

A Tell-Tale Toothpick

A Story of a Disembarked Body

New York Mercury

Jesse Ferrett's den, or room, was a most interesting spot; and Jesse Ferrett's conversational powers combined truth with delightfully descriptive pictures, associated with criminal history, in which he as a detective had created shares.

A little walnut cabinet contained some odds and ends of testimony bearing value, reminding the treasurer of scenes in which he had mounted to renown and competence.

"Now, there," said he, "is a bit of wooden toothpick, bitten off square at one end and chewed to a fibrous pulp at the other; would you believe that this innocent thing could bring a man to the dangling end of a rope or drive him into eternity?"

"No telling," said I, wisely expectant, and adding with judicious flattery, "You fellows are cunning enough to telescope testimony through a dead and stray hair."

"Yes, but the toothpick! Consider what a very ordinary circumstance a mutilated toothpick is."

"Sure enough, but I don't forget that Ferrett is not an ordinary man, even among his colleagues."

That bit of honest blarney got him, and I got the story. We elevated our feet upon the table after lighting our cigars, and observing a fresh bottle nestling in its icy crush within reach of our hands, he related the story of the toothpick.

"You recollect, it was in the winter of 18— what a hurrah there was about finding a body packed in a barrel? It had been shipped from Chicago prepaid to some little town in Wisconsin, addressed to a name that had no personality, and hence no claimant appeared, and it remained in the warehouse until it began to be unpleasantly odoriferous. The head was knocked in, and the barrel found to contain the neatly-carved and cleverly-packed body of a young woman. Of course the little community was properly shocked; the fearful thing was hastily nailed up again and returned to Chicago. An investigation followed; the 'boys' got their noses down after the game, but they couldn't get the scent anyhow; every public and private theory exploded, fallacious proved every seeming trace. No one came forward to claim the body; no one missed wife, mother, sister, or friend. If you recollect, the woman had been both young and fair at the time of her death, as a post mortem examination of the remains evidenced. Well, as time passed, and new subjects of interest pressed out the old, people availed themselves of the idea that the thing had been some kind of students' hoax. No murder had been committed; a graveyard robbery and a dissecting room trick—that's all. I happened to be in Chicago on a bit of a lark of my own at the time, and was present when the disjointed body was disembarked. I noticed— what was of no significance to the investigating parties—a sliver of wood clinging to a tress of hair; a splendid suit of wavy brown hair that poor dissevered head had, too. Meeting with no protest I cut off the strand to which the sliver clung. It proved to be this toothpick. I placed it in a

section of my pocketbook, and from that moment I became possessed of an intense, I may say a savage longing to hunt up the man who had cut up that body. A conviction pursued me that murder had been done—and I was destined to clear the earth of the fiendish perpetrator. I kept my convictions to myself, however, but for two years I worked, hunted, tricked and studied without obtaining the slightest clue to encourage me, when I received a job to work up for a banking firm which necessitated a skip over the Atlantic, and which for a time absorbed all my attention so completely that Chicago and its barrel of human flesh had only a second place in my head, although I had not left its tressed memento behind, believe me.

“My business required all kinds of disguises; in London I wore female attire and frequented all the low haunts of the town, accompanied by a clever London detective, who passed me off as his American gal on a spree. In Paris I was an Italian beggar woman, and haunted the hotels with a hired babe on one arm and a basket of crusts on the other during the midday hours, and at night I visited all the fashionable saloons of the respectable citizens, by introduction of our American Minister, who was in my secret and assisted my purpose and disguise.

“I had about collected all the threads for a satisfactory denouement, thereby saving my employers thousands of dollars and giving myself a professional lift and a neat purse for services rendered, when I felt justified in following the bent of my inclinations and ‘seeing Paris’ before returning home.

