

A Detective's Story

There had been a person killed in Colville,—a dreadful crime had been committed, the telegram said,—and I was selected to go down and work up the case.

It was my trade or profession then—hunting down thieves and assassins; and I had been so long at the business that a telegram announcing any such case was taken as coolly as if the dispatch had related to some ordinary affair.

Before noon I was at Colville. It was a little hamlet about twenty miles from New York, and three miles away from the railroad. I had answered the telegram before leaving New York, and people were therefore expecting me. As I stepped on the platform a farmer came up and inquired my name, and I was requested to take a seat in his one-horse phaeton for a drive to the village. He was greatly excited, and we had scarcely started when he commenced talking.

I soon learned that a lady was the victim—a rich old spinster, named Miss Williams. She was a woman about fifty-five years old, living in the best house in the village, and was possessed of some fortune. She had never been married, but years before had adopted a boy, who was now a young man of twenty. These two, with a couple of servants made up the family.

I learned that the family always retired at nine o'clock. If Tom, the adopted, was out, as was frequently the case, the front door was left unlocked for him to come in. He was not considered a bad young man; but he drank a little, smoked a good deal, wore good clothes, and might be classed under the head of “fast.” As for servants, I had seen them, and that was enough. Without asking them a word, I would have taken my oath that they were innocent.

In working up a case I always had a theory, and I worked to prove that my theory was right. In this case it was that Tom was guilty, and I started to prove it. Going down stairs I entered the bedroom. The dead body was still there. The blows had been dealt with terrible force, and any one of the four or five wounds would have been fatal. The deceased was in her night dress lying on the bed, and I was not long in ascertaining that she had been placed there after death or after insensibility.

There were stains on the bed, on the wall, and on the carpet at the further end of the room. Getting down on my hands and knees, I found that a corner of the carpet had been loosened; and turning it back, I discovered two or more bank notes on the floor. This, then, had been a hiding place for her money, of which she was supposed to have a large sum.

I decided that the assassin crept in, tore up the carpet and was discovered as he was seizing the money. The old lady had got out of bed and approached him, and was struck down as they stood together in the corner. This was very strong evidence against Tom. Had she awoke to discover a stranger in the room she would not have left her bed—or the

chances were against it—and she certainly would have been struck down near it, instead of reaching the corner. She had been killed in the corner—and then her body placed on the bed—I was sure of it.

If I had wanted any further evidence against Tom, I found it on the corpse. From the finger nail of the index finger of the right hand waved three or four blue threads—tiny little things, which a hundred pairs of eyes would have passed over. There was a slit in the nail, and it had caught a coat sleeve and torn the little threads out. They told me that Tom had a blue blouse coat, and then I knew she had torn the threads out as she clutched him in her dying struggle.

“Well, what do you think?” inquired the constable, as I finished my examination.

“I want to see Tom,” I answered.

“Why, surely you don’t suspect him.”

“Certainly not; I want to hear his statement,” I replied.

One of them went and brought him. I saw from the first glimpse that he had made up his mind to “brazen it out.” He was a good looking young fellow, face pale and anxious, and I saw by his set teeth that he was bracing himself up to baffle me.

“You will please to give me a plain statement of the affair, so far as you were concerned,” I said, as he took a seat.

We sat looking at him, and he had to make an effort to start off. He stated that he came in at half past nine, went to bed, and about daylight was awakened by a scream. He ran down stairs, and to his aunt’s door, and then discovered she was dead.

“But the body was cold at daylight,” I answered. “The deed took place at least two hours earlier. Have you any reason to suspect any one?”

“When I came in last night,” he answered, “a stranger moved away from the gate across the street, and as he found that I was watching him, he skulked along down the street.”

“Did Miss Williams have any money in the house?”

“She might have had a few dollars,” he answered.

He did not know where she kept the money, he said; and he was certain that she was asleep when he came in on the previous night. His theory was that the stranger whom he saw at the gate had entered the house and committed the crime.

“It seems strange that he should have known that the money was hidden under a corner of the bedroom carpet,” I said.

He made no reply, and I continued, "She must have had a desperate fight, and I think the villain's sleeves must be stained."

His eyes went down to his sleeves as I spoke, but he quickly raised them.

"I don't know, I'm sure," he said after a while. "It's an awful thing and I'm so nervous I can hardly think of any one thing at a time."

"Poor boy! It is a hard blow on you," put in one of the constables, in a condoling voice.

Tom covered his face with his hands, and seemed to be much affected; and I told him I had done with him.

"Hold!" I said, as he was leaving the house. "Have you any idea of how much money she had hidden away?"

"No."

"It makes no great difference," I went on; "I have ascertained there was nearly a thousand dollars, and the bills were all fives and tens on the Ocean Bank of New York and the Drovers' Bank of Brooklyn."

I saw he had a look of annoyance and chagrin. I had found no such memoranda, and only judged of the value of the bills and the banks represented by those left behind.

Well, there was my case. The young man was guilty, and I knew it; but if I said so, and made his arrest, I would have been mobbed. It was the general idea that a stranger had committed the deed, and it would have been folly to take tom on such evidence as I had enumerated, much of it having no weight except in my own mind.

