DR. FURNIVALL'S SOLUTION OF THE COLTER "CABIN" MYSTERY

By DR. GEORGE F. BUTLER and HERBERT ILSLEY

Insane Hospital Houses Lad While Unjustly Accused Are Released from Jail on Findings of Great Detective.

A VERY short, stout, sailor-appearing man, clean-shaven and wearing a fitless slop-shop suit of blue, with a rusty stovepipe hat in his hand and a canvas tag in his hand, came rolling up the street, and after looking hesitatingly around at the numerous lodging-house signs in the windows of the neighborhood, started briskly up the steps of No. 112 and pressed the button.

"Mum," he said to the elderly woman who opened the door, "I see by these here notices that you hev rooms to let, and as that's what I'm arter I kinder calliated I'd gin ye a call. How much be they?"

He abstracted a huge roll of bills from his trousers pocket and thrust them burglarily into her hand.

"Do what ye can for me on thet," he continued. "Count it out and see what's in it. 'Twas 300 when I skinned he over, and I calliated 'twould do. Stow the ditty-box under the berth and hang 'bent eight bells I'll drift back and kinder tidy things up a bit for night. Good-day, mum!"

He gave her an awkward pull and waddled off hurriedly, leaving the lodging-house keeper in the face and shoes of breath with the surprise of her life.

"Same as there's a man for yours!" she gasped, following him with amazed eyes as he stumped down the street on his short legs, the huge trousers flapping in the wind, the rusty hat pulled down to his ears and the coat-skirts dangling to within an inch of the tops of his stubby fingers.

At 6 the queer lodger returned, received his key and was shown to his quarters. Pausing on the threshold he turned to Mrs. Tull the flesh of his face wrinkled in a hard putty, as imitation eyes fixed his unwinking eyes stared into her own.

Mumbling in voice like a fog horn, he asked if Colter, Cap'n Joshua of Colter's Cabin. This here is my cabin. 'Tis mine for one twelve-month, and that time is up. I calliate I'll stow myself to load it clean to the skylight, and I don't never 'ev a hev no petticoats frashin' up the vessel, mum. I'll swab the decks and trim sails myself, and now you can go below and stay there. Show your fiddlehead on my companionway again without orders and I'll shove a pound overboard through the porthole."

At 11 o'clock the next morning, when she heard him bulkily descending the stairs, she stood in the back parlor doorway to observe him, but had the doughty captain chanced to look that way he could have seen nothing but the tip of an inquisitive nose and the toe of a large boot. It was the same on the second and third mornings, but on the fourth the captain did not appear at 11 o'clock as usual. She felt some uneasiness over this fact, which grew greater when the next day also he remained invisible. For more than 48 hours not a sound had issued from his room. She waited night the next noon, and then, all remaining as quiet as the houses of the dead, she ventured up to the head of the stairs and stood a moment gazing steadfastly at the closed door of the mysterious "cabin."

Always at this stage of reflection, with persons of Ann Tull's grade of mind and experience, the police begin to arrive. And within ten minutes afterward she was standing on the stairs listening to an inspector and a detective as they rap the door behind which lurked some dark secret, she was sure.

"Break in as if he had run," said the inspector. "How much was he into you, Mrs. Tull?"

"Nuthin' at all. I know me business. 'Tis in advance I always do be getting it from strange wans."

"Well, I'll see as there's anything for you later," remarked the inspector, taking a last look around. "Look in on him and keep the key till he comes out, or till he comes back. Put it anything more turns up let us know at the station." Then he went away with his man.

At eight o'clock a young lithographer, who with his brother, a house-painter, occupied the room directly over the captain's, came jumping down the stairs, and tearing the kitchen door open rushed upon Mrs. Tull, and putting his hands on her shoulders began to sob, crying brokenly:

"Oh! I am sorry, I am sorry! It was Jim and me that done it. I told him we'd be found out, and now it's come. What shall we do? Can't you hide us, Mrs. Tull, and say nothing? Then it will be all right, for nobody will ever know the difference. He had no friends to come asking for him."

"Lud's sake alive, what's all this?"

"The—the—cap'n!" he stammered. "We was playin' cards—in his room—me and Jim. He said Jim nigged on purpose, and Jim hit him."

"Was he looking, jist, whin Jim struck?" she asked, cynically.

"We didn't think at first he was hurt much," he replied whiningly. "But he didn't get up, and when we went to lift him we saw he was gone and—"

"Stop!"

She put out one of her great raw-boned powerful hands and forced him into a chair. Then she noiselessly closed the kitchen door and returning stood ponderous and threatening before him.

"What at all d'yees mane by 'gone?'" she asked in a voice that frightened him with its strength of repressed ferocity.

"I m-mean he—he was—dead!" he stammered, his face as white as chalk.

"What did yees do wid—it?" Her body was trembling now, her voice broke huskily, and the black eyes blazed.

"We took him down stairs—and—and—over to the—the river—"

With grim-set lips and without a word she threw a shawl over her head and marched the self-confessed criminal to the police station. There he told his story again, in greater detail, but essentially as he had given it to her. As he was finishing Jim was brought in by the two office men who had been hastily dispatched for him. Physically he was a good duplicate of his brother, of slight build, fair-complexioned, with a face of average intelligence now distorted with fear. He looked at the speaker shrinkingly, and as the last words of the confession left his lips and he became silent, said to his brother:

(For God's sake, Britt, what have you been saying?"

"I couldn't help it, Jim," answered Britt, miserably. "I was goin' crazy, and had to let it out. Something forced me to. I don't know what. I had to speak. But I thought she'd hide us. I didn't suppose she'd go back on us this way and get us into trouble."

The brother turned frantically to the desk-man.

