

## *The Detective's Story*

I am about to relate—began the detective police-officer—my first professional experience. Perhaps, however, I should call it an amateur rather than a professional experience, for I was not then a member of the force, and took hold of the case merely because it interested me deeply. It was my success in this case and the reputation it gave me that afterwards decided me in the choice of our really glorious profession.

One evening the papers were full of a horrible murder committed uptown the night before. The parties concerned were first-class people, and, of course, the affair made quite a stir. The circumstances, as briefly as I can state them, were as follows:

Michael Howe, the murdered man, was a wealthy merchant, fifty years old, or thereabouts. His nearest relative was a beautiful niece, Miss Ellen Howe, who lived near him, and would, it was understood, inherit his property. People acquainted with the family were aware that Mr. Howe was of a narrow and tyrannical disposition, and though he loved the girl well and spared no expense to gratify her, yet was often very harsh and cruel to her. Ellen was not only dependent upon her uncle for support, but she had, it seems, contrary to his expressed wish, engaged herself to a young bank clerk as poor as herself.

This young man, Ellis by name, was really a very fine fellow, with an unspotted reputation. Old Howe had, in years past, had business relations with Ellis' father, and had, it was said, been the cause of his ruin and suicide.

However this may have been, it was certain that Michael Howe entertained feelings of the most violent hatred towards the young man himself, and had repeatedly and in the most abusive language forbidden his holding any communication with Miss Howe. Ellis, on his part, cordially detested the uncle; but he loved the niece, and determined to marry her, in spite of her guardian, and upon the night of the murder he had called to tell him so.

The interview between Michael Howe and Frederick Ellis no human eye had witnessed. All that was known of it was gathered from the account given by the young man himself. Strange to say, this account, though it positively denied all knowledge of the murder, was fatally damaging to the young man's case. He had, he said, called upon Mr. Howe about ten o'clock in the evening. At first he was refused admittance; but as he was turning away, the merchant himself came out of the library, and told him to come in, saying they might as well have it out then as any other time. They went into the library, and as the servant also testified, the key was turned, and the two remained together until everybody in the house had retired.

The only additional evidence given by the servant was that in going around a short time after to fasten up the house she heard loud tones in the library and had paused at the door to listen. The words she caught were few. She had heard the young man stop in his walk up and down the room and say, excitedly, "By Heaven, you lie, sir! My father never did that; and were you not an old man and Ellen's uncle, I would kill you this instant for saying so." Then she heard the old man get up from his chair and move towards the door, and she had hurried away upstairs.

Ellis acknowledged the words and a great many more quite as violent. He had been with the old man an hour or so, he said. He had at once announced his determination to marry Ellen Howe, at all the hazards, but he once more asked permission to do so. Mr. Howe laughed at him, calling him names he didn't care to repeat, and finally taunted him with the crime and disgraceful death of his father. Then the young man, stung almost to madness, had used the words testified to by the servant. The old man had gone to the door, but only to see that it was secure. He did not seem to have any fear for himself, but still went on with his taunts. Finally, he said, "Young man, we have had hard words enough. I worked your father's ruin—aye, and drove him to a disgraceful death, and I glory in it. But that is not all; I hate you as I hated him, and will work your ruin, too. You shall not hang yourself—oh, no; but the sheriff will do it for you. *I shall see you hanged*—see you with these eyes—I and thousands of others shall see Frederick Ellis, son of the renowned forger, Gerald Ellis, hanged by the neck until he is dead. Yes, *I shall see it, sir—I shall see it*; and maybe your father, the man that robbed me of my love years ago, will look down and enjoy the sight with me."

Fairly beside himself with rage at this horrible abuse, young Ellis (still telling the story himself) had drawn his revolver, started forward, and fired. The ball had grazed the old man's temple, making a slight flesh wound only. Ellis had cocked the revolver again, when suddenly a better impulse seized him, and he laid it on the table. "For God's sake, Mr. Howe," he said, "take this yourself or I shall be a murderer," and then hurried out, still fearing of his self-control. After this he remembered nothing for a long while, and finally, at what hour he knew not, went home to his boarding house.

So much for the young man's evidence, given voluntarily after he had heard of the murder, and with an air that a guilty man could hardly have assumed. When asked why he persisted in giving an account so damaging to himself, he said that he could not speak aught else but the truth, even if it brought him to the gallows.

The old man had been missed early the next morning. Blood-stains were found all about the library, and a peculiar smell filled the room, though the servant found the window wide open. The fire in the grate had gone out, but there were traces about it of burned clothing, recognized as that formerly worn by the deceased. Also a ring of his, partially melted, was found in the ashes. Still more thorough search revealed the charred remains of a human skeleton at the bottom of the well a short distance from the library window.

In short, Michael Howe had evidently been murdered, and a terrible chain of circumstantial evidence connected Frederick Ellis with the deed. It was not then a day of long trials and evasions of the law. The accused was tried at once, convicted almost without a plea in his own defense—for he could urge nothing but his previous good character—and sentenced in one month's time.

Now comes my connection with the story. I first saw the prisoner in court on the day of his conviction, and I was strangely drawn to him by his fearless bearing under such trying circumstances, and the sorrowful yet unflinching manner in which he received this sentence. When asked if he had anything to say why he should not die, he repeated:

“Only this, that I am but one more of the many victims of circumstantial evidence.”

I was young then, and believed in human nature. I said to myself as I left the courtroom, “No one can convince me that that man is a murderer.”

