

The Brand of Cain

by H.S. Keller

It was murder, and most foul.

Here in the soft soil are the prints of her shoes. She was leaning against the bars, picking to pieces the daisies, and, doubtless drawing fanciful pictures in the western sky, when the villain stole up behind her and stabbed her to the death.

What was the motive?

Who was the assassin?

Those two were vague questions as yet, and time alone can only answer each satisfactorily.

The threads were few and scattering. It requires more than the usual amount of human patience to gather up the broken strands of the mystery and solve the same.

There is a larger amount of animal instinct in the nature of the detective than people at large generally believe. Some thief-takers *know* a thief, no matter in what guise he is presented. Men who have reached out the strong arm and grappled with the crime-stained, say they feel a peculiar sensation pass through every nerve when their hands come in contact with the person of the criminal. Others—and I have met them in my time—say that they can detect a murderer through the sense of smell. Their arguments are so strongly in favor of the facts, and many of them have proven to be true, backed up as they are by undeniable proof—that I have no right to disbelieve their assertions.

Hundreds have gazed upon the face of the dead girl. No one has, as yet, fully recognized her. Some claim to have done so; but when the claims are presented they fail to substantiate anything further than visionary doubts, fancies, or crude outcomings.

After she was buried I visited the spot of the foul murder. I did it, I will frankly say, out of that strange, morbid curiosity which seems to hold full sway over the strongest minds when things out of common are presented to publicity.

The keen (?) amateur detective had scoured the woodland for miles around, looking for the knife which had cleft the girl's heart in twain. Bits of mud had been carefully dug up and carried away, and splinters had been whittled off the upper bar of the fence. The amateur detective is a sleuth-hound and a nuisance. Many a dark deed has been rendered more dark through the cat-like tread and alleged keenness of the amateur. Many a first-class professional has been turned aside from the right trail and thrown off the scent by the fool amateur who looks for glory in the blood of a victim and the footprints of the assassin.

But I found under a burdock leaf what had escaped both the professional and amateur detective. I will say right here I am no detective. If I were not a pleasure seeker with plenty of means to appease my roving propensities, I might be a detective, but I doubt it. Detectives are born, not made. It requires something beyond the scope of common man to become a detective. I am not beyond the common scope; humbly, I admit, I am dull, yet I found a clue.

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Though five years have passed I am no nearer solving the mystery surrounding the dead girl than I was the day I found the quaint, old-fashioned brooch under a burdock leaf.

I carry the brooch in a small flat, case, and I view it perhaps a hundred times each day. I consult with it. In the car I take it out and look at it. In the hotel, on the steamer, at the watering resort, in the depths of the wilderness, I examine the brooch.

And I always examine closely the faces about me when I take the brooch in my hand!

Originally the brooch was nothing more than a Dutch brass-plate affair in a setting of common metal. It, perhaps, did not cost more than a quarter, but to me it was more precious than gold, for, through it I had made up my mind to unmask the cowardly murderer of the unknown girl and bring him to the bar of justice to answer before God and man for the foul deed of blood.

Upon the brass plate of the brooch was a silhouette of a man's face.

Was it painted thereon by the hand of the artist?

No.

Then how came it there?

I knew.

And now, I think, I have found my man.

That is a broad assertion, but I make it, fully convinced of the fact that I am right. Today, for the first time in my life, I have met the original of the face indelibly imprinted upon the rude Dutch brooch.

It was mutton I had ordered at breakfast that morning. The gentleman seated opposite ordered ham and eggs. I consulted the brooch, as was my manner while waiting for the filling of my order.

I started as I gazed across the table.

It was my man.

Five years I have been constantly waiting for his coming—and now, in a small country hotel in one of the Empire State inland towns, I greet him.

His order was filled first. As he lifted his egg from the side-dish it fell from his knife to the table. A small particle of the yellow spattered his white cuff. He slipped the cuff over his hand and wiped the stain off with a napkin.

I was again startled.

Upon the bare wrist of the stranger was the red print of a dagger. It may have been a birthmark. But I thought not.

After sitting opposite him for three meals, I invited him after supper to have a cigar with me. During our smoke I commenced to tell him the following strange story:

“Once, while I was crossing the Atlantic, a fearful storm broke and the steamer was in danger of being swamped. I had never been at sea in a storm before, and I kept the deck as much as possible to view the conflict of the elements. The waves seemed to have gigantic teeth as they reared up out of the darkness and then swooped down upon the vessel. The lightening lent its fretful, baleful glare to add terrors and create fear in the minds of all who were on board the steamer. Once the chain of electric fluid flashed like a livid serpent for an instant, and a deckhand fell by my side. I assisted in carrying him below. He had only received a severe shock. Upon his broad breast was photographed the bolt of Jove, the chain and anchor upon the deck. By the way, that is a queer birthmark—”

“What do you mean, sir?” quickly interrupted the stranger, drawing back.

“And upon this brooch *your* face is indelibly photographed.”

[“]Sir,” broke in he as he suddenly rose, only to find himself grasped from behind by the constable I had ordered to be present.

“It’s all up my fine fellow. Why you killed the unknown girl I cannot say; but as she lay there dead you gazed down upon her. Then Jove, the great photographer of nature, came with his electric fluid and placed your face upon this brooch, and at the same time gave you, there upon your wrist, the accusing mark of Cain.”

And that was all I had to do with the case, excepting of course having him turned over to the proper authorities. Whether or not he confessed and told why he killed the girl, what interest he had in her, whether he revealed fully the strange surroundings of the mystery, I do not know. I only recollect my portion of the case; and, doubtless, that would have escaped my mind had it not been something out of the common.

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