

The Magic Glass:
Or,
Detecting a Murderer
By M. Quad

There had been a murder down at Colville—a cold-blooded murder the dispatch said—and I was detailed to go down and work up the case.

It was my trade—or profession then—hunting down thieves and murderers, and I had been so long at the business that a telegram announcing a murder was taken as coolly as if the despatch had related to some ordinary happening.

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

I soon learned that it was a woman who had been murdered—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 being possessed of quite a large 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.

“It was an awful thing!” said the farmer, as he saw that I was interested. “It is supposed that she was murdered about midnight, though it might have been an hour later. At least, when they found her, soon after daylight, she was cold and stiff.”

“And how was it done?”

“O, that’s plain to be seen,” he replied; “she slept alone in a bedroom on the first floor, and the murderer went in and beat her over the head with an iron bolt—the king-bolt of a wagon. Her skull is crushed in, and her face is a horrible sight. We left the body just as we found it, and no one has been allowed inside the door, as we wanted you to find everything just as the murderer left them.”

“The young man and the servants?” I inquired.

“O, they are as innocent as you or I!” he promptly answered. “It was the young man Tom who first discovered the murder, and it would have made you weep to see him take on and tear his hair. It took two men to hold him at first.”

“It did, eh?” I answered, slowly; and I went to thinking, and let the farmer talk himself tired. As a general rule I do not believe that the most violent outbursts of grief denote the greatest sorrow. I wondered if there could have been such a bond of love between the

young man and the old woman that he should tear his hair and go crazy over her death, especially when her demise put him in possession of all her property? Then he was the first to discover the murder—that was a mark against him in my mind. I can't tell you why, except so far as I have told you above, but before we reached Colville I had made up my mind that Tom Williams (he had taken her name) was the murderer.

There was a crowd in the yard and around and in the house. All business in the village was suspended for the day, and the people were waiting my arrival. As soon as I ascertained that the room had not been disturbed, I shut the door, requested the selectmen of the village to turn all the people out and bolt the doors against them; and then I inquired the domestic habits of the deceased, her state of health, how much money she generally kept by her, if any, and from her I dropped off on to Tom and the servants.

I learned that the family always retired at nine o'clock. If Tom 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 the servants, I had seen them, and that was enough. Without asking them a word, I would have taken my oath that they were innocent.

Tom had been taken in by a neighbor, and was out of the way. I asked to see his room, and one of the servants was called in to show me up stairs. The room was just as he left it in the morning. I learned from the servant, who was a very talkative female, that Tom's usual hour of rising was at seven o'clock, when breakfast was ready. It was in July, and on that morning he was up and dressed and discovered the murder before five o'clock, daylight coming about half past four. He had planned no journey; had not left his bed on account of sickness; had not been disturbed, and yet he had left it. I examined the bed. The clothing was turned down and the bed was somewhat disturbed. You would have said that some one had occupied it all night; but after a moment's scrutiny I made up my mind that Tom had merely sat down on the bed, with his feet on the floor. He had sat there for a long time, making a plain dent in the bed, and he had not once stretched out on the sheet. He had not sat there to read, because the table was too far away. What then? He had sat there to ponder, I guessed. No one knew the hour when he came in the previous night, because all were asleep; but he said it was at half past nine.

In working up a case I always had a theory, and I worked to prove that my theory was right. If I failed, then I took another theory and worked at that. My theory in this case was that Tom was the murderer, and I started to prove it. Going down stairs, I entered the bedroom. The corpse was a ghastly sight. The blows had been dealt with terrible force, and any one of the four or five would have been fatal. The body was in its nightdress, lying on the bed, and I was not long in ascertaining that it had been placed there after death, or after insensibility.

There was blood on the bed, on the wall, and on the carpet. The first stains were at the further end of the room, near a lounge, but the carpet being of a dull red, the villagers had not noticed them. 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 three bank notes on the floor. This, then, had been a hiding-place for her money. The servants said she had several hundred dollars in the house, but they had no idea of where she had hidden it. It was not natural that she should put so much confidence in them.

I decided that the murderer 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 yet another 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 after 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 about 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 split 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 that she had torn the threads out as she clutched him in her dying struggles.

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

“I want to see Tom,” I answered.

“Why, merciful heavens! You don’t suspect him?”

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

One of them went and brought the young man. I saw from the first glimpse that he had made up his mind to “brass 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 go on and give me a plain statement of the affair so far as you were concerned,” I said, as he took a chair.

We all sat looking at him, and he had to make a great effort to start off. He stated that he came in at the hour named, went to bed, and about daylight was awakened by a scream. He ran down stairs and to his aunt’s door, and then discovered that a murder had been committed.

“But the body was cold at daylight,” I answered; “the murder took place at least two hours before. What scream could have startled you?”

“It might not have been a scream,” he answered; “it might have been some other noise, or I might have dreamed that I heard one.”

“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?” I asked.

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

He did not know where she kept it, 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 murder.

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

He could not prevent a nervous start of surprise. The selectmen did not notice it, but it was very plain to me. He made no reply, and I continued:

“She must have made a desperate fight, and I think the villain’s sleeves will be found spattered with blood.”

His eyes went down to his sleeves as I spoke, but he quickly raised them, and the selectmen sat there like bumps on a log, and never caught the faintest clue.

