

On His Track

Over twenty years ago (said Mr. Whitmire, a detective, with whom I recently had an interview), I was on the police force of New York. One summer night, a few minutes past twelve, I was passing my beat in a quiet part of C— Street, when a man called from a second-story window:

“I say, sir, are you a policeman?”

“Yes,” I replied. “What’s the matter?”

“I heard a heavy jar in Mr. Bradley’s house, next door, and he may have fallen and hurt himself. He just came in a few minutes ago. If I were you I’d ring the bell.”

Mr. Bradley was a wealthy old bachelor, who had lived entirely alone for years, in an old-fashioned brick house. His riches were a subject of frequent gossip; and it was said that in his house, to which no outsider was ever admitted, he kept a lot of money and silverware. I rang the bell, but there was no response.

“Are you sure you saw him go in?” I asked.

“Yes; sure of it. He hadn’t been in half a minute before I heard a heavy fall. I have heard no sound since.”

“There must be something wrong,” I said, after ringing the bell a second time, and receiving no response. I tried the door, but it was locked.

“If I were you I would force the door,” suggested the man at the window.

“I don’t like to do that. Is there any other entrance?”

“Yes, that alley just beyond the steps leads to a back yard, but the gate is probably locked, as well as the rear door.”

“I will go and see,” said I; and walking up the narrow alley, I discovered by the dim light of a street-lamp nearly opposite that the gate stood open. I looked in, and perceived that the rear door was also open, and a faint light shone out. All was perfectly quiet. I returned to the street and said to the man:

“The gate and back door are open. Come down and we’ll go in.”

In half a minute he joined me on the sidewalk, when I recognized him as an acquaintance named Henry Collins.

“Ah, is that you? I didn’t know you lived here,” I said.

“Yes, I didn’t recognize you when I first addressed you.”

“Well,” said I “there may have been some foul work in this house and we had better go in.”

We went up the alley, into the yard and entered the open door. The rear room was evidently used for a kitchen; and guided by a dim light we passed into a narrow hall with a stairway. Near the street door was an old table, on which stood a lighted candle, that had burned to within an inch of the candlestick. At the foot of the stairs lay Mr. Bradley, quite dead, and a frightful wound upon his head convinced me that he had been murdered.

At my request, Mr. Collins hurried away to the police station, two hundred yards distant, to inform the captain, while I took the candle and made an examination of the premises. A number of drawers in the second story back room had been broken open and ransacked, and on the floor lay half of a fresh looking newspaper. Knowing that the old bachelor was not in the habit of spending money for newspapers, it struck me that the robber might have had it in his pocket, and possibly used the other half to wrap up some of his plunder, leaving behind him, in his hurry, what might prove a most valuable clue. I therefore folded up the fragment, and put it in my pocket. A moment later Mr. Collins returned accompanied by several officers and a surgeon.

To make this part of the story brief, I will state that the usual formalities followed, the body being handed over to the Coroner, and the case was placed in the hands of detectives. I at first intended to give up the bit of newspaper I had picked up, but I had some ambition to be a detective myself, and concluded to keep it, at least a day or two, to see if I could find a clue from it. It was lucky I did.

On the following afternoon, while off duty—and walking around in ordinary dress, I paused opposite a well-known hotel to watch some painters who were at work on a swinging ladder under the eaves, and my eyes chanced to alight on a man who sat by a third story window, apparently engaged in packing a valise. The window was open, and, as he lifted some article from the ledge to store it away, a piece of newspaper on which it had been lying was carried out over the street by a draught of air, and came fluttering down into the gutter near my feet.

I might not have noticed this trifling circumstance but for the manner in which the paper had been torn—that is, not in a straight line, but almost in the form of the letter V, as though it had been done hurriedly. This, I remembered, corresponded with the piece I had picked up in the murdered man’s house, and I snatched it up and ran into an alley to compare them. What a leap my heart gave when I discovered that the two halves of the paper fitted exactly—there was no doubt of it.

“On his track,” I muttered. “Aha, old fellow, you don’t get off with that valise so easily.”

And being familiar with the interior of the hotel, I crossed the street, went in, and was soon at the door of Room Twenty-one, from whose window the paper had blown. I rapped gently upon the door, so as not to startle him too much.

“Come in,” said a voice within.

I opened the door and recognized, still seated on a chair by the window, the man whom I had seen packing the valise, a task he had just completed. He was a muscular man of forty years, with a clean-shaven face that wore an expression of craftiness. He seemed somewhat confused when I entered, and said:

“Ah, I thought it was the porter! Haven’t you made a mistake?”

