

Mr. Furbush
by Harriet E. Prescott Spofford

It is not long since the community was startled by the report of an extraordinary murder that occurred at one of our fashionable hotels, under peculiar circumstances and in broad daylight, and without affording, as it appeared, the slightest clew to motive or murderer. Public curiosity, finding that nothing was likely to satisfy it, gradually dropped the matter, and as gradually it died out of the newspapers.

The person who was thus abruptly ushered from this world in to the unknown region of the next was a young girl, some twenty summers old, and possessed of great personal charms. She was the heiress to a small fortune, a mere annuity, but had resided since her childhood with her guardian, the wealthy and generous Mr. Denbigh, who had always surrounded her with every luxury and elegance. When Mr. Denbigh married, he and his wife took their ward with them on the foreign tour they made, and the three had but just returned to America, residing temporarily at a hotel till their up-town mansion should be suitably prepared, when the sudden and terrible death of Miss Agatha More threw such a gloom over all their plans that the preparations were for a time abandoned, and Mr. Denbigh's energies were called upon to assist his wife in rallying from the low nervous fever into which she had been thrown and prostrated by this tragedy, when returning with her husband from a drive they had discovered it in all its horror.

Mr. Denbigh was himself greatly afflicted by the death of his ward and the fearful manner of it – she had been strangled in her own handkerchief – for beside the debt of affection he owed her as a child of a dear dead friend, long years of familiarity, her extreme loveliness, and the winning gentleness of her sweet and timid ways, had given her a deep and warm place in his heart. Of late she had been a little out of health, not recovering rapidly from the great exhaustion and weakness of severe sea-sickness, and he had been unremitting in his endeavors to promote her comfort and happiness; while in making ready their new abode, both he and his wife had paid such heed to the tastes and needs of Agatha, meaning, as Mr. Denbigh said, that it should be felt by her to be as much her own home as theirs, without any sense of obligation, that now the place without her seemed too much a desert ever to enter upon it again.

Mrs. Denbigh, moreover, must have felt sorely, it would seem, the loss of the gentle daily companion of three years; but even more than on her own account she appeared to resent the deed for the sake of her husband to whom she was so passionately devoted, and no sooner was she able to lift her head from its pillow once more than she interested herself with revengeful vigor in the proceedings that had been undertaken. Mr. Denbigh, personally, cared little to discover the perpetrator of the atrocious crime; he felt that no human justice of cord or gibbet could restore Agatha; but his wife, burdened with their bereavement and with her own weight of indignation, would not rest with the mystery unraveled. In the deepest mourning, discarding almost every ornament, impressing so upon them more deeply the emergencies of the case and commending their sympathies, she was closeted every morning with the detectives of the police, sparing her husband as

much of the painful duty as possible, as she would have walked over burning plow-shares at a word from him.

It was at first proposed that the deed had been done for plunder, as various valuable jewels, gifts from the Denbighs, and heirlooms from Miss More's own mother, were discovered to be missing; but they afforded in themselves insufficient reason, and were subsequently discovered in a package picked up by one of the police themselves at a crossing of a crowded thoroughfare where they had apparently been purposely dropped. Neither did Miss More's lovers afford any clew to the miscreant; she had had several suitors and attendants, none of whom had Mr. Denbigh favored; and although Mrs. Denbigh had urged Agatha to regard young Elliot with kindness, Mr. Denbigh frowned, Agatha remained indifferent, and young Elliot, having taunted Mr. Denbigh with the assurance that since he countenanced none of Miss More's lovers it could be but from sinister intensions on his part, had withdrawn, vowing vengeance, and declaring that, since he could not have her, nobody else should. Still, that was hardly murder. And the poor fellow was found, besides, to be in such a heart-broken state as to disarm suspicion. The only other accusation that could take shape and breath might have been directed toward Agatha's maid; but as she was able to prove that she was down in the laundry, and had remained there uninterruptedly from nine till one, while the occurrence had taken place between the hours of eleven and twelve in the morning, and as she had evidently nothing to gain and much to lose by it, that idea was also dismissed, though both young Elliot and the servant-maid remained under surveillance. Finally, in despair, the Denbighs abandoned the investigation, and departed to spend the winter in Midera, returning in the spring to their city abode, whose adornment had been left to the tender mercies of the upholsterers, since they had themselves so completely lost interest in it.

