

KNAPP: A WEAZENED WONDER

Victor Speer

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from Memoirs of a great detective:
incidents in the life of John Wilson Murray

A PLAGUE of sneak-thieving broke out in Erie in 1869, shortly after Murray became a detective. It grew to be epidemic. Furniture vanished out of houses. Clothing seemed to fall upon the backs of invisible wearers and saunter into Spookland. Ploughs disappeared from farmers' fields, as if they had started on the shortest route to China. Horses trotted off into nowhere. Entire shelves in stores were swept bare in a single night, and from one of them twenty dozen pairs of shoes seemed to walk out of sight at midday.

"We had better order the people to anchor their houses,' said Crowley to me," says Murray, in telling the story. "We watched all day and we watched all night for weeks, but the stealing went on just the same. Crowley said it must be giant rats, who had a den in the bowels of the earth and decided to furnish it from Erie. He said some one had told him that in India they had a plague, by which people wasted away and finally dried up. He concluded that the plague had spread from India to Erie, and had seized upon everything portable in and around the town. 'They're not stolen, they just waste away,' said Crowley. 'It's a case of now you see them, now you don't.' To clinch this, one of the men began to lose his hair. Crowley pointed to it and exclaimed: 'See, it's just wasting away.' I had a moustache that was not flourishing just then and I shaved it off. When I appeared for duty the next day Crowley gasped:

"Great Scott, Murray! They didn't steal your moustache, did they?"

"Finally, a new democrat waggon disappeared. It belonged to James Tolwarthy, a grocer, who had left it in front of his store the day after he had paid \$275 for it. The democrat had gone, as completely as if a modern Elijah had impressed it for chariot service to the skies. Tolwarthy was angry. He kept his waggons usually in a hotel shed near his store. When he went there to look for his new democrat he found an old crackey waggon standing in its stead. It stood there for weeks, and every day we went to look at it, as if its tongue could tell us who left it there.

"We searched every stable and every vacant building in the town. Not a trace of Tolwarthy's democrat or of any other vanished property did we find. A little child can lead us, however, and I came across a boy who said he thought he had seen the man who left the waggon in Tolwarthy's shed. He described him as best he could. It was not much of a description, but a poor description is as good as a good photograph any day. I would rather have a fair description than a dozen photographs when it comes to going after a man I never saw. I took the lad's description and started out to visit every farmhouse on every road leading out of Erie. I nosed into all of them for a radius of several miles. I found no such man as the lad described, and no hay-mow hid any plunder either, for I climbed into all of them.

"At last I found a farmer who had seen a fellow drive by his house in a new democrat about the time Tolwarthy's waggon vanished and the description of the democrat tallied with that of Tolwarthy's democrat, while the description of the man proved him the same fellow seen by the lad.

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"Crowley, Officer Snyder, and myself got a team and started to drive the road the stranger went with Tolwarthy's waggon. We stopped at every house along the way, but not a sign or trace of him could we find. For a dozen miles we made this farm-to-farm search. After fifteen miles or more we decided to put up the horses for a feed and rest. We turned off the main road, and in a secluded, out-of-the-way place, in a clearing with about twenty-five acres of pine woods around it, we saw a house. No one was in sight. We hailed, and presently a buxom, blooming woman, about twenty-five years old, seemed to pop out of nowhere and ask us if we wanted anything. Crowley asked for the man of the place, as he wanted to feed his horses. The woman whistled and out from a clump of bushes near the barn came a little, weazened old fellow, about fifty years old. He reminded me of a muskrat. The moment I laid eyes on him I recalled the description by the lad of the man who left the crackey waggon.

"We alighted and fed the horses. The old man eyed them keenly and looked at their teeth.

"What's your name?' I asked him

"George Knapp,' he said.

"Lived here long?'

"Me and my wife been here about a year,' he answered.

"Your wife?' I said.

"Yep, ain't she a bloomer?' and the old man chuckled hideously as he leered at the young woman who was standing in the doorway of the house.

"He was keen as a scythe. I innocently asked him if he had seen any stranger driving past his house in a new democrat waggon.

"Nope; no one ever drives past here,' said he. 'There ain't no past. The road stops here.'

"He parried us at every point. We searched his place, barn, house, and outbuildings and found nothing. Yet I was morally certain we had our man. As I sat in the shade by the barn I gazed idly at the stretch of cleared land running down to the creek. I noticed a place or two where the sod had been turned recently. It is the little things that point the way to big results. A signboard a foot long often tells you the road for the next forty miles.

"Knapp,' I said, 'I am going fishing in that stream.'

"All right,' said Knapp. 'Hope they bite.'

"Lend me a spade,' I said.

"What for?' said Knapp, with a sudden sharpening of his glance.

"I want to dig some bait,' said I.

"Knapp hesitated, then brought a spade, and followed me as I set out for the stream. I halted at one of the spots where the sod had been turned.

"No good digging here,' said Knapp. 'Come on farther down.'

"Why?' said I.

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"This has been dug,' said Knapp. 'It's worm—scarce right here.'

