

Strange Clews to Crime

John Cooper kept a small hostelry at Castleford, in Yorkshire, England. In June, 1829, a young man calling himself William Jones, came to the place and asked for employment. He said he knew all about horses, and, furthermore, he wrote a good hand. Cooper was illiterate, and had long felt the need of someone to help him, as he had recently built a flour mill and found it hard to keep a reckoning with the farmers who brought their wheat to be ground. Jones was about twenty-three, tall and robust, and of very pleasant manners, and, having read to Cooper and his wife out of an old newspaper, and having shown them what he could do with a pen, he was engaged at a salary of one pound a month and his board.

About three weeks after this there come to the house a peddler—a man nearly twice the age of Jones and of a different kind. He was short and robust, with red hair, a hump on one shoulder, and arms unnaturally long and sinewy. This man drank his ale, ate his bread and cheese, and offered his wares for sale. Then he sat by the fire, told good stories and related strange adventures in out-of-the-way places among the hills and on the moors.

In the evening he walked outside with his pipe and watched Jones curry the horses and fodder them for the night. Now it so happened that Cooper's bedroom was over the stable, and that, having drank more than ordinary, he had gone to rest soon after tea. After a two hours' slumber he suddenly awoke and became conscious that two persons were talking in the stable below. Getting out of bed with due caution, he

PUT HIS EAR TO THE FLOOR,

and overheard distinctly what was said. What he heard was this:

“Well,” said the peddler, “I came just as soon as I got your letter. It lay at the cottage for some days before I got it; but as soon as I read it I started right away.”

“This thing can not last much longer,” said Jones. “I'm worn out already, but I am obliged to bear up so as not to arouse suspicion. A nice idea, isn't it, for me to be doing this drudgery?”

“It is your own fault,” was the answer; “why did you not stop and face it out? Why did you sneak away and leave others to bear the brunt?”

“Sneak away!” Jones said in a bitter tone; “who would not have done the same, with the gallows staring him in the face?”

“You should have made a complete job of it,” the peddler said; ““dead men tell no tales.””

“Look you here,” Jones replied; “as you know, I'm not the man to flinch when a bullet or knife can do the business, but to put one's own sister out of the way is another matter altogether.”

“The question now is,” said the peddler, “what are you going to do if you quit here?”

“Go back to [the word was lost], and take my chance,” was the answer.

“You are a d—d fool,” the peddler replied, in a low growl.

“And you are worse than a fool,” Jones said, “or you would have managed things better than keep me waiting here.”

“Well, we strangled the old wretch, anyhow,” the peddler said, “and that put him out of the way. If you can’t manage your sister and get out of her all you want, you will be to blame, and not I.”

The conversation was then continued in a lower tone, and Cooper

CREPT CAUTIOUSLY FROM THE ROOM

and joined his wife below stairs. Like many shrewd business people who can neither read nor write, Cooper and his wife had wonderfully retentive memories, and Cooper had related to his wife word for word the conversation he had just over heard.

After consulting together for some time Mrs. Cooper said:

“We’ve had trouble enough on our hands with our boy, who is now over the sea, suffering for his share in that poaching affray at Shadwick Hall. Don’t let us meddle with the matter, whatever it may be.”

“But it may bring us into worse trouble still,” Cooper replied. “Murder has been committed, and the men who did it are under our roof, and one of them is our servant. If this was found out, it might go all the harder with us, because our boy has been in almost as bad a trouble himself.”

After a pause, Mrs. Cooper said:

“There’s still two hours of daylight. I’ll put on my things and go over to my brother’s. He’s a constable, and will be able to advise us what to do. I’ll stay there all night, and you must keep the men here till I get back in the morning early.”

This was agreed to, and Mrs. Cooper departed. Later on Jones and the peddler came into the house and sat with Cooper and a number of guests until the place was closed. Then the peddler went with Jones to the inner kitchen, where he slept, and Cooper retired to his own room.

When Mrs. Cooper returned it was past 7 o’clock. The house, greatly to her surprise, was closed, but on going to the rear she found the back door on the latch. As she was about to enter, Wm. Meek, a neighbor, called to her from the window adjoining:

“What’s the matter, mistress,” he said, “that John has not opened house by this time?”

Mrs. Cooper was in such a state of fear and trepidation that she could hardly answer, and Meek observing this climbed the fence and joined her. Then she briefly told him that she had been away all night at her brother's on business, and was

AFRAID SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED.

Meek entered the house with her. Everything appeared as if had been left over night, but on going to the small room occupied by Jones, they found that it was empty, and the bed showed signs of not having been slept upon. This, for reasons known to the reader, excited Mrs. Cooper's fears greatly, and, accompanied by Meek, she went up stairs to her husband's bedroom. John Cooper lay on the bed undressed and dead.

