

A Detective's Story

The Convict Coachman

Twenty years ago I was quite a young member of the profession to which I belong— a profession which is more characterized by romantic incidents and startling events than any other, and it was more on account of this fact than anything else that I joined it. My father, though not very wealthy, was a physician in comfortable circumstances, and, like most fathers, desired me to follow his profession. I however had a passion for a life of adventure, and the charms of such a life were only heightened by the possibility of danger; so at 20 I became a member of the secret police.

About the time I have mentioned above, all New York was in a fever of excitement over a shocking and mysterious murder recently committed. Henry Delavan, a young man of high connections and irreproachable character, the son and partner of a wealthy merchant, was found dead on the pavement of one of the principal streets. An examination showed but one wound, a deep fatal stab penetrating the heart. Near him was found a large pocket knife with two blades, a corkscrew and a screw driver. On the little piece of white metal in the center of the handle the initials J.B. were scratched as with a pin or needle. But what seemed unaccountable at the time, clasped tightly in the deceased's right hand was found a small gold earring with a costly opal pendant there-from. There was one peculiarity about the ear-ring; engraved on the gold was a small anchor surrounded by delicate ornamental carving. Neither the knife or the piece of jewelry could be identified; and every effort of the police force to obtain some clue to this daring murder was utterly fruitless, and by degrees the search began to be abandoned. I obtained possession of the knife and earring, and always carried them on my person—perhaps with the faint hope that I might be able to identify them accidentally.

About six months after the murder of young Delavan, when the affair was entirely forgotten by all except those interested in the deceased, I was called to Chicago on professional business. I was leisurely strolling down one of the most retired streets of the city, when, as I passed a small jewelry store, I saw in the show-window a piece of jewelry that immediately struck me as being familiar, I paused for a closer look, and was astonished to recognize the mate to the earring that had been found clenched in the hand of young Delavan. The fact that this earring was the exact counterpart to the one I even then had in my possession would not have been remarkable had there been a pair of them exhibited for sale in the shop window; but there was only one, and my suspicions were immediately aroused.

I entered the store, and after cautious maneuvering was only able to ascertain from the old Jew that the jewel had been brought to him to sell by an old man, who said that his mistress had lost the mate to it, and wished to dispose of this. I purchased the earring, and throwing down a gold piece in addition to the price demanded, I told the old Jew that if he would find out for me the names of the owner, and of the person who brought it to him, I would reward him liberally.

The old man's eyes glistened as he replied:

“Call here tomorrow at 3 o'clock, sir, and I will give you the information.”

The next evening at 3, I called at the jeweler's in —street. He told me that on the previous evening he had sent for the old man at an address which he had previously given him. After he had paid him for the jewel, he detained him in conversation over a glass of brandy until it was quite late, and when the old man left, he shut up his shop and followed him at a distance into the fashionable portion of the city until the old man entered a handsome-aristocratic residence on M— street. The jeweler waited a few moments, and then boldly rang the doorbell. A servant girl answered the summons.

“Pardon me,” said the jeweler, “I fear I have made a mistake. Will you be so kind as to inform me who lives here?”

“This is the residence of the late M. D’Alembert. His daughter, Mlle Marie lives here now.”

“I perceive my mistake; but I was satisfied that I recognized an acquaintance in the old man who just entered here. May I inquire his name?”

“His name is James Baker; he is my mistress’ coachman.”

“It is not the same; pardon my intrusion. Good day.” And the jeweler having obtained the required information, returned to his shop to communicate the same to me.

I gave him another piece of gold, and returned to my hotel. Once in my room I carefully considered all the circumstances of the case and became convinced that I had found a clue to the mysterious murder of Henry Delavan. It was but reasonable to suppose that the young lady, whom I strongly suspected of being the murderess, should endeavor to get rid of the peculiar earring in order to divert suspicion from herself to the innocent purchaser, in whose possession it might be found. The fact of the concealment of the names of the parties from the jeweler was suspicious, and the coincidence of the initials on the knife with the name of the coachman was rather singular. Taking all things into consideration, I determined to act promptly. Attiring myself elegantly, and concealing a revolver about my person, I proceeded to the mansion on M— street. I rang the bell and inquired for Miss Marie D’Alembert.

“What name shall I give?” said the girl, eyeing me rather suspiciously.

I handed her a card bearing the name of a prominent young lawyer in Chicago.

I was ushered into the parlor, and in a moment a young lady entered, apparently about twenty years of age. She was strikingly beautiful, with great, restless eyes — black as midnight. On seeing me she started with surprise, and retreated toward the door. Before she could utter a word, I adroitly stepped between her and the door, and fixing my eyes upon hers, said:

“Madame, my name is Johnston; I am a member of the detective police of New York.” Her cheek paled, and she seemed agitated. “Do you know this trinket?” I continued, displaying the opal earring.

On seeing it she uttered a piercing scream and dropped senseless to the floor. The old coachman heard her cries and rushed into the room. He stopped when he saw me, and demanded my business. I told him I was a detective, and drawing the old knife from my vest pocket, I said, sternly:

“James Baker, this is your knife, and with it young Henry Delevan was murdered in New York.”

He uttered a low curse, and his eyes blazing with fury, he drew a long bowie-knife and rushed toward me. I was prepared.

“Not so fast,” said I, and the six eyes of my revolver looked into his face. “Another step toward me and you are a dead man. Drop that knife.”

He hesitated a moment, and then seeing that I was in earnest, he dropped the knife and said, “I did not do it.”

I walked to the window, still covering him with my revolver, and sprang my watchman’s rattle. It was answered by the entrance of two policemen. I ordered them to secure the man and then turned my attention to the young lady, who was just recovering from her swoon. She was burning with fever and her large eyes had an unmistakable look of delirium. The intense excitement had caused an attack of brain fever.

From the coachman’s confession and other circumstances, the following facts leaked out: Some time previous to the tragedy Henry Delavan had made a somewhat lengthy visit to Chicago, where he frequently met Miss D’Alembert. Being a man of elegant personal appearance and agreeable manners, the impulsive young lady became deeply enamored of him, but as he was engaged to an estimable lady in New York, the passion was not reciprocated. She discovered the fact of his engagement, and with an inconsistency characteristic of her French blood, hated him more intensely than she had ever loved him. She determined to revenge herself and endeavored to bribe the old coachman to murder him. He would not agree to this, but in view of a reward he promised to help her. They took the evening train for New York, and she knowing in which way he would pass in going home from the house of his betrothed, they hid in an alley running across one of the principal streets. Baker had the knife open in his hand, but when about midnight they heard his steps, the old man dropped the knife and recoiled. She seized it, and as he advanced rushed upon him and struck the fatal blow. The death-stricken man did not even utter a groan, but clutched wildly at the air, and his fingers closed upon one of her earrings, and in his fall tore it from her ear. They fled precipitately, and took the next train for Chicago.

The young lady is still living a raving maniac in the insane asylum, and the ancient coachman is serving his life term in the state prison.

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