“There were several prominent Americans—New Yorkers—stopping at my hotel, and in their company I started out for a ‘night of it.’ We made arrangements with a hackman to take us to all the places of interest to gentlemen in search of knowledge, and make him responsible for our safe return. Right here, let me tell you if you visit any strange city, and feel disposed to ‘take it all in,’ just place yourself under the guardianship of an old “cabby.” Make your bargain with him beforehand, make him responsible for your safety and the hotel you are stopping at for his fare, and you’ll come out all right, even if you have a headache the following day. Make up your mind deliberately how much money a man in his sober senses ought to squander ‘seeing things,’ take just so much with you, and leave the rest with the hotel clerk. This is parenthetic advice gratuitously thrown in. Fill up the glasses; my throat is dry; give me a light.

“Well, we took in the sights up till 2 a.m., and didn’t see any great variety of sin that hasn’t its elegantly corresponding attraction in any American city. We were about to give the order to return to our hotel when the driver remarked that he had still one more place to take in—a private gambling establishment. The proprietress—ah—a lady. We were ushered in half an hour later, by the simple passport of our driver, who vouched for us by saying: ‘A square party—Americans on a lark!’

“Have you an artistic imagination? Gad! I never saw such superb taste, combining art in all its pleasing senses, as this house presented. Fountains of delightful perfumed spray; flowers, statuary, paintings; tessellated floors and frescoed walls; tabled loaded with gold-lined baskets and salvers holding all kinds of fruit, pipes, cigars, tobacco, coffee-urns with fragrant beverages of all kinds of coffee, tea steamers, wines and champagne. All who entered were privileged to partake or abstain from any or all things set before them. A balcony was supplied with various musical instruments, and a grand piano stood in the centre of the large saloon that could be

turned, by the dropping of curtains of lace and damask, into separate apartments, as the ceiling was finished in the Moorish style of architecture, supported by columns of pillars, to which the drapery was fastened. The whole scene was most picturesque. A woman of singular repulsive physique, proved herself to be a hospitable hostess. She was sitting at a rear table watching the progress of a game of cards near her. She looked to be about 35 years old; her features were regular, with the exception of a very square lower-jaw; which gave her face a coarse, hard syle; her mouth was small, and lips pretty; hair blonde to red inclining; but her eyes were black and wavering as those of a carnivorous animal.

“There was considerable money at stake upon the game she was watching, and as it seemed to excite more interest than any of the dozen other games in the saloon, our party drew near and ordered refreshments, declining cards.

“It has probably become a habit with me to study physiognomy and unconsciously watch people, and I had not been sitting more than ten minutes before I found myself covertly noting that woman’s every movement. The first discovery I made was not particularly remarkable, still it suggested a disguise—she wore a wig. And she also had her faculties on a perpetual strain to prevent a display of unusual nervousness, with which she labored as I could see by the brilliancy of her eyes, constantly on the alert. She was nibbling fruit when we first entered, but as the eager interest excited in the game increased, she took a toothpick from the holder at her side, and began to chew one end of it, after biting the other tapered end square off.

“The game was culminating in breathless interest. I had taken my eyes from her for an instant to look at the “calling” hand, and when I looked at her again she was bending eagerly forward for the same purpose, one hand resting on the table, the other groping absently on her lap for the toothpick which had dropped from her mouth and lay on the dark navy blue velvet of her dress—the perfect counterpart of that bit of wood clinging to the brown tress of hair I had cut from the barreled-up head in Chicago.

“Professional caution teaches deliberation and coolness, but involuntarily my hand went to the pocket containing my toothpick and its curling tress, while a rushing system of stratagems presented themselves like lightening flashes to my mind, each offering some feasible plan of surprising a symptom of guilt from a guilty party. However, I restrained my impatience, and pretended any amount of interest in the lucky winner of the now terminated game, and when we separated for the rest of the night, or morning, rather, at the hotel, I managed to get an hour’s sleep, and then went abroad and sought information in connection with the history of the woman.

“Mem.—Said to be the runaway wife of an Italian count. Deserted by a gambler with whom she had eloped. Been an adventuress for several years; fleeced enough money from various victims to start her own book; present establishment two years. Quite safe house; resort of first class ‘sports’ and gentlemen; said to be under protection of man high in royal office.

