

The Scratch of a Pin
Or,
How the Deed Was Done

All that day I wandered through the house unquietly. Strange fancies had come and gone through my brain. With these anxiety was mingled, and depression, and weariness. It was not for lack of money. Oh, no! I had been poor—wretchedly poor—and I had a large sum of money now. But I was fevered, excited and miserable. There was an eye watching me. I could feel, not see it. Someone was dogging me as I moved. Who it was, I could not tell, of course; but I knew there was someone on my track. At length, at nightfall, I made up my mind to stroll through the town, to look at the shops on Broadway by gas light, to drop in at the theatre, to give up the whole evening to enjoyment.

I took the roll of bank bills from my pocket—from the deep inside pocket on the left side of my coat, and counted them over. There were just twenty-four of them, each for one hundred dollars. I need not disturb them. I had sufficient money loose in my vest-pocket. So I returned them to their hiding place, and then drew on my gloves. As I was putting the glove on my right hand, I observed in the palm of the hand a thin, red mark. It commenced at the junction of the hand and wrist on the right side, and ran diagonally over to the base of the little finger. It looked as though it had been made by a pin. How it came there I could not tell.

I went out. It was a clear and cold night, and everyone seemed to be in the streets. I met people carrying turkeys, and toys, and all sorts of bundles, and I overtook others loaded in the same way. Then there were strollers like myself, carrying nothing and buying nothing, but looking at the windows and the people. Decidedly it was a gay evening, and I forgot my anxiety and depression.

Suddenly, however, the feeling that I was followed by someone came over me again. I threw my glance over my shoulder uneasily, but I could see no one whose attention seemed directed toward me. My quick glance took in one man, however, whose general appearance was unfavorable; and he struck another in the same way, for I noticed that the policeman who had just passed me, half turned to look at him, too. The man was respectfully dressed, and there was nothing remarkable about him, either, except that he wore a pair of green spectacles. He could scarcely be dogging me, either, for his manner was vacant and passive. Still there was someone following on my track.

I was then on the sidewalk opposite the theatre. The front of the house was lighted up so brilliantly that it attracted me. I crossed the street, and obtained a ticket at the box office. As I handed the card to the gruff doorkeeper, my right hand being ungloved, the man said:

“A smart scratch, that!”

I looked at my hand. The scratch had inflamed so much that there was a little ribbon of pink across the palm, with a deep red line in the centre. It smarted a little, too.

The house was crowded, and I obtained a back seat with difficulty. I surrendered myself entirely to the scene on the stage.

Suddenly, I felt myself checked in the very middle of a burst of laughter. A half-shudder came over me, followed by vexation and annoyance. The whole house turned its gaze from the stage toward me. The audience concentrated its look into one immense eye that glared at me. Someone was watching me also from behind. I glanced over my shoulder, and there, within a few feet of me, looking intently at the stage, was the man with the green spectacles, whom I had seen in the street an hour before. When I looked again he was gone.

It was absurd. What had the man to do with me, or I with him? I looked down in thought, and then I noticed the scratch upon my hand again. It was singular that I could not remember how it came. Perhaps, I thought, the mysterious man in green spectacles can tell me. I chuckled to myself at the absurd fancy, and raised my eyes to look at the play. All the characters seemed to wear green spectacles. All had scratches across their hands—great, red, deep gashes. The absurd depression deepened. I was overwhelmed with it. Even the fall of the curtain did not relieve me; and I rose and left the house.

Out of doors it had grown colder than when I entered—the sky was overcast, and a keen wind cut me sharply in the face as I passed from the vestibule. The people had mostly left the streets, but the shops were still open.

I walked down Broadway, thus receiving the wind on my back. The late hour and the chill weather gave me an appetite. I saw the word “Restaurant” above a basement door, and descended the steps.

There were two or three at the bar when I entered. I paid no attention to them, but gave my order to a waiter, and entered a box. To beguile the time until my chop could be prepared, and to rid me somewhat of the weight that oppressed me, I took up a daily paper—the *Herald*—which lay on the table, and began to read.

