

The Haunted House

A Detective's Story

Written for the New York Clipper
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The pretty city of S— was infested with a gang of burglars. The local police was entirely inadequate to the task of ferreting them out. House after house was entered, the valuables abstracted, and still suspicion could be fastened on no one.

Pending this state of affairs the authorities sent to New York for a couple of detectives to come up and aid them in the work of catching the thieves.

Ned Halsey and I were dispatched. We thought the job would occupy two or three days—a week at the farthest; for you must know that we have a rather poor opinion of the constabulary force of the interior, and vote any man a fool who can't catch a robber between two Sundays.

We didn't care to publish our arrival, we came in the character of speculators bent on purchasing produce for the New York market.

We saw the Chief of Police soon after we reached S— and from him learned (as we thought) all the necessary particulars.

It was not difficult to arrive at certain conclusions. First, that the gang was a large one. Second, that they were old hands. Third, that they were regularly organized and under skillful leadership; and fourth, that they were in direct communication with the New York “fraternity.”

This last fact was made evident in rather a queer manner. Within forty-eight hours of the time of our arrival we received the following note. I transcribe it *verbatim et literatim*.

To the 2 gents wot buys produce—you can't ketch old birds so snug as yer think. We cut our teeth in York and gradderated at Sing Sing. Go in my covies but bare in mind that we aint no produes to sell. October 4, 1860.

This note, written in a scrawling and almost illegible hand was direcred to us in our assumed names at the hotel that we made our headquarters. No signature was attached.

Ned read it over a great many times, but with all his acumen the homey epistle gave him no clue to the objects of our search.

One morning I was standing on the hotel steps, puffing a rather poor cigar abstractedly, when a man approached, gazed at me intently for a moment, and passed on.

I was tolerably certain that I had seen the face before, but for the life of me I could not tell where. He evidently recognized me in something the same indefinite manner.

It is natural, of course, for a detective to be suspicious; as a sharper looks upon everybody that he meets as a possible victim, so a detective, with an eye to business, sees in all men possible scoundrels.

Sauntering back to the reading-room, where I had left Ned, I found him and told him my small adventure.

“And what kind of a looking man was he?” Ned asked with some little interest.

“A short, stout fellow, with gray eyes, rather deep set and heavily shaded with dark brows, hair cropped close, and short chin whiskers.”

“Whiskers genuine?”

“Yes, without doubt.”

“We must take another glance at the fellow,” and Ned rose and buttoned his overcoat (for it was a chilly morning) and together we passed out on the street.

Following the direction that the stranger had taken, we proceeded leisurely along for the distance of, perhaps, half a mile, carelessly scanning the faces of those whom we met or passed.

Suddenly turning a corner we came face to face with the object of our search. He civilly returned our stare and entered a store near at hand.

“That man is ‘Short Steve’ or I’m a liar,” Ned said as soon as the stranger was out of hearing distance.

“Short Steve” was a notorious scamp who had made us plenty of trouble and had thus far contrived to escape “the lynx eyed officers of justice”—as the newspapers call us.

Neither Ned nor I had seen him but once; that, however, was on an occasion that we should not be apt to forget. It was just after the big bank robbery in Connecticut, in which Short Steve and his gang were undoubtedly engaged. We—that is Ned and I, and Sam Lewis—hunted the villains down and got them into close quarters. But they escaped after all, with the aid of their infernal revolvers, and they put a bullet through poor Lewis’ heart. I never knew a better man than Sam, and Ned and I solemnly swore that we would avenge his death some day. Had the day come?

To be candid, I was by no means certain that Ned was correct in his surmises. It was five years since we had seen Short Steve, and at last accounts he was on the Pacific coast. Still Ned was positive, and as he seldom mistook a face, I gradually fell into his way of thinking.

We reasoned that if the stranger was indeed Short Steve he would be careful not to show himself again in our presence for he could scent a detective further than blood hounds scent their prey.

Certainly there were charges enough against him to justify his arrest on the spot. Should we nab him? this was the question that we briefly discussed, keeping meantime a sharp lookout on the fellow to see that he did not escape us.

The question was finally decided in the affirmative—we would arrest him on suspicion.

