

What a Piece of Waistcoat Did

Written for *The New York Clipper*
by Vandyke Brown

Briefly stated, the facts in the case, so far as known, were these.

Mr. Richard Walton had returned to his rooms in West Twenty-third street at half-past twelve o'clock Wednesday night. He had been seen that evening in one of the Broadway theatres, and later in the cafe of the Hotel Brunswick, where he had partaken of supper and drunk a bottle of champagne. He appeared in excellent spirits, and before leaving the Brunswick made an appointment with Col. Poynton Payn to meet that gentleman at eleven o'clock the next day. He was then driven to his residence, and, having given instructions to be called at nine o'clock, retired. That was the last ever seen of Richard Walton alive. When a servant went to his room the next morning and endeavored to awaken him by knocking at the door, there was no response; and when, at last, the door was forced open, his body was found upon the floor lifeless and cold. Examination disclosed the fact that he had been shot through the heart. Apart from the absurdity of such an idea, it was plain enough that Richard Walton had not committed suicide, inasmuch as his own pistol was found in his pocket with a cartridge in each of the chambers, while there was no other weapon in the room. It was then established beyond the shadow of a doubt that murder had been committed. And here all certainty ended. Beyond the one simple and terrible fact there was nothing but mystery and guesswork.

Death, they tell us, is always sudden. It must then, be considered startlingly sudden when its messenger is a bullet. That Richard Walton was dead would in itself have caused sincere sorrow among his many friends. When to the knowledge of his death was added the astounding information that he had been murdered, sorrow was mingled with indignation and astonishment. Who could have committed the deed? Of all men whom fortune smiled upon, Richard Walton was the last to have an enemy. Possessing an independent fortune, a genial manner, and a warm heart, he made friends among all classes. A welcome visitor in the most exclusive families of the metropolis, he was equally at home among beer-loving Bohemians, disappointed artists, and unemployed actors. He was an important factor in what is known as fashionable society. He owned a yacht and half a dozen fast horses. A Grecian statue or a full-blooded setter-dog filled him alike with honest admiration. He drank extra-dry with Col. Poynton Payn, or lager with an unappreciated genius, and enjoyed the one as keenly as the other. His perfect self-possession, his exhaustless good-humor, his sunny disposition, made him a rare companion. There was not the suspicion of a snob about him. He might, and perhaps did, change his dress a dozen times a day, but nobody even thought of him as a fop. In short, Richard Walton was a gentleman. His life of luxurious ease had stretched over forty years, and he was still a bachelor. His friends—his masculine friends—counted this fortunate, because marriage might have put a check to his hospitality. Moreover, it would have been unjust for any one woman to have monopolized so big a heart. Everybody who knew him loved him. And yet he had been murdered.

By whom?

That was the puzzling question which I, John Mosher, detective, was called upon to answer. In twenty years' experience I had never grappled with so knotty a problem. At the very outset, the attempt to form any reasonable theory of the crime was baffled by the seeming absence of motive. Had the murderer robbed his victim, the case would have been comparatively simple; but there was the dead man's wallet, containing more than a hundred dollars, safe in his pocket. There, too, were his diamond shirt-studs and costly watch and chain, to say nothing of the many valuable articles in the room, left undisturbed. Plunder, apparently, had not led to the murder. The most searching inquiries among his friends failed to elicit a spark of information which might throw light upon the mystery. He had no entangling relations, so far as known, with any living person. What might have been, in the case of another, a possible solution of the problem, viz., that he had met his death at the hands of some jealous man or deeply-injured woman, was not to be considered in connection with Richard Walton. So, I repeat, it was impossible to assign any motive for the crime.

The only thing for me to do was to make a careful examination of the room in which the tragedy had occurred. I found that the door had been locked on the inside, and the key afterwards removed. It was evident that the assassin had made his escape through one of the windows which looked out upon the street. This was by no means a difficult task, since the room was on the second story, while the heavy brownstone caps of the lower windows afforded a safe rest for the feet. Both windows were open when the body was discovered. The murderer had evidently worked his way with the utmost coolness and self-possession. He had left not the slightest clue behind him. He had locked the door, as I have said, and doubtless put the key into his pocket. He had then climbed out of the window, and swung himself from the cap to the ground. Without attempting to explain how he had first got into the room, it was tolerably evident that he had lain in wait for his victim, and shot him almost immediately upon his entrance. The servants had heard no report of a pistol, but, as their quarters were in a distant part of the house, this was not surprising.

