

Finding a Criminal

From the notes of an English Detective

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

I WAS AROUSED one morning from a sound sleep by a quick, loud rap upon my door. I had been on duty late into the morning, and hence kept my bed longer than usual. By the time my wife had reached my room, I was up and half dressed. She told me that Inspector Starling, one of my brother detectives, wished to see me. I hurried down, and found him pacing to and fro across the room in a state of considerable excitement.

“Ah, Goff, we’ve got some work on our hands,” he cried, the moment he saw me. “There’s been a murder—a strange one—by Newgate Market. But come along, and I’ll tell you as I go.”

As soon as we gained the street, Starling resumed—

“Last evening one of the butchers packed a box of meat to go off today, but this morning he changed his mind, and concluded to unpack it, as there was some doubt about the stuff’s keeping. When he removed the cover, he found the body of a man cut up, and stowed snugly away in place of his meat, and this latter article was afterwards found in a neighboring cellar.”

I asked if the butcher was not suspected.

“No,” replied my companion. “We know it could not have been he, for his time is all accounted for; and beside, his character is above suspicion. No—someone who knew that the box was packed to go off this morning, must have taken advantage of the circumstance, and thus hoped to gain time for escape, or, perhaps, to have thrown the blame upon another. It was an old man who was murdered, and it was evidently done for revenge.

“Why do you think so?” I asked.

“Because fragments of the clothing were upon the limbs, and a watch and some money were found in the pockets. Strange, isn’t it?”

I acknowledged that it was.

We overtook a party of men at this juncture, and ere we had opportunity to converse much more we had reached Newgate. The box was in a small office, and a commissioner had already arrived. The parts of the body had been taken out and placed together, thus forming a whole frame with the exception of the head, this latter part being absent. The victim had been not far from three score; a tall, well-formed man, and as far as we could judge from the fragments of clothing and the appearance of the hands, a member of the better class of society.

Our first object was to find if the remains could be identified, but in this we failed entirely. Two days passed without the least new light upon the subject, but on the evening of the second day, we received notice that a human head had been found in a small pond, or pool, in Epping, and was in the possession of the officers of that place.

Here might be a clue, and I was finally set upon the track. I chose to go alone, for on such an errand too many cooks must emphatically spoil the broth. I felt sure that if I could once get my eye upon the murderer, I should know him. There is something in the very look and bearing of a man who has done a murder, as palpable to me as the color of the Ethiop. I can see it written on his face, though how I cannot tell. It may be an intuitive perception, or it may be from long habit in hunting rogues.

It was late in the evening when I started, taking the saddle for my seal, and reached Epping at midnight. I found the coroner, and with him I found the human head. It was the very one. I knew it by the gray hair, and by the manner in which it had been cut off, the neck having been divided close by the shoulders. I requested my host to keep my visit a secret, as it might be necessary that my coming should not be known. He assured me that no one save himself and messenger knew that word had been sent to London of the finding of the head.

In the morning we went out to the place where the terrible proof of crime had been found, and I examined the sandy shore of the pond thoroughly. There were too many tracks, however, for me to make anything of them. One thing I saw was sure: that the head had been thrown in at night, for it had rested in shoal water, with two bricks tied to it, whereas, had it been thrown in by daylight, the villain would have selected a deeper spot. The coroner suggested that the murderer had kept on by the great stage road through Essex, but I felt differently. I believed he had struck across towards Waltham Abbey, and upon this supposition I determined to act.

My first movement after this was to obtain a suit of laboring-men's clothes, which my host procured of a fellow who was at work in a drain in his garden. They were well worn, and when I got them on I looked as rough as I could wish. I then made a snug bundle of my own garments, which I tied up in an old cotton handkerchief, and having swung it upon a stout oaken staff, I placed it over my shoulders, and started off upon the Waltham Abbey road.

If the murderer had done his horrible work in the metropolis by dark, and then come around by the way of Epping, he could not have reached the next town before daylight. I made some guarded inquiries at the houses I passed, but I gained no information till I reached Waltham Abbey; and even here I could only learn that a man had passed through there on foot, just before daylight, two days previously. Only one person—the hostler of an inn—had seen him, and he could give me not the slightest description, not even the traveler's height.

The road by which I had come led no further, ending here in the great northern and eastern mail road to Scotland; and as I did not think the murderer would take such a route, I pushed on by a narrow path, through fields and woods, a distance of eight miles, to Hatfield. It lacked half-an-hour of noon, so I thought I would stop here and get dinner. I felt certain that I was on the right track of the man I sought. To be sure, I had gained no reliable information from others, but I felt

a peculiar confidence in my own conceptions, and hence I called for my dinner at the inn, with the firm belief that I should be able to gain some intelligence of my man ere I left.

