

The Detective's Story

“Yes, that was as neat a bit of business as ever I did in my life.”

The speaker was a short, thick-set man, with very broad shoulders and an enormous beard, as far as breadth went, though it did not descend low enough on his breast to hide the rumpled shirt collar he habitually wore open and unbuttoned, at all seasons of the year. He was a rather singular specimen of a man, for while he permitted his beard to strangle about his face in an ungainly fashion, he kept his hair cut pretty close, and his dress possessed traits that invariably puzzled the observer, and insensibly led him into summing up the wearer, only to arrive at a very unsatisfactory total.

The man with his odd ways, and oddly-arranged dress, was a positive walking interrogation, seemingly contrived to worry such people as he met in the course of wanderings, for they seldom came to any satisfactory conclusion about him. The wide-built coat of rough cloth, decked as it was with an imposing array of huge horn buttons, made the wearer look like a pilot, and his beard bore out the supposition with fairness and probability. The heavy cowhide boots, with great thick soles, however, rather upset the sea-faring idea, and the observer usually paused in his surmises, either giving up the problem in despair, or drifting off into the conclusion that the individual was a longshoreman out on a holiday, though the wide pantaloons, of old-fashioned cut, and baggy to a fault, would naturally lead the mind back again to the sea, where it remained, completely lost in fog.

But his hands, if noted, always banished any ideas of manual labors, for they were plump and soft and white, being evidently the only thing about his person that the owner took any especial pride in, for they were remarkably well kept, and scrupulously clean. A massive gold chain hung at his vest-pocket, and at times he would display a valuable gold watch, greatly out of keeping with his general appearance. Those who chanced to meet him in the daytime invariably considered him an odd fish, as indeed he was in more than one way, while those encountering him in the night accorded him a worse character and a wider berth.

Yet the man was quite innocent of evil intention toward anyone, and only proved dangerous to one class of the community, and they had placed themselves beyond any sympathy. In fact, he was a detective officer, and, in his day, one of the most noted, though he now enjoys his leisure and his savings.

George Gregory had originally begun life on the Erie Canal, and from driving team, had, by dint of perseverance and industry, risen at last to the position of Captain of a boat. An accident at length threw him out of employment, and sent him adrift on the land. How he became to be a detective was never rightly understood, for Gregory could be reticent on that score as well as others, else he would never have achieved a reputation as a secret officer of the law, silence being naturally a golden rule in the profession.

“I wish you would tell me the inside of that story,” said I to George, after the remark already noticed. “I never understood the whole of that burglary.”

“Murder, you mean, Sir. For you know they killed the watchman.”

“To be sure, I had forgotten that. But how came you to get at the bottom of the mystery? I remember there was a mystery.”

“You may well say that.” he replied. “It was simple enough, though, as it turned out, for I worked up the case all through an accident and good luck, as often happens in our business. But I’ll tell you the whole story, if you like.”

“By all means, nothing would please me better.”

“Well, you see. Prooch and Hoistman kept one of those large bonded warehouses down town, near the Battery, and they were famous in those days for having on storage some of the most valuable descriptions of goods in the market— silks and velvets, and such like, in hundreds of bales, besides wines and liquors by the cargo, sometimes, and now and then a stray case of jewels or other valuables.

We fellows on the ‘squad’ often wondered how it was that the warehouse escaped a visit from the cracksmen, though we generally agreed that it was all owing to their night watchman, old Bill Wright, as brave and true a man as you would meet in a day’s walk.

Bill used to boast to those of the ‘squad’ who happened to pass the storehouse door in the evening, that it was no manner of use to come bothering there. Not that he didn’t like to see any of us fellows on the ‘fiv.’ He was too good a fellow for that. But he would always insist that the burgs— that’s what he called the burglars— knew better than come his way, for an ounce of lead was no trifle to manage, or get away with, when a fellow got it inside of his skin, as indeed it isn’t, as I suppose you will readily allow.

“Yes, indeed.” I replied encouragingly, seeing that Gregory was looking for answer, as he took a thirsty pull at his beer mug.

“To be sure.” continued George, “a bullet is an ugly thing to manage in your carcass, no matter where you put it. Poor Bill. He was a good fellow and no mistake, and I tell you it made us all feel like tigers that morning when he was found with his throat cut and the goods all scattered about the main floor.

You see it was a dark and rainy night in the month of November, in the year 185-, when Bill turned the keys in the double lock of the front door, after bidding good night to Tom Jackson, the foreman of the laborers, and little Bob Bennett, the entry clerk, they being usually the last to leave the warehouse. Bill was always stationed inside the building, and kept two or three lanterns burning in the place, so he could see the rats run over the floors, and have a better chance to move about. Even then he must have had a lonely time of it.

