

The Resurrectionist
A Detective's Story
by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

On the sixteenth day of April, in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty-three, which day was Saturday, I received an order from our chief to proceed with all possible dispatch to Poultney, where there had been a heavy robbery, and see what I could do towards ferreting out the robbers. I was informed that it had been a bold and daring proceeding, and if I should find myself in want of help I might send word to headquarters. I made my preparations for the journey very quickly, and was in season for the four o'clock train by which I reached Poultney just at dusk. My first call was upon Mr. Robert Pond, the senior member of the firm whose safe had been robbed. I found him to be a middle-aged man, and a gentleman of the old school. His dwelling, and all connected therewith, bespoke wealth and comfort, and he certainly knew how to enjoy the good things of this life, though I must say that he had an aristocratic way with him which I thought quite out of keeping with the country town in which he lived; and at first he seemed inclined to treat me quite coolly, intimating that the quicker I did my business the better he should like it. But I remembered that he must be chafing under the burden of the loss, and also that it was Saturday evening, a time when business men like to be at rest, especially in their own homes. And then I had snuffed the fumes of tea and toast as I entered the hall, and I supposed his supper might be waiting for him.

“My name is Philip Daggett, sir,” I said; “and I have been sent up from the city to see you, and to help you if I can.”

His seeming hauteur melted away in an instant, and he took me by the hand as though I had been an old friend.

“You have not been to tea, Mr. Daggett.”

I told him I would go to the hotel and get tea, and call upon him at a later hour.

But he would not listen to any such thing. I must make his house my home while I remained in Poultney.

This had not been my plan; but upon reflection I saw an advantage in it.

“Mr. Pond,” said I, “it had been very far from my thoughts to quarter myself upon you; but since you have broached the subject I think I see a good point gained thereby. I may thus pass for a friend of yours, on a visit to your family, and the interest which I may appear to take in this robbery will readily enough be ascribed to such sympathy as any such friend might feel.”

So I went down and took tea with him, and after that we adjourned to his library, where he told me the story of the robbery.

“Last Wednesday, the thirteenth instant,” said he, “by the noon train from the West, I received a box containing fifty thousand dollars in gold. On Friday, which was yesterday, I was intending to

go to New York, when I intended to take this money with me. I should have gone on Thursday, but was waiting for a remittance from the East, which did not reach me until late on the afternoon of that day. This latter sum was fifty thousand dollars in notes on different New England banks. I ran it over to see that the amount was correct, but only took notice enough of the bills to determine that they were mostly on Boston banks. This belonged to myself and partner; but the gold was only part mine, forty thousand dollars of it belonging to a friend. All this money—one hundred and ten thousand dollars—was locked up in the safe in my store, and in order to render it more secure I had my porter sleep in the store on Wednesday and Thursday nights. Yesterday morning I arose quite early, and went down to the store before breakfast, for I felt anxious to know that all was safe. I found the outer door closed, but unlocked, and as I entered I was somewhat startled upon finding one of the back windows open. I called for Thomas—the porter’s name is Thomas Wagner—and the answer I received was a low, painful groan that seemed to come from near the door of the counting-room. I went that way, and found the poor fellow lying upon the floor, literally covered with blood. He had received a severe cut upon the head; another cut upon the left shoulder; and both his hands were badly cut; and further than this his clothing had been almost torn from his body. I lifted him up and placed a bale of cloth beneath his head, and then called for assistance; and when assistance had come I took a look into my counting-room. My safe was open—the lock had been blown off with gunpowder—and papers were scattered about the floor in all directions. As you may suppose, the money was all gone! For a little while I hardly know what I did. I ran to the rear window, and got out into the back yard; and then came by the cart-way to the street; and then reentered the store by the front door. By this time a physician had arrived, and after due examination he pronounced none of the external wounds to be of a serious character; but from the symptoms of the patient he judged that some blow or blows had been received that resulted in serious internal injury. After copious applications of cold water, and the administering of cordial, Thomas sat up, and was able to speak. I asked him if he knew that I had been robbed. It was some little time before he had wholly collected his senses; but finally he was able to tell his story.

