

The Assassin's Track
by a Retired Member of the Detective Police
by William Russell

In a certain month in the year 18—, the city of New York was startled by the discovery of a foul and brutal murder, that had been committed upon the bodies of an aged couple, residing in — street, near the “Five Points.”

The murdered pair had lived in that neighborhood for many years, and were generally esteemed by the inhabitants of that vicinity, for their quiet and inoffensive conduct. They were of German extraction, and kept a small tailoring establishment, from which they derived a comfortable subsistence. It was hinted by many of the neighbors that, owing to their frugality, they had amassed a very large sum of money, upon the interest of which they intended to retire from business in the course of the following year. Indeed the old man had frequently hinted words to that effect, in presence of his neighbors, but his wife had as frequently contradicted the assertion.

They were childless; nor was it known with any degree of certainty, whether they had any relatives, although a young man, supposed to be either a love-child or a godson, was frequently known to visit them. He was said to be a favorite with the aged couple; yet, at times, high words had been heard to pass between him and the old man; and it was supposed that these quarrels took place in consequence of the old man refusing him money when he had applied for it.

The house in which the fatal deed was perpetrated, constituted one in a row of small dilapidated frame tenements, occupied by venders of retail articles, suited to the immediate wants of the surrounding inhabitants, that, for the most part, lived in squalid misery and crime. A low groggery, a marine store, a butcher's shed, a small bakery, a gloomy pawnbroker's shop, were the principal houses in that wretched group, while the filthy brick tenements in the immediate vicinity, inhabited by various races, including Negroes, Chinese, Irishmen, Italians, etc., were falling into rapid decay, as were apparently their inhabitants, crowding the various rickety stoops of these dwellings, and the dark alleyways, at all hours of the day, inhaling the foul and reeking atmosphere of that poisonous district, which appeared then, as it does now, to consist of an independent section of this great commercial city.

At eight o'clock on the Saturday evening whereon the murder was perpetrated, the young man already alluded to as the supposed love-child of the ill-fated man and woman, entered the butcher's shop, situated a few doors from the fatal tenement, and borrowed a long, sharp knife, for the purpose, as he alleged, of dividing a quarter of bacon which had been purchased that afternoon by his aged friends. Mr. —, the proprietor of the butcher's shop, noticed that his countenance was flushed, and considerably agitated; but as he had seen him in that condition on numerous occasions—when he was supposed to have quarrelled with the old man—he imagined his trepidation to proceed from a similar cause, and consequently, took no immediate notice of the circumstance; and as he had, furthermore, lent him the knife for a similar purpose on previous occasions, he did not imagine for a moment that it was to be employed in a foul and revolting deed.

On the Monday morning following this occurrence, the neighbors were somewhat surprised at beholding the store of the old tailor closed at an unusual hour, for it had been noted that both he and his wife were early risers; but as the upper part of the dwelling was known to be occupied by lodgers, that must have been disturbed by any noise attending a deed of violence; and, as these lodgers, moreover, were known to be on friendly terms with the aged couple, they imagined that the old people had overslept themselves, especially as they were sometimes in the habit of enjoying themselves on Sunday evenings with such of their friends as were accustomed to visit them; but these were few, for the old couple were said to be penurious, and, consequently, averse to receiving company.

As the day drew towards its close, and the shutters still remained unopened, the neighbors began to speculate upon the unusual occurrence. They held consultations from the street with the lodgers above, but could gain no satisfactory information. At length a general alarm began to pervade the street; and at four o'clock in the afternoon, it was deemed advisable to force the doors of the room the old people were known to occupy. This was accomplished, when, upon entering, a most appalling sight met their view. Upon the floor, and near to the door, lay the old man, with his throat cut from ear to ear, and weltering in a pool of blood; whilst near the fireplace lay the body of his aged wife, cut and mangled in a most horrible manner. Her brains had been beaten out, and she had, moreover, received many cuts and gashes upon her arms and hands, which would seem to prove that she had made a desperate resistance. The furniture was scattered about the floor, and the wainscot was bespattered with blood. In brief, a most cruel murder had been perpetrated, but by whom? That was a mystery. At that time our detective system was in its infancy; and as I had recently achieved quite a reputation by the skill I displayed in ferreting out a dangerous band of burglars. I was entreated by the *Chief* to undertake the detection of the perpetrator or perpetrators of this foul crime. As might be expected, I set out at once to investigate the affair, and I may as well here state that I had just retired for a time from the police force, to fill a more lucrative position in a heavy importing house in Beaver Street, and that in my former occupation, I was considered one of the most expert of the detectives, and had been promoted in consequence thereof. Upon hearing of the murder, my old love for my former calling returned to me, so that I could not resist the temptation of visiting the scene where the dark tragedy had been perpetrated. Indeed, I was urged and entreated to do so by the members of the police department belonging to this city, who promised at the same time, to obtain the consent of the mercantile firm to which I was attached, for so laudable a purpose, and, also, to recompense me for all the trouble I might experience in thoroughly investigating the affair.

