

The Dog Detective

Woodcastle was a pretty town, and William Starke the richest man in it. Now I have said Woodcastle was a *town*, but do not imagine a row of cottages fronting the only street, a rickety tumble-down tavern, a blacksmith shop, and forty cur dogs. No; it was a bustling, active place, where a brisk business was pushed, many stores were thriving, and two good-sized factories, three miles back, were running with profit to their owners, and to the satisfaction of their numerous hands.

But I am forgetting William Starke. He was a leather dealer, and supplied the whole country for miles with the article. He had two branch stores at Ryeslope, forty miles back from Woodcastle, and was interested in a large tannery at the former place, to which village he made frequent journeys, in attending to his large and growing business. His family consisted of his wife, a thrifty woman of forty, who had aided him greatly by her industry and frugality in amassing his handsome property, and an only son, now about twenty-three years of age, who assisted his father in his business, and took charge of the whole concern when he was absent at Ryeslope at the “tannery”; and not a smarter nor handsomer lad than George Starke was there at Woodcastle.

One day William Starke drove around to the front of the large store, and, calling out to his son, said:

“George, I come a-nigh forgetting Ryslope today. Thee knows ‘tis seventeenth o’ December tomorrow, and the £460 due me at the tannery—”

“O, yes,” was George’s reply. “What the Manchester folks were t’ send thee over for t’ kip and raw hides.”

“Surely—the same. I will go and fetch it, and ’twill be a rough drive for me to reach it by sundown. I have no time to go back and bid thy mother good-by, for I must hasten awa’. Send Spear out till I ha’ him hooked under the wagon.”

“Ay, ay!” was George’s answer; and in a moment the great rough, burly dog was chained underneath the master’s wagon, and after a few parting directions to his son, William Starke gave his spirited horse the rein, and soon rattled through the village out on to the Ryeslope road.

It was a long drive he had before him, but he was one of those hardy men, so totally engrossed with business that he never thought of the drive or weather, which was intensely disagreeable. It was a chilly cold December day, a drizzling rain falling, which froze as fast as it reached the ground, making the horse slide to and fro in many places, although he had heavy corks, and pointed toes to his shoes, which aided him much to go over the sleety ground; and so steadily did the horse travel that Ryeslope was reached just as night was setting in, and the lights began to dance in the windows of the neat cottages. Both horse and man seemed fatigued with the journey, but when the great dog, Spear, was unchained from under the wagon, he seemed the freshest of the party; for although he had panted some, he jumped upon his master (who was obliged to reprimand him for his actions, soiling his great coat with his dirty paws) and frisked around the stable yard joyfully. O, he was a noble dog, was Spear.

Well, on the seventeenth day of December, William Starke had received his expected four hundred and sixty pounds, visited his two stores and seen that everything was going on right, had suggested some improvements in the vats of the tannery, ordered some more raw hides sent off to the Manchester folks, and by noon of the day was ready to start for Woodcastle again.

He had tied the money he had received all up in a great leathern bag, and placed it under the seat of his wagon, which was covered over with a lid which locked, wrapped his muffler closer around his throat, tied Spear again under the vehicle, and started out into the snow and sleet for home. When he left Ryeslope, it was about an hour past noon, and he calculated that even were his horse to travel his usual gait he could not reach home before about seven o'clock that evening, about two hours after dark. When he had made this calculation, he was about three miles from Ryeslope, and had arrived at the "Willow Cross Roads." He knew, if he kept the left hand road, he could cut through the woods about ten miles further on, and thereby save a slice of a good five miles; and although the track was narrow through the woods, he determined to try it to save time, if possible; so the horse's head was turned to the left at the "Willow Cross," and although Spear barked under the wagon long and loudly, and the horse rebelled against this unusual direction, still William Starke persisted and maintained the new road.

It was a furiously stormy day, that seventeenth of December. The wind howled and whistled through the trees like the wailing of thousands of unquiet spirits. The branches of the old trees cracked and snapped and fell across the path of William Starke as he journeyed on. But the iron man of business only thought of the cargo of hides he had just imported from South America, and of his contemplated journey to Liverpool to inspect them; and while the snow beat in upon him, forming a bed of ice upon the floor of his carriage, and his rough coat and boots and breeches were still with accumulated sleet, and the icicles hung in large numbers upon his beard, he but thought of "calfskins," "kip," "harness," "russet," and "cordovan." So they jogged on, on, the ground now nearly covered with snow, and the man of business only aroused to his surroundings when the horse broke through a gully here and there which had been bridged with ice, and the moment his weight came upon it there was a crash, slush, then a cry from the man momentarily aroused, "H-o-o, Prince—Hew—Come along!" and they jogged on the same as ever—on towards Woodcastle.