When the authorities came to inquire into the case, it had been found that Cooper had been strangled with a handkerchief, which lay twisted upon the floor. A strong oaken chest, which usually lay under the bed, had been drawn out and broken open. From it was missing a large sum of money which the couple had been saving for years, so that when their unfortunate son and only child—who, as may be already inferred, had broken the laws and had been transported across the seas—returned from his long imprisonment, a provision might be made for his future comfort.

Before the coroner Mrs. Cooper related the facts already in possession of the reader, respecting the employment of Jones, the coming of the peddler, and the conversation overheard by Cooper between the two men, showing that they were old acquaintances and

ASSOCIATES IN SOME DREADFUL CRIME.

The words, "we strangled the old wretch," seemed to bear directly on the killing of Cooper, showing that the men had already perpetrated a similar crime. Mrs. Cooper also remembered that Jones had once helped her husband to put a new lock on the oaken chest, although the money was not visible and never referred to.

Still it was natural to suppose that Jones would not believe that so strong a box with a secure lock was required merely for the sake of keeping a few old-fashioned garments which lay on the top of the contents, and were alone visible to Jones.

A careful description of the two men was obtained, and officers were sent for to Leeds to go in pursuit of them. At a public house just outside of Pontefract, on the way to the great North road, the officers heard tidings of them. They were there when a man brought the news of Cooper's murder, but almost immediately quitted the place and went up by the castle toward the country.

The same night the officers were upon their track, but had to give up the search and seek shelter in a farmhouse till next day. Early in the morning they arose just at dawn and heard a commotion outside. Hastily dressing, they went out and found the farmer and his man in a state of great alarm and astonishment. One of the men said that on going into the barn they found a man lying on the ground with a broken leg. The officers saw the man who said that his name was Strong, and that he belonged to Castleford; that he was

formerly in the employ of Cooper, but enlisted, and had just been discharged; and that he had saved some money, and was on his way to his former home when the night came on, and

HE SOUGHT SHELTER IN THE BARN.

He said that he was roused out of his sleep by two men whom he described, and who were evidently Jones and the peddler; that they questioned him as to who he was, and then attempted to rob him; that he had a struggle and was thrown, and that his leg was broken. He said that as he lay half insensible, the two men rifled his pockets, took from him all he had and decamped.

The constable of Castleford, who was with the two officers from Leeds, recognized Strong, and bore out his statement as to having been in Cooper's employ and enlisted. The man was removed to the house and medical aid procured. Then the officers returned to their pursuit of Jones and the peddler, and finally got wind of them in a coppice skirting the road. They at first offered resistance, but were captured and secured. On Jones was found over £1,100 in Bank of England notes, the sum which was missing from Cooper's strong box. They were conveyed to Castleford and committed by a coroner for the willful murder of John Cooper. They were then removed to Wakefield on July 21st, to await their trial.

They denied any knowledge of the murder of Cooper, and Jones said that Cooper was aware of his departure as he informed him of his intention before they retired on the night of the murder, and received from him the amount of money due to him, for which he wrote a receipt. The receipt was actually found in the money drawer in Cooper's barroom.

The story told by the two of what happened after they quitted Castleford was singular. It was about 1 o'clock in the morning when they left the premises of Cooper. They observed a light in his bedroom, and remarked that the old man was awake. Just then the light was extinguished, and the next instant the window, which was an old-fashioned lattice, opening down the middle, was thrown open.

A FIGURE OF A WOMAN

emerged. The person dropped to the ground, scaled the fence close by, and disappeared. Jones said to his companion that he supposed Cooper had taken advantage of his wife's absence to receive one of his lady friends, though he never thought he was a man of that sort. The peddler, in reply, said she was a nimble girl to climb the fence as she did. The two went on to Pontefract, and remained there in a public-house until late in the day.

On hearing of the murder of Cooper they were astounded, and saw at once that suspicion might rest on them. They resolved, therefore, to quit the neighborhood as speedily as possible. They took refuge in the barn at the place where the officers stayed, and while in the act of going to sleep were aroused by the entry of a third person. This man struck a match, and, shading it carefully from outside view, took out a package of bank notes and counted them. The impression seized both Jones and the peddler that this man must be

the murderer of Cooper. They resolved simultaneously to get the money, and, waiting an opportunity, they sprang on him. He resisted, and his leg was broken by a fall which the long-armed peddler gave him. Then the two men gathered up the money and quitted the place. They were in doubt as to what course to follow; but at length, being short of funds, resolved to appropriate the money and go to London.

In corroboration of this strange story, a calico dress was found thrust into a drain in a field adjoining Cooper's, and this dress was identified by Mrs. Meek as one which she had missed from the line in her yard the very day after the murder.

