

An Australian Detective's Story; or, Murder Will Out

I AM A DETECTIVE in the Victoria police, and have been one for some years; I was formerly one in Paris, and I was employed as such in the Hyde Park Exhibition of 1851. Since then I have been in various parts of the world; in fact there are very few of the force that haven't knocked about the world a good bit. However, at last I have settled in Australia, and hope my roving is ended.

I never had but one crack case entrusted to my care. I have sometimes tracked thieves from the diggings to the interior, and found them boundary riders on stations, or clerks that did not keep their accounts straight, and found them bullock-driving up-country, but these were small affairs; a pair of bracelets soon settled such; but once I had a matter to find out on the very slightest information received, which required all my skill and all the resources of my long experience.

Some four years ago there lived, about a mile down the river Glenelg, beyond the bridge, an oldish man, who was reported to have made somewhere a good 'pile.' He was a thorough hermit, seldom stirred out, except to go to the store and buy a few necessities, for which he always paid, and never was known to beat down the price of anything. This naturally led to the surmise that he had plenty of money. Near him lived another single man in a slab and bark hut; he was a shoemaker by trade, but in a small township like this his customers were but few, and his livelihood precarious. He was known to be as poor as his neighbor, and was as much dependent on the forbearance of his creditors as the other was on his ready money. Between these two solitary men, living on the river side there sprung up a strangely intimate friendship; always after breakfast, often through the day, and regularly at night, they had their pipe together, sometimes with a pannikin of tea only, at others with a glass of grog. There was a dim mystery hanging over the supposed rich man's history; where he had come from, or how he had made his money, no one knew, and his churlish ways forbade anyone to ask him; he and the shoemaker were all the world to each other, and beyond that neither seemed to care anything. In this uniform but curious mode of life, weeks and months passed away; the only difference observable being, that although Stevens, the shoemaker, had no more customers than formerly, he now seemed to have money always at command, and not only paid off his old scores but had money for all he needed.

One morning however—it was in the winter season, and the Glenelg was rolling its turbulent waters muddy and swift, down to the sea—the old man's hut was not opened; wood-splitters passing by observed that the old hermit was not sunning himself and smoking his 'cutty' as usual, and that night Stevens came running into the township, greatly excited, and calling on Mr. T— at the inn, told him that not having seen old Jeffrey all day he had forced an entrance into the hut, but that the old man was not there, and what had become of him he did not know. A policeman, for H— is a police station, was immediately sent to take charge of the hut until the magistrates could make inquiry. Some days after the inquiry was made, but nothing came of it, further than the suspicion that Jeffrey had met with foul play. Still, nothing was proved, nor could be proved until the body could be found; for, eccentric as the old man was, who could say he had not got up in the night, and as suddenly started from H— as he had made his appearance there?

As soon as intelligence of this affair reached headquarters at Melbourne, the matter was placed in my hands, with instructions to exercise my own discretion in my proceedings, absolving me from all disgrace if I failed, and promising me £100 if I succeeded. My plan was adopted after much consideration, and I have no reason to regret the steps I took, as will be seen in the sequel. I took the little steamer *Western*, Capt. Lucas, to Portland, 260 miles, and after stopping a day or two at Mac's hotel, I started by the mail for the far interior. After three days' journey I arrived at H— as a traveler looking for a job of work. I had a tolerably heavy swag, and this with my pannikin and billy gave me the appearance of a *bona fide* one. I went straight up to the bar, had my nobbler, lighted my pipe, and then sat down outside to consider my next movement. It was necessary I should have someone in my confidence, but I resolved not to trust the local police, as in these remote stations their life of idleness often makes them loafers and gossips. I resolved to call Mr. T— the hotel keeper and postmaster, aside—he had been an officer in the army many years—and tell him my errand. I did so—never was secret better kept—and returned as if nothing had occurred. Toward evening the bar was pretty full, and I took the opportunity of saying publicly to Mr. T— that I was out of work, that I was a groom, that I did not want to go to work on a station, and should be glad of a chance job. He at once told me to go to his stables and tell his foreman to take me on as an extra stable hand. I gave Mr. T— my swag to take care of; it contained my uniform, and my authority from headquarters to act as a detective. He understood all, and that was sufficient.

As groom I remained here 7 months; able for a long while to do nothing; but feeling more and more confident that the general suspicion of Stevens was well founded. Of course I became intimate with him, but only in the evenings when my work was done; in all respects I acted as an ordinary groom, receiving my weekly wages, and carefully avoiding everything that might lead anyone to suppose I was anything but a groom. Often have I laughed within myself as a mounted trooper has ridden up, and called me to take his horse, and given him a feed; however, I kept my own counsel, and little by little light dawned upon my track. Over the never failing pipe I had frequent conversations with Stevens about this old man; on such occasions he would generally fix his eyes upon the ground, which gave me the opportunity to watch him more narrowly. I could then see the nervous twitchings of his face, the biting of his lip, and the sudden passing of his handkerchief across his brow, which convinced me that he knew more of the affair than I did. Frequently at the close of our conversations, in which Stevens was making these unconscious self-revelations would he say—"I hate talking of this dismal subject, let's have another glass." On such occasions he always said—"I'll shout; you are only a groom, I can afford it better than you." Gradually he took to regular drinking; morning, noon, and night he was to be found at the bar. When joked about his finances he had his answer ready; he had sold his horse, or an old mate had called and given him the cash. So long as he 'shouted' freely, few cared where the money came from. My eyes, however, were steadily fixed on his drinking habits as the clue to my researches.