William Starke perceived they were about to enter the woods, and he seemed to rouse himself from his apathy in order to find the proper path for him to travel, which he now discovered to be a work of some difficulty, for the snow had entirely changed the aspect of the country, and the paths which he would have experienced no difficulty in selecting with the ground clear and clean, he found himself in much perplexity now to determine which was his proper course. However, he soon hit upon the road which he believed the correct one, and proceeded as before.

But now his way was impeded considerably, for his horse was stumbling repeatedly from the heavy branches lying hidden in the road, and every few minutes his wagon top would come in contact with the overhanging branches, sending the loose snow in a blinding cloud down upon horse, wagon, and driver. These frequent accidents made Starke wonder if he was on the right path, and the further they traveled the more thoroughly he became convinced that he had lost his way. The track was becoming more and more unfamiliar, and as a last desperate chance he

determined to allow Prince to have his head, and by his sagacity to lead him into the right road. At last the horse made a sudden turn into a wider and apparently more frequented road, which quite reassured his master that at last he would travel in the right direction. But it still puzzled him to account for the total absence of houses, for on the proper road through the woods there were several woodcutters' huts.

Night was coming on rapidly, the storm had rather increased than abated its fury, and William Starke was forced to confess that he had lost his way, and each mile he advanced left him in a greater labyrinth of doubt. He stopped Prince suddenly, determined to look about him, and to travel no longer in this uncertain direction; and he was becoming seriously alarmed lest he should be obliged to spend the night in this dense wood, where the chances were that he would perish ere the morning came.

As these unpleasant thoughts dawned upon him, and he glanced around, he thought he perceived at some distance ahead a light. He urged Prince towards the object, and to his joy discovered it to be a log house, situated at the junction of three roads, all of which seemed to lead into the wood. The smoke was curling in black wreaths from the chimney, and a bright light flickered in the window. In a moment his eyes took in all this, and also that back of the house was ample shedding for cattle, and he determined, if possible, that he would spend the night here rather than again brave the fury of the storm.

The moment he drove up to the door, there was the furious barking of as many dogs as if all the tormenting canines mentioned in Dante's Hell had broken loose, while three or four rushed out around the horse, and one, venturing under the wagon at Spear, was the next moment sent off minus a leg, an ear, and one or two other important members which are generally supposed necessary to make up a sound dog, and a voice from the doorway added to the general tumult by endeavoring to quiet the belligerent hounds.

"Down, Bull, down! Here, Rife—Rife! Git out o' the wagon, sir, they shant—Ha-uh—Fox, down—hurt thee, sir?"

"Thank thee, neighbor," was Starke's reply, but he kept cautiously upon the shafts at the same time. "I think I am lost hereabout for the first time i' my life. How far is it from Woodcastle?"

By this time there were two or three heads in the doorway, and he who appeared to be the master, replied:

"Woodcastle! Why, thou be'st full seven leagues fro' Woodcastle and off about two leagues fro' t' Ryeslope road. But, master, if thee likes to stay here the night, we can take thyself an' beast."

"Well, I will stay," William Starke replied.

The man coming forth, they took the beast back to the shedding, and then from the wagon, and the man then gave the horse from a trough his measure of corn. As they were about to enter the house, after all this was through, Starke went to untie Spear from beneath the wagon, for he was howling dreadfully, and appeared to be in great distress.

“Why, Spear, good dog, what is it? Come, thou shalt come wi’ me into the house and warm thyself, and ha’ a bit of supper.” But the hand of the man was laid upon his shoulder, and he said:

“Nay, nay—let the dog stay. The curs in the house will fight wi’ him, and he had already a’most killed my best hound pup. I will ha’ him fed here.”

“I don’t like to leave him out in this severe weather,” said Starke.

“He’ll not feel it. They’re tough, these dogs are,” said the other.

“But it’s a hard night,” said Starke, still wishing to take the dog in.

“For a man, not for a dog,” said the other.

“He’s had a long jaunt, and must be fed.”

“I’ll see to that,” said the man.

“Some raw meat, if you have it.”

