avenger. She secured a brace of pistols belonging to her deceased brother, challenged the "wretch" and when he moved toward her, wounded him severely. "Oh, Ellen," she wrote, "I know no punishment too severe for him who betrays the confidence, and who has forever destroyed the peace of mind of the fond and adoring being that loved him."²¹ And even as she was later recording her rapturous

¹⁵ *Letters*, p. 75.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Letters*, p. 8.

¹⁸ *Letters*, p. 14.

¹⁹ *Letters*, pp. 15-16.

²⁰ *Letters*, pp. 77-78.

²¹ *Letters*, p. 26.

love affair with Sharp, before he "destroyed the peace of mind of the fond and adoring being that loved him," she had a dream in which he coldly threw her off, and "I saw by his side a young female, whom he tenderly embraced. . . A dagger, all at once, glittered in my hand, I rushed upon him, and buried it to the hilt in his bosom."²²

In his *Confession* Beauchamp points out that he did not become acquainted with Ann until after her seduction and the death of her child and after she had "retired to a romantic little farm, within a mile of my father's."²³ Not so in the romantic Ann's version. Several months after the "fruits of our intercourse began to be apparent,"²⁴ as she rather naively put it, Sharp's visits became gradually less frequent, but according to her "In one of his visits, he brought with him, and introduced to me, a young man of agreeable person."²⁵ Beauchamp was not even in the area at the time and even if he had been, it is not likely that Sharp would have brought his "replacement." There is no accounting for why she would offer this unlikely arrangement in place of Beauchamp's much more romantic version of how he won her with persistence even when she would not see him at all at first.

Further intriguing problems are whether or not Ann Cook was at age thirty-three or thirty-four attractive enough to lure Sharp away from a "beautiful and amiable woman whom he tenderly loved, and to whom he had been married not one year";²⁶ and whether or not until Sharp "suddenly caught her up" in his arms and "imprinted a burning kiss" on her lips, she "had kissed no man except her father,"²⁷ or whether indeed "she had been in the habit of illicit intercourse with men for ten years."²⁸

In her letters Ann recalls when she "danced well, and loved the amusement passionately"²⁹ and when she was everywhere, "an object of attraction, an idol—flattered, caressed, and sometimes adored."³⁰ She reminded Ellen that "I am attended whenever I go out or remain at home, by young men, anxious to please me, and solicitous to gain my affections," and that she had received "several poetical effusions" on her "beautiful eyes, rosy cheeks, etc."³¹ In a comment Ellen made in reference to one of the letters she refers to Ann as a "young and beautiful woman."³² Unfortunately, the letters are not dated and there is no way from internal evidence or otherwise of determining how young

²² *Letters*, p. 56.

²³ *Confession*, p. 13.

²⁴ *Letters*, p. 62.

²⁵ *Letters*, p. 65.

²⁶ Kallsen, p. 333.

²⁷ *Letters*, p. 56.

²⁸ Kallsen, p. 339.

²⁹ *Letters*, p. 14.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Letters*, pp. 38-39.

³² *Letters*, p. 41.

Ann was when Ellen referred to her as young and beautiful, but could she in even an arbitrary ten-year period become the person Leander Sharp describes in his *Vindication*?

She was [at the time of the alleged seduction] 33 or 34 years old, small in stature, probably not exceeding 90 pounds in weight, had dark hair and eyes, dark skin inclined to sallow, a large forehead, slender nose, large mouth, low chin, face tapering downwards, had lost her foreteeth, was stoop shouldered, and in no way a handsome or desirable woman.³³

It is interesting to note that nowhere in his *Confession* does Beauchamp describe the physical characteristics of this woman who "kindled in his heart, a feeling and a flame"³⁴ he had never felt before although she was some fifteen years older than he. It is difficult to believe that a woman with the appearance that Sharp describes could have appealed to an eighteen-year-old man no matter how gallant, and one is tempted in this matter of physical attraction to vote against Leander Sharp. But what of the matter of conduct?

