

## *The Old Coat*

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### Detection of a Murderer

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#### A CALIFORNIA STORY

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The morning edition of the Sacramento *Union* had the following in its local columns:

“FEARFUL MURDER— Last night a fearful murder and daring robbery was committed in our midst. At about four o’clock in the morning, a watchman saw a man coming out of the house of Charles Walter, a well-known money lender. The officer knew that there were only two persons living in the house—Mr. Walter and Kate O’Donohue, the house-keeper. The watchman cried to the man to halt, but instead of stopping, the man increased his walk to a run. The officer again commanded him to stop, but as the fugitive did not do so, he blew his whistle. It was answered by another policeman, who came running around the corner. When the second policeman saw a man running rapidly towards him, he thought it was the watchman, and he asked— ‘Did you blow that whistle?’ The man did not stop in his flight.

“‘Catch him! Hold him!’ cried the first, and the other sprang towards the man, taking hold of his coat or cloak. The fugitive turned and dealt him a blow on the head with a blunt instrument, knocking him senseless. When the watchman arrived at the spot where the other fell, he found an old-fashioned garment, half coat, half cloak, lying on the sidewalk. In the meanwhile more policemen arrived on the spot, but the fugitive had disappeared. The wounded officer was carried to his home.

When the police officers entered the miser’s house, a horrible spectacle met their view. In the passage near the stairs they found the body of the servant girl, in her night dress, with her skull fractured. On entering the bed chamber of the money lender, which is situated on the second floor, they found him lying on the floor, close to the bed. A dark circle was round his throat, showing plainly that he had been strangled. Every drawer was ransacked, and the contents strewn about the floor. It was well known that Mr. Walter had in his possession a large sum of money in coin and drafts on banks in San Francisco and this city; but not a trace of the money could be found in the house by the police.

“We have been requested to state that the coat or cloak the fugitive wore can be seen at the office of the police clerk. No clue to the murderer has been discovered as we go to press.”

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In the afternoon of the day after the murder had been committed, a large concourse of people were passing in and out of the police station, looking at the old-fashioned coat which was exposed for identification.

“Why, I know that coat! It’s the same gray coat I’ve seen yesterday!” exclaimed a boy in the crowd.

A heavy hand was laid upon the boy’s shoulder, and a voice whispered, “Silence, boy! You are my prisoner.”

The lad turned, and saw that a man in plain dress was holding him.

“But you are not a—”

“I am a detective[.] Come along, and be silent,” said the man, pushing the boy into another room. “No harm shall befall you. Wait till I come back.”

With these words the detective left the room, closing and bolting the door after him.

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“Ha, ha, ha! your wine is good, my dear Tom. I wish I could send a bottle of it to my wife,” gleefully cried the farmer, filling his glass.

“The wine comes from Madeira,” remarked the landlord, rising and [lighting] a lamp.

“Some one comes,” cried the farmer, half rising from his seat.

“Keep your seats, gents; keep your seats. I hope I don’t intrude,” said a plain dressed man, walking into the room, seating himself, and filling a glass.

“Sir, this is my private room; the drinking room is down stairs,” exclaimed the farmer.

“This is just what I want;” and the intruder calmly drank the wine.

“This is insulting. Landlord! Ho, landlord! Where in the dickens’ name are you?” shouted the farmer, rising indignantly from his seat.

But the landlord had slipped unperceived out of the room.

“Sit down; don’t get excited, man,” said the stranger, in a calm tone, as he rose, walked to the door and locked it. Then turning, he said, “I am a detective officer, sent here to arrest you for the murder of Mr. Charles Walter and Kate O’Donahue.”

The farmer sank back on his chair, looking very pale.

“Come, come, man, don’t faint or I shall have to carry you down stairs to the carriage that is waiting for you.”

Several minutes elapsed ere the farmer regained his voice.

“So help me heaven, I am—”

“You can tell that to the judge and jury. I don’t want to hear anything. My orders are to bring you to the station-house; so come along quietly,[”] interrupted the detective.

Without another word, the farmer left, in charge of the officer.

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The examination of John Berkley was over, and he was committed to jail to await his trial for the murder of the miser and his servant.

The day of the trial at length arrived, and the court room in the City Hall was crowded to excess, for the news of the coming trial spread far and near. When the prisoner was brought into the court, a murmur ran through the assemblage; but when he arrived at the prisoner’s desk, all was silent. The clerk of the court read the indictment and the judge asked the prisoner whether he were guilty or not.

“I am innocent of the crime charged against me,” distinctly answered the farmer.

“Have you counsel?”

“I need no one to defend me, your honor. I am old enough and able to defend myself against that false and wicked charge.”

“What is your name?” asked the judge.

“John Berkley, farmer, living about 20 miles from here.”

“How long have you lived in Sacramento?”

“I arrived here about a week ago, and put up at the Farmer’s Home.”

“Right!” said the judge, looking at some papers which he had in his hand.

“What purpose brought you to this city?”

“To speculate. I brought about two thousand dollars with me. I don’t know what has become of it. When I was arrested I forgot all about my money.”

“It is in safe hands,” said the judge.

James Miller, a boy about ten years of age, was called in by the prosecuting attorney. The boy gave a clear account of his meeting the farmer, and his remarks about the old coat.

The coat was shown to the boy, and he said “That’s it! That’s the same coat!”

“Why, that is my old coat!” cried the farmer, both having recognized it simultaneously.

