

Trailing the Erie Criminals

By George T. Pardy

A True Chronicle of One of the Achievements of John Wilson Murray



At the beginning of the year 1867 John Wilson Murray became one of that famous body of experts appointed by Uncle Sam to wage war against wrongdoers whose speculations excite the attention of the federal government—the United States secret service. It was then, at the age of 26, that he began to accumulate a rich store of experience in dealing with counterfeiters, the arts of burglars and other varieties of thieves, and the training thus acquired was destined to be of incalculable value to him in after life. He spent nearly two years as special agent for the government and was then persuaded to go to Erie, Pa., where, during his early days on the lakes, he had made many friends. Mr. Thomas Crawley was chief of the Erie police force at that time and it was in violation of Murray's duty that he became a detective under him.

Shortly after his arrival there a wave of sneak-thieving swept over the town and assumed very serious proportions. Even the furniture of private houses disappeared as if by magic. Clothing took to itself wings and vanished into the great unknown. Ploughs made strange and unaccountable exits from the farmers' fields leaving no trace behind. Horses cantered away unseen by their owners and their stables knew them no more. Whole contents of stores were carried off, and from one of them 20 dozen pairs of shoes appeared to have walked into oblivion in the full glare of noon. It was all so mysterious as to be almost amusing—except to the unhappy losers and the outraged members of the police force who were totally unable to appreciate the humor of the situation.

Finally Murray met a farmer who had seen a fellow drive by his house in a new "democrat" about the time that Tolwarty's wagon disappeared, and the description of both wagon and driver convinced him that he was at last upon the right track. Accompanied by Crawley and an officer named Snyder, Murray hired a team and drove along the road the stranger had followed with the missing wagon. For fully 15 miles they traveled, stopping at every farm, but found nothing to reward their exertions. Deciding to feed and rest their horses they turned off the main road, and in a secluded clearing with several acres of pine woods around it perceived a lone house.

No one was in sight, but in response to a hail a buxom woman, about 25 years old, made her appearance and inquired if the party wanted anything. Chief Crawley asked for the man of the place, saying that he wanted to feed his horses. The woman whistled shrilly, and from behind a clump of bushes near the barn, there came a little weazened man about 50 years of age. The instant Murray saw the newcomer his eyes brightened. The boy's description of the stranger who left the ancient wagon in the shed exactly fitted the man who stood before him.

"What is your name," Murray asked. "George Knapp," replied the withered individual. "Have you lived here long?" "Me and my wife have been here about a year," was the reply. "Is that your wife," inquired the detective, glancing at the young woman who was standing in the doorway of the house.

Knapp grinned and nodded assent. He was not disposed to be communicative and his eyes twinkled cunningly as they met Murray's steadfast gaze. The detective yawned and looked around in a nonchalant, uninterested fashion. Presently he returned to the attack. "Have you seen anything of a stranger driving past here in a new democrat wagon lately?" he inquired, but Knapp shook his head.

"I ain't seen anyone drivin' past here," he responded. "Not likely that I would either, for there's no place to drive to, seen' that this is the end of the road."

Plainly Mr. Knapp was armed at all points against curious seekers for information. The officers proceeded to make a thorough search of the premises but their examinations of barn, house and outbuildings proved fruitless. Murray, however, felt intuitively that the wily Mr. Knapp was not as innocent as he would have them believe. Stroiling past the barn and surveying the ground carefully the detective took note of a stretch of cleared land running down to the creek and saw that the sod had recently been turned in one or two places. Slight indications frequently lead to big results and a sudden suspicion flashed across Murray's mind.

"Knapp," he said pleasantly, "I mean to try my hand at fishing in that creek. Lend me a spade." "What do you want with a spade?" asked Knapp, tightening his lips. "To dig bait with, of course," replied Murray readily.

Knapp looked uneasy, but produced a spade and handed it to the detec-

ive. Murray walked toward the creek and came to a halt at one of the spots where the sod had been turned.