My eye fell upon an account of the evidence before the coroner’s inquest, concerning a mysterious murder which then occupied a deal of public attention. The mystery lay less in the murder than the murderer, whom no one had been able to detect. These were the facts:

An elderly maiden lady, named Mary Ann Lawson, kept a millinery-shop in the Bowery. She slept in the back part of her shop—got her breakfast and tea there, but had her dinner sent in from a neighboring eating house. She had several girls at work, and one to attend the shop. These work-girls always left at dark—the shop-girl at ten o’clock at night—except on Saturdays, when she staid an hour later. Miss Lawson had been engaged in her business about twenty years, and had accumulated some property. She owned the house in the Bowery, letting the upper floors to various parties, and a handsome house in Thirty-Second Street, which was tenanted by a very punctual and responsible man. She received, therefore, a good deal of money, but she never deposited in the banks. She had lost a few hundred dollars once by the failure of one of these institutions, and from that time forward became her own banker.

On Friday night, about eleven o'clock, the neighbors and passersby had their attention and alarm excited by a series of fearful shrieks proceeding from Mrs. Lawson's shop. A crowd soon collected around the door—the windows were fastened—and one having had the courage to enter, the rest followed. They were met by the shop girl, Jane Brady, who came towards them with her hands and dress dabbled with blood, and exclaiming that Miss Lawson was killed. In the little back room, partitioned from the shop by curtains, the body of the unfortunate woman was found, lying in a pool of her own blood, which had escaped from a deep wound in her head. The instrument used in producing her death lay near her. It was a round piece of cast iron, into which an iron rod had been fixed, with a crosspiece of wire at the upper extremity. It made a stand for the display of a bonnet; but the bonnet which had been on this lay on the floor of the shop.

So soon as the girl, who was in violent hysterics, had sufficiently recovered, she gave her statement. It was a repetition of this, given before the coroner, which was printed in the paper. There was a bonnet which had to be sent home early in the morning, and she had staid after hours, in order to assist Miss Lawson in finishing it. At ten o'clock it was found that another yard of ribbon would be wanted, and so soon as Jane had closed the shutters, she was directed to slip quickly round into Grand street, and get it. She did so, but found none of that particular pattern. She knew it must be had, and sought it elsewhere. She found it at length, and on her return found her mistress on the floor in the back room. She raised her head, but she was quite dead. Then she shrieked, and knew nothing more of what happened until she found herself in the midst of the crowd in the front shop. She stated, furthermore, that Miss Lawson always carried her money in the bosom of her dress, and that she saw her that day with a great roll of bills.

An examination showed that the wound, which was on the top of the head, and a little to the front, had been dealt from behind—the iron weight, which was broad at the base, fitting only in that way into the wound. This would seem to show that the murderer must have been very tall, as Miss Lawson was herself above the middle size. There had been but one blow. There was no money in the bosom of the dress, and the latter was not torn or displaced, except that the upper button in the front was unfastened.

The shop-girl was at first suspected, but it being found that she had called at the shops at the time she named, and nothing else appearing against her, she was merely held in custody as a witness.

The only clue to the murderer was in the testimony of a boy who assisted the grocer on the corner. He was putting up the shutters about half past ten, when he saw a short man with a humpback, and a slouched hat, leaving Miss Lawson's shop. At the distance, and by the dim light of the street lamps, he could not be certain, but he thought the man was dressed shabbily. He could not see his face, and did not think that he would recognize him again.

That Miss Lawson had been killed for the money on her person there could be no doubt.

I was reading the details for a second time, when someone entered the box where I was, and sat down at the opposite side of the table. I raised my eyes. It was the same man whom I had seen in Broadway, and in the theatre; but he had removed his green spectacles.

Why had he not chosen some other box, of which there were several without tenants. I was quite right in my conjecture. The fellow was dogging me. I was just about to speak to him sharply, when he spoke himself.

“I beg your pardon,” said he; “but it is dull sitting alone, and so, if you have no objection, I will eat my oysters on this side of the table. Reading about that Lawson case, I see.”

I saw that there was little use in a rebuff—the man’s impudence was too strong; so I merely answered:

“Yes.”

“Singular case to some people—very!” he said. “But to a man of penetration—a man accustomed to scan men closely—it is not at all mysterious. I could lay my hands on the murderer at any moment.”