“He said that just after ten o’clock he thought he heard footsteps in the back yard, and that he unbolted the rear door and went out; but he could find nobody there. At eleven o’clock he lay down and went to sleep. He had been at work pretty hard during the day, and as a consequence he slept quite soundly. He could not tell how long he had slept; but he was at length awakened by a peculiar noise, and upon starting up he found a light shining in the store, and by the draft of air he knew that either the back door or one of the windows was open. He then started to move in that direction, forgetting to take the pistol which he had placed under his pillow; but he had only gone a few steps when he was met by two men, one of whom struck him a heavy blow upon the head that knocked him down. He quickly regained his feet, when the same man struck at him again, but missed him. The then closed with the rascals, and one of them drew a knife and made several stabs at him. Wagner was a powerful man, and for some time he gave the robbers a hard battle; but finally his hands became weak from having been cut with the knife, when another blow upon the head laid him senseless upon the floor. He says he had an idea that the ruffians left him where he lay and went into the counting-room; and not long afterwards he heard something like the report of a musket. From that time he could remember nothing until he heard me call his name in the morning. It is particularly unfortunate that Thomas cannot give any clear description of the robbers. He only knows that they were both powerful fellows, and he thinks they had some sort of covering upon the upper parts of their faces.”

“You say you found the front door of your store unlocked?” I remarked after Mr. Pond had concluded.

“Yes,” he replied. “That could be easily unlocked from the inside, and the robbers probably opened it merely to look out; but they must have entered by the back window. A hole had been made in the thick shutter large enough to admit a man’s arm, and after that it was an easy matter to unbolt it.”

“You say there were sixty thousand dollars in gold?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And that would weigh,” I said, after a little calculation, “not far from two hundred pounds.”

“Just about that. But I forgot to tell you that the box was not carried off. That was found, empty, on the floor of the counting-room.”

I then asked Mr. Pond if he had any suspicions touching the robbers.

He had none. He could only imagine that the robbers were strangers—that they had come on the train with the gold—that they knew where it had been deposited—and that they had had their plans all laid for getting possession of it.

“Of the paper money,” he added, “they may have known nothing until they found it in the safe; but they were ready enough to take it.”

“Have you the numbers of any of those bank notes?”

“I have none of them now; but I have sent to Boston, and shall probably get a return on Monday.”

After this I proposed that we should walk down to the store, and then go and see Thomas Wagner, to which Mr. Pond readily assented.

I found the store to be a large, two-story wooden building, nearly a hundred feet long, with counters upon either side, and with a short counter in the center. The counting-room was in one corner, upon my right as I entered. The back yard, which I examined by the light of a lantern, I found to be quite spacious, and it was here that most of the heavy goods were unloaded, there being a cart-way, twelve feet wide, opening to the street. There was a heavy scantling gate at the entrance of this passage, but it was very seldom locked. There could be little doubt that Mr. Pond was right touching the manner in which the robbers had gained admittance to the store. A hole, eight inches in diameter, had been sawed in the outer shutter of one of the back windows, through which a man’s arm could be inserted far enough to reach both the top and bottom bolts. Then there had been a hole bored through the sash, just under the brass fastening, so that the window had been easily opened.

“There is one thing certain,” I said: “Whoever did this piece of work knew exactly the arrangements of the bolts of these shutters. There could have been no chance hit in the application of the bit and saw.”

“I have thought of that,” said the merchant. “But then a man could have gained all that information from the outside at any time when the shutters were open.”

We then went into the counting-room and examined the safe. It was very large and strong, and would probably have resisted a pretty scorching fire; and the lock had been a strong one, and very elaborate in its system of wards and guards; but the key-hole had only been protected by a sliding cover, and the whole concern might as well have been of wood as far as protection against a practiced burglar was concerned.

