

A Detective's Story

Everybody loves romance, especially if there is truth at the bottom of it. So I take it for granted that my readers would like the story of a tragic affair that was either a suicide or a murder—nobody knows exactly which—but which was town talk long, long ago, when neither murder nor suicide was so common as it is today.

The story is as follows: A young man named Fairbanks lived up in Massachusetts, near Dedham. He was respectably connected, and had some relatives in New York who thought the world of him. He was engaged to be married to a nice young woman called Fales, and he visited New York to make some purchases for the wedding.

Miss Fales was very fond of Jason Fairbanks and he was very fond of her. They were always together. Fairbanks had a rival, a fellow in the village who worshiped this Fales girl, and kept on worshiping her. But Fairbanks, havin' a sure thing of it, could afford to pity rather than hate of fear his defeated rival, and he kept on sparkin' pretty Miss Fales day and night.

One mornin' Fairbanks and his old aunt, with whom he lived, had a long talk together, and from that mornin' the young man was never his former self again. He had been light-hearted; he now became as gloomy as a thunder cloud. He neglected his work and, worst of all he neglected his sweetheart.

Now, a man may neglect his business some time before it gets him into trouble, but if he neglects his sweetheart he will hear of it in less than twenty-four hours. So Miss Fales brought him to task and reproached him, and then he took her out for a walk into a secluded corner of the farm her father owned. They were seen walking arm and arm to this corner, and among others who saw 'em was Fairbanks' rival, who was, as usual, prowlin' round the farm.

Some hours passed and it was now dinner time—soon—and Miss Fales hadn't been seen since about nine o'clock that mornin', when she went with her lover to the grove at the corner of the farm. She didn't come to her dinner, so search was made for her. She was found easily enough—found in the grove—but found dead, stabbed several times with some sharp instrument, her pretty body all disfigured from the stabs.

In a little while a penknife was found near the body and it was identified as Jason Fairbank's penknife by the young man who had been Jason Fairbanks' rival. All this looked pretty bad for Fairbanks, but pretty soon he came along, lookin' distracted, and rushed right into the midst of the people gathered round the body. He looked like a wild man; he seemed nearly crazy with grief, and he told his story to the crowd with such simplicity and truth that everybody believed him—everybody but his rival. "I loved her" said Fairbanks, stoopin' down and kissin' the dead body of his sweetheart, "and never did I love her more than when I asked her to take a walk this mornin'. But I had received bad news lately—news from my old aunt that prevented me from marryin' her for two years to come at least. So I told her when we reached the grove that we must postpone our weddin'. She reproached me, accused me of coldness, and said I had ceased to love her. I denied her charges. God knows they were not true; but she insisted on my marryin' her, as we had originally agreed, next week. I could not grant that request, although my heart

bled when I refused it. All of a sudden she snatched my waistcoat pocket with my penknife and stabbed herself several times, although I strove with all my force to restrain her. But she was as strong as she was desperate. She fell down bleedin' and dyin' at my feet, and then I saw her no more. I know no more. I thought not of appearances, or of consequences. I ran away, and now I don't care to live when she is gone." And once more he kissed his dead sweetheart on her cold, still face.

In many respects Fairbanks' story was improbable, and in many points Fairbanks' conduct had been suspicious. But innocence is often more suspicious looking than guilt, and truth is more improbable than falsehood. And the poor young fellow's grief appeared so genuine that the country people around all began to pity him rather than to accuse him. But the other young man who had been Fairbanks' rival examined the places where the body of the girl had been stabbed, and then he turned to the crowd and said: "Those cuts there and there could not have been inflicted upon the body by the woman herself. Let anybody try if he or she could easily and without takin' a good deal of time and trouble, stab themselves as that young woman is stabbed." Well, people began to examine the location of those stabs, and then they began to shake their heads, and look very grave, and when at last Fairbanks' rival said "This is a murder," and then pointin' to Fairbanks, "and there stands the murderer," several of the crowd exclaimed. "He speaks the truth," and Jason Fairbanks was taken into custody.

If this man Fairbanks really killed that girl. What a nerve he must have had to have kissed the body he had just hacked at and killed. That kiss must have been more difficult and more devilish than the killing.

He was tried for murder, and although his friends came to his aid with money and influence, and although he had mighty good lawyers, such men as Fisher Ames and Samuel Dexter, he was found guilty of the murder and condemned to be hung.