As might be expected, the young Beauchamp, very possibly seeing himself as a nineteenth-century avenging knight and hence seeing his lover through love-sick eyes, has nothing but good to say of her morals and decorum. Ann continually makes references to the admiring young men whom she keeps at a distance, and indeed in recounting her feelings about Sharp she had never felt "as I do now in all my life" and "I did not, even in the wildest visions of my infancy—in the most romantic dreams of my imagination—form anything like a just notion of this all-powerful—this overwhelming passion";³⁵ but others would have us think otherwise. In his *Vindication* Leander Sharp wrote "the scandalous charge against Col. Sharp created a great deal of conversation, and was followed by a variety of rumors, that Ann Cook had, for many years, been guilty of shameless prostitution."³⁶ In a letter which appears in the *Vindication* one collaborating gentleman writes "that he knew Ann Cook, since the wife of J. O. B. _____ p, and from what he witnessed of her conduct at different times with men, he feels no hesitation in saying that she was a base woman."³⁷ And there are other similar statements to support this opinion.

From the standpoint of the part that the seduction played in the murder of one man by another it really does not matter whether the child born to Ann Cook was Sharp's or not. Beauchamp certainly seems to have believed that it was Sharp's and he acted at least in part from that

³³ Kallsen, p. 34.

³⁴ *Confession*, p. 14.

³⁵ *Letters*, pp. 49-50.

³⁶ Kallsen, p. 336.

³⁷ Kallsen, p. 340.

motivation. It may be that the highly imaginative Ann Cook, one to whom for reasons already suggested such a magnificent adventure could never have occurred with so prominent a man, wrote about not what was but what she wished could have been. Perhaps she wanted someone to rise to her defense as she had done for her sister Mary. Maybe the whole affair was nothing more than the granting of a wish she made when she wrote, "In reading the romances which fell in our way, how often have I wished to be the heroine, or to be placed in a situation where I could be distinguished and appreciated."³⁸ Perhaps as Leander Sharp put it, "It is more likely that Ann Cook wished to give importance to herself by connecting her infamy with a man whom society held in highest estimation; or with that jealousy and malice which the female bosom sometimes cherishes, she may have desired to involve in her ruin, the hopes and happiness of the more accomplished Mrs. Sharp, whose good fortune she had so much room to envy."³⁹ And then again, maybe the old boy "done her in."

The murder of Colonel Sharp could be explained entirely in terms of personal revenge and defense of Ann Beauchamp's honor if it were not for the deep involvement of Sharp in the heated political controversies of the day. His involvement and Beauchamp's to a lesser degree require that the assassination be viewed against this political background, which had a history dating back at least thirteen years.

At the outbreak of the War of 1812 there existed in Kentucky only two banking institutions, the Kentucky Insurance Company which had been given banking privileges in 1802 and the Bank of Kentucky which had been chartered on December 27, 1806.⁴⁰ Following the war the state developed rapidly while the source for currency was the Bank of Kentucky which was issuing a limited number of notes, but would not redeem its paper in gold or silver, claiming that such procedure would ruin the institution. This attitude prompted the Federal government to establish branches of the First United States Bank at Lexington and Louisville. These banks by demanding specie payment of notes issued by the local state banks damaged the local banks' business.⁴¹ In response to strong sectional pleas additional local banks were chartered with the consequent wholesale issuance of paper money. By 1818 a state which suffered only six years earlier from too few banks was now beset by too many. "By midsummer of 1819 business houses refused to accept the Kentucky Bank currency in payment for goods and services; branch banks of the United States would not accept the Kentucky currency; and the 'wildcat' banks refused notes from one another."⁴²

³⁸ *Letters*, p. 11.

³⁹ Kallsen, p. 335.

⁴⁰ Thomas D. Clark, *A History of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky.: The John Bradford Press, 1950), p. 138.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

From the heights of her prosperity following the war Kentucky's descent was so rapid that the state was seemingly bankrupt almost overnight.