“This was the extent of her history. Her previous life and history were—blank.

“I desired to have an interview with her alone. I gained admittance the following night, having secured the same driver and carriage. But, to tell you the truth, I was vexed at myself for the

singular importance attached by me to so trifling a coincidence as the similarity of a pair of toothpicks. Thousands of people chew the ends of toothpicks, and anybody is liable to bite off the end of one. Still I could not conquer my suspicions that all was not clean on that woman's conscience.

“I found a gracious compliance with my request for a private interview. We stepped into an alcove and drew the curtains. ‘Madame,’ said I, as if I were about to ask permission to salute her cheek, ‘when I saw you two or three years since in Chicago, you did not wear a wig.’ Scarcely were the word out of my mouth before the hand she had in her dress pocket was withdrawn, and a toy of a silver mounted pistol flashed in my face, and hissing between her teeth, she said, ‘Another word and I’ll send you to h—l.’

“I was ready for this possible consequence to my coup de main. A second later the pistol fell from her cramped clutch upon her trembling robes, and her wrists were banded with iron bracelets. A cocked pistol in one hand, with the other I removed the wig. Ah, ha! my conjectures were right; I had an ugly little brute of a man in woman's clothes. Elated with my success, I attached no significance to three successive, loud coughs, until the curtain parted and one of the waiters glared in upon me, and the next moment a handkerchief closed my mouth and I felt myself sinking beneath a clutch at my throat—then all was oblivion. I recovered my senses at my hotel in my bed. My friends said I had been put in my carriage drunk, and the driver had fetched me to the hotel and had me put safely to bed.

“I kept my own counsel, but as I expected the ‘bird had flown,’ none could tell whither. I cursed myself for a clumsy fool, and bided my time. Last summer I was on a train coming to New York; between Washington and Baltimore an under-sized man, with a long, flowing, gray beard got on. He had between his teeth a visible toothpick, the end of which had been bitten square off. The train got under way, and I rose from my seat, walked leisurely over to the one he occupied, and was about to seat myself on the vacant space beside him, when he looked up, and if terror was ever depicted upon human face—I saw it there—in those wavering, wicked black eyes. It was my man, and he knew me. ‘For Christ's sake,’ he whispered, ‘don't make a scene, and I swear to you, I will not try to escape. I give up!’

“I saw that he meant it. I wrote a dispatch which the conductor sent from the first station we stopped at. Arrived at my destination, we were met by a welcoming party with a conveyance, and the fellow said it was indeed all up with him; and fancying I knew more of his career than I really did, as he supposed I had tracked him here as he imagined I had in Europe, he made a clean breast of it. He had got intimate with the dashing young wife of an Italian count, and being suspected by the husband, she had robbed him of a large sum of money, and with her personable valuables she had fled to this country with him. ‘She was a perfect devil,’ said he. ‘I suppose the count was glad to get rid of her at any sacrifice. We lived high and traveled about, and quarreled for about a year; I couldn't shake her, and she hounded the life out of me. So one night, in a rage, I struck her, she sprang at me like a hyena; in defending myself she got the worst of it, and I had a dead woman on my hands. We were living in furnished rooms at the time in Chicago. I had no trouble in getting the body packed as you found it, although it was a disgusting job, and I felt sorry, too, for she was a fine figure. But she had the devil's own temper, and I carry the marks of her finger nails yet.’ The man was brutally unfeeling in his recital, and the only emotion he

exhibited was a round of curses when I told him he was brought to justice by his peculiar fondness for always chewing toothpicks. When I showed him that tress of hair, he looked at it long, then he begged a favor to retain it; just tonight, he begged; you can have it in the morning again before they remove me to Illinois!' I saw no reason for not granting his request and supposing he had some human sense of feeling left thinking he wanted to sentimentalize over it in remorse.

“When the door of his cell was opened next day they found him dead.

“He had strangled himself with that bonny silken tress.

“Let’s empty that bottle and stroll up Broadway.”

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