That night I got together all the printed accounts of the trial, and went carefully over every atom of the testimony. It was all reliable, and seemed to absolutely prove Ellis guilty. Yet I felt positively certain that he was innocent. I could have waged my life that he was the soul of truth and honor. Yet it was that his own testimony was true, and that was the most damaging of all. One sentence of the murdered man struck me as peculiar: “*Mark my words, young man, I shall see you hanged!*” Strange prophesy! Could the old man have had some presentiment that Frederick Ellis would so soon be sentenced to the gallows?

But he had said, too, “*I shall see it with these eyes.*” And Michael Howe was a man of his word after all. Did he mean that he would look down with his evil eyes and view the transaction from the other world? A new thought struck me. Might there not be some hidden meaning in his words? Half true they were certainly likely to be. Might they not prove wholly? Was it positively certain that a murder had been committed? Was Mr. Howe beyond all doubt passed from the land of the living? *I did not believe it!*

The next day I called upon Miss Howe. She was in deep black and quite broken down with grief. I explained, as well as I could, my suspicions and theory as to the murder, and she blessed me for the hope I brought her. She was rich, but her lover must be saved if it took all. No expense must be spared; all was in my hands. I left her with a firm determination to prove Frederick Ellis innocent, in spite of fate. It was no use to fight the evidence. I went through it all once more, examined the premises, the ring, the charred bones, but these told no story. If there had been a murder, Frederick Ellis was the guilty man. If he was innocent, Mr. Howe was alive. I must find him if I would save the prisoner; and I must find him within a month.

But how? I had no clew whatever to his whereabouts. If he had gone away, he had left no trace. I spared no expense, on all the railroads, to every part of the United States. I even dispatched a messenger to Liverpool, though for reasons of my own I did not believe that Michael Howe had left the country. I advertised for information concerning a man of his description. I worked night and day myself. Alas! all of no avail. Day trod upon the heel of day, the second week followed the first, the third followed the second, and now it was the first of March, and Ellis to be hung on the third. Miss Howe was not despondent, though. But I, though I had now given up all hopes of finding my man in his place of hiding, still indulged one forlorn hope, which I had communicated to no one. He had said: “*I will see you hanged with my own eyes,*” and Michael Howe was notoriously a man of his word. His sole passion was revenge, and thus far his scheme had been perfect. I was mistaken in the man, or he would be present to taste the sweets of that revenge to the last. He would be in town on the third of March, and I should meet him at the gallows. The more I thought of it the more sanguine I became.

At nine o’clock on the morning of the second, almost twenty-four hours before the time appointed for the execution, I received a telegram, which very much raised my hopes. It was

dated at B——, and was from Snow, the most skillful detective in my employ. It read simply thus:

“I think I have my man. He is moving your way. Watch every train from here.”

I took out no warrant, told no man of my plans, but I was present at the arrival of every train, and narrowly observed every passenger. No reward crowned my efforts, however, until the 8 A.M. train on the third. I saw Snow get off the car. I caught his eyes as he stepped to the platform, but he put his fingers to his lips and sauntered across to where a decrepid old lady, whose white hair contrasted strongly with the deep black she wore, was being assisted into a carriage. Her face was covered from sight by a thick veil. Snow lingered long enough to hear the directions she gave the driver, then driving off, he came over to where I was waiting.

“Well, Snow,” I said, anxiously, “how is it?”

“That’s the party,” and he jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the departing carriage.

“What, the old woman in black?”

“Exactly.”

I looked at him in astonishment. Then, as I began to understand, I was seized with a sudden terror lest the man should escape.

“But he will slip through our fingers after all,” I cried.

“No fear of that, sir. He is going straight to jail. I saw him pull out a pass to the execution and read it over on the train last night, and I heard him direct the hackman to drive to —— street.”

I held out my hand.

“Snow, you’re a brick!”

“Oh, I’ve done my part, sir. But, after all, I was only the legs, and did the running about. You were the head and managed the brain-work. It was the prettiest piece of calculating I ever saw, your reckoning he would happen around to see the hanging. You’d be an honor to the force, sir.”

We took a hack and drove to the prison-yard. I was, of course, provided with a pass, and we entered. Most of those who had a right to be there were already present, and among them the woman in black.

The prisoner would be led forth from his cell in a few moments now. He was already bidding Miss Howe farewell. She, it is hardly necessary to say, still believed firmly in his innocence. Should we wait until the final moment? It would be much more sensational, but hardly as human. No, we would end the terrible tragedy at once.

“Snow,” I whispered, “you are sure of your man?”

“Just as sure as I am of myself.”

“Then arrest him.”

Snow stepped forward and placed his hand on the supposed woman’s shoulder. She started.

“Michael Howe, you are my prisoner.”

The old man sprang up, and would have, gained the door, but I was upon the watch and held him fast while Snow placed irons on his hands. In the struggle, the thick veil was torn aside, revealing the closely shaven features of Michael Howe; and there on his right temple was a blood-red furrow made by the passage of Ellis’ ball on that eventful night.

To describe the wonder of the crowd and of the city, or the wild happiness of Miss Howe and the joy of the condemned man at this sudden *denouement*, is as needless as it is impossible. The story, of course, ends here.

Old Howe was committed at once, but escaped the law by hanging himself to a window-bar. His scheme of vengeance was perfect, indeed; but he carried it a little too far. He died without a will, and the young people were married at once, and have long been enjoying his wealth. Snow made a good thing of it, and they have naturally looked upon me as a friend of the family ever since. I was so tickled at my success, that I concluded to try the detective profession for a living, and I’ve been moderately successful at it ever since, though never more so than in my first case.

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