

[WRITTEN FOR THE FAMILY JOURNAL]

The Treble Assassination;

OR

The List Slippers

A Detective's Story

by John B. Williams

A FEW months since, while on a visit to New York, I met at the St. Nicholas Hotel an old gentleman, whom, from his bearing and demeanor, I took to be an Englishman. We speedily became acquainted, and I found him a very intelligent, amusing companion. He had been attached to the detective police service in England. He entertained me the whole evening with the history of his adventures. One case, especially, made a deep impression on my mind. I begged him to write it out for me. He promised to do so, and the next morning we separated. I have not seen him since. A few days since, however, I received a letter and MSS. from my friend, dated England, where, it appears, he had returned. I found that he had fulfilled his promise, and now give the history to the readers of the *Journal*, without altering one word.

IN the year 1830, rumors reached London that a small town, in one of the middle counties of England, was the theatre of extraordinary crimes. Several atrocious murders and robberies had been committed there, and not the slightest clue had been found as to the perpetrator of these deeds. Twenty-five years ago news did not travel as fast as now. The electric telegraph was not known, and railroads were only in partial operation. The reports that reached the metropolis were, in the first instance, vague and contradictory, but they soon assumed a more decided character, and a full endorsement as to their truth was received, in the shape of a letter, from the local authorities to the Police Department in Bow street, begging that the most [skillful] detective might be sent down to ferret out the real criminals.

A brother officer of mine, Matthew Harden, was [dispatched] to the theatre of these events, and he went, with the full assurance that he would be successful.

Matthew was a good fellow, and a capital hand at discovering ordinary criminals, but he did not possess the subtlety necessary to make a first rate detective. He was too frank, too boisterous, and too conceited to deal with refined [villainy.] He was fully acquainted with all ordinary modes practiced in such cases, such as disguise in dress, decoy letters and tracing out a chain of circumstantial evidence when the first link was found, but he was deficient in the power of analysis, so that when he had to do with a more acute mind than his own, he was generally foiled.

I was not at all surprised then, to learn that after he had been absent a week, a letter was received from him, to the effect that all his efforts had been entirely fruitless.

On the receipt of this letter, our Chief sent for me, and ordered me to go at once, and take

Matthew's place. My instructions were written out, and the next day I started on my errand.

In the first place, I provided myself with a book of patterns, clothed myself in a suit of chequered cloth, assumed a certain jaunty air, and was, for the occasion, transformed into a bagman, or commercial traveler, traveling for a large commercial house in the cloth line.

I went to the Bull and Mouth, Holborn, and booked myself for the town of H——, sixty miles from London, the town where the crimes had been committed.

It was a cold day in February; the wind blew from the North-East, and the top of the coach was by no means the most pleasant place in the world on such a day. But when I am engaged on special business, I never allow myself to think of my own comforts, and being also something of a philosopher, I made the best of it.

After a tedious journey of eight hours, I saw the spires of the two churches that the town of H—— contains; and we were borne, bowling along the well paved streets—or rather street—for although it is a county town, it consists only of one long thoroughfare.

We stopped at the George Hotel. I jumped off the coach, and was shown into the Commercial Room, where I found a bright fire burning. After tea I went to seek for Matthew, who was staying at the Fountain, the rival inn to the George. I found him there, and told him he must go back to London, and leave the business in my hands. He didn't like it much at first, but, of course, he had to obey orders. He then gave me all the information he had gathered, and the particulars of the various crimes which had caused such consternation in the little town of H——. Divested of all verbiage, the facts were simply as follows:

About two weeks before Matthew's visit, the inhabitants of H—— were one morning startled and horrified by the report that a fearful murder had been committed during the night previous. Martin Clasp, a night watchman, employed by the Messrs. Percival, the bankers of the town, was discovered stabbed in the back; the murderer had evidently approached him from behind, and the blow had been so surely given, that the unfortunate victim did not appear to have made the slightest struggle. The safes of the bank had been forced, and the contents rifled, amounting to some two thousand pounds.

The town of H—— does not consist of more than three thousand inhabitants, so that the consternation, spread by his murder, may be easily imagined. Every effort was made to discover the assassin, but without the slightest success.

Three days afterwards, before the excitement attending this frightful deed had subsided, the dwelling house of a retired merchant, who lived on the outskirts of the town, was broken into and robbed of its valuables. The inmates, consisting of an old man and two female servants had heard and seen nothing, although it appeared the robber or robbers had actually entered the sleeping apartments, picking the lock in the most dexterous manner.

Four nights after that another fearful [murder] was committed, which raised the public [excitement] and fear to the highest pitch. A widow lady residing in the heart of the town was

discovered murdered in her bed; she, too, had been stabbed to the heart. The house had been rifled and in spite of every effort of the local authorities, not the slightest trace or [clue] could be discovered. It was then that a Bow street officer had been sent for.

