

TRACES of CRIME

Mary Fortune

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There are many who recollect full well the rush at Chinaman's Flat. It was in the height of its prosperity that an assault was committed upon a female of a character so diabolical in itself, as to have aroused the utmost anxiety in the public as well as in the police, to punish the perpetrator thereof.

The case was placed in my hands, and as it presented difficulties so great as to appear to an ordinary observer almost insurmountable, the overcoming of which was likely to gain approbation in the proper quarter, I gladly accepted the task.

I had little to go upon at first. One dark night, in a tent in the very centre of a crowded thoroughfare, a female had been preparing to retire to rest, her husband being in the habit of remaining at the public-house until a late hour, when a man with a crape mask — who must have gained an earlier entrance — seized her, and in the prosecution of a criminal offence, had injured and abused the unfortunate woman so much that her life was despaired of. Although there was a light burning at the time, the woman was barely able to describe his general appearance; he appeared to her like a German, had no whiskers, fair hair, was low in stature, and stoutly built.

With one important exception, that was all the information she was able to give me on the subject. The exception, however, was a good deal to a detective, and I hoped might prove an invaluable aid to me. During the struggle she had torn the arm of the flannel shirt he wore, and was under a decided impression that upon the upper part of the criminal's arm there was a small anchor and heart tattooed.

Now, I was well aware that in this colony to find a man with a tattooed arm was an everyday affair, especially on the diggings, where, I dare say, there is scarcely a person with who has not come in contact more than once or twice with half a dozen men tattooed in the style I speak of — the anchor or heart, or both, being a favourite figure with those "gentlemen" who are in favour of branding. However, the clue was worth something, and even without its aid, not more than a couple of weeks had elapsed when, with the assistance of the local police, I had traced a man bearing in appearance a general resemblance to the man who had committed the offence, to a digging about seven miles from Chinaman's Flat.

It is unnecessary that I should relate every particular as to how my suspicions were directed to this man, who did not live on Chinaman's Flat, and to all appearances, had not left the diggings where he was camped since he first commenced working there. I say "to all appearances," for it was with a certain knowledge that he had been absent from his tent on the night of the outrage that I one evening trudged down the flat where his tent was pitched, with my swag on my back, and sat down on a log not far from where he had kindled a fire for culinary or other purposes.

These diggings I will call McAdam's. It was a large and flourishing goldfield, and on the flat where my man was camped there were several other tents grouped, so that it was nothing singular that I should look about for a couple of bushes, between which I might swing my little bit of canvas for the night.

After I had fastened up the rope, and thrown my tent over it in regular digger fashion, I broke down some bushes to form my bed, and having spread thereon my blankets, went up to my man — whom I shall in future call "Bill" — to request permission to boil my billy on his fire.

It was willingly granted, and so I lighted my pipe and sat down to await the boiling of the water, determined if I could so manage it to get this suspected man to accept me as a mate before I lay down that night.

Bill was also engaged in smoking, and had not, of course, the slightest suspicion that in the rough, ordinary looking digger before him he was contemplating the "make-up" of a Victorian detective, who had already made himself slightly talked of among his comrades by one or two clever captures.

"Where did you come from mate?" inquired Bill, as he puffed away leisurely at a cutty.

"From Burnt Creek," I replied, "and a long enough road it is in such d—— hot weather as this."

"Nothing doing at Burnt Creek?"

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"Not a thing — the place is cooked."

"Are you in for a try here, then?" he asked, rather eagerly I thought.

"Well, I think so; is there any chance do you think?"

"Have you got a miner's right?" was his sudden question.

"I have," said I taking it out of my pocket, and handing the bit of parchment for his inspection.

"Are you a hatter?" inquired Bill, as he returned the document.

"I am," was my reply.

"Well, if you have no objections then, I don't mind going mates with you — I've got a pretty fair prospect, and the ground's going to run rather deep for one man, I think."

"All right."

So here was the very thing I wanted, settled without the slightest trouble.

My object in wishing to go mates with this fellow will, I dare say, readily be perceived. I did not wish to risk my character for 'cuteness by arresting my gentleman, without being sure that he was branded in the way described by the woman, and besides, in the close supervision which I should be able to keep over him while working together daily, heaven knows what might transpire as additional evidence against him, at least so I reasoned with myself; and it was with a partially relieved mind that I made my frugal supper, and made believe to "turn in", fatigued, as I might be supposed to be, after my long tramp.

But I didn't turn in, not I, I had other objects in view, if one may be said to have an object in view on one of the darkest nights of a moonless week — for dark enough the night in question became, even before I had finished my supper, and made my apparent preparations for bed.