This trial and conviction made a great excitement throughout the country, and made a special sensation in New York a while. Petitions were signed for his pardon, and it was even made a political matter of, in the absence of anything more important to have a political row about.

But the authorities were not to be bulldozed. He had been tried and condemned, and they were determined he should be executed.

The young man who had been Fairbanks' rival was particularly prominent in securin' his conviction, and in insistin' on his execution. "If I couldn't marry her, I can at least hang him," he said.

But one night, one cold, dark night Jason Fairbanks' jailer mysteriously put a note in his hand. The note had some money and some instructions in it. A few hours later Jason Fairbanks found his cell door open, and walked out, like a cat, without puttin' his boots on, though the stone floor of the jail was freezin' cold. He found the jail door open, too, and out he walked into the darkness, barefooted, but free.

He then crawled along and crept away on his hands and knees, for fear some one might spy his form, if erect, even in the darkness; and he never stopped to put on his shoes till he was half a mile from jail.

Then he ran for his life, and ere mornin' he was twelve miles or so from the Dedham jail, on his way to Canada. There was no extradition treaty between Great Britain and this country; and if a criminal once got from this country to Canada he was safe.

Fairbanks was free, but far less comfortable than he had been in jail. It was piercin' cold, but he had no overcoat; he was tired, but he dared not rest; he was hungry, but he was afraid to stop anywhere to get anythin' to eat, for fear he might be tracked. His money did him no good just then, for he wanted every dollar of it to hire a boat to take him across Lake Champlain, when he should get there, into Canada, and to keep him alive in Canada till he could get some more money from his friends who had planned and arranged his escape. So he trudged on, footsore, hungry, faint, cold up hill, down hill, wadin' through ice cold streams; keepin' as far as possible out of sight of human habitation—a shiverin', starvin', sleepless tramp, with no company but his conscience and the fear of the gallows. If there is a hell for every poor sinner, Fairbanks got his between Dedham and Lade Champlain.

He reached the lake at last, two or three days later than he had calculated on, however, havin' been taken sick in some bushes one day, and bein' unable to move out of 'em for over two days and nights. But he reached the lake at last, and his heart bounded within him. He forgot all about his hunger, thirst, and nakedness, for his clothes were torn into rags by this time by his havin' to tramp through woods and bushes. He forgot all about the chills and fever that had seized upon him from exposure. He forgot that he had been endurin' the torments of the lost ones. He saw only the water that lay between him and Canada, where he would be safe. Life, even to the hunted-down victim of circumstance, the guilty murderer, is sweet, and I haven't any doubt in the world that the first time Jason Fairbanks set eyes on Lake Champlain he laughed aloud and then cried for joy in his place.

But he sobered down in a minute, and looked about him for a man to row him across the lake. He had plenty of money to pay for the boat, it is true, but then he had to avoid excitin' suspicion, and that was a hard thing to do in a man fixed as he was, lookin' like a hunted beast.

He arranged in his mind a story to tell the first boatman he should meet, but he didn't have half the trouble he expected with the boatman. On the contrary, the first man with a boat he met asked no questions at all, but only seemed anxious to get hold of the fugitive's money, which, of course, the fugitive was only too glad to give him. If Fairbanks had had time to think, this conduct on the part of the boatman would have looked very queer, but of course he didn't think, but was only too anxious to get across the lake.

He gave the boatman liberal money to row him over; he stepped on the boat and stood at its bow with his back to the boatman; his heart was beatin' on the double quick; he felt repaid for all his trouble and his tramp; he had his eye fixed on the Canada shore, and he didn't notice the boatman foolin' with the oars as if he were dilly-dallyin' with 'em on purpose; nor did he notice five or six men comin' out of the woods at a signal from the boatman.

He didn't notice anythin' or anybody in his trance, while lookin' at the Canada shore, till somebody stepped up to him and put his hand on his shoulder. Thinkin' it was the boatman, he turned and saw a Dedham constable whom he knew quite well, who told him he was his prisoner, and then looking at the other men on the shore, Jason Fairbanks saw among 'em the man who had been his rival.

His doom was sealed. All his unheard sufferin's had been in vain; he was arrested at the very moment he imagined he was at last safe from arrest. He was taken back to Dedham prison and was hung by the neck till he was dead.

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