

## *Tracing a Murderer*

A man was standing one day, with a kind of unoccupied air, a few steps from the door of the telegraph office, on Second street, Sacramento. What was remarkable about him was that there was nothing remarkable about him at all — to the casual eyes. He was a man of very ordinary appearance, of ordinary size, of ordinary complexion, with an ordinary face, and especially with an ordinary eye. He stood with his hands idly down in the pockets of a long, loose coat, as though they had dropped there themselves, and he had not taken the trouble to pull them out, and he seemed to be neither thinking of, nor caring about, nor looking at anything.

A boy messenger came tripping out of the telegraph office, taking two or three steps at once, as has been handsomely expressed, and happening to see the uninterested man whom he had seen before, he stopped short and said:

“Oh, here’s one for you; I suppose I might as well give it to you here. You’re Mr. Black?”

The man did not say that he was or that he was not, but quietly reached for the dispatch, which the boy handed him and hurried on.

Then Mr. Black with a deliberation that would have been fairly agonizing to anyone looking over his shoulder, unfolded the paper and read:

MARYVILLE, June 26, 18—. —To Mr. William Black, Police Department, Sacramento. An atrocious murder has just been discovered here. A woman, named Mrs. Wolf, was the victim. Her husband is suspected and in custody, but no evidence against. Hasten to us by the first boat while all is fresh.

L. MORTON  
Sheriff of Yuba County.

William Black was a Sacramento detective, and at that time undoubtedly the most sagacious in California. The boat was to leave in a little over an hour. Mr. Black entered the telegraph office and dispatched to the sheriff of Yuba county the words “All right.”

That evening a man with a red shirt on — a man of very ordinary appearance — landed in Marysville. He was a miner, of course, if one may always judge from indications; but he had a lazy look, as if weighed down by a woeful lack of energy; and a person might have wondered if ever such a person did pluck up courage enough to climb the mountains.

The same lazy-looking man later in the evening was in secret communication with the sheriff and several other officials.

“At what hour was the murder discovered?” he asked.

“Nine o’clock this morning — exactly.”

“In what way?”

“The news came through her husband. He rushed excitedly into a saloon, on the edge of town, saying that his wife was dead and somebody had killed her. They had come lately from the mines, and were living in a tent of their own, a quarter of a mile out of the town. We will conduct you to it by and by.”

“A physician has made an examination?”

“Yes; a skilled one. He says it is clear that the woman was murdered — strangled by a pair of coarse hands, the marks of which he found on her throat.”

“Did he say how long she had been dead?”

“Yes, many hours.”

“What does Wolf say?”

“That he did not sleep at home. He says he was drunk last night, which I have found to be true, and that, being unable to reach home, he lay down under a tree, between here and his home, and slept soundly. When he awoke, according to his story, it was near nine o’clock. Then he got up, hastened to his tent and found his wife dead, and we have some fear that an attempt will be made to lynch him. In fact, there is little doubt of his guilt, but there is no positive proof, and the case needs working up.”

“What makes you think he did it?”

“Various suspicious circumstances. His unlikely story of having slept out all night, when within a few yards of his temporary home, and not waking before nine.”

“Had they quarreled?”

“It is not known that they had, but — well, they were man and wife, and we might safely presume they had.”

“Were there not traces of a struggle left?”

“No.”

“Not a thread — a shirt button — a hair.”

“No.”

“Tracks?”

“No. The ground is so hard and dry, you know.”

“Has any stranger been seen lurking in that neighborhood?”

“Well, we have miners down here from the mountain every day — but it was none of them.”

Detective Black who wore a red shirt, was conducted to the scene of the murder. He saw the body at the office of the coroner. He saw the physician; he saw everybody in Marysville, he saw and talked to Wolf three quarters of an hour. Then he said to the sheriff:

“He didn’t do it.”

The sheriff was thunderstruck.

“But,” said William Black, “keep him in custody till you hear from me. Don’t let people get hold of him, though; for I suppose they would lynch him at a venture.”

“We’ll take care of him.”

“You might arrest and detain any suspicious looking person found in the neighborhood — always remembering that he’s innocent.”

“I will.”

The conference thus ended.