We were not camped far enough from the business part of the rush to be very quiet, there was plenty of noise — the nightly noise of a rich gold-field — came down our way, and even in some of the tents close to us, card-playing, and drinking, and singing, and laughing, were going on; so it was quite easy for me to steal unnoticed to the back of Bill's little tent, and, by the assistance of a small slit made in the calico by my knife, have a look at what my worthy was doing inside, for I was anxious to become acquainted with his habits, and, of course, determined to watch him as closely as ever I could.

Well, the first specimen I had of his customs was certainly a singular one, and was, it may be well believed, an exception to his general line of conduct. Diggers, or any other class of men, do not generally spend their evenings in cutting their shoes up into small morsels, and that was exactly what Bill was busily engaged in doing when I clapped my eye to the hole. He had already disposed of a good portion of the article when I commenced to watch him: the entire "upper" of a very muddy blucher boot lying upon his rough table in a small heap, and in the smallest pieces that one would suppose any person could have patience to cut up a dry, hard, old leather boot.

It was rather a puzzler to me this, and that Bill was doing such a thing simply to amuse himself was out of the question; indeed, without observing that he had the door of his tent closely fastened upon a warm evening, and that he started at the slightest sound, the instincts of an old detective would alone have convinced me that Bill had some great cause indeed to make away with those old boots; so I continued watching.

He had hacked away at the sole with an old but sharp butcher's knife, but it almost defied his attempts to separate it into pieces, and at length he gave it up in despair, and gathering up the small portions on the table, he swept them with the mutilated sole into his hat, and opening his tent door, went out.

I guessed very truly that he would make for the fire, and as it happened to be at the other side of a log from where I was hiding, I had a good opportunity of continuing my espial. He raked together the few embers that remained near the log, and flinging the pieces of leather thereon, retired once more into his tent, calculating, no doubt, that the hot ashes would soon scorch and twist them up, so as to defy recognition, while the fire he would build upon them in the morning would settle the matter most satisfactorily.

All this would have happened just so, no doubt, if I had not succeeded in scraping nearly every bit from the place where Bill had thrown them, so silently and quickly, that I was in the shelter of my slung tent with my prize and a burn or two on my fingers before he himself had had time to divest himself of his garments and blow out the light.

He did so very soon, however, and it was long before I could get asleep. I thought it over and over in all ways, and looked upon it in all lights that I could think of, and yet, always connecting this demolished boot with the case in the investigation of which I was engaged, I could not make it out at all.

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Had we overlooked, with all our fancied acuteness, some clue which Bill feared we had possession of, to which this piecemeal boot was the key? And if so why had he remained so long without destroying it?

It was, as I said before, a regular puzzler to me, and my brain was positively weary when I at length dropped off to sleep.

Well, I worked for a week with Bill, and I can tell you it was work I didn't at all take to. The unaccustomed use of the pick and shovel played the very mischief with my hands; but, for fear of arousing the suspicions of my mate, I durst not complain, having only to endure in silence, or as our Scotch friends would put it, "Grin and bide it." And the worst of it was, that I was gaining nothing — nothing whatever — by my unusual industry.

I had hoped that accidentally I should have got a sight of the anchor and heart, but I was day after day disappointed, for my mate was not very regular in his ablutions, and I had reckoned without my host in expecting that the very ordinary habit of a digger, namely, that of having a "regular wash" at least every Sunday, would be a good and certain one for exposing the brand.

But no, Bill allowed the Sunday to come and go, without once removing what I could observe was the flannel shirt, in which he had worked all the week; and then I began to swear at my own obtuseness — "the fellow must be aware that his shirt was torn by the woman, of course he suspects that she may have seen the tattooing, and will take blessed good care not to expose it, mate or no mate," thought I; and then I called myself a donkey, and during the few following days, when I was trusting to the chapter of accidents, I was also deliberating on the "to be or not to be" of the question of arresting him at once, and chancing it. Saturday afternoon came again, and then the early knock-off time, and that sort of quarter holiday among the miners, namely, four o'clock, was hailed by me with the greatest relief, and it was with the full determination of never again setting foot in the cursed claim that I shouldered my pick and shovel and proceeded tentwards.

On my way I met a policeman, and received from him a concerted signal that I was wanted at the camp, and so telling Bill that I was going to see an old mate about some money that he owed me, I started at once.

"We've got something else in your line, mate," said my old chum, Joe Bennet, as I entered the camp, "and one which, I think, will be a regular poser for you. The body of a man has been found in Pipeclay Gully, and we can scarcely be justified by appearances in giving even a surmise as to how he came by his death."

"How do you mean?" I inquired. "Has he been dead so long?"