“Plenty of it,” was the reply.

“I shall pay you well,” continued the new comer, “so use the animal kindly.”

Starke did not half like this proposition to leave his faithful friend behind, especially as the dog bayed so mournfully, and seemed to manifest so many signs of uneasiness, but he was obliged to acquiesce. But as he left the spot, Spear gave utterance to such a dismal, awful howl, it seemed to smite upon his heart with a foreboding sound.

When they got into the house, Starke only found his host’s wife, a rough-looking, gaunt woman, behind the stove, and another man, a short, bulldog, ruffianly-looking fellow. The rest whom he had observed in the doorway when he drove up were away, politeness forbade him asking where or wherefore. The room was stifling hot, and the odor from the common tobacco which was burning in the pipes which decorated the mouths of all three was suffocating.

Supper was soon served; a plain, wholesome meal. The oaten cakes, hot from the griddle, were eaten with an appetite by the weary traveler, who had ere this informed his host who and what he was; and nothing happened to disturb his equanimity except that now and then he thought he detected various mysterious signs between the stranger, his host, and wife, and of course he supposed they related to him; and what gradually tended to increase his uneasiness was the sound of Spear’s dismal, pitiable howling, which was unceasing, and was borne to him from time to time as the wind lulled.

William Starke was a prudent man, and the fact of his having treasure concealed in the box of his wagon did not make him less so. He therefore determined to allow the four hundred and sixty

pounds to remain where it was, rather than to excite the cupidity of these people, who might be easily tempted to commit a crime by the prospect of plunder. But he resolved to keep a strict watch on their movements, and if he saw anything further which looked suspicious, to escape if possible from the house, unloose Spear, who would be a powerful aid in case of an attack, and then take the chances of flight.

The storm continued in all its violence, the wind sweeping against the house with a rush, a whirl, a crash, which seemed sufficient to tear it from its foundations, and scatter it piecemeal over the earth. The fragments of ice were driven every second against the doors and windows, and the snow drifted in over the floor through every cranny. About nine o'clock the man asked if Starke would like to go to bed, and upon his replying yes, a rushlight was produced, and his host proceeded him up a short ladder at the side, which, when they entered a trap door, disclosed to view a sort of narrow loft, upon the floor of which was a straw bed, and after mumbling some excuses about "such a poor lodging," he left Starke the light and returned to the room below.

Starke, upon glancing around him, discovered a large closet in one end of the room, and he was about examining this, when every movement he made almost extinguished the light as it caught the many currents of air. He had no desire to be left in darkness, so he cautiously examined the place as well as he could without its assistance. There was directly opposite to him a small window, which of course led out into the yard through which he had entered. As he was making these examinations, he heard the door shut and open two or three times below, and it appeared to him the hum and mutterings of eager voices. At last he found a small hole in the loft, through which he could look below, and what was his surprise to find four men together in low and earnest conversation. That he was the subject of their mutterings was sufficiently attested from the fact of their looking anxiously in the direction of his room at the slightest noise, and again continuing their conference. He could, however, catch a few words of their conversation, and his heart almost ceased to beat as he caught the words, "leather bags," "sovereigns," "wagon," "dog," etc.

"There can be no doubt about the matter. I have fallen among thieves, that is very evident," he mused for a moment. "Pity I have no weapon; but the dog is as good as a pair of pistols, almost. But I must anticipate the rascals if possible. I may be already too late to prevent a robbing. Why did I turn off to this out-of-the-way track? But it is of no use regretting that now—there's work to be done."

His resolve was now taken. He crept cautiously to the window and opened the shutter, which act sent the sleet into his eyes, almost blinding him, and the old shutter groaned and grated upon its rusty hinges, but the noise of the conflicting elements drowned all such sounds. He dropped quietly out of the window, hung by his hands to the sill for an instant, and in another his feet sunk into the yielding snow beneath it. The instant he was upon the ground, the dog Spear, who saw through the darkness, gave a deep bark of joy, but Starke was quickly by his side.

"Quiet, dog; Spear, good fellow, be quiet. Your master is in danger."

But the moment he had spoken the sagacious animal seemed to understand each word, for he was silent in an instant, and rubbed his huge head against his master's knees. Now Starke crept

cautiously to the side of his wagon and felt for the box. Good heavens! the top was smashed in, and the leather bag of sovereigns was stolen.