“I don’t know, I’m sure,” he said, after a while. “It is an awful thing, and I’m so nervous that I can hardly think of any one thing for a moment at a time.”

“Poor boy! It is a hard blow on you!” replied one of the selectmen, in a condoling voice.

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

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

“No, I haven’t,” he answered.

“It makes no great difference,” I went on; “I have ascertained that she had nearly a thousand dollars, and that the bills were all fives and tens on the Ocean Bank of New York and the Drover’s Bank of Brooklyn. I shall notify every tradesman in the village, and put the detective of the county on the watch for such bills. I see that she was a careful old lady, and that she had made a note of the number of each bill. I have her memoranda in my pocket, and if any one attempts to pass a single one of those bills, he will surely be nabbed.”

I saw a look of annoyance and chagrin on his face, and he forgot all about trying to look disconsolate. I had found no such memoranda, and only judged of the value of the bills and the banks represented by those left behind. I threw it at him as a stray shot, and to help along another plan I had formed.

Well, there was my case. The young man was guilty of murder, and I knew it; but if I said so, and made his arrest, I would have been mobbed by the villagers, who believed his every word, and whose mistakes were with him. It was the general idea that a stranger had committed the deed, and it would have been folly to arrest Tom on such evidence as I had accumulated, much of it having no weight except in my own mind.

The women were allowed to come in and prepare the corpse for burial, the servants recalled, and I asked Tom to return to the house, and guide and direct so far as he could. One of the selectmen was a justice of the peace, and the murderer would be arraigned before him. He followed me over to the hotel, and when we were seated, he asked:

“Well, what have you discovered?”

“That the murder was committed by some one living in the village!” I answered.

“Heavens! But you don’t mean that?”

“Just that.”

“Who is the man?”

“If I knew, I would arrest him,” I replied. “So far, I have only suspicions; but perhaps before tomorrow morning we may have the villain in custody.”

“God grant it!” 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 want to go in until Tom had retired to his room, and would rather that none of the servants should see me. I cautioned him not to betray my intentions, and warned him that the capture of the murderer depended on his silence and discretion.

He promised to obey me, and I slept several hours during the afternoon, so as to be vigilant during the night. I felt certain that Tom had hidden the money somewhere about the premises, and I proposed to search for it. I also had an idea that something might turn up during the night to fasten his guilt more firmly, though I could not say what it would be.

At ten o’clock that night Parsons the selectman and myself were admitted to the house by one of the rear doors. The servants and Tom were up stairs, and three women were watching with the corpse. It was a bright moonlight night, rather cool, and Parsons had brought along some cigars. The house was arranged thus: As you entered the front door

there was a hall, stairs at the right, parlor to the left, and further down the hall a door which led into the sitting-room or back parlor. There was a bedroom off of this, and in there the corpse was lying, and the watchers sat in the back parlor. Beyond this room was the dining-room, with a small room off, and then came the kitchen. Parsons and I sat in the room off 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 approach him very gently with my proposed search, and I did not dare tell him that I believed Tom to be the murderer, although he could not help but know that I was seeking to fasten the crime on some inmate of the house.

“That woman made a brave fight for her money and her life,” I whispered to him. “The man had the bills in his hand, and she clinched into them. He struck her several blows on the hand, breaking two fingers; and if we find the money, we will find some of the bills mutilated.”

“Suppose we find it hidden about the house?” he said.

“Then we have evidence that some one in the house is the murderer,” I replied.

He shook his head dubiously, as if he were saying to himself that a detective had been sent down who didn't know his business; and I lit another cigar. Midnight would be time enough to commence the search.

It was just five 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 face, and I looked around, expecting to see him in the door. He was not there, and as I turned to the glass his whole body came into view, being clad only in a sleeping-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 rear of the house in the “jog” made by building the “L” to the kitchen. I turned from door to glass three or four times before I solved the mystery, and by that time Parsons was also 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 is walking in his sleep?” whispered the amazed selectman.

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

“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 open window, and come down over the roofs.

When we went 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 walking in his sleep,” he replied.

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

“It was he!—my God! It was!” he exclaimed, turning as white as a sheet, and having to sit down.

We looked into each other’s faces 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 crying child, and though I know he’s guilty, I couldn’t face him to save my life.”

I let him go away, and I 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 expected to. He rose up as I set the lamp down, and, taking a chair, I said:

“Mr. Parsons and I were both watching you when you put this money in the dove-cot!”

“I—you—it couldn’t—”

“Tom,” I answered, interrupting him, “I have known all day that you were the murderer! There are a dozen things to prove it besides these torn and blood-stained bills! You must go with me to the county jail.”

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

“Don’t let any one see me—let’s go now!” he pleaded; and I told him that if he would be quiet and obedient I would take him right away. He arose and dressed, and we left the house so silently that none of the watchers 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 buggy were made ready for a trip to the county-seat.

On the way out he made a clean breast of it. He was in debt for cigars, liquors, and some flash 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 concluded to murder 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 had written it out 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 for murder but he committed suicide the second night after being placed in jail; and to this day there are people in Coleville who believe that Tom was innocent, and that my unfounded suspicions and unjustifiable arrest drove him to his death.

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