

The Buried Bullet

A Detective's Story

The story I am about to relate is one of the most singular instances of a long-hidden crime brought to light at last, that has come under my notice during my whole professional experience as a detective.

About ten years ago I was especially detailed from headquarters at Washington to proceed to a small town on the New England coast, where it was suspected a gang of coiners were at work. It was an out-of-the-way place, little more than a fishing village, and though now taken in by a branch railway, at the time of which I write the only means of reaching it was by a stage from the nearest town of any importance, which was fifteen miles distant.

The coach in which I had taken my passage did not start until about eight o'clock in the evening, and as it was late in the fall, by that time it was dark. The road was a lonely and desolate one along the coast, and a heavy mist was rolling in from the sea with a most depressing effect upon the spirits of the passengers.

In almost utter silence we had traversed more than half the distance, when suddenly the coach came to a standstill. The next moment a woman's face peered through the window.

"Please, gentlemen," she said, in a voice trembling with agitation, "is there a doctor or a clergyman among you?"

There was a movement among the passengers for a moment or two, and then a benevolent face peered out from the folds of an overcoat, and its owner said, in a kindly voice:

"I am a clergyman, my good woman. How can I assist you?"

"Oh, if you please, sir," the woman said, with a gasp of relief, "my mother is dying at the house up yonder, and she has something on her mind that she dare not leave untold."

The clergyman had by this time alighted from the coach and reached the spot where the woman was standing.

"Is the house very far from here?" he asked.

"No, sir; just a few steps up yonder, where you see the light a-burning," she replied.

"Well, lead the way and I will follow you. But," he added, "the confession may relate to some crime, and in such a case it would be necessary that a witness—"

He looked interrogatively among the rest of the passengers, and I at once got out of the coach.

“I will accompany you,” I said.

Hurriedly scrawling a few words on a leaf torn from my pocketbook to the landlord of the hotel to have a carriage sent for us at once, I gave it to the mail-driver, who, whipping up his horses, resumed his journey, while the clergyman and I followed the woman’s guidance.

In a few moments we reached the house, and our guide, leading the way, through an outer apartment, entered an inner chamber, in which an old woman of probably sixty or more was lying upon the bed.

From the ashy pallor upon her face, and the glassy film coming over her eyes, it was evident that her very hours were numbered.

“I have brought you a clergyman, mother,” the woman who had been our guide said, taking the nerveless hand lying on the coverlet in her own; and my companion also advanced towards the bed, and began to utter some consoling words.

For a moment or two the dying woman seemed to struggle against her weakness, and then, with a great effort of will, raised herself to a half-sitting posture.

“Yes,” she gasped, “I sent for you, I could not die with the dark secret on my soul. I was housekeeper at the lodge when old Mr. Hallam died. His only son, Master Frank, came home to take the property. His father had not been buried a week before he, too, was carried home dead. Everyone thought he had shot himself by accident, but he did not. It was murder, and the hand that did it was—”

Her voice suddenly died away in gasping, unintelligible syllables, and she fell back upon the bed, a shiver quivering through her form, and a rattle in her throat. The next moment she was dead, with the secret of the murderer’s name still unrevealed.

As we waited for the arrival of the town carriage, my companion and I talked over the strange incident that had interrupted our journey. I found that he had been the pastor of a neighboring parish for more than ten years, and remembered perfectly the particulars of the deaths of the old man and his only son referred to by the old woman: Mr. Hallam, I learned, was the descendant of one of the Pilgrim fathers, whose family had occupied the lodge for several generations. Pride of descent was a failing of the family, and with the Old World aristocratic craving of land, each representative had kept on adding acre to acre to the original homestead, until the property was one of the most valuable in the State. About seven years before, the then owner referred to by the dying woman had died suddenly of heart disease, and his only son, Frank, then at college, was called suddenly home to take possession of the estate. When he did so, he was accompanied by his cousin, the next heir. About a week after the old man’s burial, while out shooting with his cousin, young Hallam’s gun was accidentally discharged, killing him on the spot, while his cousin, as next heir, took possession of the property, and had ever since made the lodge his home.

I had first become a detective from choice. I felt pride in my profession and took especial pleasure in the working up of intricate and mysterious cases, and the one thus accidentally brought under my notice interested me at once.

That there was a hidden crime somewhere was evident. If any credence was to be given to the old housekeeper's assertion, that the young master had been murdered, it was equally certain that the assassin was none other than his cousin who was in his company at the time, and who, by his death, inherited his property.

Still there was not the slightest shred of proof to support the supposition, and after this lapse of time to begin to collect any seemed a worse than hopeless task. Still I was finally determined to leave no stone unturned to fathom the mystery.

