

Who Did It?

ABOUT HALF A MILE from the village of Poaktown, facing the high road to Balston, and separated from the river Poak by a small garden and a belt of trees, is a long, low cottage, known in the neighborhood as "The Building." It originally consisted of two cottages, and went by the name of "Marwood's Buildings;" but who Marwood was, and what had led him to build such awkward cottages, had escaped the memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Mr. Joseph Vance, who was a spare-built, clean-shaven man of about forty, with gray hair and no whiskers, and with nothing remarkable about him, except a deep cut over his right eyebrow, had now been occupying the building for a little over a year. When he first came into the neighborhood the gossip of Poaktown had speculated a great deal as to who and what he was, but without any basis for their conjectures. He never himself volunteered any information as to his previous life, except that on one occasion he had been heard to say something, which led to the inference that he had been a sea captain. People, too, who had been inside "the building" since Vance's tenancy, had noticed the drawing of a ship, and some shells lying about the room. This was considered enough to confirm his statement, and on the strength of it the village called him the Captain.

Nothing more was known of the Captain, and curiosity about him had nearly died out, when Sarah Epps, on her return from Stokemouth, where she had been on a visit to her sister, who had married a pilot at that flourishing sea port, brought news about him, which set the village cars tingling for some time. The pilot, her brother-in-law, remembered the Captain when he was in the China trade, and Sarah was full of stories of smuggling, and even piracy, in which the Captain had taken a leading part. But then all knew that Sarah was an incorrigible gossip, and that any story under her management would grow considerably. The Captain meanwhile troubled himself very little about the village talk, living a quiet life in his lonely cottage, with his only servant, a buxom widow of thirty-five. Sarah Epps had been heard to say that she was more than a servant to him, but then nobody minded Sarah.

About the time our story commences the Captain had got into some trouble. His landlord, an easy-going, well-to-do tradesman of Poaktown, began to think that, as he expressed it, he should like to see the color of the Captain's money. The house had been occupied for more than a year, and not a penny of rent had as yet been paid. The fact had for some time been gradually dawning on the neighbors that, since the first months he had occupied the building, ready money had not been plentiful with the Captain, and that for the last eight or nine months little or nothing had been paid for. The sums owing were not large, for the Captain lived a quiet, simple life. But it was reckoned that, altogether, they must amount to over £100; and that was a serious sum to the village tradesmen, and to all appearance a very difficult one for the Captain to pay. He was dunned, and legal proceedings were threatened, but all attempts to get money were only met by civil excuses. The patience of his creditors was nearly exhausted, when one day a circular letter was sent to them, appointing a meeting for twelve o'clock on the following Monday, "when," the Captain wrote, "he would satisfy all claims, as a legacy left by a distant relation had been paid in to his account at the Balston Bank."

On Saturday the Captain walked into Poaktown, and hired a gig at the King's Arms to take him

to Balston. Johnny Wilson, the landlord's son, drove him to the bank at Balston, where he stayed about ten minutes, and came out at the end of that time buttoning into the breast pocket of his coat a fat looking pocketbook. Johnny then waited for him while he made a few purchases in the town, and then drove him straight home to the "building."

At six o'clock on Sunday morning the inhabitants of the quiet High Street of Poaktown were aroused by a violent knocking at the door of the police station. The policeman who was on night duty opened the door, and Mary Edgecombe, white with terror and panting with exertion, nearly fell into his arms, gasping out that her master, the Captain, had been robbed and murdered in the night. The inspector was immediately called, and the whole available police force of the village, consisting of two policemen, set off with him for the building. Mary Edgecombe, who seemed utterly prostrated, remained under the care of the inspector's wife.

On reaching the "building" the inspector found the front undisturbed, the windows closed, and the doors locked. On going round to the back, the door leading from the sitting room to the garden, which sloped down to the river, was found to be open, and on entering the sitting room drops of blood were seen along the carpet between the staircase and the garden door. On the staircase itself the drops of blood were more frequent. The bedroom, however, was clearly the place where the murder had been committed. The table by the window had been pushed out of its place; the only two chairs in the room were lying on the floor. The bed, which had not been slept in, was deluged with blood, and in the middle of it was a deep indentation, as if a heavy body had been pressed down upon it. A large clasp knife stained with blood was lying on the pillow, and by the door on the floor was an open pocketbook. So much the inspector saw at a glance as he entered. He took the pocketbook and looked carefully through it: it was empty; but lying near it, and behind the door, was a piece of neatly folded paper. It had evidently fallen from the pocketbook while the murderer was emptying the contents. It was a half-sheet of note paper folded in three, and written on it were the numbers and value of forty-two banknotes, the total of which amounted to \$270. Here was a clew at once. The murderer, evidently wishing to carry about him nothing which might aid detection, had left the pocketbook behind, but in his hurry had overlooked this paper. Policeman Jones was immediately sent off to Balston with the paper, to inquire of the bank manager whether those were the numbers of the notes which had been paid to the Captain the day before, and, if so, to take measures to stop them. He also received orders to telegraph immediately to Scotland Yard an account of the murder, and any facts he might ascertain at Balston.