My meal would be ready in twenty minutes, so I sat down by the window and gazed out. It was a side window and looked out into a square court, upon the opposite side of which a new brick dwelling was in process of erection. The walls had been raised above the second-story windows, and half-a-dozen men were engaged in carrying up bricks and mortar for the masons. I took an interest in seeing these fellows at their work—they were so orderly and regular in their movements. It was up and down the long ladder, in true time, like the drill of a corporal's guard—then up and down again.

But finally I noticed one man who often got in the way of others, and whose movements were strange and erratic. No one else might have seen this as I did, but he arrested my attention in a moment. Said I,—

“There is my man!”

A summary method of detecting a murderer, you will say, but it was all plain to me. He was a middle-sized man, of middle age, and dressed in the common garb of such laborers; but his clothes did not fit him. The trowsers were turned up at the bottom, and were slouchy about the waist; the frock was too full, and the cap too small. When he set his hod down to have it filled, he did it with a nervous jerk; and when he started off with the load upon his shoulder he not only moved away too quickly, but he ascended the ladder with a speed entirely unsuited to the work. No hod-carrier ever moved so before. They are not proverbial for hurrying. And then there was no earthly need for this man's moving so, since his very haste often impeded his companions. I simply saw that he was not at home, either in his work or in his garb; and, furthermore, that his mind was far from being at ease.

I had only one thing more to notice ere I took a step nearer to him, and I was not long in doing that. Soon a carriage stopped at the inn, and as the sound fell upon his ears he became so excited that he could hardly hold up his hod, which was at that time being filled. And so it was whenever anyone passed the square,— at every unusual sound he betrayed an uneasiness which was as apparent to me as though I could have seen his very thoughts.

I waited to see no more, but having thrown my bundle over my shoulder, and seen that the dirt had not been rubbed from my hands, I started out. I chose not to speak with “my man” first, but asked one of the others if I could find work on the building.

“What can ye do?” he asked me.

“Carry a hod, or use the spade,” said I.

He looked at me a moment, and then said he'd go and find the “capt'n.” While he was gone “my man” came down the ladder. He was a very respectable-looking fellow, though there was a wildness in his eye which somewhat distracted from his appearance.

“Do you find the work hard here?” I asked him.

He started as though I had struck him.

“What do you want to know for?” he returned.

“Because I have just sent to see if I can obtain work here. A man just gone to see the employer.”

“O, well—the work isn’t very hard,” he said, considerably relieved. “But where are you from?”

“From Epping,” I told him.

He turned pale, and his hand quivered upon his hod.

“And, by the way,” I added carelessly, “I saw a horrible sight there.”

I waited for him to ask some question, but he only gazed into my face with a fixed stare, while his whole frame trembled, and his pallor increased.

“It was in a pond,” said I, at length. “As I was passing I saw a human head in the water. It was cut off. My soul, how terrible it was.”

The man started back, and his face assumed a deathly look, while his hod dropped from his hand.

“You look at me as though I did it,” he gasped.

“Pooh, pooh,” said I, with a smile; and then with a stern look, I added, “I might as well suppose you knew something of the chopped-up man in the box at Newgate Market!”

The fellow continued to gaze into my face a moment, and then with a staggering, leaping step, he turned to flee; but I had watched for this, and my right hand was upon his collar in an instant, and with the left I held a pistol to his head. At that moment my messenger returned, and with him came the foreman.

“I have done my work,” said I.

Of course many questions were asked, which I answered as I thought proper. The man at first begged of me to shoot him, and then he began to declare his innocence in the most frantic terms. But I could not believe him then. I took him to London, and we soon had full proof of this guilt. The murdered man had been his father-in-law, and had cut him off from the possession of property. At the last moment the villain confessed his guilt. He said he had killed the old man close by the market with a club, and then dragged the body into an old cellar, and there he cut it up. He left the pieces there while he went to see if he could get into the market. This being accomplished he struck a light, and the first thing he saw was the box, directed to Staines. He lifted it, and finding it full—he knew it must be meat—he conceived the idea of removing some of the contents and packing the body in its place. He did this, reserving only the head which he

carried with him in a bundle over his shoulder. He had intended to flee to the North, but fearing pursuit and thinking that no one would detect him in rough garb, and at such rough work, and so near the metropolis, he had changed his mind as we have seen.

One of the last acknowledgements he made was that “the London detectives were a strange set of men.” And I told him he was not the only criminal who thought so.

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