

Finding a Criminal

From the Note-Book of an English Detective

by John Harris

I WAS aroused one morning from a sound sleep by a quick and loud rap upon my door.

I had been on duty late into the morning, and hence kept my bed later than usual. By the time my wife had reached my room, I was up and half-dressed. She told me that Inspector Starling, one of my brother detectives, wished to see me.

I hurried down, and found him pacing to and fro across the room in a state of considerable excitement.

“Ah, Goff, we’ve got some work on our hands,” he cried, the moment he saw me. “There’s been a murder—a strange one—by Newgate Market. But come along and I will tell you as we go.”

As soon as we gained the street, Starling resumed:

“Last evening one of the butchers packed a box of meat to go off today, but this morning he changed his mind, and concluded to unpack it, as there was some doubt about the stuff keeping. When he removed the cover, he found the body of a man cut up and stowed snugly away in place of his meat, and the latter article was afterwards found in a neighboring cellar.”

I asked if the butcher was not suspected.

“No,” replied my companion. “We knew it could not have been he, for his time is all accounted for; and, besides, his character is above suspicion. No; some one who knew that the box was packed to go off this morning, must have taken advantage of the circumstance, and thus hoped to gain time to escape, or, perhaps, to have thrown the blame upon another. It was an old man that was murdered, and it was evidently done for revenge.”

“Why do you think so,” I asked.

“Because his watch and some money we found in his pockets.”

We overtook a party of men at this juncture, and ere we had time to converse much more, we had reached Newgate. The box was in a small office.

Our first object was to find if the remains could be identified, but in this we failed entirely.

The next day news arrived that a human head had been found in a small pond in Epping.

There might be a clue, and I was finally set upon the track. It was late in the morning when I started, taking the saddle for my seat, and reached Epping at midnight. I found the coroner, and with him examined the human head; it was the very one—I knew it by the gray hair, and the manner in which it had been cut off.

My next movement was to find a suit of laboring men's clothes, which my host procured of a fellow who was at work in a drain in his garden. I then made my own clothes up onto a snug bundle, which I tied up in an old cotton handkerchief, and having swung it upon a stout oaken staff, I started off upon the Waltham Abbey road, and reached Hatfield at noon the next day.

It being nearly dinnertime, I sat down, a few minutes, in a room fronting a street where there was a brick building in process of construction; the walls had been raised above the second story windows, and half a dozen men were engaged in carrying up brick and mortar for the masons. For some reason—I cannot tell why—I watched these operations with great curiosity.

Finally I noticed one man, who often got in the way of the others, and whose movements were strange and erratic. No one else might have seen this as I did, but it arrested my attention in a moment.

Said I, "*There's my man.*"

I sat and watched him for about ten minutes. I saw that when he set his hod down, he did so with a nervous jerk; and when he started with the load upon his shoulder, he not only moved too quickly, but he ascended the ladder with a speed unsuited to his work. No hod-carrier ever moved so before. I also observed that when any one approached, he started, and looked at them in a way anything but natural.

I waited to see no more; but having thrown my bundle over my shoulder, and seen that the dirt had not been rubbed off my hands, I started out and walked up to "my man."

"Do you find work hard here?" I asked.

He started as though I had struck him.

"What do you want to know for?" he returned.

"Because, I am going to work here."

"Oh, well, the work isn't very bad," he said, looking relieved. "But where are you from?"

"From Epping."

He turned pale, and his hand quivered upon the hod.

“And, by the way,” I added, I saw a horrible sight there.”

I waited for him to ask some question, but he only gazed into my face with a fixed stare, while his whole frame trembled, and his pallor increased.

“It was in a pond,” said I, at length.

The man started back, while his face assumed a deadly hue, and his hod dropped from his hand.

“You look at me as though I did it,” he gasped.

“I might as well suppose you knew something of the chopped-up man at Newgate market?”

The fellow continued to gaze into my face a moment; and then turned to flee. But I had watched for this, and my hand was upon his collar in an instant, and with the other I held a pistol to his head. At this moment the foreman came up.

“I have done my work,” said I. Of course many questions were asked, which I answered as I thought proper. The man at first begged me to shoot him, and then he began to declare his innocence in the most frantic terms. But I could not believe him. I took him to London, and there soon found full proof of his guilt.

One of the last acknowledgements he made was, that “the London detectives were a strange set of men.” And I told him he was not the only criminal who thought so.

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