

## *The Model Detective*

The Only True Account of the Fate of Paul Picra

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by William O. Eaton  
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“Murder will out sometime, sure!” exclaimed Daniel Wonder to a few hearers, as he laid down a paper from which he had just been reading about a case of mysterious murder, the perpetrator of which had been discovered after years of ingenious and tortuous search. “I have many a time noticed it. It is according to the laws of nature, and must be so, if not right off, then by-and-by; if not [today], [tomorrow], next day, then a year, ten, fifty, perhaps a hundred years hence. The murder and the murderer are sure to come out. If I was on a plank alone with a man in the middle of the ocean, and was to murder him and sink him, with no ship in sight—I couldn’t feel safe! Sometime or other something would bring me out. If I didn’t tell of myself, asleep or awake, his bones would rise, or—”

“Or his sperrit?” suggested somebody.

“No; I don’t believe in spirits—but his bones, clothes, or the plank—or it might be somebody was looking at me from a ship out of sight, through a powerful spyglass, or perhaps from another plank, or perhaps happening to pass by overhead in a silk balloon, and see me do it—and so I should feel sure I was not safe until at last I was led out to be hung. You see there is always a chain of evidence between the murderer and murdered. It may be short or long. It may be broken into many separate links; but in time one man picks up one link here, another a link there, another another, and so on, until all the links are found and put together, and they are strong enough to hang the man.”

“It does seem so.” said one of the listeners, in a thoughtful awe.

“Seem so! It is so! I always know that murder will out, and have seen many singular cases of it. But the most singular case I ever heard of was the fate of Paul Picra, of Moss creek, a clerk in a dry goods store, and so covered up, according to the report, that no evidence was supposed to be left of it. He was unexpectedly missed one day, and his body was not found till three years afterward. People gave up all hopes of hearing about the poor fellow, how he came to his death, or where, or what for, or who or where his murderer was, until a traveler came to Moss creek and hearing of the murder of poor Paul Picra, he undertook to find the body, or at least the real criminal, and bring him to justice. This traveler’s name was Solomon Foxpaw, and he prided himself on his detective powers—his penetration and perseverance—and he had a restless, rolling, staring, snappy kind of eye that seemed to take in everything about him at a glance. People wished him success, but they didn’t expect it. Yet he didn’t care for what they expected. He set to work to find some links for a chain of evidence.”

“But I don’t see—”

“You can’t see anything yet. You must wait and see. Solomon Foxpaw made inquiries for a month, but ascertained just about nothing which would lead to the first link. He then sat down and reflected alone for three days, and finally he said to himself, ‘Here is a piece of woods out here, and Paul Picra was said to be poorly. What more likely than he should walk in the woods for his health—and there be murdered?’ ”

“To be sure! What, indeed?”

“With this idea Sol., without saying a word to anybody—because he hated interruption as bad as I do—walks out alone into the woods, and kicks about among the dry leaves, and examines the ground, and the rocks, and the trees, with strong suspicion.”

“To find a clue?”

“Why, of course, to find a clue.”

“But I don’t see—”

“You never will see, if you don’t wait, and follow his ideas. He pretty soon found various letters, carved on various trees—initials of names, perhaps—and among them all at last he discovered, on a tree by themselves, the letters, ‘P.P.’ ”

“Perilous Place, I suppose.”

“Perilous Place, you suppose! No, Paul Picra, he supposed, for he knew what to suppose. ‘He certainly cut those letters,’ Foxpaw felt convinced; and he put down ‘P.P.’ as his first link. ‘Now,’ says he, ‘I’ve got something to work on,’ and he felt encouraged. Looking about him a little sharper, as it Providence had directed him, he found a rusty jackknife, which had had ten blades. It had three now; a big one, a little one, and a saw blade. The horn was gone, but he felt a conviction that this knife was a second link, and he put it in his pocket. Looking about still further he saw a crack—”

“Heard a crack.”

“No! Saw a crack—a wide crack between some rocks. Something suddenly told him there was a cave there, and that he would find the body of Paul Picra in that cave. He did find a cave, a very cavernous cave—and he went and borrowed a spade, entered, and dug for several hours, till he struck something hard.”

“A box, containing the bones of Paul.”

“No. He thought so, at first; but it proved to be nothing but solid rock. He dug here and he dug there—but all was rock, and now, being much tired, he paused, and began to suspect he was on the wrong scent. A less resolute man would have despaired; but ‘No,’ says Foxpaw, ‘I’ll dig in another way.’ And so he dug off back to town again, and made further inquiries about what Paul Picra said and did, the last time he was seen; and showed the

jackknife confidentially.