"There's no sense in digging here," remonstrated Knapp; "you won't find any worms. It was dug over the other day. Come a bit further down."

"Not for me," returned Murray. "The kind of worms I'm after are right here, and it's easier work than in the hard places."

Knapp said nothing in reply, but the perspiration broke out on his wrinkled face. Murray drove the spade into the ground, and smiled as he felt the blade strike something hard. He turned back the soil with a few vigorous strokes, and there came to view one of the wheels of the missing democrat wagon, buried beneath a foot of earth. Murray looked at Knapp who grinned in sickly fashion. The detective called his companions and placed Knapp under arrest. He was told that the best thing he could do was to confess his thefts, and after reflecting a few moments he nodded and led the way to the house. His wife met the party at the door.

"Get me the shingle," said her husband. The woman obeyed without a word of protest. She went indoors and returned with a broad shingle, covered with red dots, which Knapp explained were made by chicken blood. One broad, red blotch signified where the barn stood, and the smaller marks indicated the spots where Knapp had buried his plunder. The detectives searched one of the marked places and began to dig. The first thing to come to light was a large coffin. This looked as though some tragedy lurked behind, and they lifted the casket out of the earth. It was very heavy and hastily they removed the lid, expecting to see the mutilated form of one of the robber's victims. But instead of the remains of a human being several dozens of boxes containing shoes were revealed. The weazened thief standing beside them laughed harshly.

"Corpses ain't the only things found in coffins," he remarked sagely. The officers pursued their search digging up every place indicated on the shingle map, and great and varied was the list of property that came to light. Among the things unearthed were a shroud, toilet set, a baby carriage, 40 silk dresses, gold watches, seven ploughs, a harrow, surgical instruments, a churn, a log chain, a grandfather's clock, a set of grocer's scales, hats, overcoats, pipes, a barber's pole, even a policeman's shotgun, which Knapp had stolen from the owner's house.

The men took turns at digging and even the thief himself was pressed into service, until fully ten wagon loads of plunder lay in sight. It was truly a fine exhibition of wholesale thieving, and the marvel of it all was that Knapp swore to having done it single handed. Subsequent developments proved his statement to be correct.

Knapp and his wife were taken to Erie and placed in prison. A large vacant store was hired and all of the recovered property placed on exhibition therein to be identified by the rightful owners. There was no room to spare, for Knapp had stolen enough stuff to equip a small department store.

For several years, it appeared, the cunning veteran had been plying his pilfering trade. In buying his plunder he had boxed it up securely, preparatory to sending it away. His methods were sweetly simple. He would drive into town in a wagon, apparently for the purpose of selling farm produce or garden vegetables, and in that way obtaining a thorough knowledge of different houses, always managing to sneak in later and carry off whatever he could lay his hands on. Nobody knew anything about him, who he was or whence he came. A year prior to his capture he had settled in the secluded belt of timber and kept entirely to himself.

He was tried, convicted and sentenced to 15 years in the Alleghany penitentiary, and his wife, against whom nothing could be proved, was released. But Knapp was of far too original a turn of mind to rest satisfied with serving out his time. He simulated insanity, was transferred to a lunatic asylum, and soon after sawed the bars of a window, escaped through the opening thus provided, and was never caught.

It was not long after the Knapp episode broke that a pretty large scale began again in Erie. This time it was burglary instead of sneak work, as was demonstrated by the marks of jimnies on doors and windows, and the disappearance of quantities of fine silverware and jewelry. Chief Crawley was at first of the opinion that Knapp, who had escaped from the asylum in the meantime, was operating again, but Murray did not share this opinion, knowing that Knapp, who prided himself upon his unique methods, would consider burglary a clumsy way of stealing.

After the third robbery it became evident that no lone burglar was at work. Obviously there was a gang engaged in the depredations, for some of the jobs required the services of a watcher or lookout on the outside, while a pal was inside the house. A Mr. Skinner's house was plundered

and a great quantity of silverware taken, and soon after the Skinner robbery, the home of Mr. Bliss was entered and a rich haul of jewelry made.

