

## *The Finger of Providence*

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A short, loud report, and immediately following this came a tearful cry as if some one had received a death-blow. It came from a small frame tenement in Plum Street (no Monroe), and when those who were attracted by the cries entered, a terrible scene presented itself to their horrified gaze.

A rough looking man of thirty-two lay on a floor in a rear apartment, on the second floor, in the agonies of death. One arm was literally torn from his body, and the other horribly mutilated. One side of his face was torn away, and his breast seemed torn to shreds. Several females stood by gazing on the human wreck with wonder-stricken faces, wringing their hands and uttering dismal groans, which, with the dying man's fearful shrieks made the scene a very pandemonium.

When the women were questioned as to what had caused this terrible scene, they could only shake their heads in stupefied silence; they appeared to be no wiser than those who interrogated them.

But that some disastrous explosion had occurred was evidenced by the condition of the wounded man, and the destruction of part of the furniture in the room. A table was split across the top; a looking-glass being shivered on the wall, and nearly every pane of glass in the window had been broken.

A peculiar odor pervaded the apartment; it resembled fulminating powder. Shattered fragments of mahogany lay strew around, but whence they came could not be ascertained, as no article of that wood was seen in the room.

The wounded man, by the physician's orders, was carried into another room, where his condition was inquired into. The doctor pronounced his wounds fatal—the man could not live until midnight, and it was then seven o'clock.

An opiate was given him, his wounds were dressed and the flow of blood staunched, but the man, though quiet, suffered dreadful agonies, yet with all this, he appeared to be as much stupefied at what had occurred as were two women, who, when they found their tongues at last made the annexed statement:

“The man's name is Jerry Moore; he lives a loose life, and stopped with us occasionally,” said one of the women. “This afternoon he came here with something like a box wrapped in a newspaper under his arm, beneath his coat. He went [upstairs] and closed the door, saying he did not wish to be disturbed.

“He had been in the room about half an hour, and we heard him cursing dreadfully once in a while at something or other, and at last he came down and asked us for all the small keys we could find about the house.

“I hunted up some three or four, and he took them and went [upstairs] again. Ten minutes after

we heard the explosion, and we ran [upstairs] and found things as you've seen. We know nothing at all about the thing, do we, Lizzie?" said she, appealing to the other woman.

"Nothing at all," was the rejoinder.

A policeman now came in and inquired what had occurred. He was told what could be ascertained, and he went into the room where the catastrophe occurred, and looked around in amazement. Then he walked about the apartment, and picked up various fragments and examined them curiously. Several pieces of wrought iron resembling pistol barrels [attracted] his attention, likewise some bits of mechanism shaped like the hammer of a pistol. He took those to the doctor and remarked:

"These articles I found in yonder room; they look as if they might be parts of a pistol or pistols rather, for these pieces of barrels belonged to more than one pistol."

The doctor examined them, then connected them with the bits of mahogany he had found in the same apartment. These facts, combined with the statement of the woman, that the wounded man brought a box into the house, pointed to but one conclusion. The box must have contained these barrels, and had undoubtedly been an "Infernal machine," destined to do some one a deadly injury. The policeman, who was an intelligent person, agreed with the doctor, then asked what explanation the man had made of the mysterious occurrence.

"He had not replied to my questions," replied the doctor. "He evidently was as much surprised as we have been; he appeared quite stupefied after I had somewhat relieved his sufferings. My opinion is that he knows nothing at all about the mystery."

"When he recovers we must question him; this affair must be investigated," remarked the officer.

"The man will be no more ere the hour of midnight strikes," observed the doctor, thoughtfully.

"Is he that far gone?" asked the policeman.

The doctor nodded his head.

"He should be questioned then before that event takes place;" rejoined the officer, perhaps a grave crime had been contemplated, and this man may be able to place us in possession of the facts."

"Possibly," returned the medical gentleman, "if he can be brought to speak about the matter. But at present he appears at ease, and it would be cruel to disturb him. Let him have the rest he can get; it will be of short duration in this world."