Accompanied by a posse of police—headed by their captain, I proceeded without delay to the house in which the crime had been committed. Upon arriving at the spot, we found considerable difficulty in forcing our way through the dense mob that had congregated in the road opposite the house of blood, gazing up with intense curiosity at the first floor windows, and consulting in mysterious whispers. Upon arriving at the dwelling, we proceeded along the dark passage, from which arose exhalations of a sickly odor, and mounting the narrow and rickety staircase, which creaked under our footsteps, presently arrived at the fatal room containing the murdered bodies. The blinds were closed so as to exclude the light from the dreadful scene of slaughter. A candle, whose feeble and sickly flame but added to the gloom of the small apartment, was burning on the mantelpiece, and shed a faint light upon two dark heaps, over which I stepped, and advancing towards the window, threw open the blinds.

The slanting rays of the declining sun streamed into the apartment, and fell upon the two dark heaps extended on the floor, disclosing to view the ghastly features of the two murdered human beings. I had, during my career as detective, beheld many victims of the assassin's knife, but must confess, that I never, until that moment, beheld a more revolting case of butchery.

"A bad case, this!" says the captain of police, with a sorrowful shake of the head.

"Very bad, indeed!" I replied, kneeling by the side of the murdered man, and pushing aside his long, gray locks, thickly clotted with the blood that had flowed from a very frightful gash in the throat.

"This has been pretty sharp work," I continued, "by which I would infer that the contest—if any took place—was of short duration, as you may perceive, by the remarkably clean wound, the edges of which are smooth. This wound, I should imagine, has been inflicted with a narrow and very sharp instrument, probably a keen-edged and pointed butcher's knife; for you will observe that on this spot, under the right ear, where the instrument of destruction first came in contact with the old man's throat, there is a fine incision increasing in width as it traverses the neck toward the right ear, and is precisely such as would have been inflicted by the instrument mentioned. That his death was sudden, may be inferred from this fact, that there is no wound on either of his hands, which circumstance would go to prove, that he offered no resistance, and without doubt, his death was almost instantaneous."

We then examined his pockets, and found them turned inside out, and rifled of their contents by the hands of his murderer. This was manifested by the blood finger marks by which they were stained, and which were doubtless made by the murderer only, inasmuch as the hands of the old man, were entirely free from the slightest mark of blood. We then examined the body of the murdered woman, which exhibited a very ghastly spectacle. She had evidently been engaged in a dreadful struggle with her assassin, for her arms and legs were literally hacked to pieces by the fatal instrument. Her skull had also been crushed by a blow from some blunt weapon in the hands of a powerful man, and which had doubtless ended the contest. The wound in her throat was jagged at the edges, which proved that she had been the second victim, as she had probably witnessed the butchery of her husband, and was in some measure prepared to offer such feeble resistance as her age permitted, and which had prevented her murderer from inflicting a similar clean cut by which he had dispatched the old man. Her jaws were widely extended, and upon examining her teeth closely, I found adhering to them, several shreds of white calico, which circumstance struck me as affording evidence that she had used them in self-defense upon the person of her assailant. As I never suffered appearances of this nature, however slight, to escape me, I gathered the filaments of calico, and then, with some soft wax, which I always carried about with me, took an exact impression of the edges of her teeth, for a light already began to dawn upon me, by which I fancied that I should be enabled to trace the murderer. I then called the captain's particular attention to the fact, that all the wounds on the murdered woman, with the exception of the gashes on her left arm, were inflicted on the right side of her person, and that the point of the weapon with which these wounds had been inflicted, had entered the body *in a slanting direction towards the left side*, which fact warranted the supposition that they had been given *by a left-handed person*. I also bade him to observe that the wounds on the throat had

evidently been caused by the murderous weapon's having been dawn *from left to right*, as in the case of the wound in the old man's throat, already alluded to, where I found a *fine* incision commencing on *the left side* and terminating in a *wide* gash, toward the *right* ear, which proved that the hand which had inflicted the down stroke, had exerted its force in that direction, which case must have been reversed if the assassin had been a right-handed person. The captain was struck with admiration at what he was pleased to term my "Detective Acuteness," and in his ecstasy, viewed me as a being endowed with supernatural knowledge and penetration. The pocket of the mangled woman had also been turned inside out, and rifled of its contents, whilst upon the floor were scattered portions of her gray locks that had been torn out by the roots.

