

A Railroad Detective's Story

“Yes, it was a mysterious affair,” said detective Rollins; “but I had little trouble in working up the case, although I was some time in finding the chain to which belonged the broken link that I had discovered. It all came about in such a queer way that if I should live a thousand years I should not forget it.”

“Well, that’s no way, Dick,” cried Uncle Billy Franklin, the genial Master of Transportation, after waiting a long time for Rollins to continue—“that’s no way of getting over the road. But it’s just like men in your business; stirring up one’s dormant curiosity, and exciting one’s expectations, so they settle themselves back for something good or not, as the case may be, only to be placed on nettles by long pauses, like that in which you are now indulging. Come, drop a little sand, pull her wide open, and take a run at the hill of your story.”

“Aye, aye, Dick!” exclaimed Jack Sprague, “You’ve bulletined for that yarn, so pull out, my boy.”

“You should be the last man to hurry an engineer, Jack,” replied Rollins; “either of one of the ‘company’s kettles’ or a story. In either case one is compelled—if he does not wish to run the risk of breaking down, or ‘sticking’ on some hard pull—to examine the machinery, dropping a little oil here and there, where there is danger of wear or rust, and after satisfying himself that his guides, cross-heads and eccentrics are all O.K., pull ahead, as I now propose doing, with a clear track, a good fire, plenty of water and fuel, and a good train behind.

“On the morning of the 10th of December, 1870, I was sitting in the telegraph office at the depot in D—— congratulating myself on the dearth of business on my line, on account of the terrible weather we were then experiencing, and ‘chinning’ the operator, as we sat back in our comfortable arm chairs, testing the merits of some ‘Lone Jack’ in which I had been investing, when click, click, went the call over the line for the headquarters office. Now, among other things, useful and otherwise, that I have picked up in many years service with the railroad is the art—if such it may be called—of telegraphy. I cannot manipulate the lightning myself to any great extent, but I have no difficulty in understanding the strange language as spoken by the many mouths of the telegraph line. So when Rob and I heard the call for the headquarters office, we involuntarily suspended our talking and smoking, and listened for what was to follow.

“Headquarters answered, and then his message—as near as I can recollect was sent flying over the wires:

“‘Agent Pancoast of this station (Attica), was found dead in his office at [6:30] this A. M[.] That he committed suicide, is evident from the fact that all the doors were securely locked, and it was necessary to force an entrance to his office. The body was lying about the centre of the floor, and [nearby] was a large pocket knife—supposed to be his own—covered with blood. He had stabbed himself in several places near the heart, and failing thus to reach the seat of life, cut his throat almost from ear to ear. Safe-key found on his person, and contents of safe supposed to be O.K.’”

“In a minute after this message had been turned in, there came one from headquarters, calling on D——. Then followed:

“‘Is Rollins there? Answer quick!’

“Of course, Bob told them I was.

“‘Proceed to Attica on No. 2, and investigate death of Agent Pancoast,’ was the order, and as the train was due in five minutes, I had little time for preparation.

“I was ready, however, when No. 2 pulled out, and was soon driving along through snow and sleet, on my way to the tragic scene.

“I now had an opportunity to study over the sad affair, and the causes which must have led poor Pancoast to commit the rash act. As was my custom, I drove my thoughts from the present, and, as the saying is, ‘went to the root of the matter.’

“He had been agent at Attica for some five years; he was also agent for the U.S. Express Co., doing the railroad and express business in the same office. He was a single man and slept at the depot office. He kept good company—in fact, was a consistent Christian, and there being so few of *that* class of Christians, one’s attention is attracted when one of the true metal is found. As he did not drink, gamble[,] drive fast horses or speculate, and consequently was not in financial troubles, why did he commit suicide?

“But *did* he commit suicide?

“That question I mentally answered most decidedly in the negative, when an hour later I stood in the office and viewed the body and surroundings. It was still lying in the same position as when found, it not having been disturbed further than for an unauthorized examination of the pockets, in which were found his watch, a small amount of money, and the key to the safe. I took the latter, and opening the safe examined its contents.

“I found but a few small express packages, of small value, according to the figures marked on them, with the receipt-book belonging to the agent. It showed no other entries than of the packages mentioned, and if, as I supposed, he had received any valuable packages from the messenger on the express the night before, or for railroad freight, he had neglected to make an entry of them, or had been murdered ere he had the opportunity. You see by that last how my thoughts were drifting.

“But how account for the office being securely locked—as well as the outer door and no possible signs of forcible entrance on doors or windows?

“What was easier than for the murderer to slip into the freight room unperceived, after Pancoast had hurried out to the train, conceal himself behind the freight, and when the agent locked the outer door follow him to the inner office and perpetrate the deed?

“I procured a light, and went prowling around in the dark corners behind the freight, scanning everything carefully; and just as I was on the point of going elsewhere for a clue, my eye caught something deeply imprinted on the top of a box, which, on examination, I found to be the impress of a boot-heel.

“Now you may say there was nothing strange in that; but when I tell you that a man standing on the top of this box could just see over the pile of freight and watch the inner office, you will know that I picked up a broken link—[that] impress was to me what the broken twig, or faint imprint of a foot, is to the scout on the trail.

“Here then, the murderer had stood and watched with baleful eyes his victim. From this lookout he had planned the manner and time for attack. Then, stepping carefully down, he approached the unconscious agent, with open knife in readiness for the fatal stroke, grasped him, drew him quickly backward, and with one lightning flash of the blade across the throat the deed was done.