The next morning a fresh miner made his appearance at Pine Camp, about fifteen miles north of Marysville. He was a lazy looking man. He lounged about from point to point, talking with the miners, bothering them at their work. Some thought that he was a half idiot. He stopped and talked with groups here and there and asked them questions about the best place to locate on. He was green. Then he told them a piece of terrible news — a woman had been foully murdered in Marysville. Her name was Wolf. Her husband had done it, it was thought — in fact there was no doubt of it. The simpleton! That was no news. It had been the talk of the camp for twenty-four hours.

“Oh! then you knowed it yesterday?”

He went from claim to claim; spoke to everybody; asked particularly about the mining prospects; spoke about the murder.

“That fellow won’t do much. He’s too lazy looking,” was remarked more than once.

The afternoon was wearing away[.]

The man of unsound mind stopped for the twentieth time and talked to a group of four who were working a claim. He sat on a large stone; he spoke of the murder, actually informed them as news.

“Why old fellow,” said one, “you’ve been asleep. You’re a day behind the age.”

The slow creature was a little nettled.

“Wa’al, yes, now,” retorted one of the miners, working away.

“A day is twenty-four hours,” remarked the stupid man, sarcastically.

“Wa’al suppose it is.”

“Then you haven’t knowed of it a day.[”]

[“]You’re smart, I admit; but not that smart.”

“What’ll you bet?”

“Twenty dollars and drinks all around.”

“Done.”

In those days a bet, if nothing worse, grew out of very slight difference of opinion, no matter how trifling a subject.

The money was staked.

“How is he going to be proved?”

“That’s easy.”

“Who brought the news?”

“Dave Long — one of our mess. He’d been down to Marysville over Sunday on a bender.”

“Where is he?”

“At our cabin. He’s cooking this week.”

“Well, drop them tools. You’re all dry, and so am I. Dave — Smith, is it?”

“No. Dave Long.”

All laid down their tools and the party started toward the cabin to have the bet decided and get the drinks.

“Now remember,” said the green stranger, “I’m willing to pay if I lose, but a day is twenty-four hours.”

“Well?”

He looked at his watch.

“Mark, then, it’s just ’leven now.”

There were several watches in the party — all were referred to. They varied but a few minutes.

“Let me see,” said the miner who had wagered with the newcomer — “let me see. Why of course you’ll lose, stranger. ‘Twasn’t mor’n ten yesterday morning when Dave come, and he took his time getting dinner ready — which was eat at twelve.”

“To be sure,” said another.

“Oh, wait,” said the stranger. “Leave it to him.”

“All right. He knows, for he has a watch, and had timed himself coming from Marysville.”

They reached the cabin; Dave Long, according to custom, was serving his term as keeping house for the week.

“Dave!”

“Hello!” replied a gruff voice within.

“Come out.”

“What’s wantin’?”

“We’ve got up a bet, drinks included, and it’s left for you to decide.”

Dave Long came to the door — a big, burly fellow.

“This man here, I don’t know his name —”

“Blossom,” put in the stranger.

“Well, Blossom, he came round and went to tell us news. ‘Twas about that murder, you know. I told him he’d been asleep and was behind the age. Now the bet is that we’d knowed it a day — twenty-four hours — you brought the news and know whether we did or not.”

“Now, honor bright,” said the self-styled Blossom. “Think first. I know you would not say what isn’t true, but you might forget. It’s now just eleven. Can you say you got here before this time yesterday? Think now.”

Dave Long ruminated.

“Yes, for I looked at my watch to see how long I had been coming. It was only two or three minutes after ten.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certain you could swear to it?”

“For you know,” put in one of the others, “that you got dinner after you came.”

“Yes, darn it, don’t I know?”

“But,” said the fastidious stranger, “maybe you didn’t tell the news right away.”

“Yes, I did.”

“And brought it straight from Marysville?”

“Yes.”

“All right. I’ve lost. Now for the drinks. Give us your hand, Dave Long.”

“Thar it is stranger.”

With a movement so quick that the eye could not follow it, the inquisitive stranger snatched both hands of Dave Long and brought them together, and the astonished spectators saw their comrade standing with a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. They also saw the new arrival, the man who lacked the energy, the man who had been asleep for twenty-four hours, the man with the mild name of Blossom, standing at their comrade’s elbow with a firm hand on his collar and a revolver at his temple.

“You are my prisoner! Move an inch and you’re a dead man[.] I arrest you for the murder of Mrs. Wolf. I am Detective Black of Sacramento. Neighbors, I’ve lost the bet.”

Long was fairly paralyzed. He could neither move nor speak.

A clamor arose among his comrades.