Here the general course of the matter rested. One officer alone, Detective Furbush – a man of genteel proclivities, fond of fancy parties and the haut ton, curious in fine women and aristocratic defaulters and peculators – who had not at first been detained upon the case, but had been interested in the reports of it, having become at last much in earnest about it, pursued it still, incidentally, on his own account and in a kind of amateur way. It seemed to him a fatal fascination, a predestination of events that kept his steps nearly always about the purlieu of the Margrand House.

One day that Detective Furbush had happened in a spare hour, to take his little daughter into a photograph gallery, he lounged about the window while the child was undergoing the awful operation. Along the opposite side of the street from this window ran one end of the Margrand House, with its countless windows and projections. The Margrand House fronted on a square, one end of it running down this street, and always receiving, on its stone facings and adornments, the whole sheet of the noon sun. A thought suddenly occurred to Mr. Furbush. So as soon as the operator was at leisure he attacked him with the inquiry if there were any picture of that fine building, the Margrand House? To which the operator replied affirmatively, and showed him one taken from the square. "However," said the operator, "though it doesn't take in so much, and was only what this one window could do for itself, I call this a prettier picture," and he produced something which, having been taken at such a short focal distance, resembled the photographs of

the rich architecture of some Venetian façade. “It was the morning of the Great Walden Celebration,” continued the operator.

“What one?” asked Mr. Furbush.

“The Great Walden Celebration.”

“Ah yes,” responded Mr. Furbush, not letting the rest of his thought reach the air, running as it did, “that was the morning of the More murder.”

“And we let one of the boys try his hand at the craft,” resumed the operator, there being nothing doing; and it was such a lovely scene in the street below, narrow as it is. And, as was to be expected from him, the crowd and procession turned into dot and line, and the whole of that part of the building opposite came out as if it had sat for its picture.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Furbush, as, rubbing his finger over his lips, he looked at the sheet on which the central portion of that slide of the hotel, with its quaint windows and lintels and ornamentation were most minutely given. It was in that very portion of the house that Miss Agatha More’s room had been situated; nay, so well was it all impressed upon him, that Mr. Furbush could tell the very window of the room in which she had met her cruel fate. Never was there such a coincidence, to Mr. Furbush’s mind, before or since, never such an interposition of Providence; the day that an unknown hand had brought Agatha More to her doom, perhaps the very hour, the sun had made a revelation of that room’s interior upon this sheet of sensitized paper, his Ithuriel’s spear had touched this shapeless darkness and turned it into form and truth. The Walden celebration had defiled through the street and into the square, at a somewhat earlier hour than the supposed hour of the murder, since it was to see the procession from a more advantageous point of view that Mr. and Mrs. Denbigh had driven out, and while they were gone the terrible action was thought to have been committed. Still the window might have a secret of its own to tell even concerning that.

Straightway Mr. Furbush made a prize of the operator; and procuring, through channels always open to him, the strongest glasses and most accurate instruments, had the one chosen window in the picture magnified and photographed, remagnified and rephotographed, till under their powerful, careful, prolonged, and patient labor, a speck came into sight that would perhaps well reward them. Mr. Furbush strained his eyes over it; to him it was a spot of greater possibilities than the nebula in Orion. This little white unresolved cloud, again and again they subjected to the same process, and once more, as if a ghost had made apparition, it opened itself into an outline – into a substance – and they saw the fingers of a hand, a white hand, doubled, but pliant, strong, and shapely; a left hand, on its third finger wearing rings, one of which seemed at first a mere blot of light, but, gradually, as the rest, answering the spell of the camera, showed itself a central stone set with five points, each point consisting of smaller stones: the color of course could not be told; the form was that of a star. Held in the tight, fierce fingers of that clenched hand, between the pointed thumb and waxy knuckles, and one edge visible along the tips dented into the thumb’s side, was grasped an end of a laced handkerchief.

