

Detecting a Murderer

by Emerson Bennett

The following story was related by a person who had served a number of years as a secret detective agent of the government.

“I was travelling through the interior of Kentucky, (said the narrator,) when, on stopping one day at the inn of a small village, I found the citizens of the place in great excitement over a strange murder which had just come to light. In a cornfield, about half a mile from the village, and just off from a small by-road, a young girl, apparently about sixteen or seventeen years of age, had been found dead and decaying, with such marks of violence upon her person as left no doubt that she had been dealt with in the most revolting and fiendish manner. What made the matter more strange and wonderful, was the fact that the deceased was entirely unknown to everybody in that region. She was quite respectably dressed, and though her face when discovered was somewhat black and a good deal swelled, yet there were such traces of lineament as led many who saw the corpse to believe she had been very handsome and attractive. There was nothing about her to give a clue to her identity or the place from which she came; but in the pocket of her dress was found a letter, without superscription; in her clenched hand was the button of a man's coat, with a small piece of cloth adhering to it, evidently torn out in her death-struggle with the murderer; and from the ground beside her was picked up a small key, apparently belonging to a portmanteau. These three articles were all that could be discovered calculated to give any clew to the mystery whatever; and when I state that the letter was without date or signature, and was mainly designed to bring about a meeting at the ‘*usual place*,’ where that might be, it will readily be seen how slight was the chance of proving the identity of the deceased and detecting the assassin.

“The body of the murdered girl had been brought to the tavern immediately after its discovery, and at the time of my arrival, the coroner and his jury were in the act of holding an inquest, which, as might be supposed, simply resulted in a verdict of death from strangling and other violent means at the hands of some person or persons unknown.

“The mysterious affair, however, created an intense excitement throughout the place; and before night, the town authorities, assisted by liberal subscriptions on the part of several wealthy citizens, made the public offer of one thousand dollars’ reward for the apprehension and conviction of the murderers of the unknown girl.

“This case, so unusual and mysterious—so out of the range of even mysterious murders—particularly interested me; and making myself known to the proper officials, and showing them my authority as a secret agent of the government, I offered my services to investigate the matter, which were cordially accepted.

“One of my first acts was to visit the spot where the murder had been committed to see if there were any traces of more than one person having been engaged in it, and also if possible to find

what course he had taken on leaving the field. Fortunately no rain had fallen for the last week or ten days, and the footprints of both parties were visible from the place where they had got over the fence into the cornfield, which was distant about eight or ten rods from the scene of the murder. At the latter spot there had been considerable [evidence] of a struggle, as could easily be traced by unmistakable marks on the soft ground, notwithstanding several other persons had been there since, including the merely curious as well as those who had removed the body. One thing, however, was certain. Only two persons had walked to this spot along the trail leading from the fence, as already mentioned; and as the footprints of one of these were clearly those of the deceased, it followed as a matter of course that the parallel steps were those of her assassin.

“I now felt the importance of examining the footprints of the murderer, carefully and minutely, in order to form some idea of the man himself; for that the companion of the girl was a man, was clearly proved by the button in her dead grasp, and by other evidences of a nature that I need not name. It was the fashion at that time for gentlemen, especially in the principal cities, to have boots with high heels, small at the top protected against wear by an iron rim on the outer edge, and the prints of just such a heel were there. This fact, taken in connection with the fine texture of black cloth which had been detached with the button, satisfied me that the assassin was from some large town or city, and was well and perhaps fashionably dressed.

“I measured the length of the feet, and, granting him well-proportioned, this indicated a stature of about five feet, eight inches; and from the width of the foot, and indentation made in walking, I judged his weight not far from one hundred and thirty pounds. The chirography of the note denoted a hand accustomed to the pen in a commercial or business way, with a certain individual nervousness, which showed in some degree the temperament of the writer; while the portmanteau key, which was old and worn, I fancied bespoke a man who spent a portion of his time in travelling.

“In cases of many conjectures, I have often been correctly guided by a remarkable power of intuition, answering to the instinct of the animal, but which I cannot explain or account for on any known hypothesis; and bringing this peculiar faculty to bear upon the subject that now occupied my attention, I summed up in this wise: that the murderer was about five feet, eight inches in [height], of medium proportions, good figure, fashionably dressed, of pleasing manners, with a dark complexion, a keen, scrutinizing countenance, and a dark, restless eye. Of course this was all, or nearly all, conjecture; but such was the picture that fancy drew —such the figure that presented itself before my mind's eye.

“Next in order was to divine if possible from whence he had come and whither he had gone. It was not at all likely that the two had come hither on foot; if not, a vehicle of some kind had most probably been used; and that, if not procured in this region, had undoubtedly stopped somewhere within a few miles, (besides the halt near the fence where the field had been entered,) and might perhaps be readily traced. As the footprints showed that the murderer had recrossed the fence at the point nearest his deed of crime, I looked in the by-road for some evidence of a vehicle having been in waiting there, and found such traces as satisfied me that the latter had been there, that the horse had been tied to a tree in the vicinity, and that it had come from the south and gone to the north.