“Stranger, no nonsense. Dave Long never did such a thing. He’s above such a crime. Let him go. We can’t stand here —”

“Stand back!” said the fearless officer. It will go hard with any one who interferes. This man is guilty, and I can convince you.”

“How do you know?”

“Keep cool and I will tell you. He came yesterday morning at ten o’clock and told all about the murder that was not discovered in Marysville till nine o’clock. Did he walk fifteen miles in an hour?”

David Long was as pale as death, and he stood trembling from head to foot — the picture of guilt. His comrades looked on, bewildered.

“You see,” continued Black, by the way of further explanation, “it was on his guilty mind and he couldn’t help blurting it out, considering of course, that the murder would be discovered before daylight or sooner. Luckily it was not discovered till nine o’clock — except to the murderer and he has very kindly volunteered to expose himself.”

“Curse my tongue!” exclaimed the culprit, grinding his teeth with rage and fear, “I wish it had been torn out!”

“There’s always something,” exclaimed the detective quietly. “You left no trace — not a thread nor shred, nor shoestring, not even a hair; but you came right up here and told on yourself.”

“Dave Long! Dave Long! Can this be?” exclaimed one of his comrades reproachfully.

The crestfallen wretch hung his head and seemed ready to fall into the earth.

“You poor devil!” said another of his comrades. “Who’d have thought it? If it wasn’t for old times sake we’d string you up. Take him away, Mr. Black, let us see him no more.”

“If the camp find it out, they’ll lynch him before you can get away with him[,] suggested another.

Filled with terror at the prospects, Long determined to make one desperate effort for his life. With a sudden spring he released himself from the detective and darted away toward a thicket not far off. He had some hope that his speed might bear him away beyond the immediate reach of Black or miners, where he could work off his manacles. But the agile officer bounded after him and before he had gone thirty yards dragged him down. Maddened at the situation, the prisoner began a fierce and hopeless struggle, attempting

with kicks and blows to inflict some injury on his captor; but Black whose strength was extraordinary, clutched him by the throat and soon overpowered him.

“Look here,” said he somewhat heated, “if you carry on this way they’ll learn what you’ve done, and hang you up to a tree; and I’ll not hinder them. If you will go quietly I can promise you a fair trial and you may not be hanged for weeks yet.”

“Let me up,” he faltered, “and I’ll go with you.”

“And give me no further trouble?”

“No.”

The dread of being lynched had a mighty influence on him.

“See that you keep your word, then. And mind, if on the way to Marysville, you make another such a move, I’ll shoot you down.”

And he allowed him to get up, taking care to maintain his grasp on his arm.

But the scuffle had already attracted attention, and the miners were running up from all directions.

“What’s this? What’s the matter?” a score of them asked.

They saw by the handcuffs on Long’s wrists that one belonging to their camp was in the hands of an officer, and did not like it. They were jealous of the law, and jumping to the conclusion that Long was arrested for merely shooting some one in a little row at Marysville the first thought was to rescue him.

“He shan’t go!” shouted one.

“Release him!” added another.

“Don’t let him take me,” pleaded Dave Long.

The crowd began to close in.

“Stand back!” thundered the detective, flourishing his revolver. “I am Detective Black from Sacramento, and this is my prisoner. If any man dares to interfere, I will shoot him like a dog.”

Although threats of bullets were not much in those days, the fearless bearing of the officer, who stood firmly grasping the prisoner, and with a single arm opposing a hundred reckless men, had its effects, and they stood undecided. Taking advantage of the momentary truce, Black hurriedly whispered to the prisoner.



“If you don’t tell them not to interfere, I guess I’d better fly. I’ll be all right.”

“What is it you’ve done, Long.”

He turned paler than ever.

“We must know what it is. Was it a scrape in Marysville?”

“Yes — yes. Never mind. I’ll — I’ll be back —” and his heart sank at the thought he never would — “back before long and tell you all about it.”

So the detective was allowed to depart with his prisoner.

Two of Long’s mess accompanied them, and the culprit was lodged in the jail at Marysville that night, while the murdered woman’s husband was released.

An effort was made by the authorities to keep the matter quiet for a while; but all the facts leaked out, and the angry population did not wait for the law’s slow vengeance.

On the following Friday night, July 20, the miserable wretch was taken from jail by a party of disguised men and hanged to a tree whose broad boughs overlooked the scene of the crime.

In his last moments, with the noose around his neck, he confessed his guilt, and died praying for mercy.

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