Murray and his brother officers worked vigorously. They forced every stranger in town to account for himself. They sent out the drag net and gathered in all the "regulars" in the suspicious character line. Patrols at night were doubled and a vigilant, unceasing watch kept, but the burglaries continued as usual. One night a house in one end of the town would be robbed and the next night the burglars would operate successfully in an opposite direction. Murray, annoyed by the audaciousness of the criminals, devoted all his time and energy to the task of running them down, but the only clue or trace of them that he could discover was a peculiarity in the jimmy marks, showing that a piece had been chipped or cut out of one end of the jimmy.

One night about 12 o'clock, while talking to an acquaintance in the Reed house, he chanced to notice a woman slip quietly down the back stairs of the hotel and out into the street. On three succeeding nights he observed her doing this. On speaking of the circumstance to the clerk that worthy informed him that she was a scrub woman who worked late and lived outside the hotel. There was nothing suspicious about that, but as the clerk declared that he did not know where the woman lived, Murray, out of sheer, idle curiosity, determined to shadow her to her home. When she slipped down the stairs as usual Murray followed her into the street, but before he had traversed five blocks realized that his trailing was useless. The mysterious scrub woman had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed her. Murray, surprised at the seemingly elusive powers of the ancient dame, laughed over what he considered a good joke on his ability as a shadow artist and went home.

On the following morning the Erie papers reported another burglary as having occurred in a house four blocks from where the scrub woman had vanished into thin air. Murray said nothing to his associates but that night he took up a station at the Reed house and waited. About one o'clock in the morning the figure of the scrub woman fitted lightly down the stairs and Murray followed her into the gloom of night. For 15 blocks he trailed behind, when his quarry turned a corner, and when he came up she had again disappeared. That night yet another burglary took place, and Murray, still with his mind centered on the vanishing scrub woman, began a third vigil at the Reed house. At one o'clock the chase began anew and the detective was fain to confess to himself that the female floor polisher was one of the most artful doglegs he had ever come across. He followed her until after four in the

morning, up streets and down streets, through alleys, across lots, around buildings, and then across lots again. It was an exasperating experience, but Murray persisted and gave her no chance to slip out of sight. Soon after the chase first began a cat had mewed loudly in the vicinity of pursuer and pursued, and he remembered afterward that this sound had caused the dim figure in front of him to start violently. Dawn was breaking when the woman headed away to the outskirts of the town, and stopping in front of a double house tossed a pebble against a window and a moment later went in.

Murray sat down to think matters over. He was greatly puzzled, for women burglars were an entirely unknown quantity in his experience. Yet to think that an old woman after scrubbing hard for hours in a hotel would seek relaxation from her labors by going for a stroll and prowling about all night was surely out of the question. He waited until broad daylight, and, as the woman did not reappear went to police headquarters. There he was greeted by the chief with the doleful news that another house had been broken into and robbed during the night.

Murray thought of his weary rambles in the dark. It did not seem as though his aggravating old scrub woman could have had a hand in the affair for he had never lost sight of her. All the same, acting upon an impulse he could hardly explain but was

not disposed to resist, he resolved upon paying her a visit. He went out to the house where he had last seen her. On one side of the double building lived Mrs. O'Brien, a respectable woman. Her knowledge of the occupants of the other side was limited to the fact of their being women who had resided there less than a year.

Murray knocked at the door and received no answer. He rapped loudly again. There was a scurry of feet in the hall and finally the door swung open. A big robust girl, 23 years old, stood on the threshold. Without further ceremony the detective strode in.

"What is your name?" he asked. "Mary Ann Hall," was the answer. "Do you live alone?" "I live with my mother," responded the girl.