Such was the substance of the facts told me by Matthew Harden. He then entered into particulars of what he had done, which amounted to nothing. He had caused several worthless characters to be arrested; but they were immediately released for want of evidence against them. I found it to be Matthew's opinion that a band of men had been concerned in these atrocities.

Harden had told every body his business, and had shown but little tact in conducting his investigations. He left for London by the night mail, and I returned to my inn debating in my own mind the best way to begin my investigations.

Every one was talking of the recent murders, but I mingled very little in the conversation myself.

The next morning I paid a visit to the house of the late victim, the widow lady. It was a small dwelling, situated in the main street, and it really appeared surprising how such a deed could have been committed without alarming the neighbors. I saw in a moment that I had a most difficult case to contend with. The villain or villains were no ordinary persons. The work had been done in the most scientific manner. The first thing that struck me was the *noiselessness* with which the deed had been committed. No one had heard a sound. As I have before said, the same hand, which had committed this deed, had entered the merchant's bed chamber, while he slept, without awakening or alarming the owner of the house, who was lying asleep in bed at the time.

Here, then, was my first point. The question next presented itself to my mind, that, for a man to have accomplished this, he must have worn some soft covering on his feet. This covering, I immediately surmised, must have been list slippers—then very much in fashion. When I returned to my hotel I found, by experiment, that a person in stocking feet could not move about without eliciting some sound; but on putting on a pair of slip shoes made of list, I could move about without even making a board creak.

I also made the discovery that the murderer (for I had made up my mind that only one man had been concerned in the crime) was a small man, and had light hair. I came to this conclusion from the fact that the opening, through which he had entered the widow lady's house, was a small one, not allowing a full sized man to enter. This opening had been made by the removal of an iron bar. Attached to the fragment of this iron bar were two long hairs of a very light brown.

My next proceeding was to go round to all the shoe shops in town where they sold the peculiar kind of slip shoes, to which I have referred, carelessly making inquiries as to who had purchased slip shoes there during the last two or three weeks. Trade in that particular article appeared to have been dull for some time past, for in the first four shops I enquired at, I found they had sold none within the last two or three months; but I was more fortunate at the fifth and last shop in town. Here I learned that a certain gentleman, whose name I shall not at present reveal, had recently purchased *three* pairs there. On enquiring, I found the purchaser *to be a little man, with light hair!*

Here was a most important point gained. The simple fact of the man buying three pairs of slip shoes was in itself very suspicious—this, with the fact that he was small and had light hair, was proof positive to me that I found my man. There was one thing, however, which, to any one else, might have proved sufficient to dismiss such an idea as soon as it entered the mind. The gentleman who had bought these shoes was a most respectable, wealthy, and influential man; and had I breathed my suspicions to any body, I should have been laughed at as the [veriest] blockhead that ever lived.

By the time I had made all these investigations it was late, and I returned to the George, determined the next morning I would make my grand *coup*. I retired to bed very well satisfied with myself, and slept as soundly as if the murderer were already in jail.

Early the next morning I was awakened by a tap at my door.

“Come in!” said I.

The door opened, and the chambermaid made her appearance, with a pitcher of hot water. She looked as pale as a ghost, and trembled violently.

“Why, what is the matter, Mary?” I asked.

“Oh, sir, haven’t you heard the news?”

“Why, what news could I have possibly heard?”

“Well, sir, another terrible murder was committed last night.”

“What!” I cried, starting up into a sitting posture.

“Young Mr. Pearce, of the Grange, was murdered last night.”

“Mr. Pearce!” I almost screamed out, for the name was perfectly familiar to me.

“Yes, sir; he was found in his father’s study stabbed dead, and the house was robbed.”

“And Mr. Pearce, Sen., was he injured?”

“No, sir. They say, though, he’s almost distracted.”

Mary for some minutes continued to discourse on the last fearful tragedy. At last she left the room, and I jumped up and hurried on my clothes. This last tragedy caused me the greatest surprise. I could not comprehend it—it upset all my calculations, and left me wandering about in a sea of doubt and uncertainty.

I went down to breakfast. Consternation and fear were depicted in every face. Public excitement had now reached the highest pitch. Persons appeared to be afraid to walk alone even in the day

time. In the streets groups were conversing together on the corners of the streets. Every face wore a pale, anxious expression. On the dead walls of the town I saw a handbill convening a public meeting on that day at noon to devise what was the best to be done for the protection of the town.

Mr. Pearce, the father of the last victim, was a most respectable gentleman, living in a large house called the “Grange,” about half a mile from town. He was reported to be very wealthy, and had recently made some heavy purchases in landed property. The unfortunate young man, his son, was about twenty-one years of age, and it was stated by all who knew him, that he was the very epitome of honor and honesty. He was very talented, and had already made some contributions to the literature of his country.