The officer was about to make a remark when a movement of the dying man on the bed arrested the words he was about to utter. The man mumbled a few unintelligible words, then fell back on the pillow. They hastened to his bedside, and asked had he any communication to make. He

nodded his head. The laceration of his face evidently prevented his speaking. So the doctor put such questions to him as could be answered by a nod or shake of the head.

“Did the box you brought here cause the explosion?” asked he.

A nod was the response.

“Was it given to you?”

“No.”

“Did you find it?”

“No.”

The doctor hesitated but a moment before he asked the next question. The woman had said the man had led a loose life, and it was natural to suppose he might have come by it dishonestly. So the doctor asked:

“Did you steal it?”

“If you only knew where he got it from,” observed the doctor, “but unfortunately he cannot use his remaining hand even supposing he could write, and he evidently cannot use his tongue. Is it not so?” asked he, of the man.

A nod was the answer.

“This is unfortunate,” observed the officer. “I fear the secret will go with him to the grave.”

“It seems likely,” rejoined the doctor.

At this juncture some one entered the room; both looked up and on seeing the intruder they uttered a single word, as in one breath:

“Varnoe!”

Before the detective could respond, the wounded man gave a violent turn of his mutilated body, until he lay facing the last comers; his features worked convulsively for a moment then he uttered these words:

*“I stole it from his office!”*

Then, as if his life had gone out with these words the man turned on his back, closed his eyes and three minutes more he had breathed his last.

When the doctor was assured that the man was quite dead, he asked Varnoe whether he could explain the meaning of the words uttered by the man now lying dead before them.

“Unless I am informed what it was he said he had stolen from my office, I cannot explain anything whatever,” replied the detective.

Upon this the doctor acquainted him with all that had taken place, before and since he had been summoned to the house.

“I had no such box in my office,” replied he, “unless it had been left there during my absence [today] for I have been out of the city since early this morning, and have just returned when I incidentally heard this mysterious affair spoken of by several men in my presence.”

“Then you have not yet been to your office?”

“No; I was on my way thither when I heard of this incident, and came here at once to see what had caused the strange explosion, thinking it possibly might lead to something that came in my line of business.”

The supposed fragments of the box were shown to him. He examined them carefully, then said:

“They are undoubtedly parts of some [‘infernal machine,’] and this unfortunate fellow, by stealing it from my office, has possibly saved me from the fate that has overtaken him. However, I shall know all about the affair from Mrs. Harris, my landlady, when I get to my rooms,” added he.

After taking a careful look at the dead man, the detective took his departure and hastened towards his office. He felt a little uneasy as his thoughts dwelt upon this evident attempt upon his life, and while he was determined to use every means in his power to discover the miscreants, he felt likewise that he must be wary in his movements until they were captured and placed beyond the power to do mischief.

Who the parties were was beyond his conjecture; once he thought it might be Dobson, the koniacker, perhaps escaped from prison. Then again, he thought it probable that Horace Mansfield had escaped, or been pardoned, and came over to have his revenge. Then in review came the different persons whose liberty had been curtailed through his means, and from among the whole he was unable to settle upon any one who would resort to so fiendish a mode of revenge, perhaps Dorville, the Frederick City “mysterious burglar,” whose term of imprisonment had probably expired. When he reached his rooms he at once questioned Mrs. Harris concerning the box.

“Oh, Mr. Varnoe,” cried she, greatly agitated, “I fear I am much to blame to leave the room while that man was here.”

It was evident that she supposed he knew about the box being stolen, and was about to give her a

round lecture for her carelessness. But she was agreeably affected when [he] interrupted her by saying:

“Never mind about that, Mrs. Harris. Only answer the questions I shall ask you. Who brought the box?”

“A small, genteel-looking gentleman,” replied she.

“Have you seen him before?”

“Not to my knowledge.”

“But would you know him if you were to see him again?”

“I am sure I would,” she replied with animation, “I would know him by his eyes even if he wore the most complete disguise, for one cannot generally disguise eyes, unless one concealed them behind green goggles.”