I now proceeded to examine the apartment with a careful scrutiny. I have already mentioned that the neighbors burst open the door of the room, in order to gain admission. The door, then, had been locked; but by whom? Assuredly not by the murdered victims, for we could discover no key within the room. It was evident that the murderer, after committing the bloody deed, had made his exit from the apartment through the door, which he had locked, and had also taken the key with him. That he had left the room in this manner, was certain, for the outside handle of the door was smeared with blood, traces of which were also discovered on the banisters of the stairs and on the handle of the street door. We also examined the windows, and found them fastened, which proved, of course, that the assassin could not have escaped from either of these outlets. We then examined the cupboards and chimney, but found no traces of the assassin. The bureau had been broken open, as had also several chests under the bed, the contents of which were strewn about the floor, the murderer, doubtless, being satisfied with the money he had found within them. We were about to quit the apartment, when my eyes suddenly alighted on several faint but peculiar marks upon the floor, which had hitherto escaped my notice, and which, to a superficial observer, might have been allowed to pass unnoticed; but as I had always been accustomed to give one parting and scrutinizing glance previous to quitting a scene of this description, I halted, and casting my eyes close to the marks that had attracted my attention, I saw distinct bloody impressions of the nails of a man's boot or shoe upon the deal floor, not only near the bodies but also in a direction toward the door.

I also traced them to the landing outside the door, and to the head of the staircase. After taking the exact dimensions of these footmarks, I considered my present examination as finished, leaving the rest of this mystery to the judgment and discretion of the city police department, which immediately issued an order for the arrest of the lodgers inhabiting this ill-fated dwelling. A reward was also offered for the apprehension of the young man already alluded to as the love-child or godson of the murdered people, who had apparently absconded, but who, upon hearing of the facts, came forward, and voluntarily delivered himself up into the hands of the law. I now began to have suspicions that more than one person was concerned in this dark act.

As in all cases of this description, a coroner's inquest was held upon the bodies and a verdict returned to the effect, that they had been murdered by the hand of some person or persons unknown.

The prisoner was arraigned and tried. Circumstantial evidence was certainly strong against him. He was known to have frequently quarreled with the old man, and the very day on which the murder was said to have been committed, had borrowed a knife from a butcher in the

neighborhood, and which he had not returned, and which had doubtless been used in the perpetration of the horrid deed. His hands were also scratched and cut, and there was a bruise under one of his eyes. In my evidence I gave a plain statement of the facts that had come under my observation. I had also attended his private examination, and used my best endeavors to arrive at the truth. The presiding magistrate, at my request, desired him to write his name in full. I asked this, in order to observe whether he used his right or left hand. He signed his name in firm, clear letters, and with his right hand. At this, the captain of the police glanced at me, and shook his head misgivingly, as though he would intimate that for once in my life I was at fault. He was then asked whether he could use the left hand for the same purpose. He replied that he could, and immediately wrote his name with the left hand in equally fair characters. This proved that he had the facility of using both his hands with equal freedom, and that he was, in fact, an Ambidexter. But this proved nothing, and I felt somewhat puzzled. I then examined the soles of his boots, and found them to correspond exactly with the dimensions of the footprints I had discovered in the room, where the murder had been perpetrated; but they were destitute of nails. The question then was, whether he had changed his boots or shoes since the date whereon the murder was committed. He said that he had not, and that those now on his feet were the only ones he had worn for the last three months. He admitted that he had borrowed the butcher's knife mentioned, and that he had used it for the purpose he had mentioned, and that he had been assisted by the murdered man and woman; that if we would search the small pantry on the landing we would discover the bacon that had been divided. When questioned what he had done with the knife, he said he had left it on the table, in the room where the murdered man and woman were found. That during the evening he had quarrelled with the old man, from whom he had parted in anger, and in his agitated state of mind, had forgotten to return the knife to the butcher, and thus, as previously stated, had left it on table. When questioned whether he had expected that the victims intended to bequeath him their money at their deaths, he candidly admitted that such *had* been his expectations. He was then fully committed for trial.