How the handkerchief of Agatha More, the instrument of her destruction, was always carried folded in the shape of its running knot in Mr. Furbush's great wallet, a large, laced, embroidered handkerchief; that this was its photograph he needed but a glance to rest assured. All the rest of the dark deed was hidden beyond the angle of light afforded by the window-frame. And whosoever the murderer might be, Mr. Furbush said to himself with the pleasantry of the headsman, it was evident that the owner of this picture had a hand in it. And here he paid the photographer for his labors and bade him adieu.

Mr. Furbush was now, however, not better off than he had been before. He had the hand that did the deed in his possession, to be sure, but to whose body was he to affix that hand, and how was he to do it? And in what did it differ from any other hand? In nothing but that fetter which made it his prisoner, that five-pointed star, that blot of light upon the third finger, above a wedding-ring. A wedding-ring – that would seem to prove the hand to be a woman's; the five-pointed glittering ring – that proved the woman to be no pauper. Worn above the wedding-ring, it must be its guard, and was probably as inseparable as that. To identify that hand, to certify that ring, became the recreation of Mr. Furbush's days and nights, so much to the detriment of all his other business that he fell into sad disrepute thereby at the Bureau. Mr. Furbush became all at once a gay man, plunged into the dissipations of fashionable life; he had been there before, on similar necessity, and knew how to carry himself. His costume grew singularly correct, he handled his lorgnette at the Opera like a coxcomb of the first milk-and-water; he procured invitations to ball and party, and watched every lady who for the moment daintily ungloved herself; he was as constant at church as the sexton; he made a part of the *beau-monde*. It was all in vain. And though Mr. Furbush carried the photograph in his breast-pocket, ready at any moment to descend like the hand of the Inquisition upon its victim, he might as well have carried there a pardon to all concerned, for all the good it did him.

But the world goes round.

One starlit night Mr. Furbush, pursuing some scent of other affairs along the princely avenue with its rows of palaces, took in, as was his wont, with every wink, a whole scene to its last details. He saw the beggar on these steps shrink into shadow, the house-maid in that area listening to the beguiling voice of the footman-three-doors-off no longer keeping his distance; he saw, there, the gay scene offered by the bright balcony casement with its rich curtains still unclosed; he saw, yet beyond, the light streaming from between open doors down the shining steps at whose foot the carriage waited, while a gentleman at its door hurried, with a pleasant word, the stately woman who came down to enter it beside him. She came down slowly, Mr. Furbush noted, moving like a person whom organic difficulty of the heart indisposes to quick exertion; she was one of those whom Mr. Furbush called magnificent – great coils of blue-black hair, twisted with diamonds, wreathing her queenly head tiara-wise, her features having the firmness and the pallor of marble, her eyes rivaling the diamonds in their steady splendor. A heavy cloak of ermine wrapped her velvet attire, and she was buttoning a glove as she descended. She paused a moment under the carriage-lamp, giving her husband the ungloved hand to help her in. The carriage-light flashed upon it, and in that second of its lingering, Mr. Furbush saw,

plainly as he saw the stars above him, on the third finger of that left hand, above the wedding-ring, the circlet with its five-pointed star whose duplicate he carried.

Mr. Furbush was thunder-struck. Here was what he had sought for thrice a twelvemonth; and unexpectedly blundering upon it turned him into stone. When he recovered himself with an emphatic “Humph!” the carriage had rolled away and the doors were closed.

Mr. Furbush was not the man to lose opportunities. The business in hand might go to the dogs; to-morrow would answer as well for that as to-night; for this there was no time like the present. Fortified with an outside subordinate he demanded entrance into the mansion alone, and announcing his intention to await the arrival home of the master and mistress, made himself agreeable to the footman and butler in the upper hall till hour after hour pealing forth at last struck midnight as if they tolled a knell. The footman was asleep in his chair, the butler heard the mellifluous murmur of the visitor’s voice by starts with a singing sensation as if his fingers were in his ears and out again momentarily. The wheels grated on the curb below, the horses hammered the pavement, the doors were flung apart, and the master and mistress of the house returned from the entertainments they had shared. She was a little paler, a little more magnificent, a little more imposing in her height and dignity than before; there was only one emotion, though, apparent through it all – that she valued her beauty and power only for its influence on the man beside her. Mr. Furbush’s keen eye saw the quick heave and restless agitation that the heart kept up beneath the velvets, simply in the moment when her husband touched her hand helping her across the threshold, and saw the whole story of her eye as it rested that instant on his. He would have had the entire case at once – if he had not had it before.

