

## *Story of Crime*

---

A heavy burglary of silks was committed on Church Street in the year 1856. The goods stolen were valued at seven thousand dollars. The burglars must have entered the place on Saturday night and packed up the goods during Sunday, as required considerable time to select the costliest fabrics, as they had done in this case. Moreover, they displayed a pretty fair knowledge of the different qualities of silks, for a number of our imitation goods were thrown aside, although they looked as fine and costly as the richest silks.

It was supposed that there were three or four of them, and they must have had some conveyance to take the goods away, which could readily be done in such a lonely street as Church Street is at night, and especially on a Saturday night.

There were no doors or, shutters forced, hence the rogues must have used skeleton keys. The first intimation the clerks had of the burglary was fully half an hour after the store had been opened, for all the goods stolen were taken from the second floor.

As soon as the firm were informed of the burglary, they at once made an investigation in order to ascertain the extent of the robbery. They were astounded at the amount of goods removed without being detected in the act. But doubtless they were old hands at the business, and had the vicinity well guarded to prevent a surprise.

Varnoe was summoned to the spot at once, and took a careful survey of the scene of operations. He picked up several articles, which evidently belonged to the burglars, and put them in his pocket for possible future use; for sometimes a mere trifle has been found to play a very important part before a judge and jury.

Several half-smoked cigars lay around the place. The rascals had discovered a hidden box of Havanas belonging to one of the salesmen in silk department, and had made a very liberal use of them. A twisted piece of paper, partly burned, lay on the floor. Thinking it had been used to light a cigar, the detective picked it up and found it was a letter of recent date, and, fortunately, the burnt part was at the termination of the letter instead of the sides, in which case it would have puzzled the detectives considerably to grasp its entire meaning. It was written in a feminine hand, and ran thus:

NEW YORK, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 1856.

*Dear Jim*—I hope you will take good care of yourself in this hazardous undertaking in the City of brotherly Love. For, bear in mind, if you are “scragged” there you will find a difficult matter to escape the penalty, as you have frequently done here, surrounded by considerate friends. I would like to see you before you go away, so please remain at No. 127 Bleeker street at seven this evening, and I’ll introduce you to several—”

At this point the letter terminated it having been consumed by the flame. But Varnoe carefully placed the fragment in his note-book for future reference, as it might aid him in tracking at least one of the burglars, whose Christian name is “Jim.”

This fragment of a letter was the only thing he found in the place which gave him a clue to the burglars, and a very faint one it was too. Yet it proved that the “job” was that of a New York party.

When Varnoe informed the gentlemen composing the firm that he had found a slight clue he did not mention a word about the letter he had found, as that would have put the rogues on their guard, if it came to be published in the papers. He merely said he had a clue to work upon, and it would oblige him to leave the city for a day or two.

Next day he started for New York, and put up at the Globe Hotel, corner of Frankfort and William streets. This was on Saturday, and he at once proceeded to Bleeker Street and found two houses of the same number [(No. 127).] One was a respectable looking dwelling, and it appeared that number was a legitimate one—corresponding with the rest of the numbers. But the other was evidently a spurious number, as the house was fully four blocks further away as its number was not in conformity to the adjoining houses.

The house was occupied as a cheap restaurant and drinking saloon, and Varnoe at once concluded that it was the house where he would most likely find “Jim” sometime or other, if he kept his eyes about him.

He assumed the dress and general appearance of a sporting man, when he had noticed on a previous visit that such individuals generally resorted there. The host being one of that sort himself, and a buxom bar maid also bore the stamp of a “fast woman,” both in her features, dress and conversation. Asking could he have a private sleeping apartment the proprietor replied affirmatively, then asked him his name and profession.

“My name is Gus Fabian,” promptly replied the detective, and my profession is whatever puts the most “shiners into my purse,” he added with a saucy smile.

“That is spoken like an independent gentleman, I take it,” observed mine host with a knowing wink.

“You will find me to be that after a week’s acquaintance,” quietly replied Varnoe.

“Are you a New Yorker?” asked the host, who sported the title of Major Stehie.