"We didn't do it!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "It is all a lie. I never saw the man in my life. I don't believe Britt ever did either. We never was in his room. We didn't know he was missing until to-night when we came home. They told us on the street, and he was as much surprised as I was."

Britt shook his head sorrowfully with a faint smile.

His brother gazed at him in terror, his face as white as a sheet. His lips began to twitch, his hands opened and shut spasmodically, his body trembled violently, his knees bent suddenly, and he fell to the floor in a dead faint.

"Epilepsy!" said the desk-man. "That settles it. He's an epileptic, with homicidal tendencies, very likely, just the kind to do a job like this one."

The next day a small, dark, nervous man of 60, with shrewd black and snappy eyes, evidently a farmer in his Sunday clothes, called on Dr. Furnivall.

"Wal," he said, his eyes searching the floor as if for words, "my name is Alfred Greely, and I live in Winchester. I've got two boys in this here city, and one on 'em says they—they killed a man, and t'other says they didn't. It don't look noways reasonable to me that either on 'em could do such a thing, they had such a good bringin' up by their mother, but they've been away from home a purty considerable time now, and p'raps they got inter bad comp'ny. I dunno. They was allers goods boys to home. Anyways, mother has sent me here to kinder look out for 'em, and find out the truth of what they done, and stan' by 'em whatever it was." He paused, lifting his head with a shade of sternly repressed shame in his eyes. "The world is wicked," he went on, with an effort, "and I dunno. None of us ain't perfect. P'raps they was led wrong by somebody. P'raps they was wrong theirselves. But I got to do what I can. I reckon it'll cost a master sight of money—but there's the farm, wuth sunthin' like four thousan', and there's a little in the bank—"

"It is the case of Capt. Colter, isn't it," affirmed rather than asked Dr. Furnivall, eying the visitor interestedly through his colored spectacles.

"Yes, sir."

"Was there ever a case of epilepsy in the family, that you know of—back to, say, your grandparents or great-grandparents?"

"Not as ever I heard on," he answered.

The bars of the cell-door loomed inexorably between them, but the old man, advanced, strengthened perhaps by thought of the gray old mother and wife at home, and stoutly thrusting his arm to the elbow between the cold iron rods wrung his boy's hand.

"You needn't open the door, O'Leary," said Dr. Furnivall to the turnkey. "At any rate not yet. Remain here and remember what passes. Britt, if that is your name, come forward where we can see you. There! Now tell us when you first saw Capt. Colter?"

"I saw him Tuesday night, the first time—and then again Friday night. That was when we done it."

"How did your brother come to strike him?"

From the moment when his eyes first became settled in those of Dr. Furnivall the expression of his face began to change—from self-consciousness to nervousness, to perplexity, to surprise, to earnestness, and finally, as he interrupted himself to ask the question, to deep and absorbed though. And almost instantly he continued, in the infectionless tones of a long-deaf man:

"I never saw Cap'n Colter in my life!"

The father uttered an exclamation of eager as mingled with amazement, but Dr. Furnivall motioned for silence.

"Tell me," he [illegible] to the prisoner, "why you said [illegible] and your brother had done this thing?"

"I don't know."

"Did you ever do violence to anybody, you or your brother either?"

"No sir—we never hurt anybody."

"You like to read about people being hurt, in the accident columns, and in stories, don't you? [illegible] such things distasteful to you?"

"I read all I can get about them."

"Do you ever feel queer in the head—depressed or confused, or as if you wanted to get away from yourself?"

"I'm whirly-headed often, and I can't think sometimes. My head aches a good deal. I go out in the night and run it off."

"That's all. Come, Mr. Greely, we'll have them out of here sooner or later. There's a large ball of red tape to unwind and we'll begin at once."

"But," faltered the bewildered old man, his mind torn between relief and puzzlement, "if they never done nothin' of the kind how in natur'—how—what did a say so for?"

Dr. Furnivall did not wish just yet to inform his loyal old father that his son was afflicted with insane erraburd tendencies, of a class to which self-incriminative confessions, wholly false, are so common that Quintilian held a suspicion of insanity to be inherent in all confessions. He wished to see the boy again and decide what would best be done with him. He had suspected from the first that this brother and not the other was the afflicted one, if either of them were, the fit of Jim in the police station being merely a natural faint induced by the horror of his position.

Two nights later Ann Tull was startled out of her sleep in the back parlor by a sound in the room overhead, the cabin of mystery. Her feet struck the floor with the suddenness of thought, and goaded by the multitudinous superstitions honestly inherited from generations of wild-headed ancestry, she plunged into her clothes and flew around the corner to the police station. Two officers heard her news and hastily accompanied her back. They crept softly up the stairs, the door of the "cabin" was wide open and the captain stood shaving before the mirror.

The captain looked at the policemen. He showed no surprise. On the contrary he began to address them at once as if he had been expecting this visit, explaining in short, vigorous and forceful phrases that his daughter wished him to live on the farm with her and her husband, while he wished to continue going to sea a little longer. A compromise had been effected by his taking this room near the water where he could get a sight of it when he liked, and inhale its odors, and nevertheless might be whirled in a half hour by train to his daughter in the country. That was where he had just been.

The next morning Dr. Furnivall called on the captain and accompanied him to the district attorney's office. The result was that before night the Greely boys were released. Britt, however, only exchanged the jail for an insane hospital, where he remains to-day.

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"OH, I'M SORRY, I AM SORRY! IT WAS JIM AND ME THAT DONE IT."

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Well Prepared.

"I learn," she said reproachfully, "that you were devoted to no fewer than five girls before you finally proposed to me. How do I know that you didn't make desperate love to all of them?"

"I did," he replied promptly.

"You did!" she exclaimed.

"Certainly," he returned. "You don't suppose for a moment that I would be foolhardy enough to try for such a prize as you are without practicing a little first, do you?"

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