So far so good; but where, after all, was the body? From the blood on the stairs and in the sitting room, and the open garden door, it was presumed that it had been removed from the house. After locking the bedroom door the inspector proceeded to the garden. Outside the door on the grass were the footprints of a man, the toes pointing toward the house, and the heels deeply indented in the soft earth. The rest of the footprints were partially obliterated, as if something heavy had been dragged over them. The murderer must have gone out of the sitting room backward, dragging the body of his victim after him. Across the small grass plot, and halfway through the belt of trees, the footsteps continued: there they ceased. On the soft mud and leaves was an impression as if a long heavy body had been laid there; near this impression, lying on the ground, was a spade, and at the distance of a few feet the ground had been dug up as if it had been intended to bury the body there. This project, however, had been almost immediately given up,

for the work was scarcely begun. The murderer had been interrupted, or perhaps had thought of a better plan for disposing of the body. But where? The policeman and the inspector looked at one another: they had come to the same conclusion. "In the river, of course!" Sure enough, on the river bank the footprints were again found. This time they pointed forward, and not backward, and the impression was clear and sharp. The body must have been carried. The river at this point was deep and sluggish: there would be little difficulty in dragging it. Drags were sent for, and the inspector went home to breakfast, leaving a policeman in charge of the premises, with orders to admit no one except on business.

The inspector had hardly finished his breakfast when Policeman Jones returned from Balston. He had been eminently successful. The bank manager had identified the numbers on the paper as those of the bank notes paid the day before to the Captain. The money, it appeared, had been paid to him in pursuance of an order contained in a letter received that Saturday morning from their London correspondents, Cowie, Nabob, & Co., the great China and Indian bankers. Jones had then made inquiries in the town and at the railway station. At the station he found that a man in a great-coat and wide-awake hat, who was muffled up in a comforter, and who seemed to avoid observation, had left that morning for London by the 5.30 train. He had offered a £5 note in payment for his ticket. The clerk remembered this, from the difficulty he had in getting change so early on the Sunday morning. The note was produced, and found to be one of those stolen from the Captain. A description of the man and orders for his apprehension had been telegraphed to London, and an answer had been received, stating that the police were on the murderer's track, but that, to make all safe, a detective would be in Poaktown by the middle of the day.

Mary Edgecombe, who had partially recovered from her fright, was now taken to the building. She identified the clasp knife, pocketbook, and various articles of clothing which were lying about the Captain's room as belonging to him. She stated that she had gone to bed at nine o'clock on the previous night; that the Captain was then still in the sitting room; and that she had heard no noise during the night. She was positive that no one was in the house when she went to bed except herself and the Captain. But the garden door was often left unlocked, and could then be opened from the outside. The inspector was satisfied. The motive was clear enough; the police were close upon the murderer's track; all that was now wanted was the body.

He turned to the river, pleased at the promptness and energy he had shown, and chuckling to think that the London detective would find nothing to do when he did arrive. The drags had now been at work for some time, but without success. The river had been dragged up and down, and sidewise and across, and at every conceivable angle, but no body had been found. The inspector was getting impatient, when a gig drove up to the building, and a dapper little man in a frock-coat buttoned to his chin, and with a heavy black mustache, jumped out. The crowd which had collected by this time made way respectfully, for it was whispered that the stranger was no other than detective Perkins from London.

In a few minutes the detective had heard all that the inspector had to tell.

"Wait one moment," said he, "let's get it all straight. All the village, you say, knew the Captain would have money to pay his debts tomorrow?"

The inspector nodded.

“Which amounted in all to £100, more or less?”

The inspector nodded again.

“And he drew out of the bank £270. Was that the whole legacy?”

“It was.”

“He didn’t want £270 to pay £100, did he?”

This was a new light to the inspector, who shook his head cautiously.

“From whom did the order to pay the money come?”

“Cowie, Nabob, & Co.”

“Cowie, Nabob, & Co.,” repeated Perkins, referring to his notebook; “the great China house. And you suspect no one?”

“No one except the man who passed the note.”

“Of course. But this woman who lived with him—” suggested Perkins.

The inspector shook his head. “It’s a man’s doing. She wouldn’t have the strength. Besides, the footprints are a man’s all over.”

“No one who had a grudge against him?”

“There were a good many that couldn’t get their money from him, but that’s not enough to account for this,” said the inspector, jerking his thumb toward the river.

They entered the building. The crowd outside were getting more excited. They thought that now the London detective had come the murderer would soon be dragged from his hiding place and handed over to justice. Time, however, went on, and Perkins was still inspecting the premises, while his character was rapidly falling in the opinion of the crowd outside.

