

A Leaf From the Diary of A Detective

The Neptune was as fine a vessel as ever plowed the Atlantic ocean, and although she was caught in several storms every year, yet for ten years she made her monthly trips, with her usual large cargo of living freight. Her captain was as jolly an old sea-dog as ever lived, and if once you crossed with old Bowler, you would, if possible, make the trip with him again, his greatest pleasure being in making his guests at home. I had been acquainted with him for several years before the occurrence I am about to relate, and what was at first but a passenger's acquaintance, had ripened into a firm friendship, cemented by such strong ties that it would have been difficult to sever them.

It was in the month of December, 184-, that a dispatch reached me from Cape Race, from Captain Bowler—it read as follows:

STEAMER NEPTUNE, OFF CAPE RACE,
10:30 A.M., Dec. 14.

Dear R.—Meet us at the wharf. I have a strange and dangerous case on hand.

BOWLER

The next morning I noticed in the papers a dispatch to the effect that a murder had been committed on board the Neptune, on her trip across. No particulars were given.

I readily knew from this that the Captain wanted me to sift this matter for him, so I was at the wharf some time before the steamer was to arrive; and so anxious was I, that I chartered a tug and steamed down the bay to meet her.

The Captain was delighted to see me, and as soon as I got on board, carried me into his private office, and told me the full particulars of the strange case, without making any comments whatever, until after I had expressed my own opinion. “Well, R.,” he said, as soon as he sat down, “I have a strange case on board. I have been crossing the ocean now these seven years, and this is the first time that anything unpleasant has happened on board.

“The circumstances are these: The murdered man shipped as a first cabin passenger at Liverpool for New Orleans, and seemed to be a man of some wealth. The third day out we met with several strong puffs of wind, and on the fourth and fifth we had right stiff breezes, something you would call a storm. Well, Mr. De Vere, the murdered man, was very uneasy and very sensitive, and once or twice during the most severe part of the gale, he was jostled and knocked by the prisoner, a Mr. Wallace. This of course was accidental, for when the old ship would give a lurch the passengers would have to look out for themselves. Still De Vere was under the impression that Wallace had knocked him intentionally, and threats of dire vengeance passed between them. I even found it necessary to interfere to preserve good order. At length the last straw was placed on the camel's back. The morning of the evening on which he was murdered, while he was taking a glass of wine at the bar, by some accident Wallace tripped and fell against him,

dashing the wine in his face. This was too much, and as Wallace fell on the floor of the deck, De Vere gave him a kick in the face with great venom, at the same time cursing him.

“Wallace raised himself up, and wiping the blood from his face, merely remarked, ‘Your blood shall be equally poured out.’ I endeavored to pacify them both to the best of my ability, and thought nothing more of it during the day.

“That night there were two new hands that I had shipped in Liverpool, who were going to work their passage across, on duty in the fore part of the ship. [The Captain did not use any nautical terms, as I was a genuine land-lubber.]

“The next morning De Vere did not come down to the breakfast table, but I did not pay any attention to this, as he frequently remained in his bed until 12 o’clock; but when he did not come to lunch I began to look for him, and could find no trace of him anywhere. a strict search was at once set on foot, and after several hours his murdered body was found hanging on the anchor. I at once had the body drawn up, and instituted a searching investigation into the cause of the murder, for it was evident that it was nothing but a murder. As a first precaution I caused Wallace to be put under arrest, and then held an informal inquest. The body bore marks of rough usage; the skull was mashed in on the top, displaying a portion of the brain; there were also bruises on his breast and back, and a wound in the throat which had the appearance of having been made with a razor or some such instrument; and it was evident that some very strong person must have inflicted all of these wounds.

“I first examined the two new sailors, and although they were examined separately, still they both made the same statement, to the effect that at about 1 o’clock in the morning they were both on watch, when they saw De Vere and a much smaller man, whom they recognized as Wallace, approach the prow of the vessel and engage in a very animated discussion. After talking for a short time, De Vere struck his companion, knocking him down; and he, on rising, on rising, picked up a belaying pin and struck De Vere on the head, and then continued striking him on the breast and shoulders; after which, to make things sure, he cut his throat, and heaved him overboard. This was conclusive, and I immediately had Wallace watched closely.

“On examining the body, I found that his pockets had been rifled; his watch was gone, and his purse and a very handsome diamond pin; but a search among the effects of Wallace failed to disclose any of those things. I examined everything in his berth, but could find nothing that would lead me to believe he was guilty, and yet the testimony of these two men was such as not to be doubted; and besides, the unpleasant feelings between the prisoner and the murdered man were the talk of the passengers, and the threat made by Wallace on the morning of that night was of itself evidence sufficiently strong to warrant any steps I might take. This then is how the case stands now, and I sent for you, for I did not know what to do.”

As soon as he finished, my first wish was to see the body of the murdered man.

It bore marks of hard usage. It had been embalmed the day it was found. After seeing this I went to see the prisoner, and was startled to find that he was a college mate of my brother.