The Pearces had not been long residences of H—— not more than two or three months at most; but they had brought with them excellent letters of introduction, and at once been admitted into the very best society of the place. The family consisted of Mr. Pearce, Sen., his only son, and two or three servants. The father’s grief at the loss of his only child can be very well imagined; it was stated that he was almost distracted.

The moment I had finished my breakfast I determined that I would repair to the scene of the tragedy. I had more than one motive for doing this.

I found the Grange to be a large building, evidently erected in the time of Queen Elizabeth. It was surrounded by a high wall, on the top of which was placed broken glass bottles, a very common method in England of preventing the ingress of interlopers. The entrance was by means of a massive iron gate.

A large crowd was already assembled in the court-yard, seeking for admission, but watchmen were at the door and refused entrance to all except friends of the deceased.

Before entering the house I made a thorough examination of the exterior. I found the wall was so lofty and so well defended by the broken glass that entrance except through the gate was almost impossible. I next proceeded to enquire if the lock had been forced, and learned that the gate was still locked when the murder was discovered.

I now went to the main entrance, but was refused admittance—and it was not until I told them who I was that I could obtain it. I would rather not have done this, but there was no help for it.

The room where the poor young man had been killed remained exactly in the same condition as when the deed was first discovered. He had evidently been seated at the table writing, and had been utterly unaware of the assassin’s approach. There was not the slightest evidence of any struggle having taken place; no disorder was apparent in the room, and the victim had not evidently uttered a single cry. He, like the others, had been stabbed in the back.

In the ashes under the grate were some pieces of paper, half consumed. I gathered them carefully together and made out the following detached sentences:

“.....discovery.....fearful.....a felon’s death.....murder.....horrible.....life a burden.....my father.....what to do? what to do!O God, help me!.....help me!”

I made enquiry concerning the deceased of the servants, and learned that the whole of the previous day he had been in the lowest possible spirits, that he had kept himself shut up in the room all day, and had spoken but few words.

I then asked to see the bereaved parent, but was told that he was too deeply plunged in grief to be seen. I begged the messenger I sent to inform Mr. Pearce who I was, and that the ends of justice demanded I should see him.

After some little delay I was admitted into his presence. He had on a morning gown. He was fearfully pale and appeared to be plunged in the deepest grief.

I conversed with him a few minutes concerning the late fearful occurrence, and learned that he had heard nothing during the night, and it was only when morning had come and a servant had entered the study that the fearful truth became known to him.

When I heard his statement I left him, and going to the watchmen guarding the door, I begged that they would accompany me to perform a disagreeable duty. The men stared as if not comprehending what I had said.

Accompanied by the watchmen I returned to Mr. Pearce’s chamber, and knocking at the door I informed him that I wished to ask him another question. As soon as the door was opened I entered, and placing my hand on Mr. Pearce’s shoulder, I exclaimed:

“Mr. Pearce, I arrest you for the [willful] murder of your son! I also accuse you of having murdered Mrs. T——, the widow lady, and the watchman in Mr. Percival’s bank.”

The man turned livid.

“What do you mean?” he said. “Are you mad?”

“No, sir, not exactly, thank God I am in full possession of my senses, or I might not have succeeded in discovering the perpetrator of these fearful crimes.”

“Where is your proof?” he exclaimed.

“I have discovered a letter, which your son was writing at the time you stole behind him, your feet protected by those list slippers you wear.”

“That letter was destroyed!” exclaimed the assassin.

“You, see,” I exclaimed, turning to the watchmen—“he virtually confesses that he destroyed the letter after having committed the deed. What a pity it is for these clever murderers, that they sometimes forget themselves. [“]Here,” I continued, pointing to his morning wrapper, “is a spot

of his son's blood still on his dressing gown." The assassin saw that he had committed himself, and sank down in his chair speechless.

The moment I saw him I knew that I stood in the presence of the man who had committed these fearful deeds. *He was a small man, with light hair, and wore list slippers.*

He was removed to goal, and there that same evening confessed his crimes. It appeared that he had the reputation of being wealthy when he was really straightened in circumstances. He became desperate, and determined that he would recruit his fortune by burglary. In his early life he had associated with robbers and housebreakers, so that he was quite *au fait* at the business. Once entered on his career of crime, he stopped at nothing, and soon added the murder to burglary. By some means his son became acquainted with his father's crimes and accused him of them. Pearce made a faint denial, [and] determined that he would sacrifice his son. How he effected his purpose the reader already knows. While the poor young man was in the very act of writing a farewell letter to his father the fatal blow was given. After the deed was committed Pearce tore up the letter and threw it on the fire, where it had been partially consumed. The only way to account for the father sacrificing his own son is that the fear of detection became stronger than his parental love.

Six months after, the wretched criminal was hanged on the Castle Hills, and his body was burned at the cross roads.

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