We found Thomas Wagner living in a small, low-roofed house, near a wet meadow, on the extreme outskirts of the village. His wife was with him, and by his bedside sat his son—a thick-set, broad-shouldered, muscular fellow, some five-and-twenty years of age, whose Christian name was Aruna. I certainly had no occasion at that time to suspect him of having been concerned in the robbery; but my long acquaintance with villains of every grade, and my natural aptness in reading physiognomies, led me to think to myself that I had never met a man who had more natural qualifications for a rascal than he had.

And Aruna Wagner was most assuredly “his mother’s own child.” He resembled her in every respect, so far as form and physiognomy were concerned. Had I found that mother and some in a New York den, I should have considered it my official duty to keep a close watch upon their movements.

Thomas Wagner, as I could tell of him as he lay upon the bed, mostly covered up, was a large-framed, muscular man of about fifty years of age. His hair, which was of a dull red color, was shingled pretty closely and the contour of his head agreed pretty much with the outlines of his face. There was not much intellect; but there was a certain amount of shrewdness, and a vast deal of determination, in those features. I could easily understand how such a man, if attached by robbers, would fight to the death, if he was able, before he would give up. He was just such a man as I should have selected to bear heavy burdens up and down stairs; but I do not think that he was just such a man as I should have selected to stand guard alone over much treasure.

He had a thick bandage about his head; some strips of adhesive plaster upon his shoulder; and both his hands were bandaged.

“You have had a tough time of it, my friend,” I said, after Mr. Pond had introduced me as an old acquaintance of his.

“Sum’at,” he replied, in a weak, gurgling voice. “But I wouldn’t a’ minded it if I could only ‘ave settled the cusses.”

“I hope you are not much hurt.”

He shook his head and groaned.

“Taint the cuts, sir; but they jumped on me arter I was down, and the doctor says I’m hurt inside.”

“Poor Thomas!” moaned his wife, in a tone and manner that did not seem at all natural to her. “He vomits up lots of blood, sir; and the doctor shakes his head when he looks at him.”

“I am done for, sir,” said the porter, gasping and groaning. “There’s sum’st the matter in here as can’t be mended. I’m bleedin’ inside all the time.”

I spent half an hour by the man’s bedside, and got from him all the information he had to give; but it was little more than Mr. Pond had given me before.

“You had a fair view of the forms of the two men who attacked you?” I said.

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Are you acquainted with the teamsters who bring goods to the store?”

“Yes, sir; I know ‘em every one.”

“Might it not have been that one or two of them had a hand in this?”

“Lord bless ye! No, sir.”

I returned with Mr. Pond, somewhat puzzled. I had gained but little information yet beyond the simple facts of the robbery and its method. But then the case was before me, and I was bound to work it up if the thing were possible.”

“Mr. Daggett,” said my host, as we were getting ready to retire, “since you have been sent to help me I put the case into your hands. If you make nothing of it you shall be paid for your time and trouble; and if you succeed in finding the robbers and restoring even the bulk of the missing money, I will give you ten thousand dollars.”

So I had a double incentive to action; and I do not think I stretch the truth when I say that professional pride was as strong a motive as was the hope of gaining the liberal reward.

The next day was Sunday. In the forenoon I attended church with Mr. Pond, and the afternoon I took to myself. As I passed the hotel I saw quite a collection of people in the bar-room, so I went in and sat down. The conversation was upon the robbery, and if had taken the liberty of asking questions myself I do not know of one which I would have asked that was not asked by others present. One gentleman, who seemed to have a clear view of the matter, was anxious to ascertain if any strangers of a suspicious looking character had been seen in the village of late; but no one

had any knowledge of any such. Two of the men engaged at the railway station were present, and they were positive that none such had landed there.

At the end of half an hour I went out, and determined to walk down and call upon Thomas Wagner, as I had some important questions I wished to ask him. I found the house and rapped at the door. Mrs. Wagner answered my summons, and I told her I wished to speak with her husband.

