

## *The Detective's Oath*

---

I chanced to be in the New York Court of General Session, a good many years ago, when two professional thieves were being tried for burglary.

There was but little doubt of their guilt; but they had secured excellent legal services, the actual evidence against them was very slender, and there was every promise of their being acquitted, when the prosecuting attorney suddenly called, as a witness for the state, the name of Patrick Harnden, the mere mention of which caused an abrupt and striking overshadowing of the criminals' prospect.

They both lost countenance – their counsel looked black; and as the bearer of the name, a powerful, well knit young man, with a pale face, and iron jaw, and a stern relentless eye – stepped upon the stand, and in hard tones and in simple language, gave the evidence that secured their conviction beyond a doubt, they turned white with terror, and trembling as though confronted with a ghostly Nemesis of all their crimes, and harkening to the accusing words of Fate itself:

“These are professional thieves; they are guilty of this particular charge for which they are now of trial, as my evidence will prove, and they are the last of the ‘Silver Gang, the members of which I have haunted, tracked, shadowed, and hounded down, one by one, for years.’”

Such was the opening sentence of witness Harnden's testimony, which, in addition to securing that particular conviction, displayed throughout a certain sleuth hound tendency and a deadliness of purpose on the part of the speaker that was quite remarkable.

After the prisoners had been sentenced to heavy penalties McArdle, the veteran detective, who sat at the reporters' table, whispering in my ear:

“I knew it was all up with those fellows as soon as Harnden took the stand. Did you notice the crushing effect of his mere presence upon them? He is the *bete noir*, the incubus, the hunting, nightmare phantom of their tribe.”

“What is he? A detective like yourself?”

“Something of that sort, though he has been hunting down this especial Silver Gang of thieves, about the last of whom have just been disposed of, more out of revengeful hatred than for pay. He is not only a thief-transformed, but a thief converted into one who has proved their retributive and pursuing Nemesis. [Sometime] I will tell you his story, if you would like to hear it.”

I expressed an ardent desire to that effect, and not long thereafter he told me the story, very much as follows:

“Patrick Harnden was about finishing his apprenticeship at brass finishing, and was a sober, industrious, promising young fellow when he became attached to a pretty shop lifter, named

Jenny Brettle, and then went downward till he landed in her profession. I am bound to confess that they agreed well together, and clung to each other, through thick and thin, with a devotion and affection that I have seldom seen equaled. Still, they were only thieves, after all, and Jenny, as a thief's wife, was, perhaps, not greatly better than she was before; she was faithful to him, and that was all.

“They were identified with the Silver Gang, an associated band of robbers, who were just then becoming infamously notorious under the mysterious direction of Monteith, a clever rascal, who acquired immense influence over them through the uniform success of his schemes, and was, strange to say, almost as much of a mystery to his criminal subordinates as to the police and those upon whom their depredations were committed. He only communicated with them under various disguises. Not one of them at that time knew who he was, what was his real name, occupation, or even probable age; but as each of the Silver Gang (so named from one of its specialties of robbing wealthy houses of their silver and service-plate) was under a terrible oath not to pry into things that did not concern him, and as it was to their interest to keep the oath, the identity of the ‘major,’ as he was called, remained secure.

“To make a long story short, Harnden fell under the displeasure of this mysterious leader, through a dispute concerning the division of the spoil, and was marked for summary punishment. The major put up a job on him, and then betrayed him into the hands of the police, doubtless under the supposition that he would be effectually disposed of by being sent up for a term of fifteen or twenty years. But the entrapped man got only twelve months, by pleading guilty, and then after swearing vengeance against the man who betrayed him, bidding an affectionate farewell to his wife and child, and solemnly promising the judge who sentenced him that he would come out of prison a reformed and altered man, prepared to undergo his punishment with philosophical cheerfulness.

“I was present at his last interview with his wife and child, and it was very affecting.

“ ‘Good-by and God bless you, Jenny!’ he exclaimed, kissing her and the babe on her bosom. ‘I’ll bravely work out the year’s sentence, and, when I come out, I’ll do as you’ve long begged of me – I’ll turn honest, and work for you and the little one with these arms like a good man. Keep away from the major and the miserable band you’ve been herding with. Don’t let them hunt you down, as doubtless they’ll try to do, and I’ll make it sunny and good for you when I come out.’

“ ‘Bless you for those words, Pat,’ murmured the poor thing in reply. ‘Little Dennis shall grow up an honest man after all. Good by – good by!’