Before he had time to consider this infamous robbery, the back door of the house was thrown open, and a blaze of light full upon him—the direct, sharp, narrow light from a bull’s-eye, or dark lantern, held by the woman. Simultaneously with this discovery, the four villains, with bludgeons in their hands, rushed upon him.

Upon that snow, the wild winds dirge-like and with tempest tone bursting in anger, and the huge folds of clouds rushing, sweeping full of hail and sleet over them all, was their murderous deed completed. In vain did the brave man struggle with his assailants. In vain did their bludgeons beat him to his knees; he fought there still till his deadly gripe sent one man to his account with God. In vain did the brave dog, chained as he was, make more than one feel the sharp blow from his savage fangs, whilst the bones cracked before his deadly hold was loosened. In vain all these powers; for a villainous blow descended upon that head and crushed the skull in its descent, and the victim had scarce time to call on his Maker ere he was dead—murdered there, with the woman holding the light to see the work well done.

“Mother,” said George Starke, upon that night of the seventeenth of December, “Mother, aint father ower late tonight? He never staid at Ryeslope, thee knows.”

“O,” was the reply, “thee knows he was to receive some money, and he may have been belated; and then ’tis an awful night, his wagon may have broken, or—” And the good woman went on framing excuses for her husband’s absence; although her heart misgave her, she would fain cheat herself that all was right.

“I wish he were well at home, mother.”

“Ay, boy, and so do I.”

“It’s so wild a night he may have held over.”

“He may, but it’s not like him, George.”

“True,” said the son, seriously.

It was difficult to know what course to pursue, and so George and his mother waited the steady course of the hours, but with growing impatience, momentarily becoming more and more nervous and anxious. Only those who have thus waited in a torture of suspense can appreciate the suffering of the mother and son, to whom the howling winds without seemed to chant a heartless requiem.

Twelve of the clock was sounded at Woodcastle Church, still the watchers waited for the absent one. One, two, sounded, and the mother was in tears and the son striving to comfort her in his

poor way—and poor enough it is, to speak words of comfort to others when our own hearts are bleeding.

Three o'clock on the morning of December eighteenth many of the factory people at Woodcastle were astir, and preparing to walk out towards their work in this blustering morning. Four o'clock, and a stray villager appears, then some in couples, all trudging through the snow. After a while the gray light seems to be gathering in the east, dispelling some of the morning gloom. At the entrance to the village a single horse attached to a wagon startles the early walkers. He is running, stumbling, up again, running again, the wagon surging to and fro. You could swear that horse had no driver.

“Tis William Starke’s horse and wagon!” “Runaway! runaway!” “Ho-o! Ho-o-o!” “Look at the dog!” “The dog is dragging behind!” “Come on!” are some of the exclamations, and soon a crowd, a curious crowd of boisterous villagers follow the flying horse and exhausted dog on to William Starke’s store—into William Starke’s stable yard. The poor animal had arrived at the stable door, and falls to the ground, the shafts smashed to splinters in his fall; the bleeding dog is raised from under the body and unchained, and the body of William Starke himself is dragged out of the wagon, his skull crushed, and he dead, dead and cold, and his life’s blood frozen on the floor of the wagon where he laid.

“Murder! murder! William Starke is murdered!” the cry went abroad through the village that early dawn, eighteenth of December, A.D. —.

“My husband murdered!”

“O, my father, father!”

The wife and son cried thus, on that bloody morning, eighteenth of December. Words are all too weak to describe the harrowing anguish of those bereaved ones at that terrible discovery.

A year, about, since William Starke was murdered, a year of grief, so far of ceaseless mourning for that good husband, kind father, and exemplary man, a year of search after the murderer, or murderers, a year of useless search.

No news of William Starke since he was known to have left Ryeslope that afternoon, seventeenth of December, with four hundred and sixty pounds. No news before or since that eighteenth day of December, in the morning, when his mettled horse dragged his murdered body to his own door at Woodcastle, and the exhausted dog Spear trailing in the snow underneath the wagon. No news, no news. George Starke was now the great leather dealer at Woodcastle; George Starke, the son, now owned the stores and tannery at Ryeslope, and made the journeys and got the money.

George Starke was riding home from Ryeslope on the seventeenth of December, just one year that day since his father was murdered; and George was driving the same horse Prince, and he had the same good dog Spear with him—but, Spear was not chained under the wagon, as he used

to be. O, no! but Spear was running alongside: for “people” said “that if Spear had been loose the night of that seventeenth of December, or the morning of the eighteenth of December, that William Starke never would have been murdered.” And the opinion of the people was worth something, so Spear was not tied.