A couple of old nurses were allowed to come in and prepare the body for burial; the servants recalled; and I asked Tom to return to the house, and guide and direct as well as he could. One of the constables went and fetched a justice of the peace. He followed me over to the hotel, and when we were seated he asked, "Well, what have you discovered?"

"That the crime was committed by some one living in the village," I answered.

"You don't mean that?"

"Yes."

"Who is the man?"

"If I knew I would arrest him," I replied. "So far I have only suspicions; but before to-morrow morning we may have the villain in custody."

“I hope so,” he exclaimed, much excited.

I then told him that I wanted to pass the night in the house with the corpse, and wanted his company. I did not wish to go until Tom had retired to his room, and would rather none of the servants should see me. I cautioned him not to betray my intentions, and warned him that the capture depended on silence and discretion.

At 10 o'clock that night, Mr. Parsons (the justice) and myself were admitted to the house by one of the back doors. The servants and Tom were up stairs, and three women were watching the corpse. It was a bright moonlight night, rather cold, and parsons had brought some cigars.

We sat in the room beyond the dining room, having no light in the room; but the door was partly open, and a lamp on a stand in the dining room shone in and the light fell upon a large mirror hanging on the wall to the left of us.

I had to prepare him very gently for my proposed search, and I did not dare to tell him that I believed Tom to be the original, although he could not help seeing that I was trying to fasten the crime on some inmate of the house.

It was just three minutes of twelve o'clock, and we had been very quiet for a long time, both thinking, when I suddenly saw a face in the glass on the wall. It was Tom's, and I looked round, expecting to see him in the door way. He was not there; and as I turned to the glass his whole body came into view, being clad only in a night-shirt. The moon was streaming in at the window, falling in a shower on the glass, and between moonlight and lamplight the glass was converted into a magic mirror to represent what was transpiring in the rear of the house in the yard behind the kitchen. I turned from door to glass three or four times before I solved the mystery, and by that time Parsons was watching Tom.

The young man had a small bundle in his hand, and after bending his head to listen, and then peering about, he advanced several feet, reached up, and his hand and arm went beyond our vision. There was a “coo-coo,” as if doves had been disturbed, and then he pulled down his arm, brushed something off his hand, and stepped back out of sight.

“He's walking in his sleep,” whispered the amazed magistrate.

“See here!” I said, my hand on his shoulder; “when he raised up he was hiding something. If it was money will you believe that he committed the crime?”

“Let us look,” he answered.

We removed our boots, and silently passed out of the back door. There was a dovecote on a post near the rear end of the kitchen, and going to it I inserted my hand and drew out a bundle. It was the money! Looking up we saw that Tom had crept out of his window, and come down over the roofs.

When we were in, and spread out the money, we found several new bills badly torn, and there were blood spots on others.

“Does this convict him?” I asked of the trembling Parsons.

“But he may have been waling in his sleep,” he replied.

“He may have been—but where did he get this money?”

“It was he!—it was!” he exclaimed sitting down.

We looked at each other for a long time without speaking, and then he said, “Let me go home? I can’t be here when you make the arrest. I have known that boy ever since he was a child; and though I hold him guilty, I couldn’t face him to save my life.”

I let him go, and had to brace my nerves for what was to come. I said nothing to the women; but taking the money in one hand and the lamp in the other I went upstairs, pushed open Tom’s door, and found him wide awake in bed, as I had expected. He rose up as I set the lamp down, and, taking a chair, I said: “Mr. Parsons and I were both watching when you put the money in the dovecot.”

“I—you—it couldn’t”

“Tom,” I said, interrupting him, “I have known all day you killed Miss Williams! There are a dozen things to prove it besides these torn and stained bills! You must go with me to the county jail.”

He held out for a reply, but when he saw I had trapped him, and that it was no use, he broke down, began to cry and surrendered.

He rose and dressed, and we left the house so silently that no one knew of our going. He declared that he would make no effort to escape, and accompanied me to a livery stable, and stood by while a horse and chaise were made ready for a trip to the county prison.

On the way out he made a clean breast of it. He was in debt for bets, cigars, liquors and jewelry, and his aunt refused him except a small sum. He had at first planned to rob her of part, but changed his mind and decided to kill her and take all. She had been awakened, sprang out of bed, seized and recognized him, and he had struck her down and then put the body on the bed, just as I figured it in my own mind. He believed himself secure from detection, but when I spoke about the bills having been numbered, he had left his bed and changed them from one hiding place to another for fear that they would be found.

He would have been tried, but he committed suicide the second night after being placed in jail; and to this day there are people in Coleville who believed that Tom was innocent, and that my unfounded suspicions and unjustifiable arrest drove him to his death.

Freeborn County Standard [Albert Lea, MN], March 14, 1878

Mexico [MO] *Weekly Ledger*, April 11, 1878

Fayetteville [TN] *Observer*, May 9, 1878

This is an altered shortened version of “The Magic Glass: or, Detecting a Murderer” from *Ballou’s Monthly Magazine*, May 1875