Without replying I deliberately locked the door and put the key in my pocket, while he stared amazedly.

“I see you are getting ready to leave,” I remarked sarcastically.

“Yes,—but—”

“Suppose you stay in New York a little longer,” I interrupted.

“Why, sir, what do you mean?” he exclaimed, rising from his chair.

“Oh, nothing of any great consequence,” I replied, coolly. “Perhaps you wouldn’t object to my taking a look into that valise, eh?”

“Perhaps you’ll do me the kindness to get out of my room,” he retorted.

He had taken the valise from the floor, and I quickly snatched it from him. I had scarcely done so when he dealt me a blow near the temple with his fist, sending me reeling across the room, where I brought up against the door. He then snatched up the valise which had fallen from my hand, threw it on the bed and angrily exclaimed:

“Look here, sir, are you drunk or crazy? Now hand me that key and get out of my room, or I will throw you out of the window!”

“Not so fast,” said I, drawing my revolver. “I am an officer, and am here to arrest you for the murder you committed last night.”

He stared a moment, and then a change came over his countenance, and he sat down again and fairly roared with laughter.

“Come, you can’t play that,” said I. “This is no laughing matter. Where are the money and silverware you took from Bradley’s house?”

“Are you really an officer?” he asked, growing serious again.

“Certainly I am. Perhaps you never saw this bit of paper, sir,” said I, displaying the piece that had blown from his window.

“My friend,” he replied, “I admire the earnestness with which you go about your duties as detective, but you have by some means or other got on the wrong scent. I am very sorry I struck you in a moment of anger, and hope you will pardon me. I am Charley M—, a Boston detective, of whom you have probably heard. I arrived about daylight this morning, and have since been taking a good sleep before attending to a little business in Brooklyn. I registered as J. Brown, for a reason you will readily comprehend. Here is my card, and here are some slight evidences of my vocation.” Here he took two pairs of handcuffs from his pocket and jingled them before my astonished gaze. “By the way, if that is the piece of newspaper that fell from my window, and you think it has any connection with the affair you speak of, it will probably afford you an important clue. I found it here, where it was probably left by a former lodger and I think there is a name on the margin.”

I examined the margin over the title of the paper, and to my astonishment found written in pencil the name and residence of Henry Collins. It was a weekly paper, which I observed was published in a little city he had formerly lived in, and its date was so recent that he must have received it on the very day preceding the murder. I immediately took leave of Mr. M—, saying that I thought I knew where the paper came from, and, begging his pardon for having treated him so rudely and hastened down to the office of the hotel, where I examined the register, finding the name of J. Brown (the detective) with Room twenty-one assigned. I knew the clerk, and I inquired:

“When did Mr. Brown take Room twenty-one?”

“Early this morning, when I was not on duty.”

“Did anyone occupy the room during the night?”

“No—or, yes—let me see,” he replied, glancing over the preceding page of the register—“here is the name of Harvey Elton. I remember now. He was without baggage and paid for the room in advance, saying he wanted to be called at three o’clock. The porter went up at that hour, but the door was open and the bed had not been slept in. The other clerk mentioned to me that he gave the same room to Mr. Brown because he wanted a front room.”

“Do you remember the appearance of Elton?”

“Yes—rather small man, with a very full black beard.”

Henry Collins was a small man, but wore no beard. Of course my suspicions were fixed on him as soon as I discovered his name on the margin of the newspaper, yet I never dreamed that he was capable of committing a crime.

My mind underwent a series of rapid changes. One moment I regarded it as almost certain that Henry Collins had something to do with the murder; the next moment I would say to myself, “It is preposterous; he is no such man. There are a thousand ways this paper might have got into other hands. He may have lent it to old Bradley; or it may have fallen from his window; or he may have lost it from his pocket. Why should he have called my attention to Bradley’s house? Besides, he wears no beard.

On the subject of this beard, it did not at first occur to me that he might have worn a false one, but it did finally, and I recalled, very soon afterward, what I now regarded as a most suspicious circumstance.

It was about midnight that Henry Collins told me that Mr. Bradley had been in but a few minutes. I now remembered that the body was cold and rigid when I first went in, and I hastened away to meet the surgeon who had made the examination five minutes later.

I had the good luck to find him soon, and in reply to my inquiry he stated that Bradley must have been dead two hours when he was called.

“Have the detectives found any clue?” he asked.

“Not that I’m aware of,” I replied, and took my leave.

My first step now was to go to an establishment in which Collins was employed and inquire for him.