She told me that I could see him; but she feared he was beyond speaking. She said he had been vomiting more blood, and that he was well-nigh gone. I went in, and was soon convinced that I was too late for information. The man seemed to recognize me, but he could not speak. His lips were bloody, and blood appeared to froth out at every breath, and he seemed to breathe, too, with the utmost difficulty. I did not stop long, for the sufferer took no further notice of me after the first glance of recognition, and I felt that I was not needed. The woman followed me to the door, where she informed me that her son had gone for the doctor.

“Poor Thomas! I don’t think he’ll ever see the sun rise again. He’s been a good husband to me, sir.”

At this point the afflicted wife put her dirty apron to her eyes, and with a very few words of cheer I left her.

I do not propose to worry the reader with an account of the fruitless efforts I made to hunt up the robbers; so I shall pass very briefly over the events of two or three weeks.

On Monday Mr. Pond received from Boston the numbers of most of the bank notes he had lost, and on this Monday, too, we heard that Thomas Wagner had died. On Tuesday he was buried. A few of the hands in the store attended the funeral. Mr. Pond went down to the cot in the forenoon, and carried to the widow a generous sum of money; but he did not see the corpse, as the coffin had already been closed, and the top screwed down.

On Wednesday I found some tracks which I thought it worth while to follow, and I followed them for two weeks, and made noting of it. Then I returned to Poultney, where I found nothing new, save that Mrs. Wagner and her son had sold off what little of worldly goods they possessed, and had gone out West.

Somehow I had allowed a strong suspicion to possess me that all was not right with Aruna Wagner, and while I was debating with myself whether I had best follow him, a circumstance transpired which helped me much. I was in the office of the hotel when a gentleman came in and asked the landlord to give him small bills for a bank note of one hundred dollars. Such a note was sure to interest me, and I asked the privilege of looking at it. It was an issue of the *Suffolk Bank of Boston*, and upon referring to the list which Mr. Pond had given me, I found that I had the number of that very note! I recognized the man as a grocer and provision dealer of the place, so I stated to him that that was one of the notes which had been stolen from Mr. Pond’s safe; and as soon as I convinced him that such was the fact, he told me how he came by it. He had just received it by mail from a man in Brantford, a town on the railroad, and about forty miles distant.

I took the note, giving change for it from my own pocket, and before the sun went down I was in Brantford. I found the man who had sent the note to Poultney, and he had received the note from a clothing dealer whose store was close by. I called upon the clothing dealer, and he had received the note from a stranger; and when he had described the stranger, I recognized the exact description of Mr. Aruna Wagner. Half an hour afterwards I was on a freight train bound back to Poultney, having made up my mind that I would obtain some further information, if possible, touching Aruna's location in the West, and then set myself upon his track.

I reached Poultney about midnight, and went to the hotel. In the morning, when I came down from my room, I saw a man in the lower hall who motioned to be with his finger. He was a rough-looking, sharp-visage fellow, with cold. Grey eyes, a sallow, bloodless, complexion, square-built, and heavily framed.

"Do you wish to speak with me?" I asked.

"Your name's Daggett, ain't it?" he replied.

I told him it was.

He said he wanted to speak with me in private.

I saw by the man's anxious manner that he had something upon his mind which he, at least, considered of importance, and as I never allow myself to throw a chance away, let it come where it will, I told him to follow me to my chamber. He did do; and when I had closed the door and given him a chair, he sat down and began to twirl his dirty hat upon his thumb.

"Now, my friend," said I, "if you have business let it be business, and the fewer the words the better, for my time is valuable just now."

"You're arter the chaps as robbed the big safe down to Pond's store, aren't ye?" he returned, a little carefully.

I told him I was.

"And I s'pose you'll make a good thing out on't if you find 'em, won't ye?"

This man evidently knew something, and I meant to get it out of him, so I confessed that I should make a good thing if I succeeded.

"Well, now," he went on, "s'posin' I could put ye on the right track, wouldn't ye be willin' to make a little divvy with me?"

"Would you put me on the track of Aruna Wagner?"