“Not by birth,” was the reply, “I was born in New Orleans and have resided there until very lately. I was obliged to leave my native place owing to a little unpleasantness I had with a gentleman about the ownership of a gold watch and a few diamonds I had in my possession, he insanely persisting in claiming them as his, and offered to leave it to a high official to decide which of us was the legal owner. But I declined any arbitration in the matter, and purposely left the city secretly in order to escape his importunities.”

This speech so tickled the Major that he laughed until the tears started from his little black eyes.

“Well, Mr. Fabian,” said he admiringly, “you do put it fine, and that’s a fact. Why did you not study law?”

“I have done so since I was a mere lad,” replied Varnoe, with a leer, “and have practiced at the bar besides—before and behind it—I once kept a saloon, after which I took my drinks “before the bar,” perceive, eh?”

“Oh, I take,” laughed the delighted Major. “I suppose you are not out of practice before the bar, are you?”

“Scarcely,” was the laconic response.

A bottle and two glasses rattled on the bar, and two ‘hail fellows well met,’ took a social drink at the Major’s expense.

Then they had a long confidential conversation together, and at the end of an hour Gus Fabian was pronounced by mine host the entertaining and whole-souled gentleman he had ever met. Of course this was mental; the Major was too well bred to Ratter a comparative stranger in that extravagant style.

In the evening the Major promised he would introduced him to a few “congenial spirits” whom it was as an honor to know, and the detective smiled blandly, saying:

“I would be pleased to become acquainted with any gentleman whom the Major honors with his friendship.”

The flattered Major insisted on taking another drink with Mr. Fabian after which the latter left the saloon to take a walk and see the city, as he observed. But his real object was to see the [Mayor] and ascertain the character of the Major’s [saloon] and the reputation of its frequenters.

His honor informed him that the place was one of bad repute, being the resort of thieves, burglars and pickpockets, both male and female.

Varnoe, however, kept his name and profession a secret from the Mayor. He was well aware that many of the New York detectives and police officers were in collusion with a number of the most desperate characters; hence, to let the Mayor or his officers know that he was in their midst, would be equivalent to telling the burglars he was aiming to capture, that a Philadelphia detective was on their track! Varnoe still had his wits in hand, and could not possibly commit so silly a blunder as that.

In the evening, at about 8 o’clock, the saloon began to present a pretty lively appearance, most of the visitors, belonging to that class known as “fast men” men. There were rude, illiterate fellows; flashy, and vulgar fellows, and genteel-looking men; who, but for “solid” men of means, their bearing and language being calculated to convey that impression.

Varnoe, as we have before observed, was a very good physiognomist, and could give a pretty accurate guess at the person's character, disposition and proclivities after a close observation. He studied the face of each in turn as they entered, and wondered which of them was the "Jim" he most wished to see. But as he knew not what sort of person he might be, he finally hit upon a sharp-looking, genteel chap of about thirty, as the Church Street burglar. He was just the kind of fellow a "fast" woman would take a fancy to.

A number of the visitors appeared to regard this man with a great deal of deference, and the detective judged him to be a chief among them, and anxiously awaited the hour when the Major would have leisure to introduce him to those "congenial spirits." But the steady influx of patrons kept him and his bar-maid very busy for quite a period, and it was past 9 before the host could leave the bar in charge of the girl and redeem his promise to "Mr. Fabian."

But now he came forward, and calling several of the men by name, led them into a room in the rear of the bar-room, and held a low consultation with them, after which he came out and approaching the detective, said: "Mr. Fabian, if you will step into the rear apartment I shall introduce to you some of the boys I spoke of."

The detective followed him, and soon stood in their midst. The Major then introduced him, and by so doing mentioned the name of each one as he was introduced to Varnoe. The sharp-looking chap was Pete Burns; then followed the names of Jerry Jones, Bill Cochran, Jim Benson, Patsey McCloskey and "Chick," Jim Denverin. The Major had evidently enlightened them during his consultation with them in regard to Gus Fabian's presumed profession, for they it all, with a single exception expressed themselves "delighted to make the acquaintance of Mr. Fabian!" This exception was Pete Burns. Varnoe appeared not to notice the indifference, nay, almost contempt with which the man saluted him when introduced; and he perceived that the Major also noticed the coolness of Burns, for he glanced at him inquiringly upon which the latter manipulated his fingers with a few rapid gestures, which Varnoe interpreted as rapidly, meaning: "I do not like this Southern chap; I must know more about him. He may be a spy!" To which the Major replied, in the same language: "You are mistaken; he is just what he represents himself to be."