Having satisfied my mind on these points, and after searching every nook and corner in the room, I made my way to the yard below. The fine, closely-cropped turf left no impression of any footprint: but upon one of the sharp pickets of the iron fence I found something which I regarded as a priceless treasure. That something was a small piece of woolen cloth, perhaps an inch and a half wide and three inches long. A ragpicker might have thrust it into his bag as possessing no greater value than it would fetch by weight. Anybody, I take it, except a detective would have looked upon it as a most insignificant discovery. But to me that bit of cloth was a revelation. I saw almost at a glance that it had been torn from a vest. There was the spot marked by thread where the button had been sewed on—what a pity, I reflected, the button was gone! There was the binding about the edge, and there was a bit of the lining—it must have been a hard pull to have torn so tough a material. Small as the piece was, it was still large enough to show the pattern of the fabric, and that was the all-important feature. A curious pattern it was—a dark-brown groundwork, upon which were blocked out reddish checks fully an inch square. This combination could have been selected only by a person fond of loud dress. It was strongly suggestive of a heavy brass watch-chain and a soiled shirt-front. I put the bit of cloth into my pocket, feeling that I had fallen upon the key which would eventually unlock the mystery of Richard Walton's death.

My experience has taught me that crime, after successfully scaling stone walls, is very apt to trip up on a pebble. In the famous Mansard murder, which I had the honor to unravel, the perpetrator of the crime, after displaying the utmost caution and cunning, appeared openly with his victim's diamond ring upon his finger. In the case at hand, the assassin, instead of passing out through the gate, climbed the fence. And by taking that unnecessary trouble he left behind him, as I have explained, a most damaging clue. With this clue safe in my pocket, I made an end of my investigations at the house.

That same afternoon I received the appended note from Col. Poynton Payn:

R. W. drew seven thousand dollars from the Trustworthy Bank yesterday P. M.. Have just learned the fact. He intended to be present at the Wetmore sale of thoroughbreds to-day, and the money was doubtless drawn for the purpose of making purchases. P. P.

I need hardly say that the information contained in the foregoing note was of a most important nature. It threw a flood of light upon what had before been an impenetrable mystery. The motive for the crime now became apparent. Richard Walton had been murdered for money. The assassin, whoever he might prove to be, had robbed his victim of the seven thousand dollars, and had left untouched the watch and diamonds, fearing, no doubt, that these latter would be difficult to dispose of without exciting suspicion.

It was too late that afternoon to call at the Trustworthy Bank: but, promptly at nine o'clock the next morning, I was at the teller's desk. It appeared that Mr. Walton had drawn the money a few moments before the hour for closing the bank—three o'clock. He was then in high spirits, and had incidentally mentioned that he intended to invest a few thousands in the Wetmore stock. The money had been paid to him in thirteen five-hundred-dollar bills, four one-hundred-dollar ones, and two fifties. He had placed the notes, with the exception of one hundred and fifty dollars, in a large morocco wallet, which he carried in his breast-pocket. The smaller amount was put into the wallet which was afterwards found upon his body.

"Could you identify the bills if you saw them?"

"One of them I think I could," was the answer. "It was a five-hundred-dollar note, and there was an ink-spot upon one corner—purple-ink, like this I use. The spot was as big as a wafer."

As there was nothing further to be gleaned from this source, I left the bank and walked along Twenty-seventh street, intending to take a Fourth-avenue car downtown.

