

Stabbed in the Back

by a New York Detective

I had been engaged in my profession about a year, when rumors reached New York that a small town in the extreme western portion of the State was the theatre of crimes. Several atrocious murders and robberies had been committed there, and not the slightest clue had been found as to the perpetrators of these deeds. There was no telegraph or railroad to the town in question, therefore, the reports that reached the metropolis were in the first instance vague and contradictory, but they soon assumed a more decided character, and a full endorsement as to their truth was received in the shape of a letter from the local authorities to the police department, begging that a most skillful detective might be sent down, to ferret out the real criminal.

A brother officer of mine, Mr. George Lewis, was dispatched to the theatre of these events, and he went with the full assurance that he would be successful. George was a good fellow, and a capital hand at discovering ordinary criminals, but he did not possess the subtlety necessary to make a first rate detective. He was too frank, too boisterous, too conceited, to deal with refined villainy. He was fully acquainted with all the ordinary modes practiced in such cases, such as disguise in dress, decoy letters, and tracing out a chain of circumstantial evidence when the first link was found, but he was deficient in the power of analysis, so that when he had to do with a more acute mind than his own, he was generally foiled.

I was not surprised to learn, then, that after he had been absent a week, a letter was received from him, to the effect that all his efforts had been entirely fruitless. On receipt of this letter the chief-of-police sent for me, and desired me to go at once and take Lewis's place. My instructions were written out, and the next day I started on my errand.

In the first place, I provided myself with a book of patterns, clothed myself in a suit of checkered cloth, assumed a certain jaunty air, and was for the occasion transformed into a bagman or commercial traveler, traveling for a large commercial house in the cloth line.

I took the cars to Erie; from there I had to travel sixty miles by stage, in order to reach the town where the crimes had been committed. It was a cold day in February; the wind blew from the northeast, and the inside of the stage was by no means the pleasantest place in the world on such a day. But when I am engaged on special business, I never allow myself to think of my own comforts, and being also something of a philosopher, I made the best of it.

After a tedious journey of eight hours, I saw the spires of the two churches that the town of P— contains; and we were borne, bowling along the well paved street, for the town consists of only one long thoroughfare.

We stopped at the Eagle Hotel, and I was shown into the parlor where I found a bright fire burning. After supper I went to seek for Lewis, who was staying at the Fountain, the rival inn to the Eagle. I found him there, and told him he must go back to New York and leave the business

in my hands. He did not like it much at first, but of course he had to obey orders. He then gave me the information he had gathered, and the particulars of the various crimes which had caused such consternation in the little town of P—. Divested of all verbiage, the facts were simply as follows:

About two weeks before Lewis's visit, the inhabitants of P— were one morning startled and horrified by the report that a fearful murder had been committed during the previous night. Jasper Copman, a night watch employed by Russell & Son, the bankers of the town, was discovered stabbed in the back. The murderer had evidently approached him from behind, and the blow had been so surely given that the unfortunate victim did not appear to have made the slightest struggle. The safe of the bank had been forced and the contents rifled, amounting to some \$10,000.

The town of P— does not consist of more than three thousand inhabitants, so that the consternation spread by this murder may be easily imagined. Every effort was made to discover the assassin, but without the slightest success.

Three days afterwards, before the excitement attending this frightful deed had subsided, the dwelling-house of a retired merchant, who lived on the outskirts of the town, was broken into and robbed of its valuables. The inmates, consisting of an old man and two female servants, had heard and seen nothing, although it appeared the robber or robbers had actually entered the sleeping apartments, picking the locks in a most dexterous manner.

Four nights after that another fearful crime was committed, which raised the public excitement and fear to the highest pitch. A widow lady residing in the heart of the town was discovered murdered in her bed. She, too, had been stabbed to the heart. The house had been rifled, and in spite of every effort of the local authorities, not the slightest trace or clue could be discovered. It was then that a detective officer from New York had been sent for.

Such was the substance of the facts told me by George Lewis. He then entered into particulars of what he had done, which amounted to nothing. He had caused several worthless characters to be arrested, but they were immediately released for want of evidence against them. I found it to be Lewis's opinion that a band of men had been concerned in these atrocities.

George had told everybody his business, and had shown but little tact in conducting his investigations. He left for New York by the night mail, and I returned to my inn, debating in my own mind the best way to begin my investigation. Everybody was talking of the recent murders, but I mingled very little in the conversation myself.