There was an apparent frankness in the demeanor of the young man, that, spite of appearances against him, won my immediate esteem, and although I felt convinced that the evidence about to be brought against him, would end in an ultimate sentence of death, I could not avoid feeling prepossessed in his favor, and I forthwith determined to use my best efforts to save him, provided I could discover the slightest fact in his favor. In brief, I did not believe him guilty.

It appeared strange to the police department, when I founded my belief of his innocence on the very fact which would probably cause the jury to render a verdict of guilty. I allude to the circumstance of his having borrowed the butcher's knife. The department smiled incredulously at my assertion, and good-humoredly bade me confess that for once my vaunted system of tactics had failed. I shrugged up my shoulders and said, "Gentleman, you may think as you please, but you may depend upon it, that a man that is going to commit a murder in a certain locality, would never be so foolish as to borrow a knife from anybody residing in the immediate vicinity. It also appears to me that this young man—having been so intimate with the murdered man and woman—had a thousand opportunities to use more subtle means for their destruction. I feel certain that the murderer, or rather *murderers* are at large, and that God being willing, I shall yet bring them to justice; but whether I can accomplish it in time to save the young man from an ignominious death, is altogether another question. I do not believe him guilty, and would furthermore state that the murderer, whoever he may be, had an *accomplice!*"

The young man was tried by an impartial jury, and, although he brought upon the stand a great number of respectable witnesses in his favor, he was, nevertheless, found guilty, and sentenced to be hung in two weeks from that date.

It is truly astonishing to reflect upon the number of persons that congregate at all hours of the day, at the various eating houses or dining saloons in this vast city; and, I have no doubt, that many of our readers are ready to acknowledge, that the fare served up at most of these establishments is generally of a most excellent description. At any rate, I have always considered it to be so, in proof of which I beg leave to state that on that very afternoon—I am alluding to the day on which the young man was sentenced—I felt unusually sharp-set, and so entered one of those favorite resorts, seated myself in a box, where I found three individuals chatting merrily (these being the only persons present, with the exception of the landlord and waiters). I then called for an oyster stew. My companions were young men, and in excellent spirits. They conversed upon the weather, upon the opera, and then upon the pending election, and other local matters. The oysters were truly excellent. I remained there for about two hours, then paid my bill and departed.

I must assuredly have possessed the appetite of a wolf on that week, for I found it necessary to pay continual visits to dining salons, without being able to satisfy my hunger; and I do verily believe that I paid my respects to every eating house and oyster cellar in this city, yet my appetite increased.

On the following week I recommenced my rounds, and visited eating house No. 1. I once more seated myself in a box, in which I found two individuals regaling themselves over a plate of most excellent roast beef and vegetables, the whole sending forth such a savory smell, that I could not resist the temptation of ordering a supply for myself. My companions, on this occasion, were somewhat more taciturn than those whom I had met there on a former visit, and seemed more intent upon enjoying the excellent viands placed before them, than entering into conversation. Somehow or other, I have always felt nervous in the company of left-handed persons, and I found that one of these gentlemen cut his meat with his left hand, which he had doubtless sprained, seeing that it was bandaged with a broad black ribbon. I cannot be certain whether my gaze attracted the attention of this gentleman or not, but I saw that he eyed me with a very ugly scowl. To avoid being rude, I seized the newspaper, and forthwith commenced reading with great attention. Of course, it was not my intention to play the eavesdropper to what these two gentlemen might be pleased to utter, yet their conversation would obtrude itself to my hearing; and, presently, these two gentlemen—who, by the by, were rather unprepossessing in their appearance—commenced talking upon general subjects; but the theatres seemed to engross their minds; and I heard the gentleman who had scowled at me, tell his companion that he was engaged at the Park theatre for a week, to “go on” in the mob as a soldier in a new piece that was to be produced that very evening, and that “Bulky” had been engaged for the same purpose.

I must confess that I have always cherished a sincere love for theatrical performances; indeed I may say, that it has been one of the chief delights of my life, and even in these degenerate days of the drama and claptrap music, I cannot resist the temptation of attending our theatres two or

three times a week; and I felt an irresistible inclination to visit the Park Theatre on that evening; so on my return home, I called upon my old friend, the police captain, to whom I imparted the desire I felt to see the performance on that evening, offering, at the same time, to treat him to the pit, if he would honor me with his company. There must have been something peculiar in my countenance when I made this announcement, for my friend, the captain, eyed me curiously, and slapping his thigh, exclaimed, "I'm blest if you havn't tracked them!" I shrugged up my shoulders, being entirely ignorant, of course, of the subject to which he alluded, and, after obtaining his promise to accompany me, took my leave.