“But to make sure of his work he had used the knife in giving several stabs in the region of the heart; and then arranging the body, and dropping the knife near, to give the appearance of suicide, he had opened the safe, abstracted only the valuable packages, locked the doors of the office and freight-room with duplicate keys, and fled, leaving, as he thought, no trace.

“But as I studied the heel-mark in the soft pine I knew that he *had* left a trace—a link that I determined should be fitted to a chain that should bind him hand and foot. As I have said the exact imprint of the heel was deeply impressed into the yielding pine. The maker of the boot to which that heel belonged must have had leisure, and a fanciful turn of mind, when engaged in its manufacture, for he had made in the centre a perfect star, and there it was, every nail distinct[.] It was useless to think of tracing his course without, for it had been snowing all night—and in fact all day—and of course every mark was long since obliterated.

“As I expected, the country coroner and jury returned a verdict of death by suicide. I immediately held a consultation with the railroad express officials, to whom I imparted my belief of murder, but cautioned them to let the impression go forth that they were satisfied with the verdict, and then the chances were that the murderer would not take alarm and fly. My idea was that he was no stranger to that section, and that he would, unless startled by the fact being made known that Pancoast had not committed suicide, remain, for fear that his going away would create suspicion.

“I visited all the boot and shoe stores in that part of the country, ostensibly to buy a pair of boots, but I was hard to suit. I managed to discover, however, that none had made or sold a pair of boots or shoes with a star in the heel. I fell to inspecting every shodded foot, and the marks they might make, with indefatigable perseverance. It grew to be such a mania with me that I greatly surprised Mrs. Rollins by mechanically raising her bootees, as she laid them aside to don her slippers one evening, and examining the heels thereof; and she fell to expatiating on the beauty of the fit and their cheapness, fearing, the dear little woman, that I was growing parsimoniously inclined.

“I had boots and shoes, from number nothings to unheard of sizes, mixed up in my dreams; and

when one night I missed the Express, and took the Fast Freight for D——, and threw myself down on a seat in the caboose and fell asleep, it was not surprising that I fell to dreaming of the perplexing solution to the mystery attached to the murder of Agent Pancoast.

“I seemed to be in an invisible shape, wandering around from place to place in search of a pair of boots with a star worked in the heel with nails. At last I stepped into a store, which I recognized as being the one next door to the headquarters in C——. Great ‘broad-treads,’ with strange devices worked in the heels with huge nails, flitted before me, and ranged themselves on the long counter by the side of little shoes with no heels at all. Dainty ladies’ shoes and gents’ boots seemed of their own volition to leave the shelves and boxes, and come down for inspection.

“At last came the pair I had looked for so long—a pair with a perfect star worked in the centre of the heel. I had already reached out my hand to take them up, when before me stepped a man I had known by sight as a sort of ‘ne’er-do-well,’ who had been braking on the road for a few weeks, who, taking possession of them with an air of ownership, stalked out.

“As he slammed the door I awoke, and, starting to my feet, with the exclamation: ‘At last I have found him!’ found myself face to face with the man of my dream. His slamming the door *coming in* had awakened me, and now, with pale face, he stood before me and asked what I meant; and then, before I had recovered from my bewilderment, he laughed nervously, and with a remark that I was dreaming, picked up his lamp and started out. But before he reached the door I was myself again, and in an instant I had my hand on his shoulder.

“‘Not so fast, my friend,’ said I. ‘Sit down here and let me see your boot-heel.’

“‘What the deuce is that for?’ he asked, with much surprise.

“‘Do as I tell you,’ I answered, pushing him into a seat.

“By this time the other brakeman and the conductor had crowded up, and stood lost in wonder at my proceedings.

“I now raised his foot, and a thrill ran through me as I saw that I had found the chain. There it was, as plain as the nails could make it—a star in the centre of the heel.

“‘Who made you those boots?’ I asked.

“‘Watson, next door to headquarters, in C——,’ he replied.

“My dream to a dot! I was now sure of my man; and pulling out the knife with which the murder had been committed, and which I had carried for just such an occasion, I opened it, and holding it up before his eyes, demanded in an [abrupt] tone:

“‘John Peters, is not this your knife?’

“His bravado instantly deserted him, and turning as pale as a corpse he stammered out that it

was.

“You never saw a fellow weaken so quick, and when I put the ‘bracelets’ on him, he ‘squealed’ the whole thing.

“It was a sorry New Year to him, for it was on New Year’s morning that I stepped from the train at Attica with my prisoner, and hurried him to jail. His trial came off in due course, and as he had confessed to the murder, no defense other than the insanity dodge that was set up by his counsel.

“He had gone over from C—— on the train that reached Attica at [11:30.] He had slipped into the freight-room while Agent Pancoast was at the train, and concealed himself behind the freight; and he *had* stood on the box and looked over the pile of freight watching his chance to slip out. He *had* seized his victim from behind, cut his throat, and then, after stabbing him, arranged the body and knife to give the appearance of suicide. After possessing himself of two valuable packages in the safe, and taking a large roll of money from the wallet of the murdered man, he locked the doors with duplicate keys, walked to the next station, concealed himself in a boxcar on the Night Freight, and reached C—— without being seen by any one. He had been ‘braking extras’ on the road for some time, and the very next day was offered and accepted a permanent position, knowing that his doing so would keep suspicion from attaching to him.

“He deserved hanging, if any murderer ever did, but he got off with imprisonment for life.”

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