So we entered the store. The suspicious looking customer had just completed his purchases and was about to go out. I approached him and he turned and looked me in the face for a moment (as he had done once before), then seizing my hand, he shook it heartily, exclaiming:

“Jack Bosworth, old boy, how are you? I’ve bothered my head these two hours thinking who you were. And no wonder, either. We haven’t met since that night we grew so eloquent in our essays at the closing exhibition of the — Academy.”

I never experienced a more sudden change of feeling in my life. Instead of the odious Short Steve, I beheld before me George Avery, the truest and best of my early friends.

I forthwith introduced him to Ned, who gazed at him with the profoundest astonishment, and seemed to still cling to the idea that he was yet in the presence of Short Steve. But when the shopkeeper addressed my friend as Mr. Avery, and when he asked him if he would have the purchases sent to his house, even Ned’s incredulity gave way, and we emerged from the store together.

Avery insisted on our dining at his house, and we accepted the invitation.

Over a prime bottle of cabinet sherry I related the story of our suspicions; whereat George laughed heartily and vowed that he would let his beard grow to the length of St. Peter’s, in the pictorial Bible, to prevent others making the same mistake.

Ned Halsey was disgusted with our failure to discover the perpetrators of the robberies and resolved to start for New York the next morning. I had intended to accompany him, but George would not hear to it, and, at his earnest request, and his wife’s (a pleasant and affable little woman) I consented to remain their guest for a few days.

My friend’s place of residence was situated in the suburbs of the town. It was a fine site, and the surroundings were rather romantic than otherwise.

I arose earlier than the sun one morning (it is not my usual custom to do so), and took a walk in the brisk, bracing, October air.

A pretty looking white cottage not far off had attracted my attention, and towards it I wended my way. I fancied it to be the abode of some newly made victims to the unerring darts of Cupid—

that chubby god to whom unreasonable artists give an impossibly long bow and impossibly fat legs.

Judge my surprise when I found that it was entirely deserted. The gate was unhinged, the tall withered grass was uncut in the door yard and no sighing disciples of Hymen had built their fireside altars there. The house was well built, the location was certainly desirable, and I was at a loss to discover a cause for its desertion. So when I returned I broached the subject to my hostess.

She assumed a grave, mysterious air, and in a low, confidential tone, such as only women possess, she informed me that the house was haunted.

I smiled rather incredulously.

“O, I knew you wouldn’t believe it,” she continued, “and I don’t know as I do myself; but there is certainly something very strange about it. We own the place and we have never been able to get anyone to live there for more than a month. First we rented it to a young married couple” (so my speculations concerning it were not altogether unfounded), “but they heard night after night strange and unearthly noises that could be traced to no human agency, and so they came to the conclusion that it was best to seek a home in some less awe-inspiring place. Next an honest carpenter with a small family and no superstition took it, but in less than a week they declared that all the ghosts of Hades haunted the place, and so it became again vacant.”

Subsequent tenants only confirmed the previous reports. The queerest part of all is that George spent one night there, and though he won’t admit his belief in ghosts he acknowledges that he heard some strange and unaccountable noises. Mrs. Avery told me all this in such a plain matter-of-fact way that my curiosity was really aroused.

Her husband came in shortly after, and over the comfortable breakfast we discussed the matter more thoroughly.

I suggested that George and I spend a night at the haunted house and endeavor to sift the spirits.

He yielded a ready assent, and so we repaired thither before sunset in order that the goblins might not get the start of us.

It was a clear and beautiful moonlight evening. We concluded to take our positions on the second floor and to keep a close watch, one at the east and the other at the west window. We were in separate rooms, but the door between us was open and we could chat with each other. With a thousand pleasant reminiscences of our boyish days it was not difficult for us to keep wide awake. Not a sound had we heard up to one o’clock. I suggested that our skepticism prevented our hearing the noises, and was railing George on his belief in the stories concerning the house, when suddenly the sound of a footstep, as of someone approaching, reached my ear. We were both on the alert in a moment. From my position I could see the figure of a man closely muffled coming towards the house. I beckoned George towards me, and together we watched the intruder.

He moved with the greatest care, treading on the thickly-tufted grass so as to leave no footprints. He finally reached the house and opened, noiselessly, the window directly beneath me. Having apparently taken a close observation, he gave a low, shrill whistle, and forthwith six other men emerged from the grove and beat their steps toward him.