“You have the right to cross-question the witness,” said the judge.

“I have listened to the boy’s narrative, and it is true in every particular. I know his evidence is strong against me,” said the farmer.

The watchman’s evidence was next given, and everything he said was strong evidence against the prisoner.

A detective here walked up to the prisoner, and asked him in a low voice, “Did you lose your coat on the way to the hotel?”

“No,” replied the farmer, “it was stolen from me the first night I lodged at the Farmer’s Home.”

Without another word the detective left the court room.

“Prisoner, have you any witnesses?” said the judge.

“The only witness I have is the landlord of the hotel,” replied the farmer.

Thomas Sabin was called to the witness stand. He stated that he knew the prisoner; that he never saw him leave the hotel after dark, and that he was an honest man.

After he had finished, the farmer said “Do you remember that early in the morning of the day after my arrival I rushed into the dining room, very much excited, and told you that some thief had stolen my coat?”

“I do not,” said the landlord, in a firm voice, although he knew that he was telling a falsehood.

“Man, man!” said the farmer, wringing his hands, “you are swearing my life away.”

“I swear no man’s life away; no coat has ever been stolen from my house.”

“Did you not go with me to my bedroom to search for the missing coat?”

“Did I not ask you to restore the garment or pay for it when you were begging that I should not inform the police?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh, Tom! Tom! Your father was an honest man; he never told a falsehood. Why do you perjure yourself? The good God is looking down upon us. He knows that you are giving false evidence.”

The landlord raised his right hand toward Heaven, exclaiming, “By the living God above us, I do not—”

“Hold!” interrupted a man entering the court.

It was the detective. He held in each hand a short bar of iron, and in the other hand he carried a bundle of clothing. The landlord turned abruptly toward the door, and when he saw the detective coming through the passage which the crowd had made for him, he cried in an agonizing voice, “Oh, my God! I am lost!” And he fell senseless to the floor.

“Order!” cried the officer, as the assemblage began to yell and hoot.

After order was restored, the detective said; “Your Honor, I have been at the Farmer’s Home. It is only a few steps from this hall. But where is the landlord?” inquired he, turning to the spot where he had been standing a few minutes before.

During the confusion and yells of the crowd, the landlord recovered from his swoon, and was trying to make his escape; but when he was passing through the door he was detained by an officer stationed there, and dragged back to the bar.

“This is the real murderer, and I can prove it,” pointing to the trembling landlord.

“God bless you, sir; you have saved my life!” ejaculated the farmer, turning to the detective.

“All right, my man; I’ve only done my duty,” said the officer. Then turning to the judge he continued, “When I arrived at the hotel, I was told that the landlady was out, but the servant showed me the attic. With the utmost dispatch I examined the window, where I found that a pane was moveable, so that any one— a thief, for instance— could slide back the glass, thrust his arm through the opening, and unfasten the wooden bar. I also discovered that the edge of the widow sill was broken, and a ladder was resting against a little platform above the window. The thief must have issued from a dormer window above, and descended by means of the ladder to the little platform, and from there he must have lowered himself through the attic window, into the room where the farmer was sleeping. Then I hastened to the bedroom of the landlord. My search there was rewarded by finding this blood-covered iron bar, or jimmy, as the burglars call it, and this shirt, in which was wrapped this bundle of papers and six rolls of gold coin. The bundle contains drafts on banks in this city and San Francisco, all in favor of Mr. Walter.” The detective laid the bundle and bar on a table. “I immediately ran here to prevent the condemning of an innocent man,” concluded he.

“What have you to say to the accusation of the officer?” demanded the judge, turning to the landlord.

“I will confess,” said Tom Sabin. “It is no use now to deny my guilt. I went to the farmer’s room for the purpose of robbing him. I was aware that he had money concealed in his coat, and I took that and quietly left the attic. The officer had described how I effected an entrance. I knew that the miser had a lot of money. His servant girl said so to my wife, who told it to me. As I found no money in the coat, I made up my mind to rob the miser. The back part of Walter’s house adjoins mine; and therefore it was easy to enter it by means of a window, which is situated on the roof of the house. I took the farmer’s coat with me, because it was raining. When the old miser was awakened by the noise I made in forcing open the secret drawer (which the servant girl had minutely described to his wife,) he tried to stab and shoot me; but the cap only exploded, and I grasped the arm that held the dagger. I then strangled him, making sure that he was dead; after which I ransacked everything in the room. I took the money and drafts, which I secured about my person. The robbery was not done in the dark; I had my lantern with me, but only opened it when the miser was dead. When I was passing through the passage, I came in contact with the servant girl. She attempted to fly from me, shrieked ‘Murder!’ I dealt her a blow with that iron bar. I then thought the best plan was to go out by the front door, and I came very near being taken by a policeman; but he only caught the old coat, and I struck him with the iron bar, and escaped down a side street. I thought to fasten the guilt on the farmer, and this is why I denied ever having heard him talking about the missing coat. Now you can do what you please. I have given you the entire facts.”

Farmer John Berkeley was honorably acquitted by the jury; and that very day he left Sacramento, vowing never to return to speculate in that city.

Three days after the trial of the farmer, the landlord was found dead in his cell. He had killed himself by opening a vein in his arm.

*The Janesville [WI] Gazette*, April 4, 1871

*The Wisconsin State Register* [Portage, WI], February 25, 1871