"This fellow mistrusts me," thought Varnoe. "I must remove that suspicion as speedily as possible, if I wish to succeed in this enterprise."

He treated them all after the introduction, and played his assumed part so well before the hour for retiring, that the suspicious Burns himself became an attentive listener to the entertaining conversation of Gus Fabian; the New Orleans gent.

The apartment assigned to the detective was a small square room on the third floor, back, which communicated with another apartment; but the door leading to the other room was locked on the other side, and had a stout bolt in Varnoe's room, as was the case with the door through which he had entered.

An unobserving person or unsuspecting one, would have retired with the assurance that he would be perfectly secure from intrusion while he slept. But not so with the ever-vigilant for detective.

He saw Pete Burns telegraph to the Major, while taking their final drink, to “dose” Fabian, and Varnoe succeeded in disposing of this last drink in a manner which completely deceived them all; not one of them suspecting that the handkerchief, with which he pretended to wipe his mouth, had a fine sponge concealed beneath its folds, and which received the “dose” instead of Varnoe’s stomach.

Before he turned off the gas, when he retired to his room, he carefully examined the door, for he felt confident that it contained a secret panel through which Burns intended to creep after the “dose” had taken effect, and probably examine his effects, in order to discover if anything suspicious could be found among them.

He was not mistaken. He discovered unmistakable indications of a secret panel, and two hours after he had retired, and was breathing like one in a deep sleep, the panel was noiselessly drawn aside and a faint light shone into his room.

Still keeping up the semblance of sleeping profoundly, he covertly watched the movements of the intruder, and recognized Pete Burns.

He gently removed the “sleeper’s” pants, coat, vest, hat and [boots,] and passed them noiselessly through the orifice, when another person, (the Major, doubtless) took them from him. Then Burns passed also through into the other apartment, when the panel glided noiselessly back into its place, leaving Varnoe’s room perfectly dark.

“Cautious, Pete,” thought the detective, with an inward chuckle, “you little suspect that I have ‘dosed’ my effects, especially for such prying fellows as yourself,” which was indeed the truth. Everything calculated to lead to suspicion as to his real character, was left at the Globe hotel, locked in a safe. And everything about his person, at the Major’s saloon, was in conformity with the character he had assumed.

Now let us see what Pete Burns found among the effects thus scrumptiously obtained:

A wallet containing ten or fifteen dollars, a watch and chain of no particular value, a revolver, a note-book containing items of various sums borrowed, (i.e. stolen from different individuals) mostly in New Orleans, but in two or three instances in New York. These New York loans, of course, were the latest insertions in the book.

But a letter found in a secret pocket of the coat, probably was of more interest to the doubting Pete than both money and watch together, for it was not his intention to retain any of the effects—merely to examine them. This letter bore date, two weeks previous, and ran thus:

*Dear Gus*— I am so glad that you reached New York without any mishap. That watch and chain affair of Col. Hassinger created quite a stir, especially when you failed to appear as you had promised to do. You must keep away from the city for good, I fear as your real character is more than suspected, and even I am looked upon with suspicion. Write soon again.

Ever your own,

CHIOYILDE

Half an hour afterwards his effects were replaced exactly as they were found, and next morning both Pete and Major greeted him with great cordiality. The letter evidently quite hoodwinked Burns, and he now regarded Gus Fabian as a *confrere*.

After some conversation and a delicious breakfast, Burns departed, having some business to attend to, he observed, winking slyly as he went out.

Several customers coming in engaged the attention of the host, leaving Varnoe at leisure to study out plans for his future movements. He wondered whether *his* Jim and Jim Benson were identical. He suspected not, for this Benson did not appear like a person who possessed the qualities requisite for a successful burglar; he looked more a sneak-thief, according to Varnoe's judgment, and he judged him correctly, as he subsequently discovered.