"Was he the old 'un's boy?"

“Yes.”

“Lord bless ye, no! I’d put ye on a better thack ‘n that.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“But will ye divvy?”

“I was about to inform my strange visitor that he must come to the point at once, when he reached out his forefinger and interrupted me.

“Look here, Mr. Daggett. I found out ‘at you was the detective what was workin’ up this ‘ere case, and I thought I’d come and help ye if ye’d divvy with me. Now, mind ye, I ain’t a—a—robber, and I never had no hand in stealin’ anybody’s money in all my life; but still I should want ye to make me a solemn promise that ye wouldn’t never let out what I tell ye. Will yer do that?”

“If you had no hand in this robbery, you have my word that I will not betray any other secret you may open to me,” I told him.

“And if I open yer eyes—if I put he on the right track—will ye divvy?—will ye come down handsome?”

“If you give me reliable information that shall lead to the arrest of the robbers, other than Aruna Wagner, I will give you one hundred dollars.”

The cold gray eyes snapped, and the bony, dirty hands came down with a slap upon his knees.

“Done!” he cried. “I shall hold ye to that figger. What say if I should put ye onto the track of *the old ‘un himself?*”

“What?”

“Onto the track of THE OLD ‘UN!”

“Do you mean Thomas Wagner?”

“Exactly.”

A dim, vague, shapeless suspicion, which I had before tried in vain to analyze, was assuming tangible form in my mind.

“Out with it,” I cried. “Lead me to that, and the hundred dollars are yours!”

“And ye won’t blow?”

“Not a syllable.”

“Then, sir,” said the man, slowly and surely, “when Tom Wagner’s funeral took place a coffin was buried, but Tom Wagner wasn’t in it. A stick of wood, just about as heavy as a man, was in that ‘ere coffin.”

“How do you know that?”

“Remember, you won’t blow.”

“You have my word of honor that I will not.”

“Well, then, I digged down after that ere body the very next night, and when I came to the coffin, and had pried the kiver off, and went to hitch a rope around the neck, I found a log of wood all rolled up in two or three quilts, and there wa’n’t no body there. That’s a nice way to cheat the doctors as wants human subjects to cut up, isn’t it?”

Of course there was a bare possibility that there might be some failure—some weak point—in this bit of testimony, but I did not allow my mind to run much in that direction. I asked the resurrectionist what his name was.

“Seein’ as you’ve got my story,” said he, in an off-hand way, “you may have the rest in welcome. My name is Adam Dogbear.”

“Very well, Mr. Dogbear. A bargain is a bargain. I was to pay you one hundred dollars for information that would lead to the arrest of the robbers, and as soon as I assure myself that your story is true, you shall have the money.”

“Come with me tonight,” he urged, “and I’ll show ye. You shall see the inside o’ that ere pine box for yourself.”

But I told him there was no need of that. If I wished to look into that grave, I would do so by daylight, and in the presence of the sexton. I furthermore told him if he would go about his business, and hold his tongue, I would pay him ten dollars down, and give him the rest as soon as I had found Thomas Wagner. He seemed satisfied with this, so I gave him ten dollars, and he left me.

As soon as I had eaten my breakfast, I hurried away to see the physician who had attended upon Thomas Wagner. I asked him if he saw his patient after he died.

“No,” said he. “The old fellow requested, before he died, that no one should be allowed to gaze upon his disfigured form. He said that folks who never cared for him while he was alive, would come after he was dead, just to satisfy their curiosity, and he didn’t want it so. His wife and son had him nailed up in his coffin in a very few hours after he was dead.”

I called upon others who had helped to nurse the wounded man, and they all told the same story that the doctor had told. I then went to Mr. Pond, and told him that I had got upon the track of his missing money. I explained to him what I thought proper, and then left him.