All then entered the house from the window and we could hear them walking around beneath us.

To tell the truth George and myself were somewhat frightened. My mind was immediately made up as to the identity of the visitors; they were, without doubt, the veritable robber gang that had thus far so successfully eluded our pursuit. But it seemed as though we had “caught several Tartars.” The idea of “attacking” seven desperadoes was not altogether pleasant. Concluding that discretion was the better part of valor we lay perfectly still and listened. Through a crack we saw the shimmering of a light. Then a door opened and the whole party went into the cellar. Now was our time for action. Being less clumsy and more accustomed to such work than George, I bade him remain where he was while I took a peep at the seven men who were not in Buckram.

Removing my boots I descended, by the stairway, to the main floor. In my pocket I usually carry a gimlet; it is as useful in my business as a pair of scissors to a counter-jumper. With it I bored a hole through the floor and through this I gazed. A strange spectacle met my eyes.

Seated around a rough deal table were the seven ruffians busily engaged in counting and assorting money and other valuables. I could hear the musical chink of gold (it was before the days of greenbacks), and could see large quantities of rich silver plate. All the party were closely disguised. They appeared to be not on the best of terms with one another, and there was plenty of growling and grumbling concerning the distribution of the property. It was all in a low tone, however—so low that I could not catch the import of many of the remarks. The captain of the gang seemed to possess supreme authority, and when a pugilistic subaltern sought to interfere, on one occasion, the chief struck him a fearful blow on the head, that, (to use a slang phrase) “settled his hash.”

Satisfied with what I had seen of these substantial ghosts, I arose, bolted the cellar door, and returned to the place of George’s concealment.

I reported progress to him, and we held a brief consultation. It was arranged that one of us should repair to the town without delay and obtain reinforcements. George being better acquainted with the town than I, concluded to undertake this part of the job, while I staid and watched.

He was not absent more than thirty minutes, but it seemed as many hours to me. When he returned, a dozen stalwart men accompanied him.

They surrounded the house, and I, approaching the cellar door, administered to it a most tremendous thump that sent a dull echo thro’ the deserted rooms, and which evidently roused the robbers to a sense of their imminent danger. The lights in the cellar were immediately extinguished.

One of the party—a deputy sheriff—then approached the door and cried out:

“In the name of the law I demand the surrender of all persons in this house.”

The thieves were evidently consulting in whispered tones among themselves. Soon a voice came in reply:

“We surrender.”

The cellar door was then opened. Hereupon the burglars made a sudden rush, evidently hoping by simultaneous action to overpower their captors.

A somewhat desperate fight ensued, but we were too many for them, and ere long they were all securely bound and powerless.

He who was apparently the leader of the gang had received an ugly gash over the forehead, which bled profusely. I approached him to see if he was seriously hurt. I noticed that he wore long, false whiskers, which I did not hesitate to pull off. And then, in the face before me I beheld that of my long-sought enemy—Short Steve. He glared at me in impotent rage, and fairly gnashed his teeth for anger.

“Well, my man,” I said with excusable exultation as I took him not too tenderly by the arm, “our day of reckoning has come at last. There is a piece of rope in New York just long enough to stretch that devil’s neck of yours.”

It was an unkind remark to make to a helpless prisoner, but the poor, dead face of Sam Lewis haunted me continually, and after all revenge is sweet.

By the time that all the prisoners were safely lodged in the jail the gray streaks of morning had already brightened the east.

George and I returned to his home, where we found his wife already up to receive us. She listened with womanly curiosity to our adventure.

Later in the day, when the news had spread that the robbers were captured, the pretty city of S— was in a perfect hub-bub of excitement. I found myself lionized to such an extent that I was right glad to get back to New York.

Ned Halsey was surprised at the odd *denouement*, but he insists to this day that he had a *clairvoyant-like* impression of the proximity of Short Steve when he mistook my friend Avery for him.

We stood together in the court room—Ned and I—when the judge, turning to the notorious criminal, condemned him in the words:—“You shall be hung by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on your soul.”

New York Clipper, December 9, 1865

The Weekly North [McGregor] *Iowa Times*, May 9, 1866