This condition prompted the calling of "relief" meetings in which efforts were made to save the depressed debtors from complete ruin, and numerous pleas for relief were made to the legislature. The legislature responded by granting short stays on all judgment executions; passing in 1820 a replevin law, and ultimately revoking all banking charters except that of the Bank of Kentucky, leaving thereby in the state the Bank of Kentucky, its thirteen solvent branches, and the two branches of the National Bank.⁴³ But the National banks made the people feel oppressed, for they did not hesitate to foreclose on mortgages and to execute their rights. In retaliation, the legislature "extended the time of replevy on judgments of this bank from three to twelve months, and, under certain conditions, to two years."⁴⁴ This legislative action aroused the people who thought that if the legislature could extend the period of replevy, it could also legislate relief.

Even though a majority of the members chosen for the General Assembly in 1820 were elected because of a pledge to support a relief program, the relief was not forthcoming. Debtors' property was seized by their creditors and sold to satisfy the outstanding debts.⁴⁵ It was now a matter for court decision.

In 1823 the Court of Appeals upheld a decision of a circuit court of Bourbon County that the replevin act of the legislature was unconstitutional because it violated the right of contract guaranteed in the national constitution and this act impaired, *ex post facto*, the "right of contract clause" embodied in the state constitution. Legislative patience was exhausted and sentiment in the state climbed to fever pitch in favor of relief and against the court.⁴⁶

In 1824 the Relief party again won the campaign for state offices but not in sufficient numbers to give them the two-thirds majority necessary to remove the incumbent members of the Court of Appeals.⁴⁷ Failing in the impeachment, the Relief party did succeed in having passed a bill repealing the act by which the Court of Appeals had been organized and passed an act establishing a New Court made up of four judges, while the Old Court had only three. The Old Court, quite naturally, claimed that these proceedings were irregular, unconstitutional, and void, and each professed to be the court of last resort.⁴⁸

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 139-140.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Clark, p. 142.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 142-143. See also: Orval W. Baylor, *John Pope Kentuckian, His Life and Times* (Cynthiana, Ky.: The Hobson Press, 1943), pp. 150 ff.

⁴⁷ Lewis F. Johnson, *Famous Kentucky Tragedies and Trials* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Baldwin Law-Publishing Company, Inc., 1922), p. 440.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

During this violent period when the office of the Clerk of the Old Court was broken into and its papers and books removed by force and delivered to the Clerk of the New Court and men on both sides were not a hair's breadth from committing felonious acts on their enemies, Colonel Sharp, who believed the act that organized the New Court to be constitutional, was the Attorney General. He felt that it was his duty, evidently, without stopping to inquire into the expediency of the act, to afford his official aid in carrying it into execution. His inflexible firmness in the whole affair brought down upon him the most bitter denunciations from the active men of the Old Court party.⁴⁹ Even while the proceedings in Court were pending, he was spoken of in the most savage manner; and after their termination, he was threatened with vengeance. He was denounced throughout the ranks of the Old Court party as an *inquisitor*, and a tool of the new judges who were called *usurpers*.⁵⁰ One of the local newspapers (obviously a voice of the Old Court party) ran an editorial in the April 20, 1825, edition, which stated in part: "The attempted overthrow of the constitutional Court of Appeals is viewed as a case no less palpable or atrocious than the *usurpation* of Caesar. The important difference is that Caesar had an army, and the Revolutionists of Kentucky have none, yet."⁵¹ This was the condition of affairs when the race for the legislature was made in 1825. "Never before in the history of the State had the passions of men been raised to such an intense heat, and the political storm center was at Frankfort."⁵²

Although long before he announced himself a candidate for the legislature on June 29, 1825, Sharp knew that the materials had been collected and that he would be publicly assailed with the old story of seducing Ann Cook, he nevertheless accepted the bid to run. And the vituperation, if possible, increased. Once again the pens of the opposition newspaper editors began to scratch:

The avowed and open enemy of the relief system, while he was disinterested; an opposer of Judge-breaking, before they were broken; a profigate in morals and a weather-cock in politics; a follower of majorities and a sycophant of power; now that the relief system is consumed by expelling three intelligent and honest Judges, and putting in four, who are a contrast to them; being the majority's Judges . . . why now, this same Solomon P. Sharp will support four Judges. I protest against this attempt to impose Solomon P. Sharp on them as a man fit to be elected by an honest community. Mr. Amos, [Amos Kendall, the publisher of *The Argus of Western America*, was a New Court party backer] well knowing the vulnerability of his protege, says he expects him to be assailed; and

⁴⁹ *Vindication*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵² Johnson, p. 44.

that he understands that the materials have been laid up for the purpose long since. Yes, Amos undoubtedly recollects documents that were in print prior to Mr. Sharp's being appointed Attorney for the Commonwealth, and which alleged several heavy charges against him, without being able to recollect that they were refuted. . . .⁵³

Attack after attack upon Sharp's motives and his character followed.⁵⁴ Beauchamp himself was a violent Old Court Partisan and was most probably highly stimulated by the denunciation contained in the newspapers of his party, especially upon Colonel Sharp, who was looked upon as an apostate from their cause. In his *Confession* he admitted to receiving at about this time several letters from Frankfort which exasperated him to the highest degree, but he evidently found one even more provocative than the others:

Some little time before the election, I received a letter from a gentleman . . . informing me of the reports and insinuations which Colonel Sharp and his family had circulated, that the child of my wife was a mulatto. . . His letter was written in a spirit of pure, honorable and disinterested justice; because he thought it right I should know of this vile conduct of Colonel Sharp and his family, and *set them right*. [About the writer of the letter] it is sufficient to say he was a man on whose word I would, and *have resigned my fate*. [Italics Beauchamp's]⁵⁴

Not a few of the interpreters of the "facts" when the *Confession* was published early in 1825 agreed that in saying that he had resigned his life upon the word of his correspondent, Beauchamp admitted in fact that he committed the murder in consequence of the letter. Statements agreed that Beauchamp "appeared to be very much embittered against Col. Sharp for his principles as a politician."⁵⁵ To one who mentioned that he had always voted for Colonel Solomon P. Sharp, Beauchamp replied "that any man who would vote for Colonel Sharp ought to be damned" and this person acknowledged that Beauchamp "appeared to be very hostile to Col. Sharp for his political conduct only."⁵⁶

And so, while these references are by necessity selective, they are representative of the basic feelings and thoughts of the main actors in this drama. Ann claimed that Sharp had fathered her child, but her letters attest that she had made many other claims which in the eyes of a disbeliever were just as absurd; Beauchamp, for reasons never really spelled out, rose with obvious complete dedication to her cause and in effect sacrificed his life for whatever motivation prompted him to kill; and Sharp, irrespective of his part in the private matter, had so embittered

⁵³ *Vindication*, pp. 46-47.

⁵⁴ *Confession*, p. 23.

⁵⁵ Kallsen, p. 349.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

tered some of his political enemies that for them there was no alternative to assassination.

Notwithstanding the strong possibility, perhaps even the likelihood, of prejudice in Leander J. Sharp's "conclusions," and in recognition of the explosive political atmosphere that prevailed at the time of the murder, one is tempted to agree that the following excerpt from the *Vindication* offers at least a satisfying explanation for Beauchamp's actions:

I do believe that the murder originated wholly in party feeling; but there were few, *very few*, who had any agency in stimulating the murderer, or knew his intentions. That Beauchamp was actuated by private wrongs as well as party rancor, I fully believe; but his private feelings were excited by the falsehoods of political partizans, invented and communicated to him for the purpose of producing the ruin or the death of my brother.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Vindication*, p. 140.