"Call her," said Murray shortly. Mary Ann complied, and in answer to her summons the ancient scrub woman skipped out of an adjoining room in a manner that suggested the activity of 16 rather than the natural decrepitude of 60.

Murray fixed his penetrating eyes upon her and was greeted with a coquettish leer. "I want to know your name," he said.

"My name is Mrs. Julia Hall," replied the old woman, still grinning broadly.

"Just so," remarked Murray. "Well, for else lives here, Mrs. Hall?" "For answer the old woman's mouth opened and gave vent to a yell of "Maggie!"

This call brought to the front a small sharp-faced woman some ten years younger than the active Mrs. Hall. The latest arrival smiled at her comrades and confronted the detective unabashed.

"Sit down ladies," requested Murray, and the trio promptly responded by depositing their respective per-

sons on the floor of the room where the interview was taking place. The detective glanced around and observed that the chief articles of furniture in the apartment were a cook stove, a rough kitchen table and one shaky rocking chair.

"You work out all night, ma'am?" queried Murray, addressing Mrs. Julia Hall.

"I always am," she replied coolly. "Julia isn't able to sleep nights," broke in the second oldest of the trio, adding by way of explanation, "I'm her friend, Mrs. Maggie Carroll."

"It can only sleep daytimes," asserted the ancient scrub woman. "I work or walk all night."

"When she was young she had a fever and has been that way ever since," volunteered Mrs. Carroll.

Murray, much puzzled, stood eyeing the three odd figures on the floor. He questioned them as to their mode of life and mentioned the recent burglaries, but obtained no satisfaction. They protested their innocence of any wrongdoing and maintained stoutly that they were only hard-working women. Murray sat down on the venerable rocking chair to pursue his examination in comfort. It gave way under him and he rolled upon the floor. The kettle on the range, struck by his foot, crashed down beside him. The three women laughed heartily, but as the lid of the kettle fell off a sudden silence succeeded to their uproarious merriment, and their eyes rested upon the apparently innocent

self up against a problem such as had frequently enlisted his attention during his term in the United States secret service. It was concerned with the appearance of a number of counterfeit \$20 bills in Erie financial circles during the winters of 1869 and 1870. A man by the name of Fred Landers kept a restaurant in the town, and one day when the detective dropped in the proprietor told him of a fellow who had ordered a light lunch, paid for it with a \$20 bill, bought a drink as he went out and offered a second \$20 bill to the bartender who said he could not change it.

Murray looked at the bill Landers had accepted. It was cleverly designed but not well enough to deceive the practiced eye of a man trained to detect such forgeries. Landers described the fellow and Murray caught him at the railroad station, but did not find any of the counterfeit money in his possession. He was merely a "shover of the queer," one who passes the bad money and receives only a couple of phony bills at a time.

In no other line of criminal work is there such scientific organization shown as in that of counterfeiting. The men who pass the money never do business with the man who makes the plates. The plate maker is an engraver who usually receives a lump sum for his work. Those who print the money are the manufacturers and they dispose of the queer in wholesale quantities to dealers, who sell to retail dealers, who have, in turn, their "shovers out," passing the money. The man who fell into Murray's hands was a shover. Having made the arrest and searched him, he found on a piece of paper in the prisoner's coat pocket the name, "Tom Hale, New York." Murray at once sent a telegram addressed to Hale as follows:

"Come on. I am sick. Stopping at Morton house. Room 84."

Murray made arrangements with the clerk of the Morton house to keep track of any person who called and asked for the guest in room 84. Nobody came. The shover, who was known as "Poke" Sales, stayed in jail, having been identified by Landers and the bartender. A week passed without any fresh developments. A heavy snowstorm had been raging for several days, the trains were blocked and all traffic delayed. But on the ninth day there was a new arrival at the Morton house. Although it was an excessively cold day he wore no overcoat. He inquired for Mr. Sales in room 84 and was instantly pounced upon by Murray who was close at hand. Upon being taken to headquarters and searched several hundred dollars was found upon him, but nothing in the way of counterfeit money. Still, Murray detained him with the intention of hunting for his baggage, for it was obvious that a man wearing such expensive clothes as adorned the person of the prisoner would be likely to have an overcoat in the vicinity somewhere.

