

My First Attempt
A Detective's Story
by E.H.K.

It was my fortune during the summer months to be traveling up the Hudson River; on the trip I made the acquaintance of one of New York's ablest Detectives. At my request he told me the following story. I give it in his own language as nearly as possible, with the exceptions of names, and dates:

Most of my earlier years were passed near the town of S——, in New York State, where I was born. I never shall forget the morning of the twentieth day of August 18——; it was my eighteenth birthday. On reaching school at nine o'clock all the scholars were present; but the old schoolmaster had not made his appearance. After waiting 'till ten three of the boys, besides myself, agreed to go to his house to see what delayed him; (it was his first absence in his whole term of teaching something over ten years.)

He lived alone in a piece of woods some mile from the schoolhouse, keeping bachelor's hall.

On arriving at the place we found the house closed in front, and no marks of any living thing stirring on the premises; no response came to our knocking except the growling of the old man's dog who was in the building. We knocked again but received only a similar return. We paused and looked at each other wondering what it could mean, but coming to the conclusion that the owner was at the barn we went towards it; on our way there one of the boys called my attention to the dog who stood in the open doorway of the house (the back door); the animal knew us immediately, and sprang towards us with evident manifestations of delight, but on reaching us he commenced to moan and whine piteously, and pull at our clothing: at first we could not make out his meaning, when he again commenced to pull one of our number towards the house; finding that he wished to be followed we accompanied him; he manifested his satisfaction, by low whining and wagging his tail, and started for the house.

On entering the building a sight met our view well calculated to strike terror to stonter hearts than those of four school boys, neither, with the exception of myself, more than fourteen years of age.

Stretched on the floor lay the old schoolmaster. We stood rooted to the spot by the suddenness of the sight; the poor dog jumping towards his master laid down by his side, licked his cold face and hands and whined piteously, neither of us dared stir; as for me a cold horror seemed to chain me to the floor, for running from beneath his head and making its way as it seemed right to my very feet, was a dark red stream, that I knew to be blood. I stood spell-bound gazing at the dead body; I know not how long, and then took a glance around the room; it was in a state of great confusion, the bed clothes torn from the bed and partly wrapped around the corpse, (which was in its night-clothes,) the table and chairs upturned upon the floor, some of the white linen bore red stains as if imprinted by human fingers saturated with gore. Near by the body lay a ponderous hickory cane, a portion of the root formed a heavy handle, which bore evidence of its having done duty in the murderous assault. I did not take in all details at first sight, for as soon as my heart resumed its avocation, after the first stoppage which it did with a vast bound, I turned

and with that organ jumping in my bosom as if it would leave its place through my throat, rushed frantically from the horrible sight, followed by my frightened companions, at a pace which almost redoubled the action of my internal palpitor.

We ran rapidly to the nearest habitation, some quarter of a mile distant—the house of a Mr. Small—and seeing the owner at work nearby made known to him our discovery of the murdered schoolmaster. He immediately dispatched the rest of my companions to acquaint the neighbors and the Coroner of the affair, and accompanied me to the scene of the murder. It was at this second visit that I was better able to acquaint myself with the full details of the surroundings of the tragedy. As we were about to enter the house, Mr. Small stopped and looked at the side of the doorstep for a moment and then stooped down and examined closer. ‘That is it, sir?’ I asked nervously, looking down likewise. ‘A footstep,’ he answered, ‘and here are others leading towards the well.’

The ground was soft from the effects of a slight rain which had fallen the previous night, and in the muddy path plainly could be traced the footprints of a man. ‘But there are none that I can see going towards the house, except yours,’ resumed Mr. Small, referring to our footsteps made at the previous visit; I looked again and could see that this was the case. We searched carefully around the house, avoiding treading on the soft ground as much as possible, in order not to obliterate any other strange footprints, as by the aid of these we might be able to trace the murderer; we, however, found no other tracks, and came to the conclusion that only one person had been engaged in the perpetration of the deed. Mr. Small took the measure of the tracks and found this to be the case. After reaching the well, no further trace could be discovered, as the ground was covered with grass sod and thus the foot could make no impression. Being at fault in our examination, we made our way to the house which we were about to enter, when we were joined by Dr. Stevenson. We called his attention to the tracks we had just been following up, he bent down and examined them closely for a short time, and then arising said ‘The man who did this job was either lame, or his boots were broken.’ ‘Howd’y no that?’ asked Small. ‘Why, it’s easy enough,’ answered the Doctor, ‘see here the track of the left foot on the left side is deeper indented in the earth than the right.’ He pointed to several places as proof of his assertion; ‘it’s a trick I learnt when traveling among the Indians, West.’ We adjourned to the building where nothing further of importance was discovered. Mr. Small and the Doctor examined the body and ascertained that life had been extinct some eight hours thus making the perpetration of the deed four, A.M.