"About a fortnight, I dare say, but we have done absolutely nothing as yet. Knowing you were on the ground we have not even touched the body: will you come up at once?"

"Of course I will!" And after substituting the uniform of the force for the digger's costume, in which I was apparelled, in case of an encounter with my "mate," we went straight to "Pipeclay."

The body had been left in charge of one of the police, and was still lying, undisturbed in the position in which it had been discovered; not a soul was about, in fact, the gully had been rushed and abandoned, and bore not the slightest trace of man's handiwork, saving and except the miner's holes and their surrounding little eminences of pipeclay, from which the gully was named. And it was a veritable "gully," running between two low ranges of hills, which hills were covered with an undergrowth of wattle and cherry trees, and scattered over with rocks and indications of quartz, which have, I dare say, been fully tried by this time.

Well, on the slope of one of the hills, where it amalgamated as it were with the level of the gully, and where the sinking had evidently been shallow, lay the body of the dead man. He was dressed in ordinary miner's fashion, and saving for the fact of a gun being by his side, one might have supposed that he had only given up his digging to lie down and die beside the hole near which he lay.

The hole, however, was full of water — quite full; indeed the water was sopping out on the ground around it, and that the hole was an old one was evident, by the crumbling edges around it, and the fragments of old branches that lay rotting in the water.

Close to this hole lay the body, the attitude strongly indicative of the last exertion during life having been that of crawling out of the water hole, in which indeed still remained part of the unfortunate man's leg. There was no hat on his head, and in spite of the considerable decay of the body, even an ordinary observer could not fail to notice a large fracture in the side of the head.

I examined the gun; it was a double-barrelled fowling piece, and one barrel had been discharged, while very apparent on the stock of the gun were blood marks, that even the late heavy rain had failed to erase. In the pockets of the dead man was nothing, save what any digger might carry — pipe and tobacco, a cheap knife, and a shilling

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or two, this was all; and so leaving the body to be removed by the police, I thoughtfully retraced my way to the camp.

Singularly enough, during my absence, a woman had been there, giving information about her husband, on account of whose absence she was becoming alarmed; and as the caution of the policeman on duty at the camp had prevented his giving her any idea of the fact of the dead body having been discovered that very day, I immediately went to the address which the woman had left, in order to discover, if possible, not only if it was the missing man, but also to gain any information that might be likely to put me upon the scent of the murderer, for that the man had been murdered I had not the slightest doubt.

Well, I succeeded in finding the woman, a young and decidedly good-looking Englishwoman of the lower class, and gained from her the following information:—

About a fortnight before, her husband, who had been indisposed, and in consequence not working for a day or two, had taken his gun one morning in order to amuse himself for an hour or two, as well as to have a look at the ranges near Pipeclay Gully, and do a little prospecting at the same time. He had not returned, but as he had suggested a possibility of visiting his brother who was digging about four miles off, she had not felt alarmed until upon communicating with the said brother she had become aware that her husband had never been there. From the description, I knew at once that the remains of the poor fellow lying in Pipeclay Gully were certainly those of the missing man, and with what care and delicacy I might possess I broke the tidings to the shocked wife, and after allowing her grief to have vent in a passion of tears, I tried to gain some clue to the likely perpetrator of the murder.

"Had she any suspicions?" I asked; "was there any feud between her husband and any individual she could name?"

At first she replied "no," and then a sudden recollection appeared to strike her, and she said that some weeks ago a man had, during the absence of her husband, made advances to her, under the feigned supposition that she was an unmarried woman. In spite of her decidedly repellent manner, he had continued his attentions, until she, afraid of his impetuosity, had been obliged to call the attention of her husband to the matter, and he, of course feeling indignant, had threatened to shoot the intruder if he ever ventured near the place again.

The woman described this man to me, and it was with a violent whirl of emotional excitement, as one feels who is on the eve of a great discovery, that I hastened to the camp, which was close by.

It was barely half-past five o'clock, and in a few minutes I was on my way, with two or three other associates, to the scene of what I had no doubt had been a horrible murder. What my object was there was soon apparent. I had before tried the depth of the muddy water, and found it was scarcely four feet, and now we hastened to make use of the remaining light of a long summer's day in draining carefully the said hole.

I was repaid for the trouble, for in the muddy and deep sediment at the bottom we discovered a deeply imbedded blucher boot; and I dare say you will readily guess how my heart leaped up at the sight.

To old diggers, the task which followed was not a very great one; we had provided ourselves with a "tub," etc., and "washed" every bit of the mud at the bottom of the hole. The only "find" we had, however, was a peculiar bit of wood, which, instead of rewarding us for our exertions by lying like gold at the bottom of the dish in which we "turned off," insisted upon floating on the top of the very first tub, when it became loosened from its surrounding of clay.

