

The Death-Watch in the Wall

New York Mercury.

A few years ago a [shrewd], but somewhat inexperienced young man, whom we will call Oscar Tolles, was taken into the employ of a firm of private detectives whose principal office was located on Broadway.

Pecuniarily Oscar Tolles was independent of any sort of work or profession whatever; therefore, the reader will at once surmise that he had some object of extraordinary character in making the search of unknown and concealed desperadoes and outlaws a business.

And the reader will be quite correct to surmise thus.

Detectives whom he had liberally paid to trace an individual who, he believed, had caused the death of his father or his mysterious disappearance, had failed, and, therefore, he determined to assume the role of detective himself.

The circumstances of his father's disappearance were peculiar.

Oscar's father had been the proprietor of a large and well-stocked sheep-farm in the far West, doing remarkably well, when he conceived of the idea of driving a flock of his choicest blooded animals across the plains to the nearest city, partly urged by his instinctive love of adventure, and partly because he fancied his stock would be in a better salable condition by grazing by the way than they would be if pinned in the ill-heated and uncomfortable cars then in vogue on the railway. Before he started on his slow journey he had sold the rest of his stock, some ten thousand head or more—to a drover unknown before in that part of the country, and who paid the old gentleman the highest market price. Oscar was absent at the time, consequently his father departed with the proceeds of the sale concealed on his person, and was never seen again. From the first Oscar suspected this strange drover, who had come and gone in his absence. He traced his father to the nearest shipping place and here lost the clue, although he ascertained that a fine assortment of blooded sheep had been sent by rail to New York by a peculiarly distinguished looking drover whose description was identical with that of the unknown man who had made such an extravagant purchase of his missing parent. The high-mettled mustang rode by the elder Tolles, and the valuable shepherd dog which accompanied him, had also been sold to the owner of a prominent livery stable by the same mysterious personage. After several months spent in a fruitless search the young man went on to New York; resolved to find, at whatever cost, the strange man whom he believed to be the most murderous of scoundrels.

The unknown drover had been described to him as being rather tall, with a body and limbs as wiry and muscular as those of a gladiator: and having the look and accent of a Spaniard, being very dark with long black hair and fiery black eyes, and a most violently impetuousness of manner.

And this was the sort of man he was looking for in the low slums and gilded saloons of New York, when his chief sent him on a search after a very different kind of personage. This man

whom he was expected to find and decoy into the charge of the police and whose photograph he consulted from time to time, had a complexion as fair and rosy as that of a girl, and had also blonde curls and an elegantly-dressed blonde beard. He was described as a seeming gentleman of leisure in his manner, his associations, and his extravagance. But his offence was a heinous one. He had robbed a wealthy old man of an immense sum of money and then immured his victim in an asylum for the insane, from which a liberation had been effected unsuspected by the gentlemanly sinner with the elegant blonde-beard, and who it was hoped would be speedily captured.

But day followed day, bringing to the young detective not the slightest hint of success.

He was heartily discouraged when one day he left the office, leaving the chief more than usually disappointed and dissatisfied.

“Fair and rosy as a girl! curling blonde hair and full beard,” he repeated as he walked slowly down the street, his head bent on his breast, and his hands locked on his back.

“If you are speaking of a man answering that description you have just passed him,” said a brisk voice in his ear.

Oscar Tolles looked up and around quickly, in astonishment, but he did not see the polished rascal of whom he was thinking.

The stranger who had spoken to him laughed lightly.

Oscar glanced at him curiously. The intrusive stranger was more *tout ensemble*, like a priest of clergyman than an ordinary mortal. His dress was the finest black broadcloth, and scrupulously unassuming hat above a snowy “choker” the closely cropped gray hair, and smoothly shaven face, the grave eyes and stern lips, and pleasant voice—all completed the sanctimonious semblance.

“You are a novice in the detective business, I infer,” observed the stranger blandly.

“Somewhat,” acknowledged the young fellow, and instantly wroth at his stupidity in making the confession.

“Well, it is an art to be learned, I assure you. I have been a detective myself, and know all about it. I have seen you several times, young man, and have taken a considerable interest in you. I can give you some profitable advice if you will find it worth your while to accept the acquaintance of an old man like me. That is my house around the corner: you see the Mansard, do you not? Here is my card. If you will pardon the presumption of a garrulous old chap as I am, I will gladly invite you to lunch with me.”

The young detective glanced at the neat card. It was plainly engraved with the name “Abner Davidson.”

Even the most experienced detective would hesitate to refuse so fair a seeming invitation; the fraternity are too eager for adventure, and, beside, have an irresistible desire to know everybody and all about them. Their brain is a sort of store-room where they store faces and incidents for possible emergency in the future.

But in this instance Oscar Tolles, less discreet than his professional brethren, made a confident of his new friend, whose appearance indicated his station of Hon. Retired Prosperity, as he modestly assured his visitor, was indeed his worldly position.

“So the poor gentleman has escaped from the asylum?” he observed in unctuous tones. “What a mercy! And how fortunate that the vile scoundrel who caused his incarceration, carelessly lost the picture and packet of papers. The villain will be brought to justice, for it is impossible for him to escape. You say the original portrait is painted on a porcelain plate that is set on the inner case of an old and valuable chronometer; and that it and the papers are still in the possession of the unfortunate man who so happily escaped from the home for lunatics? When will you see him?”