“And, with a last weeping embrace, he was off to prison, while she slipped quietly out of the court and disappeared.

“But the infernal major pursued the wife as remorselessly as he had betrayed the husband. Acting under his secret orders, the gang shunned, hounded and maltreated her, and finally turned her out of the wretched Five Points rookery which she had occupied with a member of them.

“She was without money and reputation, miserably sick, and the weather was snowy and cold. Nevertheless, she made a hard fight for it, occupying any shelter that she could beg, day after day and night after night, and seeking ceaselessly, persistently, to obtain honest employment.

“But it was all in vain. She had no character, by way of recommendation to start with, so the major and the creature gave her one. At every shop store, factory or household that she applied to for work, it was but to find that she had been forestalled by information secretly supplied, concerning her criminal antecedents, which effectually set to naught her claims and supplications.

“At last she was desperate, hopeless, without a friend and without a home, and in this pitiable plight was found one evening crouching under one of the high stoops in the neighborhood of the Central Park by a policeman, who gruffly ordered her away, and advised her to seek a night’s lodging at the nearest station house.

“But she gave no heed to his advice – perhaps being half-crazed with her sufferings – but wrapped her baby still more tightly under her poor, thin shawl, limped away through the fast falling snow, and entered the park.

“Out in the snow, under the bare trees, in among the leafless, rustling shrubs, away up through the hillocks, did she wander in the lifeless, deserted park, which then must have seemed a wilderness, indeed, but more acceptable, more inviting, than the peopled but heartless streets, from which she fared, with the hunger in her body and despairing misery in her soul. No one could interfere with her there or hunt her down, or taunt her with her past wickedness and present friendlessness.

“Faster and faster fell the blinding snow, but it seemed to touch the earth softly and tenderly, affording her the covering and shelter that humanity had refused. It was bitter cold and she tore her shawl into strips to more thoroughly wrap up her child, while rendering her own poor shoulders defenseless to the shivering wind.

“Then she huddled closely against a rock to keep off the drift, and cuddled up about the child as near as she could creep. And then, after the storm had slackened, the moon came out and looked pityingly on the forlorn pair.

“The drift whirled faster and faster over them to complete its work, and then at last poor Jenny, the world’s forsaken waif, fell asleep forever under the soft, white mantle of snow, which like Charity’s covers each year such multitudes of sins.

“The park policeman found her on the following morning, at a spot about two hundred yards north of the Seventh avenue entrance, frozen stiff. No stone ever marked her grave, and a four-line newspaper paragraph, with a single heading ‘Unknown Woman Found Dead in Central Park,’ was the only notice taken of her death.

“The child was found still alive and moving on the pulseless bosom that would nourish it no more, but also died on the third day thereafter from the effects of the exposure, and that was the last of them.

“Scarcely a week after this event, Harnden was set at liberty, and it chanced that I was the first acquaintance he met upon his return to the city. I should have mentioned that I had known him from his boyhood, had deplored his evil courses, rejoiced in his promised reform, and was now anxious that he should not be tempted to go back upon his good resolutions, which I dreaded the effect that would be produced upon him by the news of his wife’s and baby’s pitiful death, of which I was certain he was as yet totally ignorant.

“My own duties had taken me away from the city during the greater part of his imprisonment, or I should certainly have endeavored to in some measure befriend the poor creature, the particulars of whose miserable fate, as I have just described to you, I had only myself learned a day or two before thus meeting him at the depot upon his return from the prison.

“As soon as Harnden stepped from the train and saw me, he grasped my hand and dragged me into a neighboring public house, where we entered a private room.

“ ‘You see me return to the world a changed man, McArdle, and I trust with some years of happiness in store for me,’ he said, and I noticed that he was looking capitably, with a clear, manful light in his dark eyes. ‘But tell me quickly – where and how is Jenny?’

“I felt myself growing pale, and could make no immediate answer.

“ ‘Speak! Jenny and the child – how are they both, and how have they both fought through it all?’ he repeated with growing disturbance. ‘Man alive! why do you turn your face away?’

“ ‘Have you heard anything of them?’ I stammered, stupidly wishing to delay the shock.

“ ‘How the deuce should I, when I am not two hours out of bolt and bar? Tell me quickly McArdle! She is not ill, is she?’

“ ‘No, not ill – that’s certain. But you will probably learn something of their fate elsewhere.’