Both Tom and Bob remarked to each other as they passed up Stone-street into Broadway, that it was an extra dark night, for the clouds were as black as ink, and the heavy drops of rain that came pattering down made them run for a stage. Little did either imagine that they had just seen

the last of poor Bill alive, nor did they feel any alarm for him or the warehouse, so safe and regular had both been for many a year.

The next morning the rain had ceased, and as Bob Bennett turned the corner, and came in sight of the old warehouse, he was surprised to see the laborers all standing in an idle group at the door, which was still closed, though the hour for opening had already come and passed.

As soon as Bob made his appearance the foreman, Jackson, spoke up and said he was afraid something was wrong with the watchman, for he couldn't make him answer, or hear him. Bob hammered at the door a few seconds until his fists were sore, and then ordered the men to get a plank and burst it open. This was soon done, and a terrible sight met their eyes.

There, right in the middle of the passageway, left between the piles of bales and boxes, and near the office door, lay the dead body of poor Bill Wright. A pool of blood had formed around his head, and as the men stepped inside, they discovered that the dead man had had his throat cut in a frightful gash. By his side lay his revolver, all of the chambers still loaded, and on further examination a deep and crushing wound was found on the back of his head, showing that he had been struck down unawares, and rendered senseless before he could use the pistol he so often fondled and relied on, as a means of defense the hour of danger.

“The rest was all clear enough. A man had hidden himself among the goods in the daytime, and crawled upon Bill unbeknown to him as he made his rounds in the night. Seizing a favorable opportunity, the thief had dealt Bill a blow on the head with a slung-shot or a club, which stunned him, and rendered him an easy victim to the knife that had passed across his senseless throat.

The murderer, for we afterward found out that the man who knocked poor Bill down had killed him, must then have opened the street door with the keys he I found hanging at the dead man's waist, and so let in the gang, who had a clean bill, as the health officers say, to proceed in sorting out their plunder. The value of the lot of goods carried off was estimated at over eleven thousand dollars, and consisted mainly of velvets and silks of the best description. The packing up had been systematically carried on, and the work must have taken considerable time, for the gang had busted over fifty different bales in their search. Not only had they ransacked the stock on the first floor, but left traces on the second floor above, for a basket of champagne had been sampled, and several empty sardine boxes showed that a regular supper had been indulged in.”

“They did all that work while the dead body of the watchman was lying there?” said I, in one of the momentary pauses made by Gregory while looking after the bottom of his beer mug.

“Of course, they did. What do you suppose a lot of wretches like them cared for a stiff?” retorted my companion in a disdainful tone. “It's not like that kind of cattle. Why, they were so careful in their work that they even stripped all of the pieces of goods they picked out for plunder, and tore off the bands and trade-mark labels in order that no trace could be found to them afterward. Oh! They did the thing up regularly, and in good shape. We could see it was a professional job, easy enough.

I wasn't put on the case at first, though nearly all of the 'squad' went down and took a survey of affairs, for we naturally felt interested in the case, brave old Bill being quite a character in his way and a general favorite with us. The Chief detailed Jack Willet— it was him that went to England after Bass, the bank forger— and Jack took with him his partner, Ned Griffin.

Well, they laid their heads together. and came to the conclusion that the 'stuff' had been carried away on a truck from the front door, especially as the keys could not be found. Accordingly, Ned and Jack inquired at every stable they could and stopped every chance-carman they met, in hopes of finding the man who had removed the goods, for, you know, thieves frequently make 'stall' of it, as we call it, by hiring a regular carman to do such business just about daylight. But the lay was a poor one, as it turned out, and Willett and Griffin were so disgusted at their ill luck that they almost threw the thing up as hopeless.

About a week after poor Bill's funeral I happened to pass the warehouse, so stepped in for a moment to see Bob Bennett, who I always liked for his bright and cheerful manner, not being given much that way myself, as you may have noticed before now. Bob was only too glad to see me, and as he gave me a glass of wine from a demijohn they kept handy in the office, he, of course, began talking about the burglary and the murder, for all hands were naturally full of it.

I listened to Bob and his theories for a few minutes, and was about to cut him short and get away, when when my eyes were suddenly caught by the sight of a bit of gold that was peeping from under one of the piles of boxes forming the passage to the rear of the store. Knowing that if Bob saw me pick up anything, out of the common way, his ready tongue would soon make everybody as wise as himself, I cast about for a plan to get rid of him for a moment.