But the day of this seventeenth of December was a beautiful, clear, cold day, not the stormy awful night of last year, and George Starke thought he would take the back road home—a road through the woods it was—and get home earlier. The roads were good, but somehow or other (it was strange, too) Prince did not want to go that road; and, George generally was accustomed to obedience from his horse, he was determined that he should go—so on they sped. It was about two o’clock in the afternoon that they approached a comfortable looking house at the side of the road, directly fronting three other roads. He had never seen the house before, and was surprised to find one there; but still more surprised was he, when he found that his horse would not approach the house, but shyed off towards the woods, and trembled as though he would fall to the ground. But George Starke’s surprise did not end here, for he observed two men seated upon a bench in front of the house quietly smoking pipes; but his attention was attracted to them in a peculiar manner, by his dog Spear making a direct rush for these two quiet smokers, seizing one of them by the throat, and rolling him to earth.

In an instant George ran to the aid of the wounded man, and knocked his dog off, who no sooner left his first victim, than he darted in a straight line to the second man, who quickly ran into the house and bolted the door, the dog, with glaring eyes and exposed teeth, snarling all the while, as he threw his huge body against the door and tried to paw it down.

“Back, Spear, back!” the young man shouted, as he kicked the dog right and left. “How dare thee! What ails thee, dog? I hope, my good fellow, thee are not hurt”—addressing himself to the man who lay upon the bench, the blood oozing from the wounds the dog had made upon him.

“Keep the dog away—he has killed me,” the wounded man replied.

“Open the door,” shouted George to those within. “The dog shall not harm any one.”

But the man peeped cautiously forth, and would not admit the wounded man, and all George’s entreaties would not satisfy them, so he called Spear, who seemed loath to leave the premises, and drove hastily off towards Woodcastle.

Now the more George Starke thought of this circumstance, and the unusual and ferocious conduct of his dog, the more was he perplexed and determined to investigate the matter. Was it not possible that his father might have taken that road for a short cut that day one year ago? Was it not likely that Providence had mysteriously spared the dog and animated him in his ferocity? But he would think no more, for thought on this subject was painful and perplexing; but the next day five horsemen, good stout men and true, George Starke their leader, and the good dog Spear in company, set out for the strange house.

All was still and quiet around the premises, the dogs had been sent away, and not a sound was there to indicate the existence of a soul about the house. George Starke knocked at the door and

demanded admittance; the sound reverberated through the room, but none answered the summons.

In a few moments a large log was brought, and the door fell in upon the floor smashed into a dozen pieces. There was not a soul visible; but the rank smell of burning tobacco betrayed that recently the room had been inhabited. A ladder was in one end of the room, before which Spear was standing, his mouth open, showing his glittering teeth, whilst a low, savage growl escaped from him.

“The ladder, the ladder! To the loft above!” exclaimed George, and in a moment he had mounted, but he found the trap fast, and barred on the upper side.

This was quickly burst open, and with a bound, Spear was in the loft above, the men quickly following. Two men were dragged forth from a corner where they had been concealed behind a straw bed. They were quickly bound, and then a search was commenced, and in the old closet in the corner was found the *leather bag* in which William Starke had all his gold. This significant evidence was conclusive.

After a long search, the wife of the keeper of this den was found hidden in one of the old sheds behind the house; and when the criminals had been removed to Woodcastle, the following confession was made by the woman:

“That one of the men had died from the effects of the wound received from William Starke on that bloody night; that repeated trials were made to kill the dog, but as he fought so valiantly, and they had no firearms to reach him, they could not get near enough to dispatch him. They at last concluded, as the best means to prevent the crime being traced, was to harness up the horse Prince again to the wagon, place the body inside, then take him about three miles to the Woodcastle road, place pricks under the saddle of his harness, which would goad him to fury, and start him off homewards—all of which was done. That the day before the whole party had been so alarmed by the appearance of the dog, that they had concluded to leave, which they were preparing to do when they were surprised by the party and arrested.

Upon the eighteenth of December, just one year from the arrest of the three men, they were hanged by the neck at the town of Woodcastle, and the same day the woman was transported for life, says the chronicle, “For the wanton murder of William Starke, leather dealer of Woodcastle, and tanner of Ryeslope.”

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