It was not long before most of the neighbors joined us and lingered around the house discussing the affair until about one, P.M., when the Coroner came and held the inquest. The stick which was the only instrument used was recognized as belonging to the old schoolmaster, otherwise nothing further was made manifest regarding the affair, with the exception of a piece of dark cloth about an inch in surface with a peculiar sort of bone button on it, which was found by myself attached to a nail protruding from a portion of the bed near the headboard and must have been torn from some portion of the murderer’s person during the fearful struggle for life which had taken place. No further evidence being given a verdict of ‘death at the hands of some person unknown to the jury’ was given, and the old man borne to his long home in the adjoining village.

In a few months the interest in the affair died out, and in a few short years it was almost forgotten.

The Coroner's theory [of] the affair, however, was generally admitted by all to be the correct explanation of the manner in which the deed had been perpetrated. He said the murderer had evidently entered at the rear door previous to the storm; the old man had been known to lock either door as he kept little or no money on the premises, all he was able to save out of his small salary was on deposit in the Bank at ——-. On the previous day he had received his quarter's salary, and it must have been for this small amount that the murder was committed. Evidently the old man had awoke and discovered the murderer who had attempted to strangle him in bed when probably the piece of cloth had become detached and caught against the bed; the old man had broken away and rushed for the front door to cry for help when the wretch seized the cane and dealt the murderous blows that deprived the old man of life. He had probably turned him on his back to see if life was extinct and then ransacked the room for the money as none was discovered. He had taken it and made his way out by the back door, the singular portion of the affair was that no further traces in any direction could be discovered of the way in which the murderer had fled.

I was permitted to retain the piece of cloth, and treasured it almost as a relic; it is singular what a morbid appetite I always had in regard to affairs of this kind, all details of murders, suicides, robberies, etc., that I could in any way possess myself of, were treasured up in the recesses of my brain with as much tenacity as the miser hoarding up gold in his lonely hiding place.

Three years after the murder I was in New York seeking employment, and, like most other strangers, found it extremely difficult to obtain a situation. One day as I was making my way down Broadway, near Barnum's Museum, corner of Ann street and had almost made up my mind to return to the farm and as the immortal Burns has it:

“Then farewell hopes, o'laurel boughs,
To garland my poetic brows!
Henceforth I'll rove where busy ploughs
Are whistling thrang,
An' teach the lanely heighths and homes
My rustic sang.”

I was accosted by my old friend, Coroner Wilder, who now held the office of Captain on the Police force of the city. After the usual courtesies of a meeting for the first time in two years, I accompanied him at his invitation to dinner. On being informed that I was out of employment he promised to do his best to get me on the force, which to me was a chance beyond my highest hopes.

Well I was appointed; was made, I may say, as proud as Lucifer.

The [morning] after I had passed examination and been installed in my new position, Capt. Wilder called me into his private office and informed me that he was going to put me on a delicate piece of business, as the person he wished to trace was an old hand, suspected at this

time of manufacturing and issuing counterfeit money, a desperate hard case; and well acquainted with most of the officers on the force, consequently it was necessary to place a stranger on his track; he had chosen me for this purpose having full confidence in my prudence and courage; in regard to my ignorance, he would post me. I was to follow my man and report to him each night at appointed rendezvous when he would give me all necessary information for future movements. I was rather afraid that I should not be able to come up to the standard at which he had placed my abilities, but he assured me of perfect success if I only followed his instructions implicitly, using the remarks of Forrest, in Bulwers Richilien.

“In the bright lexicon of youth, there’s no such word as fail!”

Thus assured of success I undertook the job and went actively to work.

For the first day or two I met with little if any success, I shadowed my man from place to place, but made no discovery of importance; however on the fourth day he evidently not noticing any of his old shades following him became somewhat bolder and I managed to track him to a low den in cherry Streets the resort of some of the worst characters in New York. After remaining there some hour or more he came out and looking up and down the street to see if he was followed, made his way rapidly towards James street. I should, more than probably, have not known him on this second appearance for the day, so ably was he disguised, had it not been that a pair of blue glasses he had upon his eyes becoming loose dropped as he came from the door. He quickly replaced them but the momentary glance was enough to convince me that I was not mistaken in him, notwithstanding the different color of his hair and the old seedy suit he wore; there was something peculiar about him although a perfect stranger that struck me as familiar. I followed him down James street to Water thence to Catherine and taking the Ferry we both crossed together.