“Tonight,” answered the young detective. Mentioning the time and place where his chief requested him to meet the man in whose service he had been employed.

After another pleasant half-hour Oscar Tolles left the palatial home of his hospitable and new friend, and some time later he started for the steamboat landing.

It was a sultry, thickly-clouded spring night, and, either because oppressed by the heat or the fumes of Mr. Abner Davidson’s old port, he was very long upon the way, and when he at last arrived at his destination he found the steamer gone and the passengers due all landed and dispersed.

He was not unprepared the next morning for the anger of his chief.

“If you would succeed in anything,” he said with severity, “you must be punctual in everything. This poor man has only escaped from an asylum to be foully murdered. Last night, not two hundred feet away from the landing, he was stabbed to the heart, and the body was rifled of that precious watch and those valuable papers; and, to make you still more culpable for your want of zeal, that very rogue with the long blonde beard was seen skulking about the place not five minutes before the murder was committed. The body of poor Tolles—”

“Tolles?” cried the foiled detective, springing to his feet. “Did you say Tolles?”

“You are a fine fellow for a detective,” sneered the chief, “when you cannot remember a name the same as your own.”

“You never mentioned the name before,” groaned the young fellow. “I thought you said Knowles.”

“I mention it now, then,” was the contemptuous reply: “Oscar Tolles, sen., late of Texas, and the millionaire owner of a famous sheep farm.”

“O, good heavens! my murdered father,” cried the young man.

And this conviction so suddenly forced upon him proved to be the truth.

His father’s fate was at last known, although not the mysterious assassin.

“But I will find the murderer yet,” he declared to the chief; “I will find him if the search cost me all my fortune and takes me my lifetime.”

In his first perplexity he decided to call upon Abner Davidson for advice.

He was rather reluctantly admitted to the room of his sanctimonious new friend, whom he found lying in a luxurious couch, and closely wrapped in a silken counterpane.

“Well, my boy, what can I do for you?” inquired Abner Davidson, who seemed not a little annoyed at the persistence with which the detective had forced his way to the apartment.

“You were so kind,” faltered Oscar, “and seemed so interested in this peculiarly mysterious and tragic affair, that now he is dead—”

“Dead! did you say?” interrupted the man, in a strangely intense and horrified whisper, and at the same time his visage turning gray and ghastly.

Before Oscar could answer, there suddenly broke the quick silence a sound that seemed to come through the wall.

Tick! tick! tick!

Slow, loud, regular, like the death-watch heard in haunted houses.

The sound seemed to frenzy the man. He jumped up in his bed, his cleanly shaven face like ashes and over it gathered and rolled great beads of icy sweat.

“That cursed watch,” he cried, as if he had suddenly gone mad. “I stopped it myself, and the devil has set it to ticking to betray me. But I did not mean to kill him—I swear I did not. I never shed human blood in my life. I waylaid him to get the papers and the watch. He drew his pistol, and I struck him in self-defense. In the scuffle, perhaps, my knife was accidentally thrust into some vital part. But what am I saying? Has my brain turned that I should rave like this?”

Oscar had heard every word, while wonder, rage, and gratification were depicted on his fine, youthful face.

“Do not mind me,” went on Davidson, piteously; “I am threatened with brain fever, my physicians tells me, and am delirious at times. You have better go now, and I will see you when I am stronger.”

Tick! tick! tick! And with every tick the man’s eyes grew wider, and his gestures more furious and spasmodic.

“Go!” he shrieked at last, in a fury.

But Oscar’s keen eyes had been noting every object about the room, and presently fell upon a queer little chest that had been thrust out of sight, and evidently in great haste, for the lid rested on the bent catch of the lock, showing that the clasp had been forced inward by the sudden and violent fall of the cover.

Through the crevice he caught the gleam of curling blonde hair.

With his teeth set hard upon his nether lip and his heart pounding against his breast like a hammer on an anvil, he deliberately arose, crossed the room, opened wide the quaint old chest, and pried forth two false wigs. One set was black and the other blonde.

And tick! tick! tick! sounded the hidden watch in his ear; and the man on the bed glared upon him in futile wrath.

The young man turned and sternly faced the cunning scamp who, by different *aliases* and disguises, had escaped detection so successfully and long.

“Abner Davidson, there never lived a villain who in the end did not outwit himself, and that is what you have done. You recognized me that day, and divined why I was playing detective. You knew that your victim had escaped from the asylum, and to obtain the watch you assumed the blonde disguise in which you were known at the asylum, and then waylaid my poor father. In this black wig you were known as the drover who appropriated his property in Texas, and whom I have always believed to be a freebooter. Now I desire to see the watch.”

The peculiarly musical and sonorous ticking soon guided him to the place where it was hidden.

He opened the curiously-carved old case, and saw therein, exquisitely painted on porcelain, the portrait of Abner Davidson.

“This is all that is needed to convict you, you fiend,” said young Tolles. “You can ring for your servants now. I am going for the officers.”

But when he returned Abner Davidson was breathing his last. He preferred death to disgrace in the city where he had been respected as an honest man, and he had torn the bandage away from a gaping wound made by the pistol-ball of his victim, and his dual life was soon over.

And thinking undoubtedly of the important watch, his last words were:

“I hear the death-watch in the wall!”

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