“What peculiarity were about his eyes?”

“They were the blackest, brightest and most restless eyes I ever beheld,” said she. [“]They seemed to see everything in the room at one sweeping glance.”

“*Pete Aram*, as I live,” exclaimed the detective; then he asked, “Was he alone?”

“Alone here,” was the reply; but I watched his departure from behind the window shade, and at the corner he was joined by a tall, elderly man, and they walked together.”

“Mansfield in disguise, no doubt,” Varnoe thought, as he left the lady’s presence and entered his office to study the matter over. He had seated himself when a tap was heard at the inner door, and his landlady entered, saying, as she handed him a letter. “This came with the box, sir, and I was to let no one see it or handle it but yourself.”

He took the letter, and when alone once more opened it at once. A small key dropped out of the envelope; after curiously examining it, he placed it in his pocket, then read the precious epistle. It ran thus:

“This key will open the box, the contents of which are intended solely for my friend Varnoe, as he has richly earned them.

Signed—“An unknown, but appreciative friend.”

He at once recognized the chirography of Horace Mansfield. There was no attempt at disguising the hand, and it suddenly occurred to him that Mansfield knew him only as Varnoe, and had probably not the slightest suspicion that he was the man he had so deeply injured in England or he would have hesitated in writing this letter, knowing that the writing would be recognized by

Alfred Peters.

“This blow, then, was intended as a revenge on the detective, who had captured his wife, sister and her husband, as well as himself, in the midst of their triumph,” thought he. “Very good. But, my fine fellow, I shall treat you to another dose of [‘Varnoe’] before many days, if you have the temerity to remain in the city forty-eight hours longer.”

Adopting a deep disguise, he represented a well to-do traveler of past middle age, and he at once entered upon the task he had planned out for himself. He first went to the Girard House and registered himself by an assumed name, then took a seat in the reading-room and buried himself, seemingly, in the perusal of an evening paper, but covertly watched every man who entered the apartment.

The evening passed, but he did not see the two villains he was seeking. He remained until after breakfast next morning, then went to another of the principal hotels, where he remained until after dinner. He entered the gentlemen’s parlor to look at the afternoon papers for a few minutes, when he was agreeably surprised to see the two rascals seated side by side, each eagerly scanning a paper as if in search of an item of vital importance to them. They were looking for an account of the “shocking affair,” they evidently supposed had occurred ere this.

But Varnoe, with his usual fore-thought, had sworn both the doctor and the police officer to secrecy in regard to the last confession of the dying thief. Hence, when the affair was published in the afternoon papers on the following day, his name was not mentioned in connection with the “mysterious explosion.”

He watched them closely from behind his blue glasses, when suddenly Pete Aram exclaimed in a loud whisper in Italian:

“Ah, here it is at last!”

The “elderly gent” looked and they silently read it together. When they finished the item they turned and looked at each other in consternation for a few moments, then Mansfield broke the silence by exclaiming in Italian, still:

“By heaven, what mystery is this? Who was the man who met the fate intended for that infernal detective?”

“And how came he by the box, and in such a locality, too?” rejoined the other, in the same tongue.

“Two questions we must have answered,” observed Mansfield. “And I mean to go at once to the house and see those two women; they may enlighten us. If this Varnoe has escaped the doom I intended for him, I must try another plan, for I shall not leave this city until I have removed him from my path.”

“All very well, my friend,” rejoined his companion, “but my advice still is, let the man alone, he

has only done his duty in the line of his profession. You and I would do the same, if we were placed in his situation, just as we follow our vocation and do not like to be interfered with while we do it. Do we, now?"

The detective smiled at the logic of this philanthropic rogue, but frowned ominously at the response of the greater villain of the two:

"Hang your philosophy, Pete. Just think what a series of enjoyments he has snatched away from us when he detected us; for I think he had more to do with it than those two pig-headed Scotland Yard detectives. I was told that this man was the sharpest hound after his game of any in the country. I believe it, for it took a shrewd one to detect you and my sister, gotten up as you were, by exchanging sexes."