On the following morning Murray began a systematic hunt for the missing overcoat. During the course of his search he stepped into a saloon kept by a man named John Anthony.

"Here's a curious thing happened yesterday," he said. "There was a well-dressed chap came in here, washed his hands and walked out again leaving his overcoat behind him. You'd think that would be about the last thing he'd leave on a bitter cold day."

"Seems funny," responded Murray. Let me look at that coat, John." The overcoat was produced and in the first pocket Murray examined he found \$1,000 in counterfeit \$20 and \$100 bills wrapped up in a handkerchief. They were such excellent counterfeits that they actually deceived the eyes of several bank experts to whom they were shown. Murray went back to the jail and approached his prisoner.

"Hello, Hale, here's your coat," he said. "All right, thank you," said the stranger. "Then it is your coat, Tom?" queried Murray.

"Why, certainly," replied the prisoner. Murray produced the counterfeit money from the pocket and Hale, realizing what a grave mistake he had made, denied that the garment was his property. Murray compelled him to do it and the fit was perfect. The saloon-keeper identified him as the stranger who had left the coat in his place.

"Poke" Sales pleaded guilty to passing counterfeit money and received a five-year sentence. Hale was taken by the United States authorities to Pittsburgh, then to New York and finally to Washington. He was a smooth talking fellow and made the government officials believe he would be of great use to the secret service department. He promised to expose the entire counterfeiting business and Wood, who was the chief of the secret service, engaged him on the force and sent him to New York.

But Hale's promised exposure of his former colleagues turned out to be a fake. He enabled the secret service men to get hold of a few small shovers, and that was all. Then Wood left the department and Col. Whiteley became chief. Whiteley proceeded to call down Hale for his failure to accomplish anything worth while. Hale became insolent with the result that he was arrested, taken back to Philadelphia and tried. It was proved that he stood in with thieves, and at the finish he was convicted and sentenced to the penitentiary for 14 years.

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The dispatches announce that an American girl in the duchess of Manchester will entertain two kings—those of England and of Spain. Possibly a better and truer way of putting it would be that the two kings will be entertained by an American girl, for the pleasure is theirs.

For a king to abdicate his throne because his wife is unwilling to be queen is probably a unique incident in history. But then, Christmas Island is a unique kingdom.

God to Remember. When death has come it is never our tenderness we repent of, but our severity.—Eliot.

Europe and lap over on the toes of Asia? Or, if all the cattle she raises in each year were one cow, she would browse on the tropical vegetation along the equator, while her tail switched icicles off the north pole, and that her milk could float a shipload of her butter and cheese from Charleston to New York? Or, if all the mules we market each year were one mule, it would consume the entire annual crop of North Carolina at one meal and kick the spots off the sun without swelling its sides or shaking its tail? Or, if the hogs we raise annually were one hog, that animal would dig the Panama canal in three roots, without grunting, and its squeal would be loud enough to jar the coconuts off the trees along the canal zone?

South Congressmen Soared High in Speech in Eulogy of His Native State.

The following is quoted from a prosperity speech of a southern congressman: Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Chairman, that the cotton cloth made in South Carolina annually would make a sheet big enough to cover the entire face of America and

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ONCE RANG UP FARES

New Illinois Senator Former Street Car Conductor.

William Lorimer Rose to Present High Post from Humble Beginning—Has Been in Congress for Several Years.

Chicago.—The second native of England to be elected to the present United States senate is William Lorimer of this city. The other is Senator Sutherland of Utah. No one would ever suspect Senator Lorimer of being an Englishman, but he was born in the city of Manchester, England, 48 years ago.