"Never mind,' said I. 'I only want a few, and it's easier digging.'

"The perspiration started on Knapp's weazened, wrinkled face. I never dally in my garden with my spade but I see a vision of Knapp dripping like an April shower.

"I drove in the spade. It struck something hard. I turned back the soil and there lay one of the wheels of Tolwarthy's democrat buried beneath a foot of earth. I looked at Knapp and he was grinning in a sickly sort of way. I called Crowley and Snyder and arrested Knapp. Then we led him down to the stream and sat down and informed the old man, on the edge of the water, that the wise thing for him to do was to confess the whole series of thefts. He looked at us and then at the water and then back at us. I think he understood. At any rate he stood up.

"Come on,' he said, and led the way to the house.

"The buxom woman met us at the door.

"Get the shingle,' said Knapp.

"Without a word she went indoors and returned with a broad shingle. It was covered with red dots, which Knapp explained were made with chicken blood. One big blotch was to show where the barn stood. The smaller dots spreading out beyond it showed where Knapp had buried the plunder.

"We began to dig. The first thing we struck was a coffin.

"You murderer!' said Snyder. 'Now we know why you used blood to dot the shingle.'

"We lifted the coffin carefully out of the grave. It was very heavy. We prized off the lid, expecting to see the mutilated body of one of Knapp's victims. Instead of a pallid face and glazed eyes we found dozens of boxes of shoes. Knapp chuckled.

"Coffins ain't only for corpuses,' he said.

"We unearthed samples of everything from a needle to an anchor, a shroud, a toilet set, a baby carriage, forty 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 shot gun, that cost one of the Erie policemen \$80, and that Knapp had stolen from his house. One of us would dig for a while, then Knapp would dig, and if any one dug more than his share it was Knapp. We uncovered ten waggon loads of stuff, including Tolwarthy's democrat, which Knapp had buried piece by piece; even the bed or body of the waggon being interred behind a clump of bushes. It was the most wholesale thieving I had known. Old Knapp gloried in it, chuckling over each fresh discovery we made. The marvel of it all was how he had managed to steal the stuff. He swore to us that he had stolen it all single-handed, and I believe he did.

"We took Knapp and his wife to Erie, and locked them up. We hired a large vacant store in the Noble block in Erie, hauled in the plunder from Knapp's, and put it on exhibition for identification. It filled the place. Knapp had stolen enough to equip a department store.

"In burying his plunder he had boxed it up, preparatory to sending it away in the fall. He said frankly that he had been stealing for years. He explained that the way he did it was to drive into town in a waggon, pretending he was selling farm produce or garden vegetables, and seize opportunities in that way to familiarise himself with houses, and then sneak in later, and steal whatever he could carry away. No one seemed to know much about him, either

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who he was or whence he came. A year before he had settled in the secluded tract of timber, and had kept entirely to himself. He told me he had preyed on other places before he set out to steal everything portable in Erie, but never before had he been made to dig for two straight days uncovering his own plunder.

"Knapp was very angry over being compelled to work so steadily with a spade. He vowed he would get even. Sometime after he had been locked up in Erie, he called us in and informed us, in profound confidence, that he had buried \$2,500 in gold out on his place, and if we would take him out there he would show us where it was. The story was plausible, and three of the fellows got a team, and drove out seventeen miles with Knapp to his place. They took three spades and a pick with them. Knapp began a lot of manœuvring, pacing off distances from house to barn, and from barn to tree, and from tree to stump. They followed him, and he tramped about for an hour, leading them through briars and swamps, and finally back toward the barn again.

"'There is the place,' he announced.

"They began to dig as if their hope of eternal salvation depended on it. Knapp encouraged them to greater exertion, and told them he had buried the gold seven feet deep to have it secure. They toiled for hours, digging to a depth of eight feet, but finding nothing. One of them, who knew unbroken earth when he dug it, accused Knapp of tricking. The old man said he might have made a mistake in his measurements, and he led them off for another tramp through brush and wild wood, and ended up about ten feet from the hole they had dug just before.

"'Ah, yes, I remember. This is the place,' said the old man. 'There is \$2,500 in gold in two canvas bags.'

"They fell to again. It was a broiling hot day. They toiled until toward sundown, when the old man began to chuckle.

"'That'll do,' he said. 'I'm even.'

"'Even for what?' they asked.

"'For the two days I had to dig,' said Knapp.

"'And there's no gold here?' they demanded wrathfully.

"'There's gold all right, but I cannot remember where it is,' said Knapp with a chuckle.

"They drove him back to Erie, and locked him up again. He was tried, convicted, and sentenced to sixteen years in the Alleghany Penitentiary. His wife was released. Knapp played insane, and beat the Penitentiary. He was transferred to the lunatic division, and, soon after, he sawed the bars, escaped, and never was caught. I saw him several times in the Erie gaol before he was sent away. He always was chuckling.

"'Murray,' he would say on each occasion, as I was leaving, 'remember you are leaving a man who never met a man who knew enough to be his partner.'

"'What became of him no one knows. He was a weazened wonder.'