From this point I took a brother officer named Swinton to help me. That night we were in Bradford, and from thence, without much difficulty, we traced Aruna Wagner and his mother to Indianapolis. Thence we traced them down the Wabash to Vincennes, where, for the first time, we heard of a third party. At Vincennes they had been joined by a large, stout, middle-aged man, who left with them for the Mississippi. But this man's description did not answer at all to that of Thomas Wagner, except in the mere matter of bulk. He was described as having long, black, curly hair, very dark complexion, and as appearing to be quite a gentleman. But after more particular inquiry of the keeper of the hotel where this individual had stopped, I thought I recognized my man. He had called his name Jonas Stapelton, a thing which Thomas Wagner could easily do, and as for the black hair and dark complexion, in these days of pigment and wigs, nothing could be more simple.

From Vincennes we followed the trail across the country to St. Louis, where, after a search of two days, we found Aruna Wagner and his mother, and with them we found Mr. Jonas Stapleton. I saw the man first in the back parlor of a low public house, and I am confident that he might have gone into Mr. Pond's store at Poultney, and remained there an hour, without his old mates recognizing him. As the house in which our game had taken shelter was of a rather dubious character, and as both Thomas and Aruna had shown themselves to be bold and reckless, I thought it best to call two policemen to aid us, which they gladly did.

When we entered the house we found the trio at tea by themselves. The moment Aruna saw me, he started to his feet and drew a pistol, but Swinton had gone in before me, and was in season to give the young man a gentle tap on upon the arm with a billy that let his pistol fall to the floor. We had some trouble with the gentleman with long, black, curling hair, and Mrs. Wagner did not readily succumb, but we overcame them at length, and when I had lifted the black wig from the head of the bellicose gentleman, Thomas Wagner stood before us. There was no need of washing away the stain from the skin, or of taking the dark dye from the eyebrows and beard. The stiff, sandy bristles were just starting out over the wounded scalp, and I could not repress a momentary smile at the ludicrous figure he cut.

The rest of my story can be told in a very few words. We brought our three prisoners back with us to Poultney, and as good fortune would have it, we secured very near the full amount that had been taken from the safe, only about five hundred dollars being missing. They had not begun to launch out when we nabbed them. Thomas Wagner, when he found that there was no possible hope for him, made to Mr. Pond a full confession. He and his son had been planning for a long time to rob the safe, and had only waited until there should be a large amount of money in it. About twelve o'clock on the night of the robbery, his wife and Aruna came up, and he let them in by a back window. He then blew the safe open, and while his assistants were taking the gold from the box, and putting it into two bags, he sawed out the piece of the shutter, and bored the hold in the sash. The wounds he had inflicted upon himself, except the one upon the scalp, and that his son had done with a jackknife. Touching the pains which he pretended to suffer, those had been mostly assumed, and in the other matter he had managed to effectually deceive the

physician by drinking small quantities of blood, which Aruna procured fresh from the veins of a calf that was kept in an outhouse, and then taking doses of an emetic, which his dutiful son also provided. Arrangements for disguising himself had been made several weeks before, so that, on the night while his wife and son were packing the log of wood into the coffin, he was on his way by the night-train to Buffalo.

The good people of Poultney pronounced it a very strange affair, and for several weeks the log of wood that had been resurrected from the graveyard was an object of rare curiosity. And these same good people regarded me as something possessed of wit and penetration rather more than human, for I could not tell them how simply the knowledge of the contents of the grave had come out—I could not have done it without betraying my good friend, Mr. Adam Dogbear, and that was a thing I could not do, so I allowed the multitude to believe that I had worked it all out as the astronomer solves a difficult celestial problem.

I paid Mr. Dogbear the remaining ninety dollars, and he pronounced me a gentleman. And I paid it cheerfully, feeling that the information had been worth the money. And yet I am confident that I should have got at the same result without his assistance. I should certainly have found Aruna Wagner, for I had determined upon that before I saw Dogbear, and if I had found him, I should have most likely to have found his father also. Still, those things are very uncertain, and I have no disposition to allow any consideration of what might have happened without his assistance to detract from the merits of my friend THE RESURRECTIONIST.

The New York Ledger, June 30, 1866