He looks about 35, and acts as though he were about 25. He has been going to congress ever since the Fifty-fourth congress. His first two terms were from one Chicago district and the rest from another. This change in habitat was brought about by a little political necessity, another man having grabbed the nomination while Mr. Lorimer was not looking. He was not feazed by this little maneuver, but promptly moved into the Sixth district and was nominated from that place.

"He is a man of ability, character and force," said Speaker Cannon of him the other day.

"He is about the hottest politician in the United States," is the private opinion of most of the good judges of politicians in Washington.

Thirty-two years ago Lorimer's folks took him to Chicago. His first education was gleaned from the streets. Next he was doing a man's work for a man's pay by wheeling salt in a Chicago packing house. The next promotion was to the back end of a State street car in Chicago. He collected fares for the street car company by day and cultivated the friendship of the boys in his precinct by night. The first thing the precinct

know Billy Lorimer was carrying it around in his vest pocket. He kept out of big politics until he was the boss in little politics. Then he had himself elected to the Minneapolis convention as a Republican national delegate. He had been graduated from the street car platform and was a real estate dealer. He also interested himself in city affairs and was known throughout the western metropolises. Lorimer was for Blaine in the Minneapolis convention, but the Cook county organization was for the re-nomination of Harrison.

It is a characterization of Lorimer that he has stuck to his friends. A couple of weeks ago he was talking the senatorial deadlock at Springfield over with a friend in Washington.

"Why don't you jump in and take it, Billy?" he was asked.

"I don't want to," was the answer. "I am going to try to elect one of my friends."

"Well, if you can't elect a friend, are you going to let Hopkins come back?"

"If I cannot elect a friend I will take it myself. I know I can have it, but I will not take it unless they refuse to unite on a friend of mine."

Although Senator William A. Hopkins did not know it, that was the understanding of Lorimer's friends and his election was not a surprise to those who knew him.

Personally Lorimer is a delightful character. He is a chubby man with a leonine mane of blond hair. He wears a Texas mustache of a reddish hue and is a simple dresser. He is not much of a debater, and cuts little figure on the floor of the house. He is a strenuous worker in committee and is constantly busy in the interests of his constituents in Chicago. He presents the paradox of a politician who is an ideal family man. He is the father of eight children and spends all of the time he can at home with them.

Mrs. Lorimer, who was born in Canada, is a devout Roman Catholic and her work for charity and institutions in Chicago has been unflagging. She has given her services as a vocalist freely to newly created parishes for years until they were in a position to retain paid singers. She has been equally generous in other charitable movements, appearing with her children for public charity affairs and always contributing generously to benefits for eleemosynary institutions. Nearly all the children are musicians.

Her Imma of the Auto. An old inmate of an almshouse in New York, age 86, who had never in the course of her life seen an automobile before, fell in a dead faint in the street when one whizzed by her, with the horn tooting. When she recovered she told the doctor who had attended her that she had been in hell and had seen Satan. Some of the victims of the speed maniacs would not quarrel with her diagnosis of the situation.

Honor Great Explorer. In a few days the tercentenary of the discovery of Lake Champlain by the man whose name it bears, will be celebrated by New York and Vermont. A statue of the discoverer will be unveiled with appropriate ceremonies.

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Gossip of the Planets. It would be nice to have a few words with Mars and Venus or both of them and get them permanently on our circuit. It might be worth much to learn their political systems, what they know about big navies for keeping the peace, how they deal with prison grafters, what rights their women have and what kind of hats they are wearing this season or expect to wear next fall, the standing in their respective baseball leagues, their method of handling trusts, whether the Salome

dance goes there, whether they have germs under control and if they pay any attention to the phases of the moon in conducting their affairs. There is a lot more to gossip about, but the rest will keep until the conversation opens.

The Artist. The artist, the man who is striving to actualize an idea, inevitably feels a sense of human dignity or worth in which the mere paid laborer is a stranger.—Henry James.

THE SCREAM OF THE EAGLE

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