

The Incendiary

Greenwold is a rural township, in which there is a little village, a grist-mill, a saw-mill, a paper-mill, a small woolen factory and many farms. It is largely a farming town, in fact; every autumn the farmers hold an agricultural fair in their enclosed fair grounds, and the exhibits of live stock and farm products are a credit to both farms and farmers.

As in many other rural towns in the East, the people are generally related to each other, either by marriages or blood relationship. There were, at the time of the settlement of Greenwold, two families, the Marshalls and the Browns; and even now fully half the entire population bear either one or the other of these names, and far more than half are related to one or the other of these families. Ansel Marshall and his sons, Hiram and Ephraim, own what is considered the best farm in Greenwold.

The Browns, though also farmers, own the mill property. Of late the property has fallen into possession of five brothers— Calvin, Holmes, John, Stephen and Sumner Brown.

For more than half a century there has existed in this town of Greenwold that ugliest and most disintegrating of all social elements, a feud. It lies between the Browns and Marshalls. It had its origin years ago, in a dispute about a “fence-line,” and has been perpetuated in annual quarrels about flowage on the small river which furnishes water power for the mill. The Marshalls own the meadows, and the Browns by the dam by which they secure their water power overflow the low lands, much to the detriment of the Marshall hay crop.

There have been numerous law-suits of Marshall versus Brown, and Brown versus Marshall, resulting in heavy pecuniary losses to the two, and much profit to the county lawyers, and also much hard feeling and sometimes personal quarrels between the irrate principals. Such a feud breeds dangerous rancor, and the younger Browns and Marshalls appear to have inherited this malignant feeling.

The last lawsuit occurred four years ago. It was Marshall versus Brown in that case, I believe; and the trial resulted in the decision that the dams of the Browns should be of a certain height which—as the flowages extended back for five miles along the river and embraced a considerable lake connected with it—greatly injured the waterpower for the mills and the factory, and in fact seriously damaged the Brown interests.

The meadows of the Marshalls were correspondingly enhanced in value, and their barns overflowed with hay. In fact they built four new barns in the course of the second year, to hold their increased crops.

The Browns, greatly dissatisfied and enraged by the verdict, became still more bitter in their feelings towards the Marshalls, and it was said that one of the younger men threatened to have revenge adequate to the injury done. It was not very strange, therefore, that when, during October, 1881, a barn and its contents belonging to the Marshall farm was burned, suspicion was excited that the fire was caused by an incendiary.

There was no evidence of it, however, and the insurance was paid.

In January following, another barn belonging to the Marshalls was burned. The fire broke out at 10 o'clock one forenoon, and the barn, with six head of young cattle and eight or ten sheep, was entirely consumed.

This second fire naturally created more comment and excitement than the first.

It was not, however, till a third barn and several outbuildings closely connected with the dwelling-house of Ansel Marshall were burned in July following, that the public excitement took place in public action.

A town-meeting was called, "to see what the town would do" about it; and as there were almost as many Brown voters as Marshall voters in town, it is needless to say that the meeting was an exciting one. The Browns—in good faith for the most part, no doubt—indignantly denied the insinuations of the Marshalls, and opposed any action on the part of the town. A majority of the town's people, however, very properly voted to have the matter investigated. The selectmen were empowered to take such steps as they deemed best, to ascertain the facts connected with the burning of the buildings.

Instead of offering a reward for the detection of the supposed incendiary, as is commonly done, the selectmen, two of whom were Marshall men, showed their good sense by making no public stir, but communicated secretly with a detective bureau in New York City.

They asked simply to have the incendiary of the Marshall barns caught, without further reference to the Marshalls, and named a sum that would be paid for detection and conviction.

The bureau accepted the offer; and so it happened that the present writer—and hence my knowledge of the case—being then in the service of the bureau, was sent to Greenwold to see what would be discovered relative to the burned barns.

For the time being I became a "fruit-tree agent" for a New York horticulturist and entering the town as such, began taking orders for trees, making thorough canvass of the place. In four days I sold fifty dollars worth of fruit-trees in Greenwold. I scarcely asked a single question about fires, but picked up what information respecting them I heard in the ordinary conversation of the townspeople.