“Mr. and Mrs. Denbigh,” said he, approaching them then, “may I beg to see you alone for a few moments on a matter of importance?”

And in conformity with his request he was conducted, through other apartments, into a library, a place more secluded than they, a rather somber room, wainscoted all its lofty height in book-cases, and with here and there a glimmering bust. Mr. Denbigh himself turned up the gas and closed the door.

“Your business, Sir?” said he then to Mr. Furbush.

“My business, Sir, is more particularly with Mrs. Denbigh; although I desire your presence. I am a member of the police –“

Mrs. Denbigh, who yet stood with her hand laid passively along the back of a chair, slowly grasped the back till the glove that she wore with a quick crack ripped down the length of the finger, and the five-pointed ring protruded its sparkling face like the vicious head of a serpent.

“I am a member of the police,” continued Mr. Furbush quietly. “I have something in my possession which I desire Mrs. Denbigh to look at and see if it belong to her.” Perhaps

the woman breathed again. Whether she did or not he proceeded to open his great leathery wallet on the library-table beneath the chandelier.

Mrs. Denbigh moved forward with her slow majesty, dragging her velvets heavily, and the cloak dropping from her shoulder.

“Queer subjects – women,” thought Mr. Furbush. “Ah! you had more spring in you once. As handsome a thing as a leopard!”

But in spite of that calm deliberate step Mr. Furbush saw her heart fluttering there like a white dove in its nest. She did not speak, but waited a moment beside him. “Will you be so kind,” said he, “as to remove your glove?”

She quietly did so. Perhaps wonderingly.

“Excuse me, madame,” then continued he, lifting her hand as he spoke, doubling its cold fingers over one end of a running-knot that a soiled handkerchief made, a laced embroidered handkerchief he had produced, and powerless in his grasp, he laid hand and all – a white hand, doubled, but pliant, strong, and shapely, holding in its fingers, between the pointed thumb and waxy knuckles, the laced handkerchief’s end, just an edge visible along the tips deep-dented into the thumb’s side; and with the five-pointed ring burning its bale-fire above it, laid the hand and all on the table beside the photograph that he spread there.

“Is it yours?” said he.

A detective has perhaps no right to any pity; but for a moment Mr. Furbush would gladly have never heard of the More murder as he saw in the long, slow rise and fall of the bosom this woman’s heart swing like a pendulum, a noiseless pendulum that ceases to vibrate. Her eyes wavered a moment between him and the table, then, as if caught and chained by something that compelled their gaze, glared at and protruded over the sight they saw beneath them. Her own hand – her own executioner. A long shudder shook her from head to foot. Iron nerve gave way, the white lips parted, she threw her head back and gasped; with one wild look toward her husband she turned from him as if she would have fled and fell dead upon the floor.

“Hunt’s up,” said Mr. Furbush to his subordinate, coming out an hour or two later, and the two found some congenial oyster-opener, while the Chief explained how he had gone to get his wife’s spoons from the maid who had appropriated them and taken service elsewhere. Mr. Furbush made a night of it’ but never soul longed for daylight as he did, he had a notion that he had scarcely less than murdered – himself; and good-fellow as he must be abroad that night, indoors the next day he puts his household in sackcloth and ashes.

You will not find Mr. Furbush’s name on the list of detectives now. He has sickened of the business. He says there is too much night-work. He has found a patron now – a

wealthy one apparently. He has opened one of the largest and most elegant photographing establishments in the city; he was always fond of chemicals, he says. He has still, in an inner drawer, some singular but fast-fading likenesses of a hand, a clenched, murderous hand – among them not the one Mr. Denbigh burned. He has few secrets appertaining to his profession, which no one else has yet obtained. Meanwhile it has never been exactly explained how the story of the ring found the light.

Perhaps it was in order that Mr. Furbush might never be convicted of compounding a felony!

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