While the Major was still behind the bar, a handsome woman of about twenty-five entered by a private street-door and asked the landlord.

"Is Jim in yet?"

"No, Fanny," was the reply. "He left barely fifteen minutes ago; he had some private business to attend to."

"Oh, I'm sorry I could not see him. I have something of the highest importance to tell him. But I'll write him a note, and be sure to give it to him the moment he returns."

She was handed a half sheet of note paper, on which she penciled a [few] lines, then tore it off and dropped it on the floor before the bar. She then began again and finished it to suit her fancy, and placed it in an envelope and sealed and addressed it. The Major took it, and with a bold glance at the handsome detective, the woman glided from the room with the grace of a duchess.

Varnoe had his eyes on those bits of paper Fannie had partially torn and dropped on the floor, and managed to secure them unnoticed by his host. When an opportunity presented itself he placed them together, at the first glance he recognized them as identical with that of the partially burnt letter found in the "burglarized" store on Church Street.

Then this thought flew onward with lightning speed. This woman had asked for "Jim," and the Major told her that he had left fifteen minutes ago on private business. Yet he must have had reference to Pete Burns, as no one else had left the place at the time referred to.

In a subsequent conversation with the Major he casually observed:

"Did that lady wish to see Jim Benson?"

"What?" exclaimed mine host, in a scornful tone, "Fannie Dawson inquire after a petty sneak thief? Not she. She is too high-toned for that. She wanted to see Pete Burns!"

“Then I must not have heard her aright,” rejoined the detective, carelessly, “I thought she asked for Jim, hence I inferred that it was Jim Benson she inquired for.”

“You are correct in one part,” said the Major with a smile. “She did ask for Jim—meaning Peter James Burns is his full and proper name; but my lady doesn’t fancy the first name; in fact she dislikes it so much that she never mentions it, but always calls him by his middle name.”

“Eureka!” almost issued from the lips of the detective as the concluding words left the lips of the speaker. He had one of the Church Street burglars almost in his clutches, and need only bide his time to have him completely in his power.

Half an hour later Burns returned to the saloon, but found the Major absent. At this juncture Varnoe displayed his shrewdness to a remarkable degree. By the scraps of paper he had picked up where Fanny had thrown them, he had learned that she was about apprising him “that devil of a detective, Varnoe,” had left Philadelphia with a clue of the Church Street burglars, and she feared he might have traced Jim to New York.

What more she had written in the note given to the Major to be delivered to Jim, Varnoe did not know, of course, but he was resolved that Jim Pete Burns should be in his power before that note could fall under his observation.

To accomplish this, he ascertained that Burns would return to the saloon in an hour at the farthest, probably sooner. Upon this information he sent the Major on an errand that would consume an hour, at least, then patiently awaited the return of his “game.”

When the barmaid had informed Burns that the Major had been called away, Varnoe at once took him aside and said in an undertone:

“The Major requested me to tell you that he would be at the Globe Hotel, and wanted you to call there as soon as possible. He said I should tell you that the ‘Church Street affair’ would prove a much more profitable investment if you were to meet the parties at the Globe.”

“Church Street affair?” echoed the burglar, pretending surprise yet glancing suspiciously at “Mr. Fabian.” “What does he mean by that?”

“I don’t know, but I supposed you would!” was the “very innocent” response.

“Ah, yes, now I know,” suddenly observed Burns, “and I’m off at once. Any objection to accompany me?” asked he.

“None at all,” replied Varnoe. And the butcher led the lamb to the slaughter-house quite unresistingly.

An officer of the Philadelphia police force awaited them at the hotel and arrested them both, and the afternoon train conveyed Pete Burns to the City of Brotherly Love, where he had a speedy

trial and a long term of imprisonment, and to this day, probably he does not know that the “New Orleans gent” was the cause of his arrest and conviction, for at the trial Varnoe donned his customary disguise, whereas when in New York at the Major’s saloon he wore no disguise whatever.

As “Mr. Fabian,” Varnoe returned to New York and managed to secure two more of the burglars, and recovered the greater portion of the stolen goods.

*Louisiana Capitolian* [Baton Rouge, LA], February 14, 1880

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