It was a queer piece of wood, and eventually quite repaid us for any trouble we might have had in its capture. A segment of a circle it was, or rather a portion of a segment of a circle, being neither more nor less than a piece broken out of one of those old fashioned black wooden buttons, that are still to be seen on the monkey-jacket of many an Australian digger, as well as elsewhere.

Well, I fancied that I knew the identical button from whence had been broken this bit of wood, and that I could go and straightaway fit it into its place without the slightest trouble in the world — singular, was it not? — and as I carefully placed the piece in my pocket, I could not help thinking to myself "Well, this does indeed and most truly look like the working of Providence."

There are many occasions when an apparent chance has effected the unravelling of a mystery, which but for the turning over of that particular page of fatality, might have remained a mystery to the day of judgment, in spite of the most strenuous and most able exertions. Mere human acumen would never have discovered the key to the secret's hieroglyphic, nor placed side by side the hidden links of a chain long enough and strong enough to tear the

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murderer from his fancied security, and hang him as high as Haman. Such would almost appear to have been the case in the instance to which I am alluding, only that in place of ascribing the elucidation and the unravelling to that mythical power chance, the impulse of some "inner man" writes the word Providence.

I did not feel exactly like moralizing, however, when, after resuming my digger's "make up," I walked towards the tent of the man I have called Bill. No; I felt more and deeper than any mere moralist could understand. The belief that a higher power had especially called out, and chosen, one of his own creatures to be the instrument of his retributive power, has, in our world's history, been the means of mighty evil, and I hope that not for an instant did such an idea take possession of me. I was not conscious of feeling that I had been chosen as a scourge and an instrument of earthly punishment; but I did feel that I was likely to be the means of cutting short the thread of a most unready fellow-mortal's life, and a solemn responsibility it is to bring home to one's self I can assure you.

The last flush of sunlight was fading low in the west when I reached our camping ground, and found Bill seated outside on a log, indulging in his usual pipe in the greying twilight.

I had, of course, determined upon arresting him at once, and had sent two policemen round to the back of our tents, in case of an attempted escape upon his part; and now, quite prepared, I sat down beside him; and, after feeling that the handcuffs were in their usual place in my belt, I lit my pipe and commenced to smoke also. My heart verily went pit-a-pat as I did so, for, long as I had been engaged in this sort of thing, I had not yet become callous either to the feelings of wretched criminal or the excitement attendant more or less upon every capture of the sort.

We smoked in silence for some minutes, and I was listening intently to hear the slightest intimation of the vicinity of my mates; at length Bill broke the silence. "Did you get your money?" he inquired.

"No," I replied, "but I think I will get it soon."

Silence again, and then withdrawing the pipe from my mouth and quietly knocking the ashes out of it on the log, I turned towards my mate and said,

"Bill, what made you murder that man in Pipeclay Gully?"

He did not reply, but I could see his face pale and whiten in the grey dim twilight, and at last stand out distinctly in the darkening like that of the dead man we found lying in the lonely gully.

It was so entirely unexpected that he was completely stunned: not the slightest idea had he that the body had ever been found, and it was on quite nerveless wrists that I locked the handcuffs, as my mates came up and took him in charge.

Rallying a little, he asked huskily, "Who said I did it?"

"No person," I replied, "but I know you did it."

Again he was silent, and did not contradict me, and so he was taken to the lock-up.

I was right about the broken button, and had often noticed it on an old jacket of Bill's. The piece fitted to a nicety; and the cut-up blucher! Verily, there was some powerful influence at work in the discovery of this murder, and again I repeat that no mere human wisdom could have accomplished it.

Bill, it would appear, thought so too, for expressing himself so to me, he made a full confession, not only of the murder, but also of the other offence, for the bringing home to him of which I had been so anxious.

When he found that the body of the unfortunate man had been discovered upon the surface, in the broad light of day, after he had left him dead in the bottom of the hole, he became superstitiously convinced that God himself had permitted the dead to leave his hiding place for the purpose of bringing the murderer to justice.

It is no unusual thing to find criminals of his class deeply impregnated with superstition, and Bill insisted to the last that the murdered man was quite dead when he had placed him in the hole, and where, in his anxiety to prevent the body from appearing above the surface, he had lost his boot in the mud, and was too fearful of discovery to remain to try and get it out.

Bill was convicted, sentenced to death, and hung; many other crimes of a similar nature to that which he had committed on Chinaman's Flat having been brought home to him by his own confession.