You see I didn't know whether I was on anything like a clue or not. But we were always looking out for the chances and accidents in our line of business, else we wouldn't do much you may depend. But knew I saw a bit of gold under the box there, and I wanted it.

Telling Bob that talking was dry work as indeed it is— yes, I don't mind if I do have another mug, thank you— and that his wine was good, he good-humouredly took the hint and started for another glassful. The moment he was out of sight I glanced round to make sure that no one else saw me, and, stooping down, soon found that the bit of gold I had seen was a tiny little stud, set with three pearls, and, having the letter F. engraved on the back of the button. I had scarcely time to note all this and slip the stud into my pocket before Bob came back with his wine.

Quietly sipping at my glass I set Bob hard at work talking about the murder over again, and managed in an indirect way to ascertain that the dead man had never been known to wear anything like jewelry, except indeed an old-fashioned silver watch he had carried ever since he had been connected with the place. It was evident, therefore, that the stud in my pocket did not belong to poor Bill. Could it belong to one of the gang? I determined to find out, so I told Bob I had lost a stud and didn't know but that I might have dropped it in the warehouse, at the same time asking him to inquire some time if it had been found.

As I expected. Bob could not contain himself, and was only too eager to help me in my supposed trouble, for he immediately began to bawl out to all hands, asking if any of them had found a stud like the one I described. It so happened that everybody connected with the warehouse was in

the building, even the partners in the firm, so I soon ascertained that none of them had found a stud.

I suppose you see that I really wanted to know if anyone had lost the stud I had in my pocket, and that by my saying I had lost one would of course lead to the owner showing up. Thus I got an answer to my real question without any one suspecting my secret.

Thanking the warehouse people for their kindness in so trifling a matter, I walked away, fully convinced that I possessed a clue to the identity of one, at least, of the murderous gang. But it was a slight chance to go on wasn't it? Yet it turned out all right in the end, as I will show you. The firm had offered a reward of two hundred dollars for the murderer, or any of the gang, who could be convicted. That was pretty good sum for those days, though, I presume the 'fly cops,' nowadays, wouldn't think much of it. No reward was offered for the stuff carried off, as is the common practice now, so there was no inducement to look for the goods except for evidence. Merchants in these days know their own business best, I suppose, else they would not send the Police after stolen property to gain big rewards. I could give you many a queer case where burglars got good hauls in ready money by surrendering their swag to detectives, who, in return, pretended they couldn't find the criminals, and yet shared the rewards with them.

But as I was saying, the firm had offered a handsome reward, and the Mayor had offered another, so I had a good stake in view if I could work up the job alone. Taking good care to let none of the 'squad' suppose that I intended meddling in the case, I kept my eyes open, and at odd times poked my nose into some of the low haunts in the Fourth and Sixth Wards, in hopes of something turning up. Two or three weeks passed by, however, and I hadn't struck anything, and the murder was being rapidly forgotten, as is always the case in this City, somehow.

One night I was on office duty, and having read all the newspapers about, was idly turning over our file-book of advertisements, when I suddenly came across the account of a burglary that had occurred uptown, a few years before, in the residence of a Mr. Falconer. Among the articles described in the circular was a set of studs precisely like the one I had been carrying in my pocket so many days. The discovery led me on a new track, and I saw my way clear in a moment, for I remembered that a well-known burglar had been convicted and sent to Sing Sing for that robbery. His name was William Watson, at least, that is his prison name, but he was best known as 'Crazy Bill,' not that he was any crazier than you or I, but because he once got out of an ugly charge by pretending insanity. So well did he play his cards that the jury acquitted him as a lunatic, and he went to the Asylum, and afterward got out on habeas. But the name of 'Crazy Bill' stuck to him after that.

Watson had a partner in the burglary, a fellow named Sam Sniffen, though he once did time in the State Prison under the name of Hammond. Sam escaped conviction on the trial by a clever *alibi*, and was 'turned up,' as we call it. I knew Sniffen was still in the business, but we all understood he had gone West. At any rate, he hadn't been seen of late. Still it stuck in my mind that if I could ascertain that he was in town about the time poor Bill Wright had his weazen cut, I could make a good case against him, or at all events compel him to squeal on somebody else. But it was miserable chance, after all.

My luck was still not all gone, however, for the very next day one of our men mentioned that he had seen Sniffen on Broadway, and we must look out for him. This fixed me, and I spent all that day and night in looking for Sam, who I secured at length in an oyster-cellar, down near the Old Bowery Theatre. Sam was very anxious to know why he was arrested, when I staggered him by saying that I had good evidence in my possession, showing that he had had a hand in the Falconer burglary, as the missing studs had been traced to him. Sam smiled scornfully, and remarked that I was off my reckoning for once, for he could prove that Crazy Bill had given the studs to his woman.