The facts gathered were these in substance: everybody believed that either "Steve" or "Sum" Brown had set fire to the barns, but there was not the slightest evidence against them.

Steve Brown was spoken of as a blustering fellow. It was he who was said to have made the threats against the Marshalls. Sum Brown was less talkative than Steve. I sold him three "Flemish Beauty" pear-trees and a "Gage plum" for his garden; and I noticed that he was a very observant person. I learned too that he filed the saws and usually attended to repairing the

machinery both in the carding-mill and the grist-mill. John and Holmes Brown were older men, rather hard and morose, I thought, and possibly revengeful.

I learned further that Sum Brown had been absent from Greenwold at the time of the fires; once in July, buying wool for the factory, and once in March, buying corn in the West. The Browns dealt in Western corn at their mill.

A visit to the sites of the burned barns offered no clue to the source of the fires. There was positively no clue by which an incendiary could be traced. The case was one of indefinite suspicion—one which might require months of close study and constant watching, for which the compensation was insufficient. I could employ my own time more profitably otherwise.

I thought it a good test-job for some beginner, however, and I knew a young fellow, named Garrett Coulter, who had made application to the bureau to be employed by it in some capacity, having a great wish to enter the detective service.

Accordingly, after making my report to chief, on my return from Greenwold and the fruit-tree business, I suggested keeping the case and setting “Ret,” as we called him, to work upon it.

Ret was sent for. He was a vigorous young fellow of 18 with, I regret to say, a strong flavor of the “gamin” about him. He had had all the advantages of a street education and not much education of any other sort, indeed. But he had a quick eye, was full of tact, and might, I fancied, develop into a detective of the ferret order.

The service required was explained to him; and to stimulate his zeal, \$300 were promised in addition to his expenses, if he detected the incendiary and procured his conviction. He was advised to go to Greenwold as a laborer, with his bundle, and if possible, hire out in the employ of the Browns, or failing that, to get work on a farm near at hand.

He was bidden to report by letter to a given address every week. We wrote to the selectmen of the town, counseling patience and silence; but not a soul in Greenwold was made aware that was other than what he seemed to them.

We communicated with our junior every week, but more for the purpose of keeping him steadily at his work than anything else. The reader may be able to imagine Ret going about the place with his ice-cream and peanuts; and it is easy to imagine that Sum Brown came in for some close watching, both by night and day.

Then for nearly a month his reports were simply monotonous; but he did not get disheartened or disgusted, nor did he lose his head and run into wild theories. When he had nothing to report, he said so. Our chief grew hopeful. “Ret will catch those Greenwold fire-bugs,” he predicted.

Two weeks more passed, then one day I was sent for to come to the city office in haste. A telegram had come from Ret. It said: “Come to Larchville station by first train. Will meet you.”

Larchville was ten miles from Greenwold. When, in my former character of a fruit-tree agent, I

stepped off the train at Larchville the following evening, about the first person I saw was Ret, whistling on the platform. But I saw that his eyes snapped. We walked away together, and when at a safe distance from other ears, he said:—

“Ketched ‘im, cap’n.”

“Whom?” I inquired.

“That Sum Brown.”

”Sure?”

“Well, I think so. You see, cap’n,” Ret continued, “I’ve mistrusted him ever since I saw his old-fashioned clocks with wooden wheels, I didn’t quite know why at first, but I mistrusted sumthin’, an’ so I watched. The fact is, cap’n, I watched that chap days, nights too, till after one ev’ry morning, to see that he didn’t leave his house without my knowin’ it.”

“Last Wednesday night about ‘leven, he slipped out his back door with sumthin’ under his arm. It was cloudy and dark, but I followed him, and didn’t lose sight of ‘im, though I kept back where he didn’t see me. I saw ‘im cross the bridge, an’ then he went up the river road, on the other side of the stream, fer two miles or more, up ter that upper barn of Anse Marshall’s, the one that stands off from his buildin’s on the interval. I saw ‘im go round that barn an’ saw ‘im crawl under the back end, where it sets up off the ground five or six foot. I thought he had a light under there, but I ain’t sure, fer I was some distance off, in the alders. After he had been under there a while, he crawled out an’ went home.