"What will be your next attempt?" asked Pete with a yawn; proving thereby that he had lost all interest in the affair since the badly conceived plot had failed.

"That I shall decide upon after I have questioned those women," was the curt reply, for Mansfield had noticed the other's perceptible yawn, and it angered him not a little.

The detective left the room before I they did, and at once proceeded to the house on Plum street, where he arrived with an officer of well-known courage. He did not trust himself alone with two such men. One so vindictive and the other as agile as a cat and as full of resources as a Chinese juggler.

Having arranged matters with the two women, Varnoe at once laid his plans. The place was a low tavern. The officer was in citizen's dress and was instructed to take a seat in the bar-room, while the detective went into the rear apartment, leaving the door ajar. He assumed the same disguise he wore at the time he caused the arrest of the precious trio at the Girard House several years before, and he knew that Mansfield would recognize him the moment he appeared before him.

Half an hour after he entered the house the delectable pair of rogues entered and called for drinks. While partaking, Mansfield observed with an indifferent air:

"My good woman wasn't it in this street where a singular explosion occurred not long since?"

"Why, yes, sir, it happened in this house, sir," replied the woman, excitedly.

"Is that so? Please tell me all about the affair."

The woman told what the reader knows already, and when she had finished, Mansfield asked:

"And it was not discovered what caused the explosion?"

"No, sir, I believe not."

“But [today’s] paper states that it was supposed to have been caused by some ‘infernal machine,’ which the man had brought to the house,” remarked the villain.

“Well, yes, sir,” rejoined she, “he did bring a kind of box with him, and as the box was not seen after the explosion, it must have been blown to pieces.”

“Was the man known to you?”

“Jerry Moore known to me?” cried the woman; “well, I should think so. I’ve known him for five years or more.”

“Where did he get the box?”

“I’m sure I can’t tell you,” was the reply, “for he just came, in and went [upstairs,] and then the explosion took place, and he never spoke a word from that time till he died.”

“I can answer that question,” spoke a deep voice from the adjoining apartment, and the next instant the detective appeared within the door. A cry of rage and surprise combined issued from the throats of the two miscreants, for both recognized the redoubtable Varnoe.

Mansfield braced himself against the wall, his left hand thrust in his breast pocket, while Pete Aram cast his restless eyes about the room, seeking the most accessible avenue of escape. The police officer regarded them with apparent indifference, but kept his vigilant eyes on the movements of both. Varnoe continued:

“The man stole the box from the office of the detective, where it had been carried by Horace Mansfield’s emissary, Pete [Aram.] The thief lost his life and saved mine by the act. I shall ever be grateful to his memory for this act, but I shall punish his murderers for their devilish crime.”

In an instant Mansfield withdrew his hand from his breast pocket—it grasped a pistol. He was aiming it at the heart of the intrepid detective, when the police officer dexterously struck up his hand. The weapon exploded at that moment, the muzzle happened to be on a line with the head of the arch-villain, and the bullet went crashing through his skull. He fell upon the floor a corpse.

Pete [Aram] thought this was his opportunity, and he darted for the door, hoping to escape amid the confusion that prevailed. But Varnoe had his eye upon him. As he sprang for the door the detective pounced upon him like a panther and bore him to the floor; he ceased resisting when he found it was of no avail. The officer remained with the dead body, while Varnoe conveyed his prisoner to the station house and notified the coroner.

The evidence proved conclusively that Horace Mansfield came to his end by his own hand, though involuntarily inflicted. Pete [Aram,] at his trial, was fully identified by Mrs. Harris, as the person who had brought the infernal machine to the house, and he was sent to the penitentiary for a term fully commensurate with his crime.



The talented but profligate villain, Horace Mansfield, found a final resting place in an obscure corner of the Potter's Field, and the life-long wrong he had inflicted on Alfred Peters was avenged.

*Louisiana Capitolian* [Baton Rouge, LA], February 7, 1880

This story was one of a number of stories, likely written by different authors, all featuring Mr. Varnoe, the detective.