Summer was now coming on; though it was a late summer it was a regular hot Australian one; in the course of a few weeks the Glenelg began to dry up, and its long chain of water holes to appear. Now was the time for ascertaining whether the remains of the old man were to be found in any of the water holes in the neighborhood of H—, and one evening as I was talking to Stevens about this I said,—“You or I may as well try and find the remains of Jeffrey, and so lay claim to the Government reward.” I noticed this gave him quite a turn; and although he tried to

conceal it I saw that he trembled all over, and though generally very mild spoken, he got quite angry with me, and told me I might do what I liked, but he wasn't so fond of looking after dead men, especially if they are murdered. I replied: "No one said that Jeffrey was murdered; you have always said he made away with himself." "I thought so once, but now, the more I think over the matter, the more convinced I am that he was murdered." "That has to be proved," said I, "and to prove it we must first find the remains, and as the river dries up I have no doubt we shall find them in *one of the water holes near his hut*." This was not exactly a guess, but was a conclusion arrived at thus: 1, Stevens was a slight-built man, and, supposing him to have been the murderer, could not have carried Jeffrey far; 2, everyone knows that murderers seldom have nerve or forethought to carry their victims far from the scene of the murder. As soon as I had said this he became pale and said—"Well, let's have a nobbler; I cannot stand this everlasting talk about a murdered man."

We had our glass and parted for the night; but my mind was already made up. Stevens, beyond doubt, was the murderer, and I must obtain the proof. I am not going to defend our code of morals. I admit that we often do evil that good may come; but society should not employ us to find out dark crimes if they mean to condemn us for our questionable methods of procedure.

It was now late in Jan. and intensely hot. It was surprising to see how rapidly the Glenelg ceased to be a river, and how each day the water holes became shallower. Prompted by me Mr. T— obtained, from a neighboring magistrate, orders for the police to examine every water hole within a mile on either side of old Jeffrey's hut. As soon as this was known Stevens was down at the bar trying, I suppose, to smother his memory in deep potations of whiskey. Directly the police commenced searching the river I discharged myself, and having obtained my check, proceeded, or pretended, to spend it after the usual up-country fashion, which everybody knows, meant staying in the bar and shouting right off the reel. This I did not exactly do; I kept myself sober as a judge; behind the scenes I prompted everything; through Mr. T— I suggested every step that had hitherto been taken, and now I had only to wait the result of the searching and dragging the water holes. Those who know the country know that it is no easy matter, and that it occupies considerable time. Sometimes only 2 or 3 could be searched in a day, on others more. Whilst this was going on Stevens became almost a resident in the bar, seldom leaving it, but betraying intense and childish curiosity as to the result of the search. "Have they found anything?" or, "haven't they found anything yet?" or "well, I should have thought they would have found something by this time," were expressions that frequently fell from his lips. It was, I think, the fourth day of the search, and Stevens had been drinking hard all the time; on the afternoon of that day a sack was found with human remains in it at the bottom of a hole; and on the evening of that day drink and excitement had rendered Stevens incapable of taking care of himself, and, he was conveyed to the lock up as drunk and disorderly. I, too, though perfectly sober, affected to have been out on a spree, and was locked up in the same place with Stevens, and my name on the list as drunk and disorderly. I never saw such a change in a man as came over Stevens when he found I was with him. The effects of the drink were passing away owing to the excitement produced by the discovery of the remains; and no sooner was the lock turned on me than he clasped me by the hand as the "Groom that had always been so friendly," and began to cry like a child. His thoughts were running on the murder, and I resolved to use the opportunity. To make this right, I began—"I say, Stevens, do you know they found the old man's body? It was in a sack and was weighted with stones; and one of the stones was your lapstone."

The skull is broken in 2 places, so that it is plain he must have been murdered. You talked in your sleep just now?” “Did I? what did I say?” “You said if they would let you off you would show them where his money was.” (This he had said in his sleep.) Upon this he gave a convulsive shriek, fell back upon the straw and exclaimed—“Yes, I killed old Jeffrey—but don’t peach on me; they can only bring me up for being drunk and disorderly, and I’ll give you half the money. I say, groom, you won’t peach, will you? I’ll leave these parts. I had too much whiskey. Let me sleep; I’ll tell you everything tomorrow; but don’t peach, and I’ll make a clean breast of it.” Before the morning broke he had confessed everything to me. I had always been a good fellow, and he didn’t mind telling me all. He had entered the old man’s hut at midnight, beat in his skull, put the body in a sack, and, fool that he was, put in his lapstone along with other stones to make it sink, and had hid his money under the mud floor of his cottage. The next morning we were both brought before the magistrate of the district charged as aforesaid. On being asked what I had to say, I handed him my authority to act as a detective, and requested to be placed in the witness-box, as I had a charge of murder to bring against Stevens who was there on the minor charge. In less time than it takes to tell this, I had left the room, and to the surprise of all, especially the local police, the well-known groom of H— was in uniform bringing his charge against Stevens, founded on his own confession, of murdering Jeffrey.

The sequel is soon told; my evidence hung Stevens, who, previous to his execution, confessed not only this murder, but the murder of a mate in the bush some years back, with whom he was working on a station, making a stake and rail fence.

New Hampshire Statesman, February 3, 1865
Lamoille Newsdealer [Hyde Park, VT], February 8, 1865
Frostburg [MD] Mining Journal, March 13, 1875

Reprinted as
“Story of an Australian Detective,” *Harper’s Weekly*, February 4, 1865