As I was anxious to obtain a front seat in the pit, I took care to be at the theatre with my friend, at an early hour, and after a pretty tough squeeze at the door, succeeded in gaining a very comfortable seat behind the leader of the orchestra.

The house soon became densely crowded, for the new piece was of a local character, and according to the programme, would doubtless, turn out a highly attractive affair, as it certainly proved to be; but I must confess that the portion which attracted my curiosity occurred at the end of the piece, when a grand battle between the American and English troops ensued, and in which both parties fought with unequalled bravery and determination. There was, of course, much scuffling between the parties engaged, but the American soldiers finally prevailed, knocking down their enemies in all directions; and, as men engaged in these sanguinary representations *will* fall about the stage in divers positions, it so happened that one of the supernumeraries—a stout, burly fellow—was thrown upon his back, with his feet toward the audience, so as to exhibit the soles of his boots ornamented with large bright hobnails, and which strange to say, were so arranged, as to exhibit a device exactly corresponding with those foot tracks I had discovered in the murdered people's apartment.

I pointed this circumstance to the police captain, who stared aghast. But, no time was to be lost, and, as the curtain fell, we jumped upon the stage across the orchestra, and pushing aside the curtain, succeeded in singling out the gentleman with the suspicious looking boots, together with my scowling friend, whom I had that very day met at the eating saloon, both of whom we immediately conveyed to the Tombs.

On the following day, these two men were examined, but they stoutly denied all knowledge of the murder. They were a pair of ill-looking ruffians, and the gentleman with whom I had the honor of dining on the preceding day, eyed me with a dark and frightful scowl, as I measured the soles of his companion's boots, which corresponded exactly with the measurement I had taken of the bloody foot tracks. I then desired the scowling gentleman to unbind his wrist. This he refused to do, upon the plea that his physician had strictly ordered him to keep it in a bandage, lest it should come in contact with the air. Upon being asked what ailed his bandaged limb, he replied that he had received a hurt in falling from a coach. I nevertheless insisted upon his unbinding it, which he did with a dogged reluctance, and upon our examining it, we found the impression of teeth firmly indented in flesh, and corresponding precisely with those of the woman's I had impressed upon the wax. Notwithstanding all this evidence, they still persisted in their innocence. But in searching their lodgings, further evidence of their guilt came to light. These lodgings were situated in the rear buildings of a dark alleyway, nearly opposite the fatal dwelling, and in which the identical knife wherewith the dark deed had been committed—was

discovered concealed in an old sink. Finding escape impossible, they finally confessed their guilt, and were sentenced accordingly.

It appeared that they had long premeditated murdering the old man and woman, in whose possession they expected to find a large sum of money. That the very evening whereon the wrongfully accused young man had borrowed the knife, they had entered the house between the hours of eleven and twelve. Proceeding up the dark and narrow staircase with due caution, they peeped through the chinks of the door into the room occupied by the old man and woman. That the old man's back was turned towards them. Opening the door cautiously, they suddenly attracted the eyes of the old woman, who, upon beholding them, uttered a cry whereupon the old man turned round and confronted them. That a butcher's knife lay on a side table which "Jake," the left-handed individual, immediately seized—in preference to his own short dirk—and cut the old man's throat. That the old woman thereupon endeavored to raise an alarm, but that the "Bulky"—the gentleman with the questionable boots—had rushed upon her, in order to prevent her carrying it into effect. That Jake having dispatched the old man—who fell without a struggle—advanced with his knife upon the old woman—who resisted desperately—and seized his hand between her teeth, lacerating it severely. That she fought to the last, and warded off the blows from the butcher's knife with both her arms; but was finally dispatched, being felled to the ground by a blow from a chair in the hands of Bulky, when Jake "finished it off" by cutting her throat. They then rifled the bureau, chests, and pockets of their victims, and finally quitted the apartment, locking the door and absconding with the key.

The young man who had so narrowly escaped falling a victim to circumstantial evidence, was of course acquitted, and received all due congratulations from those who had previously deemed him guilty; whilst my friend the captain, and the police department duly acknowledged that the manner in which I had arranged matters to detect the left-handed gentleman smacked of originality, and that I had not altogether been undeserving of the credit and approbation I had received during my experience in my capacity as ONE OF THE DETECTIVE POLICE FORCE!

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