“Wal, when I was sure that he went home, I went back an’ got under the barn, an’ I lay on some straw there till it got light a little. Then I began to hunt round, an’ by-an’-by, way back in one corner, under lot of straw an’ stuff, I found somethin’ which I reckon you’d like ter ‘have a look at, cap’n.

“So I crawled out an’ come straight over here to Larchville and telegraphed. Then I went back to watch Sum Brown; an’ I found that he had gone to Boston to be gone four days, about wool, his brother Steve said.”

We could not procure a team at Larchville, and were compelled to walk to Greenwold after dark last night. Toward morning we reached the Marshall barn; and by the light of a little lantern which I had taken along in my bag, Ret brought out from under a rubbish heap, back in one corner, an old soap-box, within which was a clockwork arrangement of wooden wheels and a pendulum.

With the exception of a few wires and a mainspring the whole was of wood. A large wooden hammer was drawn back, set, evidently, at the end of a certain fixed time, to strike against the butt end of a large phosphorous match which was bound alongside of a file at such an angle that the stroke would be certain to strike fire. Piled up beneath the point of the match were other

matches, a sponge soaked in kerosene, and as much as a pound of pitch. The contrivance spoke for itself.

“You see, cap’n,” said Ret grinning exultantly, “he’s a cunnin’ chap. He made his clock of wood so that it’ll burn up, an’ leave no tell-tale wheels behind in the ashes. An’ he sets it so it will run for a day or two, while he goes off on business, so if anybody accuses ‘im, he can prove a *lullaby*.”

“A what?”

“A lullaby, or an alliby; some kin’ of a *by*. You know, cap’n, wot I mean.”

“Certainly, Ret,” I said. “But what next? Have you any plan for catching him with this machine in his hands?” That’s what you need to do to make a certain thing of it.”

“Yes,” replied Ret. “That is, unless you can tell me sumthin’ better.”

“Let me hear your scheme,” I said.

“Wal, you see, when I found his clock goin’ here the other night, I jest stopped it, jest as ‘tis now, so it wont go off. Now, when Sum Brown comes back an’ sees the barn isn’t burnt, he’ll think that it didn’t strike fire, an’ so will come round next night to know the reason. We must be on hand to catch him while he’s under here a-lookin at it.”

I could think of no better or simpler plan. Ret put the mischievous clock carefully back in the place where he had found it.

Brown did not return till the second day after. We watched his house that night, but he did not leave it either on that night or the next. I surmised that he felt some little apprehension that his machine might have been discovered by the Marshalls and that the barn might be watched.

He took a ride along the river-road past it the third afternoon after his return. We had plenty of watching during all those nights. At last, on the fifth night, Ret came hastily to my room at the hotel, and said, excitedly, “Brown’s gone out towards the barn.”

We hurriedly followed, and stealing up from the path along the river bank, came to the rear of the barn, a lantern was glimmering in the space underneath it; and sure enough, there was our wily Sum Brown, with his clock in his hands; he was re-setting it.

The next moment we were upon him and had handcuffs on his wrists before he could even get up in the low space beneath the barn floor. He was caught in the very act, and after his first involuntary exclamation, said scarcely a word, though he looked at both Ret and myself in no little amazement!

We took the miserable fellow away, along with his dangerous clock, and rousing up the sheriff, who lived in the village, gave him into custody.

The arraignment, trial and conviction of Brown for barn-burning, followed in due course. He was sentenced to ten years in State prison. Ret received his \$300. He is still connected with the detective bureau. There are some persons whose natural qualities are those of the fox and hound. They are naturally keen and love to follow and ferret out crime. Such persons have their use in the community. Still, for good reasons, I should prefer that a son of mine should not become a detective.

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