I at once felt a deep interest in the case, and after a short conversation with him I felt fully convinced that he was innocent of the crime, although the circumstantial evidence was so strong against him, and the great trouble now was to discover the guilty person or persons, as the case might be.

My first care was to secure the presence of the two witnesses, although they seemed unwilling to have to give such damning testimony against a man who was a stranger to them; and besides, they had no means, and were coming to pursue their trades, one being a shoemaker, and the other a blacksmith; but when I promised to pay them for their time and trouble, they seemed more willing.

I then examined very carefully the spot of the murder, to see if I could discover any kind of a clue. There were the blood stains on the floor, and the coils of rope were knocked about in a very unsailorlike manner, which bore unmistakable signs of a struggle. I also looked over the side of the ship, to see where the body was found; and on a very close examination I thought I noticed the handle of something caught in one of the links of the anchor chain. I succeeded in letting myself down, and found that it was the handle of a shoemaker's knife that I had seen, and the blade had spots upon it resembling blood. I was confident then that it was with this instrument that the throat of the murdered man had been cut. I placed the knife in my pocket, but said nothing about it.

I then brought the two witnesses in the presence of the prisoner, and asked them if he was the person they saw commit the murder. They both stated unhesitatingly, "Yes."

There could be nothing done now but to hand over Wallace to the proper authorities, upon the arrival of the ship in dock.

I sent for my brother as soon as we landed, and we went together with Wallace, so as to obtain for him as comfortable quarters as possible. At the same time I assured him that I would eventually succeed in having him acquitted. As there were no witnesses to wait for, and as the lawyers could only confine their investigations within the narrow limits of a ship, there was no necessity for delay in the investigation and trial, which took place within three days after the arrival of the ship in port.

The evidence was given in accordance with the facts stated above.

The captain testified to the quarrels between them, and the apparent unpleasantness that existed. He also gave his testimony with reference to the money and valuable effects which De Vere had about him, but which could not be found, either on his person or in the possession of the prisoner.

The two sailors testified to the struggle in about the same language as that given to the captain. And on being questioned as to how they could distinguish the features of the murderer sufficiently well to swear to him, they both replied that they saw by the light of the moon. Both of these witnesses were examined separately.

The bartender testified to the threat made by Wallace on that morning, "Your blood shall be equally poured out," and also to the unfriendly feelings that existed.

The evidence was so conclusive, that Wallace was put upon his trial, charged with murder in the first degree.

Wallace was a small man of a sickly nature, and had been traveling in France for his health; and was now returning, confident that for the rest of his life he would be an invalid. And my brother, after examining the fractured skull and bruised shoulders and breast of De Vere, said that it was impossible for him to have made them.

At the trial the evidence was the same.

In the intervening time between the inquest and the trial, I had made myself familiar with the haunts of the two sailors, and had obtained for them both work at their respective trades, with personal friends, whom I charged to keep a watch over their new workmen. And by the day of the trial, which was only four days after the inquest, I had obtained considerable information, and I determined to manage the case for Wallace myself.

As it was at the inquest, so at the trial I had these two witnesses examined separately, the blacksmith first; and when he testified that he saw the murderer by the light of the moon, I called for the log of the ship as testimony, and read the following as the record of that night:

"Dec. 10—Wind, W.S.W.; cloudy and foggy—had to keep the fog bell ringing all night. Neither moon nor stars visible, so could not tell position."

I dismissed this witness, or rather asked the Sheriff to keep him in custody, as I might want him again, and called the other.

The same testimony, and again I put in the log book as testimony; and when I saw him falter, I pushed things, and taking the knife from my pocket, I placed it on the table before the Judge, saying:

"I charge this man with the murder, and can prove my charge."

I was then about to begin with my proofs, when a deputy sheriff entered, and stated that the blacksmith wanted to turn State's evidence and confess all he knew about the crime.

I assented to this, provided he would be also put upon his trial, and that his confession would not alter his chances for conviction.

He was then brought in, and stated that the shoemaker had suggested the deed, for the purpose of obtaining the money and valuables of the murdered man. He said that he went to Mr. De Vere's cabin, and told him that the gentleman whom he had insulted in the morning wanted to see him in the forward part of the boat; that Mr. De Vere got up and dressed at once, and went to the place where the shoemaker was waiting. As soon as he got there, he—the blacksmith—hit him on the head, felling him to the floor; and the shoemaker, fearing he might cry, cut his throat with his knife, while some more blows were given. Then they both pitched him overboard, not thinking but that his body would be the food of sharks before morning. But when the body was found the next day, they consulted together and formed their plans. The testimony which they had both given, and had repeated so often and so accurately each time, was the result of this.

Search was made among the effects of the two men, and pawn tickets for the valuables were found in the shoemaker's trunk. An officer was sent to the pawn shop, and there found the watch and a diamond pin, the property of De Vere.

There was no use for delay—the same jury was retained, and the prisoner was made witness, and the witnesses became prisoners; and after only one hour, both of the prisoners were sent to the State Prison for life. Wallace never recovered from the shock he received at being placed on his trial for murder; and two months after this, I assisted at his funeral.

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