The next morning I paid a visit to the house of the late victim, the widow lady. It was a small dwelling, situated on the main street, and it really appeared surprising how such a deed could have been committed without alarming the neighbors. I saw in a moment that I had a most difficult case to contend with. The villain or villains were no ordinary persons. The first thing that struck me was the noiselessness with which the deed had been committed. No one had heard a sound. As I have said, the same person who had committed this deed had entered the

merchant's chamber while he slept, without awakening the owner of the house who was lying in bed asleep at the time.

Here then was my first point. The question next presented itself to my mind, that for a man to have accomplished this he must have some soft covering to his feet. In minutely searching the apartment, I discovered clinging to a nail in the floor, some shreds of white woolen of very thick texture. I immediately surmised that the murderer must have worn thick woolen stockings over his boots, for the purpose of deadening the sound of his footsteps. I made the experiment myself, and found that I could move about in them without eliciting the slightest sound.

I also made the discovery that the murderer (for I had made up my mind that only one man had been concerned in the crime) was a small man and had light hair. I came to this conclusion from the fact that the opening through which he had entered the widow lady's house was a small one, not allowing a full sized man to enter. This opening had been made by the removal of an iron bar. Attached to the fragments of this iron bar were two long hairs of a very light brown.

My next proceeding was to go round to all the dry goods shops in town where they sold the peculiar kind of stockings to which I have referred, carelessly making inquiries as to who had purchased woolen stockings there during the last two or three weeks. Trade in that particular article appeared to have been dull for some time past, for in the first four shops I inquired at, I found they had sold none for the last two or three months, but I was more fortunate at the fifth and last shop in town. Here I learned that a gentleman, whose name I shall not at present reveal, had recently purchased three pairs there. On inquiring, I found the purchaser to be a little man with light hair.

Here was a most important point gained. The simple fact of the man buying three pairs of woolen stockings was not in itself very suspicious, but the fact that he was small and had light hair was proof positive to me that I had found out my man. There was one thing, however, which to any one else might have proved sufficient to dismiss such an idea as soon as it entered the mind. The gentleman who had bought those stockings was a most respectable, wealthy, and influential man, and had I breathed my suspicions to anybody I should have been laughed at as the veriest blockhead that ever lived.

By the time I had made all this investigation it was late, and I returned to the hotel, determined the next morning I would make my *grand coup*. I retired to bed, very well satisfied with myself, and slept as soundly as if the murderer were already in jail. The next morning I was awakened by a tap at my door.

“Come in,” said I.

The door opened, and the chamber-maid made her appearance with a pitcher of hot water. She looked as pale as a ghost, and trembled violently. “Why, what's the matter, Mary?” I asked.

“O, sir, haven't you heard the news?”

“Why, what news could I possibly have heard?”

“Well, sir, another terrible murder was committed last night.”

“What ?” I cried, starting up from my chair.

“Mrs. Adams, of the Elms, was murdered last night.”

“Mrs. Adams!” I almost screamed out, for the name was perfectly familiar to me.

“Yes, sir, she was found in her husband’s study stabbed dead, and the house was robbed.”

“And Mr. Adams, was he injured?”

“No, sir, they say he is almost distracted. It appears that he went to bed first, as is often his custom. He fell asleep and knew nothing of murder until this morning.”

Mary continued to converse for some minutes on this last fearful tragedy. At last she left the room, and I finished dressing as quickly as possible. This last crime caused me the greatest surprise. I could not comprehend it—it upset all my calculations, and left me wandering about in a sea of doubt and uncertainty.

I went down to breakfast. Consternation and fear were depicted in every face. Public excitement had now reached the highest pitch. Persons appeared to be afraid to walk alone even in the day time. In the street groups were conversing together. Every face wore a pale, anxious expression. On the dead walls of the town I saw a handbill convening a public meeting on that day at noon, to decide what was best to be done for the protection of the town.

Mr. Adams, the husband of the last victim, was a most respectable gentleman, living in a large house called the Elms, about half a mile from town. He was reported to be very wealthy, and had recently made some heavy purchases in real estate. The unfortunate woman, his wife, was about twenty-five years of age, and it was stated by all who knew her that she was kind, affable and generous. She was very talented, and had made some contributions to the literature of the country.

The Adamses had not been long residents of P—; not more than two or three months at most, but they had brought with them excellent letters of introduction, and had at once been admitted to the very best society of the place. The family consisted of Mr. Adams, his wife, and two or three servants. The husband's grief at the loss of his wife can be very well imagined; it was stated that he was almost distracted.

The moment I had finished my breakfast I determined that I would repair to the scene of the tragedy. I had more than one motive for doing this.