As to the man Strong, he stuck to his original story, but a remarkable fact came to light. He swore that the two men robbed him of all his savings, which an entry in his pocket book showed were £27 15s. In a leathern bag found in his jacket pocket that precise sum was discovered, and though he tried to explain this it was a signal failure. Strong was indicted, tried for Cooper's murder, and convicted of the crime. Before his execution he admitted that his sentence was just. He said his visit to Cooper was friendly, but on reaching the house he found it closed. There was a

LIGHT IN COOPER'S ROOM,

and climbing to the window which was easy of access, he peered through and saw the old man over his strong boxes counting his notes. The idea seized Strong to get the money. He climbed the fence and walked about in the adjoining field, considering what he should do. Seeing a gown flapping in the high wind, the disguise was suggested. He procured the dress, donned it, and, after the light in Cooper's room had been extinguished for a reasonable time, mounted to the window and entered. Cooper slept heavily, and Strong, using a cotton kerchief which lay at the sleeping man's pillow, strangled him after a terrible struggle. Then he took the money and departed.

Though Jones and the peddler were released on the charge of murder, they were detained until the London authorities could be communicated with, as it was evident from the conversation overheard between them by Cooper, and repeated by him to his wife, who in her turn repeated it to the officers of justice, that they had been guilty of some grave crime. Though an expert detective, by the name Grover, was sent down, neither of the men was identified, and as it was impossible to detain them without some specific charge, they were released, no attempt being made to hold them for the robbery of Strong.

THE SEQUEL.

In March, 1833, Detective Grover was sent down to Wath, near Rotherham, to investigate the mysterious death of George Sandeman, a wealthy resident. He had gone out shooting with his game-keeper after breakfast, and two hours later was found dead in a wood near by with a bullet through his chest. The keeper said he quitted his master when he entered the wood, and that as he was crossing the home field five minutes later he heard the discharge of a gun, and supposed that Mr. Sandeman had shot a rabbit or a hare. The gun lying by the side of the corpse had been discharged, and the post mortem examination ended in finding the bullet embedded in the tissues behind the man's left lung. The gun

found was Mr. Sandsman's own fowling piece. The bullet found in the corpse was peculiar, having evidently been pared with a knife.

Miss Sandeman, George's sister, gave important testimony. She said that George had caused some new bullets to be cast, and that she was present when he tried them and found they were a trifle too large for the gun. Thereupon she suggested paring or scraping, but he said it was too tedious a job. Then she took one of the bullets and clipped it all round with a knife. Even then, however, it was too large for George's gun. George said it would fit his old fowling piece, and Miss Sandeman, with her own hands, loaded it and put in the bullet which she had clipped. A few minutes afterward the keeper came into the room where George kept his sporting implements and asked his master whether he was going out shooting. George replied that he was and told the keeper to

TAKE THE OLD FOWLING-PIECE,

and accompany him. He did so, and the two men departed company. Miss Sandeman identified the bullet in the body as the one she had clipped.

The remarkable testimony resulted in the arrest of the keeper, and almost at the same time it was ascertained that George Sandeman had only the day before his death executed a will by which he left the sum of £5,000 pounds to his "faithful keeper and friend, John Ridgworth."

When Detective Grover reached Wath, these facts were narrated to him. On seeing the remains of George Sandeman, he immediately identified the dead man as the person hitherto known as William Jones. Without saying a word, he sought the presence of Ridgworth, the keeper, expecting to recognize in him the peddler. He was not disappointed. To be brief, Ridgworth ultimately confessed that he shot George Sandeman, and related the story of their long association.

Ridgworth was formerly the groom of George's uncle, by whom George and his sister were brought up. George had grown very wild and had made away with a large amount of money, so that his uncle swore that he would disinherit him and leave all his money to his niece. The uncle subsequently had an attack of paralysis, and after he had recovered, found that George had sold three of his best horses and spent the money. His uncle sent for a lawyer, and made a will, as was supposed, in favor of George's sister. George was informed by the servants that the lawyer was to bring the will next day for signature. That night Ridgworth was in attendance on his old master, who was subject to occasional fits of insanity and needed watching. In the middle of the night George entered the bedroom, and, with the aid of Ridgworth, strangled his uncle. Then a rope was placed

ROUND THE NECK OF THE CORPSE

and the body so fixed as to make it appear that the unfortunate man had committed suicide by hanging himself to the bed-post. To his great mortification George learned next day that the will had already been signed, giving all to his sister. He disappeared, but it was generally supposed that he had gone away in disgust and chagrin at being disinherited. Ridgworth, who had urged George to put his sister out of the way, also,

remained behind and saw through the coroner's inquest and interment. He then sought George, from whom he had received a letter telling him of his whereabouts.

When George learned that as suspicions of foul play existed, and that it could be proved beyond a doubt that his uncle was insane when he made the will, he resolved to return. The reader knows the rest. On coming across the man Strong with the plunder in his possession, the temptation to take it was too great. Soon after George's return home, an amicable arrangement was made of the property, and he settled down at Wath, taking Ridgworth into his employ as keeper. From time to time, however, Ridgworth demanded large sums of money to keep quiet, and ultimately induced George to make a will as stated. The murder of the unfortunate and misguided young man followed. Ridgworth was hanged in York in the fall of 1833.

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