All of us, I assume, have found that most important results often hinge upon a trivial circumstance. So it happened that morning. Had I taken a Fourth-avenue car, as I meant to do, it is highly probable that the mystery of Richard Walton's death would have remained a mystery to this day. As it was, the fact that a car passed down just before I reached the corner led me to continue my walk along Twenty-seventh street until I came to Third avenue. There I boarded a car, and fell to speculating upon the chances of discovering the gentleman who had left a sample of his waistcoat on the fence of Richard Walton's house. So completely was my mind occupied that I probably should not have noticed the man who got aboard the car at Eighth street but for

the fact that, in making his way to a seat, he stepped upon my most sensitive corn. That at once roused me from my meditations, and made me painfully conscious of his presence. He sat down directly opposite me, so that I had abundant opportunity to examine him at leisure. Even had he not stepped upon my corn, I should have taken an immediate dislike to the fellow. He had a bulldog sort of face, with small, restless eyes, a flat nose, and thick, protruding lips. There was something in his appearance which at the first glance aroused my professional suspicions. Although his face was strange to me—and at that time I knew pretty nearly every criminal in New York—I made up my mind in short order that his photograph would not be out of place in the Rogues' Gallery. I saw, moreover, that he did not know me—a circumstance which satisfied me that he had not been long in the city.

While I was still studying this passenger with professional interest, the conductor came in for his fare. The man wore a blue-flannel sackcoat, which, upon the conductor's appearance, he unbuttoned to get at his vest-pocket. In so doing he disclosed a soiled shirt-front, a brass watchchain, and a waistcoat of peculiar pattern. It was the sight of this last which set the blood tingling in my veins. For I saw, before the coat was again buttoned, that a strip, measuring perhaps an inch and a half by three inches, had been torn from the lower edge of the man's vest.

And so it flashed upon me that I was sitting face to face with the murderer of Richard Walton.

The suddenness of the discovery dazed me for a moment: but when that was passed I was thoroughly cool and self-collected. I felt for the bracelets, to make sure that I had them with me, touched the outside of my pistol-pocket, to give myself fresh assurance, and then folded my arms and waited.

When the car reached Canal street the man got off. I followed his example. He stood a moment on the curbstone, as though undecided what to do; then turned and sauntered slowly down the west side of the Bowery. In front of the Atlantic Garden he stopped, and then entered. I was close behind him, so that when he sat down it was by no means surprising that I should also take a seat, which I did at the next table. The man ordered beer. So did I. At that hour in the day the Garden was wellnigh deserted. There were no visitors at any of the tables about us. The man and I sipped our beer for some time in silence. At last I spoke:

"Nice sort of place this."

He looked at me suspiciously, I thought, and simply nodded his head by way of assent.

"Have another glass of beer with me?" I continued.

"I don't mind," he answered gruffly.

The waiter brought the beer, and we drank to "better acquaintance"—a sentiment which I uttered with the utmost sincerity.

"Curious case, that murder up in Twenty-third street the other night," I said, putting down my glass.

The man gave a sudden start, and stared at me savagely.

“What murder’s that?” he asked, with a poor attempt at appearing unconcerned.

“Why, Walton,” I replied; “Richard Walton. Fine fellow. Rich, but not at all stuck-up. Found murdered in his bedroom. Very mysterious. Whoever did it covered his tracks so carefully that the police haven’t got a clue!”

“Let’s have some more beer,” interrupted the man, making a clumsy effort to change the subject of conversation.

“In one moment,” I replied, nerving myself for the climax. “The police, as I say, haven’t a clue to this murderer, but there is a detective who has. Before we drink the beer I merely wish to inform you that I am the detective, and here is the clue!”

As I spoke I pulled forth the strip of waistcoat with my left hand, while with my right I seized hold of my pistol.

The man sprang to his feet with an oath.

“Gently!” I exclaimed, bringing the muzzle of the pistol close to his head.” Make the least show of resistance, and you drop in your tracks. I shall be obliged to ask you to put on these trinkets,” I added, producing the handcuffs.

Before the fellow had fairly collected his senses I had the bracelets upon his wrists, and was leading him out of the garden.

For the rest I need only refer you to the newspapers, which contained full accounts of the trial and conviction of Richard Walton’s murderer—the man who was brought to justice by a strip of woolen cloth.

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