“He’s no conjuror. I told ye so afore,” said one sturdy countryman who had been a skeptic from the first. And this time his assertion did not meet with the disapprobation it had called forth when pronounced half an hour before. The crowd were tired of waiting.

Perkins meanwhile, unconscious of hostile criticism, had looked over the kitchen and Mary’s bedroom, but without making any discovery. When he came to the Captain’s bedroom he stood in the middle of it and took a general survey. He then proceeded to the details. He raised the chairs, and then put them down again in their original positions, repeating this operation two or

three times, and watching with great interest how they fell. Then he came to the bed. He looked at it from all points: first a full view, then a three-quarters, then one side view, and then the other side view, till he had exhausted it and the patience of the inspector. He then stood and mentally threw himself upon it in such a position as to make the impression which still remained on it. There was some hitch, for he hook his head. He pulled out the drawers, and examined the wardrobe of the deceased man. A pair of boots lying in the corner of the room next attracted his attention. He examined them carefully. Something in the lining of one of them seemed to interest him, for he brought out his pocketbook and referred to something written in it. He then examined the boot again, and seemed satisfied, for he pocketed it.

“Boots, I suppose, are the Captain’s?”

“Yes, his servant identifies them,” said the inspector, who was rapidly coming round to the opinion of the crowd outside. What on earth could it matter whether the Captain had two or three pairs of boots? At last Perkins finished his examination of the bedroom, and went downstairs inspecting each stair as he went. These were apparently more satisfactory, for his face brightened considerably, and after he had been shown the traces of blood along the floor of the sitting room, it had expanded into a broad grin.

“You see how it was done?” asked the inspector, whose opinion of Perkins had by this time reached the lowest ebb. Perkins smiled, he was not the man to commit himself. He walked to the table, and turned over the books and papers till he found some sheets of blotting paper. These he examined attentively, holding them up to the light, and turning them in every possible direction. The result seemed to be satisfactory, for he pocketed them.

The footprints in the garden, the half-dug grave under the trees, and the impression in the wet leaves seemed to interest him little. He examined them, but only like one preoccupied with his own thoughts. They came to the river bank.

“We’re dragging the river,” said the inspector, pointing to the two boats which had now been working unsuccessfully for some hours.

“Ah yes!” said Perkins, as if he thought that the necessity of doing so had never struck him.

“The man’s a fool,” thought the inspector.

“And now about this Captain,” said Perkins, choosing the clearest footprint he could find in the soft mud, and pulling the boot out of his pocket. “His name is Vance, you say. What is he captain of?”

“Nothing that I know of, but they do say that he has been a captain in the China trade.”

“China?” repeated Perkins, as if the idea of that country gave him exquisite delight.

“Yes, China,” repeated the inspector, gruffly. He was losing all patience; how on earth did such a born idiot ever become a detective?

“What sort of man is he?”

“Tall, spare-built, about forty, gray hair, and no whiskers.”

“Deep cut over the right eyebrow,” added Perkins, quietly, as he stooped and fitted the boot into the impression.

“Yes,” said the inspector, puzzled at Perkins’s knowledge.

“He never went by that name here, did he?” said Perkins, handing the boot to the inspector, on the lining of which was written “A. Compton.”

“Never.” He was getting more and more puzzled.

“Compton, alias Watkins, alias Crowder, and now alias Vance; I’ve wanted him these two years,” said Perkins, cheerfully. “I’ve got him now.”

“Yes,” said the inspector, grimly, “he’s safe enough there.” And he jerked his head toward the river.

“Bless you,” laughed Perkins, “he’s nearer China by this time. He’ll die with a rope round his neck yet. It’s a plant, man; don’t you see he has murdered himself, and bolted with the swag. That room somehow looked queer. It was overdone: too much blood, and too regular. When I found that boot, I thought how it was, and this settled it,” said Perkins, pulling the sheets of blotting paper out of his pocket, and holding them to the inspector. There, all over them, were the words Cowie, Nabob, & Co., in a neat clerk like hand, with that peculiar flourish at the end which those who have dealings with that eminent house know so well. “That letter to the Balston Bank is a forgery: it’s not the first time he has served Cowie, Nabob, & Co. this trick. He was in their London counting house for five years, came over with a forged character, robbed them to the tune of £2000, and bolted. He’s been smuggling and thieving all over the world since then. But when’s the next train to town? I wouldn’t miss him for anything.”

Perkins was right. The manager of the Balston Bank found to his astonishment that Cowie, Nabob, & Co. repudiated the letter which purported to bear their signature. It was a forgery. On the following Tuesday the Captain was arrested at the London Docks, as he was booking his passage for Melbourne, and at the next Balston assize he was tried by the name of Joseph Vance, on a charge of forgery, and sentenced to penal servitude for the term of his natural life. His creditors at Poaktown were the only persons who regretted him.

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See plagiarized & altered version “WHO DID IT? How the Question Was Solved by a Shrewd Detective” in *The [Monroe, Wisc] Daily Independent*, December 22, 1891