On doing so I was informed that he had asked and obtained leave of absence to visit Trenton.

I next started for his house, which was half a mile distant, carefully looking up and down every street I crossed. I had made half of the distance when I caught a glimpse of the very man I was looking for.

He was coming toward me on one of the cross streets, showing that he had come directly from his house. He carried a valise, and by his side walked a small, rough-looking man whom I did not know, and with whom he was conversing earnestly. I went a few steps to meet them, and was within a few yards of them before Collins saw me.

“Ah, how are you, Mr. Collins?” I said.

He started visibly, but on recognizing me seemed to regain his composure and answered my salutation. He would have passed on, but I detained him by passing in front of him, and opening a dialogue.

“Not going traveling?” said I.

“Yes—a short distance—only to New Haven.”

“Wouldn’t it be just as well to go to Trenton?” I asked, in a significant tone, eyeing him keenly.

He turned very pale, and in a voice that quivered perceptibly, said:

“Great Heaven, Mr. Whitmire, what do you mean?”

“I mean that you and your friend must go to the station with me.”

With a look of despair on his white face that I never shall forget, he dropped his valise and staggered a step or so to an awning post, which he grasped for support.

At the same moment his companion turned to dart away, but, luckily, two men, who had just stopped on the sidewalk to talk about something, stood directly in his path, and his movements being confused, I reached him in one bound and seized him by the collar, warning him not to resist.

He was thoroughly cowed, while Collins had too little strength left him to attempt to escape.

In five minutes I marched them into the station, together with the valise, and had them locked up in separate cells.

I then told the captain the whole story. He was disposed to think, at first, that I had made a blunder; but on questioning the two prisoners, and especially on examining the valise and finding a large sum of money in it, he concluded that I had caught the right men, and so distanced the regular detectives.

It proved to be so, and the two men were duly convicted of murder on evidence that was beyond all dispute. Indeed, when Collins lost all hope of escaping the gallows, he was so broken down that he made a full confession, giving substantially the following account of the crime:

The stories of Bradley’s great wealth had first put it into his head to rob him. By watching for a long time from a back window he had discovered the nature of the fastenings by which the back door and gate were secured. He was not bold enough to undertake the task alone, but he knew a certain bad character named Kevern, to whom he confided his scheme, describing the fastenings on Bradley’s gate and door and asking him if he thought he could force them.

Kevern said he could, and readily entered into the plot. They went to work a little after dark one night, when they knew that Bradley had gone out; but the fastenings of the rear door resisted much longer than they had expected, and they had but fairly succeeded in entering when Bradley came in at the front door, locked it, and lighted his candle.

Determined not to be foiled now, they rushed upon the old man and struck him down with the tools they had been using. That, it seems, was between nine and ten o’clock.

They then ransacked the house, finding considerable money, chiefly in bank notes. The latter were in a disordered condition, and to make a compact bundle of them, Collins hastily tore in two the fatal newspaper, which he chanced to have in his pocket, using one half to wrap his spoils in, and in his nervous haste leaving the other lying upon the floor.

In order to examine their plunder at leisure they went to the hotel alluded to, where one of them engaged a room to which he repaired, and in which he was soon joined by the other. Both were disguised, a portion of Collins’ being a false beard.

Collins felt so nervous over the awful affair that night that he would not take any of the plunder home with him, and so, after counting the money, he entrusted it to Kevern for the night, with an understanding that they should meet next day, take a trip to New Haven, and there each deposit his share in a bank in his own name, or any name he might choose to assume.

When Kevern made a package of the money again he picked up a fragment of another newspaper he found in the room, leaving that bearing Collins' name lying upon the floor. It was shortly after Collins' returned home that night that he called my attention to Bradley's house, foolishly thinking that by doing so he would never once come within the range of suspicion.

Collins died from pure terror before the day appointed for his execution, but Kevern paid the extreme penalty of the law.

It was in this case which I worked upon my own account, and in which I was largely assisted by mere chance, that gave me a place on the detective force, and I have been pretty successful ever since. Many a man has worked harder and displayed more sagacity than I did on that occasion without accomplishing so great an end.

Frostburg [MD] Mining Journal, August 29, 1874

Saline County Journal [Salina, KS], November 16, 1876

Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture [Boston, MA], October 10, 1885

The Indian Chieftain [Vinita, Indian Territories], October 22, 1885—with the subtitle "A Chance Discovery Which Led to Important Results"

Daily Kennebec Journal [Augusta, ME], December 29 & 30, 1885—with the subtitle "A Chance Discovery Which Led to Important Results"