“With this supposed clew to the first direction taken by the villain after the murder, I went back to the village and made preparations to follow him.

“I do not propose to enter into a detail of all I said and did. Let it suffice, that a little after dark, I had reached a village six miles north of the one where the inquest had been held, and where there was a railway station. I put up at the principal inn of the place, and made my first inquiries of the landlord. Had any stranger, travelling in a buggy or a vehicle, stopped with him within the last week or so? Certainly, several had. Had his attention been drawn to any one of them by any suspicious appearance or circumstance? He could not say that he remembered anything out of the usual way of travellers, all of whom, of course, had some peculiarities.

“But why do you ask?” he inquired.

“I am an officer, in pursuit of a murderer,” I replied; and I went on to tell him all about the horrible affair, adding my own conjecture and suspicions.

“Ha!” cried the host, with a start, “I wonder if that wasn't the man that hired a horse and buggy of me, about four days ago, to go a piece down the country. He came out from Louisville in the cars, he said, and wanted to make a short visit to a friend; but when I asked him where his friend lived, he didn't exactly know, as he had never been to see him, and in fact his friend had only been a short time in these parts himself. I didn't altogether like his looks, and I hesitated about letting him have the team, till he told me he had his sister with him, who was going to remain a few weeks, but that he himself must get back to the city the next day. He got the horse about two o'clock in the afternoon, and fetched him back between eight and nine the same evening.”

“That is the man, for a hundred dollars!” cried I. “Describe him!”

“The host did so, and his description so nearly agreed with my preconception of the villain—in dress, size, [height], and general appearance—that I was almost startled at the reflection that I had arrived at so much truth by a means so mysterious to myself. The innkeeper had not seen the girl at all.

“Having gained all the information I could from the landlord, my next inquiry was concerning the conductor of the train from the city on that day. Luckily the same train was in that night, and the conductor resided in the place. I went to his house and found him at home. He could not throw any additional light on the subject. He thought it quite probable there might have been such a man and girl on his train that day; in fact, now he came to think of it, he was almost sure that two such persons got out at that station,—but that was all he knew.

“The next down train carried me into Louisville. I procured all the daily papers and carefully looked them through. In one I found a Mary Barton, a girl of seventeen, advertised as having left her home on an errand, and not having since been heard of by her afflicted mother, whose residence was given. There was a description of the girl, and an earnest prayer for information concerning her. I knew she was the murdered girl, and I went straight to her mother's house. She was a poor widow, living in a court, and her darling child, she said, was all she had left to make life desirable. Alas! not even her now; but I had not the heart to tell her so. I informed her that I

was an officer, and that I had reason to believe her daughter had gone off with a man whose description I gave, and asked her if she had any knowledge of such a person. At first she said she had not; but after thinking awhile, she added, that the description reminded her of a clerk in a certain commercial house, whom she had once seen speaking to her daughter. I felt that the man she alluded to was the one I wanted, and as soon as I could decently get away from her, who was in sore affliction and put a hundred anxious questions, I hastened to the house she named, and, on pretence of wishing to purchase some goods, went in, and saw, as I believed, the murderer before me.

“After looking at different samples of goods, I said I would soon return, and then hastened to a magistrate's office, got a warrant and saw it in the hands of the proper officer. I then told the latter I would precede him and have a little conversation with the clerk, and that I would give him a signal as soon as ready.

“‘By-the-by,’ said I to the clerk, on returning to the store, looking keenly at him while I spoke, ‘It seems to me I have seen you before! Do you not sometimes travel for this firm?’

“‘Oh, yes, occasionally,’ he replied.

“‘Now I think of it,’ I went on, ‘I believe I have seen you recently. Ah, yes—you stopped at the village of —, with your sister, on your way to a friend's house in the country. Yes, I remember.’

“My eye was fixed keenly upon him as I spoke, and he flushed deeply red and then turned deadly pale.

“‘Let me see!’ I continued; ‘your sister’s name was— Mary Barton— and— and—*she died— she was murdered in a cornfield!*’

“He gasped, staggered, uttered a wild shriek, and then with one bound left me, and ran swiftly towards the other end of the building.

“‘Stop him! he is a murderer!’ I shouted, bounding after him.

“Before I could catch him, or any one else comprehend what was taking place, there was a sharp report, and the man fell dead. He had drawn a small pocket pistol, and fired the charge into his brain through the right temple. He left a wife and two small children to mourn his loss.

“Why he took Mary Barton away from the city and murdered her as he did, will probably remain a mystery through all time. To save the feelings of the innocent living, the two dreadful tragedies were hushed up as much as possible, and were never very generally known.

“I returned to the place of the murder, and made my report to the authorities. I had done my duty, and hunted the villain down. They would have given me half the reward, but I declined to take anything beyond a reasonable amount for my time and expenses. With this I resumed my journey, satisfied with the extraordinary accomplishment of my design.

The New York Ledger, November 7, 1863

This story was also published anonymously in *Alta Daily Californian*, September 4, 1864.