Mr. Hallam, I learned, was well known and a general favorite with all classes throughout the whole country for miles around. Judging also, as I was much in the habit of doing, as to the probable nature of a man's acts by his physiognomy, I was obliged to admit his face exactly the reverse of that of a man who would commit such a treacherous crime. The proof of my surmises at once, or their complete refutation. I determined to have the young man's grave opened, and the skull with the bullet found in it examined.

Upon inquiry I found this a matter more easily accomplished than I had at first imagined. The Hallam family had to be thrown off the scent so soon, and accordingly made friends with all the servants at the lodge who had been there in the old man's time, to try and gather some particulars of the tragedy.

From the old butler I gleaned information likely to be useful.

"Ah, yes," he said, shaking his snow-white head, with a sorrowful air, "I remember it as well as yesterday, and only this morning I was cleaning up the guns that the young gentleman had out that very afternoon."

A little more conversation and I had become possessed of another important fact—the guns carried by the cousins were of entirely different makes. The one that Frank had carried and been accidentally discharged, was a five-grooved rifle, while his cousin's was a double-barreled fowling piece.

"Yes," I said, "it certainly was a most melancholy affair; and then to have the corpse cut and hacked by surgeons in searching for the bullet must have made it seem more so."

"Ah, but we were spared that," the old man said, with a little accent of half triumph. "The bullet embedded so fast in the skull that the coroner waved the point on account of Mr. Hallam's feelings, and it was never taken out."

No sooner did I hear this than my resolution was taken. Here was either face was resolute and determined, certainly—the face of a man who, once his mind was made up to a certain point, would persevere without faltering to the end, but not that of an assassin.

Still it should be the detective's unalterable maxim to stand fast to his theory until disproved. I was determined not a private vault beneath the church, and all I had to do was to induce the sexton to grant me admittance.

This, partly by a bribe, and partly by a display of my authority, I easily managed, and together we entered the moldy vault.

The lantern held high by the sexton threw a pallid light around, as one by one I read the inscriptions on the plates of the tiers of coffins until I came to one with the name "Frank Hallam, Aged 24." Then the sexton and I removed it from the shelf, he holding the light, while I unscrewed the nails from the lid.

The body was quite reduced to dust. Only a mouldy skeleton wrapped in a yellow shroud lay before us. Without disturbing its position more than necessary I raised the skull in my hands, and, holding it closer to the light, saw the bullet still fast embedded in its thickest part.

In an instant, with the point of my knife, I had forced it from its bed and held it in the hollow of my hand. My doubts were conclusively set at rest now. It was not the conical-shaped ball of a rifle, but a round bullet, such as would be used for a smooth-bore.

I drew the sexton's attention to the fact, to be used as evidence in the future if necessary, and then, once more screwing down the lid of the coffin, we replaced it on the shelf and left the vault.

An hour later I was at Hallam Lodge, demanding to see its master.

I was shown into the library where he sat in an easy-chair before a desk, busy with some papers. He rose as I entered, and remained standing, waiting for me to state my business.

"I have come on an errand that will probably surprise you," I said, keeping my eye steadily upon him, and my hand upon the handle of the revolver in my breast-pocket. "It is to arrest you for the murder of your cousin seven years ago!"

He never flinched an inch at my words. I had not been mistaken in my estimate of the man's determined character. His voice was calm, as if discussing an affair of ordinary business, as he answered:

"I have been expecting something of the kind for a long time. That a deed of blood always will come out in the end is true. In fact, I am only surprised this has not come out before."

His coolness staggered me. In all my experience I had never met such a criminal as this. He went on in the same matter-of-fact tone:

"Are you open to a bribe?"

"Most emphatically no."

“Then there is no use talking, and you had better do your duty towards me—supposing I choose to allow you.”

As he added the last half dozen words, a small gold-mounted revolver flashed with electric quickness from his breast, and the next moment covered my heart.

“Remove your hand from your pocket,” he said.

So rapid and unexpected had been his movement, that he had me completely at his mercy. My hand still grasped my revolver, however, as he spoke I drew it and fired.

The bullet whizzed harmlessly past him, and the next moment the weapon was dashed from my hand, while the barrel of the other’s revolver was pressed cold against my forehead.

“I have a great mind to kill you for that trick,” he said, still in his cold measured tones; “but it would be of no avail. I confess myself guilty of the murder of my cousin. This event has not been unfor[e]seen, and my mind has long been made up as to what course to pursue. You are welcome to take me to jail—dead, if you wish it, but never alive!”

As he ceased speaking, the revolver left my forehead and was pressed against his own. The next moment a report followed and he fell heavily to the floor. Recovering my self-possession in an instant, I bent over him, but a single look showed that the shot had taken effect and he was dead.

His crime, as it always will, had found him out at last; but with a calm determination, that in a better cause would have been heroic, he had still triumphed over the law, and dealt out his doom with his own hand.

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