We sat in the gentleman’s cabin, he on the centre against the partition of the wheelhouse, while I sat on the seats against the centre of the cabin. On nearing the Brooklyn side of the river he went towards the front of the boat. I retaining my seat, I noticed that he walked lame, I had been watching him three days and this was the first time I had seen this peculiarity, it was not very noticeable, apparently one foot was a little shorter than the other; as we came to the shore and I was about to follow him, I noticed a small dark object on the floor of the cabin, near where he had been sitting. I picked it up, it was a button, I don’t know why it was that I put it in my pocket but I did and followed my man; he was walking up Main street at a rapid pace. On reaching Sands he turned to the left and made his way down till he came in the vicinity of the Navy Yard. At that time as at the present this portion of the city of Brooklyn bore a most unenviable reputation. In front of a low and dilapidated wooden tenement which had evidently grown old in service, he again paused to take another observation, but evidently convinced that he was not followed he entered the house. I lingered in the vicinity some four hours or more but he not making his re-appearance, and it being now dark, I came to the conclusion that there was no use in remaining longer, so went to my appointment with the Captain, who expressed himself highly gratified with my management of the case so far. I did not think it worth mentioning the finding of the button, but on reaching my room after making arrangements for the next day, and was about to retire, I remembered it and took it from my pocket, I was about to throw it upon the mantelpiece when I was startled not a little by seeing that it looked very like the button attached

to the piece of cloth found in the room of the old schoolmaster some three years before. I had that piece of cloth in my trunk and immediately took it out and compared the buttons, they were one and the same pattern. You can easily imagine that it was some time before I went to sleep that night. The whole scene of that fearful August morning was before me again almost as vividly as it was at the occurrence—the overturned furniture—the dead body—the piece of cloth with the button attached—the footsteps leading to the well. Dr. Stevenson had said ‘the man who did this job was either lame or his boots were broken,’ and here I had two links in the chain. The man I had been following all day was lame—and where he had sat in the ferryboat, I had found a button exactly like that upon the piece of cloth discovered in the house of the murdered man; possibly it might not have belonged to him, but circumstances certainly seemed strangely to point towards him as the possessor. Well I must let things take their course and determined not to say anything for the present to the Captain, if I could make a case of it, well and good, if not I certainly would not be laughed at for discovering a mare’s nest. The next morning I was up bright and early, and at my post, I had not long to wait, my man went over the same ground, and I saw him enter the house in Brooklyn. I discovered also that the coat he wore was minus a button and was patched underneath where one of the other buttons was attached, all the other buttons on it were plain bone while the two that I had bore a peculiar device or figure somewhat different from any I had ever seen before.

Several days after this discovery Capt. Wilder informed me that he had been conversing with the Chiefs of the New York and Brooklyn Police and they had determined to make a descent on the old building the next day. On seeing my man safely housed I was to report myself at the nearest Police Station where I would find him prepared. The next day as agreed I had freed my game, reported at the station and found Capt. Wilder, and some ten men in waiting, and we all proceeded by different routes to the front of the time worn tenement. On the arrival of all we entered and after posting two men at the front door and two at the rear, we searched the building, but found nothing to further our researches on any of the floors, but on making our way to the basement we found the door to the front room locked; after knocking twice it was opened by an old man and the object of our visit demanded. Capt. Wilder made known his desire to see Galilio Salvia, (the name of the man I had been tracing). The old man pretended to know no one of that name, but on a description of him being given said he had been there but had gone away again. We knew this could not be unless he had left during the time of my going to the station. We however searched the room and the rear basement without discovering any trace of him on the premises, for a time we seemed as it were at a standstill but just at the moment when our leader was about [to] give it up as a bad job a sound like the report of a pistol came as it seemed from beneath our very feet, we all stood and gazed for a moment at each other and the old man made for the door but was brought to a standstill by Capt. Wilder who presented a pistol at his head, telling him if he didn’t show us immediately whence the sound came he would blow out his brains; this summary proceeding made him agree to lead us to the place which he did by pulling up a trap door most admirably concealed, and leading us down a pair of steep steps opened another door and we found ourselves in a sort of a sub-cellar lit by several lamps suspended from the ceiling the smoke of the recently exploded pistol was still discernible—in the centre of the room stretched upon the floor was the object of our search surrounded by four others leaning over him. So sudden was the advent on the scene they were unable to make any resistance and were easily captured. We found that a pistol in Salvia’s pocket had exploded accidentally and severely wounded him, his wounds were bound up by one of our party and all were lodged in

Jail. All the implements for the manufacture of counterfeit money and some thousands of issues of different coins, admirably executed, and metal for the making of more of the false money, were discovered. I received great credit for my portion of the working up of the affair. Two or three days afterwards I made Capt. Wilder acquainted with my suspicion that Salvia was the murderer of the old schoolmaster and arrangements were made to have him tried, but he disappointed the law by dying in prison. Before his death, however, being charged with the crime, he confessed to the commission, stating that he had entered the house, as was believed, and, after committing the murder, made his way on horseback from the spot. I have been engaged in many affairs since then, but think my first attempt not desperate bad for a new beginner!

“Yes!” and thought I, it was a fortunate thing for you that Salvia kept that old coat otherwise you would never have suspected him.

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