Sam was locked up, nevertheless, for I told our Chief the whole story, and we kept him for safety. I knew that Polly Wycher, a well-known pickpocket in her day, had lived with Watson for some years, and had lately taken up with a fellow named Jim Fletcher, otherwise called 'Knuckles,' because of his awful big hands. I 'pinched' Polly that afternoon at her lodgings, over on the east side, and searching vigorously was rewarded by finding the other two studs in her bureau drawer. Telling Polly that I knew how she came by the studs, offered to say nothing about it if she would give me the third one, as they were family relics and worth a good reward. Polly was thoroughly frightened, and finally confessed to me that she had loaned the stud to Fletcher a few days before, to replace one he had lost. She said Jim was out of town, but would soon be back, and she would get it from him as soon as possible.

The case was now clear enough, for after locking up Polly, we notified Philadelphia and Boston that 'Knuckles' was wanted, and in less than a week we had him in the cells, along with his two pals, Tom Harrison and Ed. Everett. These last named men had been confined several days before we got 'Knuckles,' and were quite uneasy in their minds, as they could only guess our purpose. There was a fourth man in the gang, as we afterward found out, though we never got him, however, for he got 'fly' on our movements in some way, and made off to California, then all the go, and he was hung there a year or two after, in some mining town, for his old tricks at stealing.

I went down stairs to Fletcher's cell the night he was brought in, and asked him if he knew what the charge was. He said no, though I could see by his eye that he half suspected. Determined to test the matter I suddenly produced the stud, and inquired if he knew that. He blanched in a moment, but, with a gasp, managed to stammer out that he didn't know anything about it. ["Yes you do,"] said I to him, ["and you're the man who killed the watchman, and here's the evidence that'll hang you.["]

I shall never forget the look of terror and agony the poor devil gave me, as I turned away from the grated door of his cell, and went upstairs, for he fairly seemed to see the gallows over my shoulder.

It had been arranged that all three of the prisoners should be brought together the next morning, in order to see how they would act, for, you see, we were considerably in the dark still, and had to feel our way. The programme was spoiled, however, for 'Knuckles,' who was always a weak-kneed cuss, surprised us by having a private hanging match of it, all to himself, in his cell. He had managed to use a handkerchief for a cord, and a staple in the wall to swing off from. He did

the thing most effectually, for although the man in charge of the cells saw him apparently asleep on hill bunk at midnight, he was found dead, and almost stiff at 2 o'clock.

I felt savage enough at Jim cutting up so rough, for I hadn't had a decent chance to work up a case against him, but he had saved me the trouble by leaving a piece of scribble behind him, in which he confessed that he had killed the watchman. From his note, scrawled and half-worded as it was, from being penciled in the dark, we gathered that Jim was the man who had hidden in the store-house overnight, and knocked down the watchman, as I have already told you. He then went for the keys at Bill's waist, but seeing that the poor fellow was not quite stunned by the blow and was bravely fumbling for his revolver, he whipped out his knife and cut Wright's throat. Jim took care to say that though Harrison and Everett were in the job, neither had any hand in the murder. The news of Fletcher's arrest, suicide, and confession, of course got into the papers, and I had enough fame for that day; besides, I got the best share of the rewards."

"What was done with Harrison and Everett, after that?" I asked, as Gregory appeared to consider his story ended.

"Oh! they confessed everything, and gave up the goods, their pal's death having completely upset them. When put on trial they pleaded guilty to the burglary, and considered themselves lucky to get off with a sentence of twenty years in the State Prison, though they didn't remain there long, for Harrison died a few years after, and Everett managed to escape and disappeared from this part of the country."

But I forgot to tell you how they got away with the goods, and a cute thing it was, too. While 'piping off' the warehouse people and laying their plans, as is always done by first-class burglars, the gang discovered that the scuttle of the storehouse was quite close to a window in a tenement-building, the rear of which jugged on to the warehouse. They managed to hire this room, and after they had gained an entrance, and packed up the goods, the thieves deliberately carried all of the pieces upstairs to the top floor, and passed them up on to the roof, finally dumping the goods into the window. That stuff lay quietly in that room for three days, but none of us ever tumbled to the scuttle, so clean had they left their track behind them. Had they dropped anything on the stairs, or neglected to fasten the scuttle, neither Griffin nor Willett would have gone on such a wild-goose chase, and I would probably never have had a hand in the matter." W.

New York Times, April 30, 1871