I was very much embarrassed and annoyed, but I kept cool—that is, I tried to look cool, and rejoined:

“Indeed!”

“Why,” said he, “the case is perfectly clear. But here comes your chop, followed by my oysters. So soon as I have bolted them I’ll tell you exactly how the thing was done, and show you how the murderer will be taken.”

While he was eating his oysters, I examined him curiously. He was a man apparently about fifty, with clearly cut features, and a projecting forehead, with hair of an iron gray color, and a square chin, under which was a crisp gray beard. He was dressed comfortably and with good materials, but not fashionably, and his overcoat was buttoned closely, just showing the collar of the coat beneath. The only thing which showed him not to be a gentleman, apart from his rudeness, was a pair of sprawling, chubby and red hands, with closely cut nails—the little finger of the right hand one garnished with cheap rings.

“Yes!” said he, finishing the last spoonful of his stew, “the thing is plain enough to a man who looks into such matters closely. Now, nothing escapes my observation. For instance, by the manner in which you occasionally carry your hand to the inside pocket of your overcoat, you have a large sum of money there.”

I started.

“Oh, that’s all right. That was very easily to be seen.”

I found it necessary to say something, though my mouth was dry, and my throat constricted so that I could scarcely speak. At length I jerked out:

“Since you can find out everything, I wish you would tell me how I got this scratch on my hand, for I cannot make it out.”

As I spoke I looked at my hand. The inflammation had increased, and filled the whole palm. The centre line was blood-red.

“Oh,” said he, looking at it curiously, “that is easy enough. I’ll explain that presently. I want to give you first my theory of the murder.”

“You see the business has been laid for some time. The man who did it was a shrewd man, but not a practiced hand. He is not a common thief—he did not rob the till—nor take velvet ribbons, nor anything but the money on the woman. He laid for that, and he got it. That’s a confounded good overcoat of yours,” he said, feeling it; “I think I know its make. You bought it at—? and he named a firm.

“Ye-es,” I replied.

“I felt sure of it. Well, as I said, the thing was put up. He knew that the old girl kept the money about her, and was watching. So soon as the shop-girl stepped out, he stepped in. Now, if he had been a common ruffian, the old woman would have ordered him out, and if he hadn’t gone, she would have alarmed the neighbors. But though he was shabbily dressed, he was a gentleman in manners. He inquired about a bonnet for a lady. None of those in the front shop suited him. There were some in band boxes on the shelves in the back room. Miss Lawson went to get down one of these. The back part is only partitioned by a curtain, which was partly looped up. The counter extends quite up to the curtain. A bonnet stand was on it. He picked that up, and as she reached to the shelf, her head as thrown back, and he dealt her a blow which finished her. He took the money from her bosom, and walked out. That was the way it was done.”

I sat there half petrified. At length I said:

“But he was a short man with a hump back—she was a tall woman, and—”

“Oh! The hump made no difference. It was artificial, and he stooped. Now as to that scratch—you did it against a pin in the old woman’s dress, when you drew the money from her bosom.”

My first impulse was to knock him down, with another effort I undertook to reason the matter with him. But he went on too quickly.

“It was very neatly done. When you went out this evening, I dogged you, and my companion entered and searched your room. He found the bundle of curled hair that you used to stuff out the back of your coat. He found a piece of ribbon, not an inch square, in one of your old shoes. It matches some in Miss Lawson’s shop. The money—all you haven’t spent—is in your pocket now. Do you know how I was set on your track? You bought a suit of clothes—the one you have on—yesterday. You gave a hundred dollar bill to the tailor, and got the change. On the day that Miss Lawson was killed, a gentleman paid her an account with that bank note. He always marks his money, with his own initials, and the name of the person he gets it from. The paper was a

little thin, and the tailor asked this very man if it were good. He recognized it, and gave us information. I spotted you from description. You have had no money scarcely until recently—having run through everything. These are hand cuffs,” he continued, drawing them from his pocket. “My companion is waiting at the bar there. The game is up—you had better come quietly. I am armed.”

A! if I had gone directly home from the theatre, and they had come for me there, I could have easily killed them both. Or, if I had left the city at once! But it is useless to think now on what might have been, for here I sit in the condemned cell, and tomorrow I am to die.

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