“Nobody had seen Paul have such a knife, but Sol. Foxpaw happened at last on an old lady who remembered she had bought some mixed yarn of Paul the day he was missed. He seemed sick and unhappy, and said he wanted to go to sea for his health. This was all that Foxpaw could paw out of her. It seems little, but he thought it was a good deal. ‘Wanted to go to sea. That’s another link,’ says Sol. ‘A man who goes to sea naturally goes to a vessel, in the first place. Mosscreek is a seaport place. I will go down to the water side and inquire among the vessels.’ So he went down, and by good luck he soon discovered that, for years past, the schooner Flying Turtle had been in the habit of bringing stock from the city for the dry goods store. ‘Another link,’ says Foxpaw. ‘What more likely than that Paul, knowing the skipper, went in the Flying Turtle that day to the city?’

“So he asked the captain, who said he was not sure he didn’t, and that sometimes he had; and he shouldn’t wonder. ‘Here is half a link more,’ says Foxpaw. ‘I will go in the Flying Turtle, and make further inquiries.’

“It was during this trip, only a day’s voyage, that he added three or four more links to his chain. On closely questioning the captain the latter remembered that on the fatal day one of his passengers from Mosscreek to the city was a rawboned, swarthy, ugly looking man, who had a dissipated nose and a several bladed jackknife. He remembered a saw-blade in it, because it was the first he ever saw; and had said at the time that if he was as homely as the owner of the knife, he should cut his throat with it, and leave the consequences to other people. Foxpaw now showed the rusty knife, and the skipper said it might be the same, and added that the ringer’s name was Murdman or Markman, and that on landing in the city he had seen him at the Jolly Tar tavern at the head of the wharf.”

“Seen Paul Picra?” said one listener, much gratified.

“Why, no! Pay attention! Seen this ugly fellow—don’t you see?”

“Yes, I see; but I don’t see—”

“But you must wait and see, or you will certainly lose the links. Up goes Solomon Foxpaw to the Jolly Tar, as interested as if he had been Paul Picra’s only brother—”

“Did he have a brother?”

“None of your business—and asked the landlord to let him look at his arrival-book, of three years before. The landlord sent to the garret for it, and they overhauled it together; and, sure enough! there stood the name at the proper date, in a fierce, big hand, of Mike Murdman, and—”

“Paul Picra.”

“No! What do you know about it? ‘Mike Murdman and Friend.’ ‘This is the biggest link of the

lot,' says Sol. to the landlord. 'Do you recollect what kind of a looking man his friend was?'

"'No,' says the landlord, 'but I recollect that next morning the two had a quarrel. They had slept together, and Murdman was charged by the other with stealing his money in the night. But Murdman swore no, and as proof, said he hadn't enough money to pay his own bill; and they went out quarreling, without paying. And that's the last I ever saw of the other fellow, to my knowledge.'

"'More links—I'm getting a chain!' says Foxpaw. 'Went out together, quarreling about robbery. And did you ever see Murdman again?' "

"'O yes,' says the landlord. He's captain of a brig now. He came back a year afterward and paid his bill, and now he stops here once every three months, every return trip he makes. It is time for him now; brig was due yesterday; if you stop, I'll introduce him to you.'

"Was the man hung?"

"Well, this beats all, I declare!" cried Daniel Wonder, exasperated. "Here you are, wanting to get to the end of the chain before I've got the links fastened together. You would never make a detective."

"I don't care anything about the links. All I want to know is, was the man hung? You've got me so excited I can hardly keep my seat. It would be a satisfaction to know if the man was hung, at the start."

"Well, he wasn't hung at the start, and never would have been, if Sol. Foxpaw had been as impatient as you are. Have you no interest in the philosophy of the thing?"

"No," said the man, nettled; "and I don't care, now, whether the man was hung or not; I hope he wasn't; and I hope Paul Picra was cut into as many bits as there are links in your story!"

"Go on, Daniel, go on," said the others, "and if he interrupts you again, we'll hang him."

"So do. Well, Foxpaw waited three days, patiently, for the next link, and then the brig came to port, and Murdman came to the tavern, and the landlord introduced him to Foxpaw, over a glass, and they sat down to talk. Sol was usually a cool fellow, but, as he afterward said, he had his scruples about sitting down and talking with a murderer, and he felt very pale and nervous considering the critical business he was on. Sol. eyed him carefully all over, and he seemed to look homelier and homelier the more he examined him. He thought of poor Paul Picra, and felt ashamed of himself because he had been drinking in a friendly manner with this monster, who for three years had escaped being hung, and who no doubt imagined he should escape forever.