“ ‘Fate!’ he echoed, in a broken voice and then suddenly grasped me by the collar; ‘tell me all, and this instant!’ he cried hoarsely. ‘Do it, or I’ll throttle you in your tracks.’

“ ‘Try to bear up, Pat,’ I muttered, holding him off, and trying to soothe him. ‘I’d sooner take a stretch in jail myself than break the news to you. Both Jenny and the child are dead, Pat.’

“ ‘Dead?’ he yelled – ‘dead! dead!’

“The two last words came out in horrified, bewildered gasps, and he staggered to his feet, back against the wall, as white as a ghost.

“ ‘Yes,’ I exclaimed hurriedly. ‘I was out of town the whole winter, and I only learned the particulars a day or two ago. The gang, in obedience to the major’s orders, first turned her into the street, and then hunted her from the place, so that she could not procure employment.’

“And then, while he stood there gasping and glaring at me, I gave him the whole sad and bitter story, much as you had it, but more in detail.

“ ‘Oh, the fiends! the demons!’ he at last moaned, beginning to wring his hands, but without a tear upon his white, horror-wrinkled face. ‘And you, McArdle – even you did not lift a hand to save her.’

“ ‘By heavens, Harnden?’ I cried, ‘had I been in the city and known your wife was in trouble or in want, I’d have lost my arm at the shoulder blade sooner than let her perish. It was no fault of mine.’

“ ‘Oh it matters not! Words – words are nothing now,’ cried the poor, bereaved fellow, suddenly towering before me, with blazing eyes and cloudy brows, like an avenger of old. ‘At last I am alone – alone in the world, with every hope, every tender feeling blasted. They have killed my wife among them, Mac – my own Jenny, that was all the world to me, —and my little child, that was as innocent as the angels in heaven. Oh, had they no mercy? Could they not have spared them and let me suffer? Listen to me, Mac, and what I am about to solemnly swear before high heaven. I’ll have life for life, hunting for hunting, sleuth hounding for sleuth hounding, so may the God of justice and of vengeance help me in my hour of bitter need! I swear by all that is sacred, to live but for one object – to tear the mask of mystery from the major’s face, and to hunt him off the face of the earth! And not him alone, but all of them all, all, all! Not a villain shall escape, male or female. Every one of the accursed Silver Gang – every mother’s thief of them – shall feel a thief’s power, a thief’s vengeance! I constitute myself their Nemesis, to hunt and hound them down forevermore!’

“Harnden fairly shrieked forth those wild, threatening words, after which he staggered into to the chair again, breathing so hard and looking so white that I hastened into the adjoining saloon to procure him some refreshments, fearing that he would faint. But when I returned he had partly recovered, and gently but firmly refused the glass of stimulant I proffered him and the former indulgence in which had not a little to do with his swift descent amid crime and sin.

“I may conclude my sketch by saying that he has never touched a drop of liquor since, and that he fulfilled the requirements of his terrible oath, wild and fitful as they seemed at the moment of their utterance, to the very letter.”

“He turned detective, then, and hunted down the members of the gang, one by one?”

“Yes, or in pairs or groups,” replied my narrator. “Of course, it was some time, owing to his antecedents, before he could be entrusted with regular detective work. But it was not long before he made himself equally admired by the force and feared by the thieves, in an auxiliary capacity, and when he was regularly commissioned as a detective, the cold-blooded, patient, relentless and

systematic tenacity and persistence with which he began to hunt down, entrap, inveigle and pick off the members of the gang, was a caution.”

“And the major?”

“Why, he was the fourth or fifth that Harnden disposed of, by a strange and exciting stratagem, an account of which would make a capital sensation story in itself. His arrest, unmasking and exposure was one of the newspaper hits of three years ago. He turned out to be a big gun named Monteith, who while planning robberies in secret for a long time had been living at the best hotels, which probably afforded him ample opportunities for concocting the long series of burglaries which he planned for his subordinates to execute. He was sent up for twenty years, chiefly upon Harnden’s testimony, and died miserably in prison, of pneumonia, contracted in the quarries, only a short time ago.”

“And the two thieves convicted the other day were, then, the last of these banded criminals?”

“Yes; Harnden has only been five years in pursuing the gang, often at the imminent risk of his life, and numerous and powerful as they were, not one of them remains [today] to curse our community. Either dead, fugitive, or within prison-walls, they have all disappeared, thanks to the piteous event that transformed a thief into an honest man, and brought about the making of the ‘Detective’s oath.’

*The Stevens Point Journal* [WI], September 25, 1880