I found the Elms to be a large building, evidently erected prior to the Revolution. It was surrounded by a high wall, on the top of which were placed broken glass bottles, a very common

method in that part of the country for preventing the ingress of interlopers. The entrance was by means of a massive iron gate.

A large crowd had already assembled in the court yard, seeking for admission, but watchmen were at the door, and refused entrance to all except friends of the deceased.

Before entering the house, I made a thorough examination of the exterior. I found the wall was so lofty, and so well defended by the broken glass, that entrance except through the gate was almost impossible. I next proceeded to inquire if the lock had been forced, and learned that the gate was still locked when the murder was discovered. I now went to the main entrance, but was refused admittance, and it was not until I told them who I was that I could obtain it. I would rather not have done this, but there was no help for it.

The room where the young woman had been killed remained exactly in the same condition as when the deed was first discovered. She had evidently been seated at the table writing, and had been utterly unaware of the assassin's approach. There was not the slightest evidence of any struggle having taken place; no disorder was apparent in the room, and the victim could not have uttered a single cry. She, like others, had been stabbed in the back. On the floor were strewn some small pieces of paper as if a letter had been torn up and thrown there.

In the ashes under the grate were also some pieces of paper, half consumed. I gathered them carefully together, and made out the following detached sentences:

“Fearful discovery—a felon’s doom—my husband—life a burden—O, God!—what to do?—my husband—horrible! horrible!”

I made inquiry concerning the deceased of the servants, and learned that the whole of the previous day she had been in the lowest possible spirits, that she had kept herself shut up in her room all day, and had spoken but a few words.

I then asked to see the bereaved husband, but was told he was too deeply plunged in grief to be seen. I begged the messenger I sent to inform Mr. Adams who I was, and that the ends of justice demanded that I should see him. After some little delay I was admitted into his presence. He had on a mourning gown. He was fearfully pale, and appeared to be plunged into the deepest grief.

I conversed with him a few minutes concerning the late fearful occurrence, and learned that he had retired to bed about ten o'clock, and his wife told him she would follow him in a few minutes. He had fallen asleep, and did not awaken until morning and it was then, that after a servant had entered the study the fearful truth became known to him.

When I had heard this statement, I left him, and going to the watchmen guarding the door, I begged that they would accompany me to perform a disagreeable duty. The men stared as if not comprehending what I said.

Accompanied by the watchmen, I returned to Mr. Adams's chamber, and knocking at the door, I informed him that I wished to ask him another question. As soon as the door was opened, I entered, and placing my hand on Mr. Adams's shoulder, I exclaimed:

“Mr. Adams, I arrest you for the willful murder of your wife! I also accuse you of having murdered Mrs. B—, the widow lady, and the watchman in the employ of Russell & Son, bankers.”

The man turned livid.

“What do you mean?” he said; “are you mad?”

“No, sir, not exactly; thank God, I am in full possession of my senses, or I might not have succeeded in discovering the perpetrator of these fearful crimes.”

“Where is your proof?” he exclaimed.

“Here are the stockings,” I replied, going to a corner of the apartment, and taking from it a pair of woolen stockings— “which you wore over your boots, and here are some small pieces of paper still adhering to them with which the floor of the study was strewn when you entered. I have also discovered a letter which your wife was writing at the time you stole behind her.”

“That letter was destroyed,” exclaimed the assassin.

“You see,” I replied, turning to the watchmen, “he virtually confesses that he destroyed the letter after having committed the deed. What a pity it is that these clever murderers sometimes forget themselves.” “Here,” I continued, pointing to his dressing-gown, “is a spot of his wife's blood still on his wrapper.”

The assassin saw he had committed himself, and sank down in his chair speechless. The moment I saw him I knew that I stood in the presence of the man who had committed those fearful deeds. I saw the woolen stockings in one corner of the apartment, and Mr. Adams was a small man with light hair.

He was removed to jail, and that same evening confessed his crime. It appears that he had the reputation of being wealthy, when he was really straitened in circumstances. He became desperate, and determined he would recruit his fortune by burglary. By some means his wife became acquainted with her husband's crimes, and accused him of them. He made a faint denial, and determined that he would sacrifice his wife. How he effected his purpose the reader already knows. While the lady was in the act of writing a farewell letter to her husband, the fatal blow was given. After the deed was committed, Adams tore up the letter and threw it on the fire where it had been partially consumed. The only way to account for the husband sacrificing his wife, is that the fear of detection became stronger than his love. Six months after, the wretched criminal was executed in the goal yard of the town.

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