"'I have drunk with him,' thinks Sol., 'but it was a means to an end; and as that end is a rope's end, I shouldn't feel ashamed; but I must begin to gather up more links, however, I

feel.' And pretty soon he had a god opening.

" 'Do you chew?' says Mike Murdman.

" 'I do,' says Sol., holding out a plug; 'and if you don't like to bite it off, here's a knife to cut it.' And he pulled out the rusty jackknife he had found in the woods.

" 'What's this?' says Mike, staring at the knife, just as Sol. expected he would.

" 'Only a knife I found.' Says Sol. 'Perhaps you've lost one. Does it belong to you?'

" 'To me?' says Mike, looking at it with a shudder and coloring up. 'I guess not. Take it back. Horrible. I don't cut tobacco with such a knife as that!'

" 'You needn't be afraid. It is rusty—but you don't think there's blood on it, do you?'

" 'Blood,' says Mike, with another shudder.

" 'Yes, blood,' repeats Sol., severely. 'As I told, I found that knife; and who knows but there's blood, and human blood on it, which makes it so rusty? The murderer might have thrown it away, after he had done the deed, mightn't he? and thought nobody would find it?'

" 'How should I know?'

" 'It is an old knife,' continues Sol., 'but an older head owned it, I reckon. Yet the oldest heads are liable to get out of their latitude and longitude. Now, you are a seafaring man, and have you ever been to Moss creek?'

" 'Moss creek? Well, I may say I have, once.'

" 'And more, too.'

" 'No. Only once.'

" 'Only once. And what did you go there for?'

" 'I didn't go there *for!*' says Mike, with a kind of sneer, as if he was mad to be so questioned; and Sol. said he looked confused. 'I didn't go there for anything. I got drunk—stepped aboard the vessel by accident.'

" 'By accident? A stranger there? Then you don't remember a young clerk, Paul Picra?'

" 'No.'

" 'Nor the woods—nor the cave?'

“ ‘No.’

“ ‘I thought not. Short memory, I suppose?’

“ ‘You ask a great many questions!’ now says Mike. ‘Are you crazy? You are very pale.’

“ ‘It is you who are pale,’ says Sol.’ ‘and I want you to answer me some more questions.’

“ ‘Not another word, till you take more brandy,’ says Mike. ‘You need it.’

“ ‘One word for me and two for himself,’ thought Sol. ‘His guilt makes him faint, and he wants a glass to stiffen him up. I’m willing. More drink will make him less cautious.’

“So he agreed, and they drank two or three times more. ‘He seemed to gulp it down like a fish,’ Sol. said, ‘and I thought I should soon get him drunk. But instead of that, I got floored myself. I lost all consciousness, and was put to bed, and next day I was unable to find him anywhere. Suspecting that he had got the start of me, and had fled out of my reach for the present, I now thought that the best thing I could do was to go back to Moss creek for a day, and have a talk with Paul’s old employer and the town authorities.’ So Solomon Foxpaw did go back and told them all that he had discovered and heard; and what do you think? They actually laughed in his face, and said that all these links, which he had taken so much pains to get together, amounted to nothing!”

“That was all they knew!” exclaimed Daniel Wonder’s indignant hearers. “But how did Solomon Foxpaw get hold of the slippery murderer at last?”

“He didn’t get hold of him,” said Daniel Wonder.

“No?”

“No. What the authorities said discouraged him, and he then resolved that he would not pursue the search any further.”

“Who did get the murderer?”

“Nobody.”

“Then who found the body of Paul Picra?”

“Everybody. For, on the very day when Foxpaw gave up the search, Paul Picra came back to Moss creek, safe and sound.”

“What! Then he wasn’t murdered at all?”

“Why, no! I told you in the first place that it was a report. But it seems he had got a letter in the city, calling him home in a hurry, as his mother was dying, a long way off. He went

home, and she died, and he inherited a rich property; and not caring a fig for the people in Moss creek, he never wrote to them.”

“Not murdered, after all!” cried the disappointed hearers. “Where was the singularity you spoke about, then?”

“In the perseverance of Solomon Foxpaw.”

“Pshaw! O pshaw! What did you work us up so for?”

“That is what Solomon Foxpaw said to those who had excited him so; but they said to him, as I said to you, that is was so reported, and that he had expected to work a miracle, without any reason—namely, to find, from no evidence at all, the dead body of a man who was not dead. And he was as dissatisfied as you are that the man turned up alive. But still, as I said before, murder will out, and no doubt if that Mike Murdman had murdered, and Paul Picra had been the one he killed, Solomon Foxpaw would have had him some time, sure!”

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