

Roger O'Mara, Detective

My First Big Case— The Perrysville Murder



How, by a Ruse, He Forced the Men Who Waylaid and Shot a Jovial Farmer and an Old Clockmaker to Come Out from Cover, Thus Fixing the Guilt.

This is the second of the Roger O'Mara stories. It shows how, in the detective business, a man must be ever vigilant and never willing to let a case drop. Roger O'Mara's whole life has been full of adventure, and this case is one of the most dramatic.

BY ROGER O'MARA

WHEN you are catching rats don't set out with a silken butterfly net. Get a rat trap. Rat traps are practical devices; the right bait, a ruthless steel spring—death! Butterfly nets are excellent for missing winged insects on charming summer afternoons. They help pass the time.

But they lack the grim efficiency of more serious instruments.

It is so with criminals. Murderers, too, are hunted and captured for the protection of the community, and, like rats, they can't be caught with butterfly nets. Police detectives, however soft-hearted they may be personally, are required to understand and often to play upon the weaknesses of the criminal mind very much as a steel trap lures and then crushes its victim. The detective's job ends, of course, when guilt is legally established. But up to that moment his work is neither duty nor easy. Nowadays tenderer methods are

praised and sometimes tried. I was not trained in that school. Forty years ago the third degree, for instance, as a legitimate device for inducing criminals to confess when a complete chain of proof is lacking, had not been questioned.

My first big case—the Perrysville murder in 1874—is a striking example of the scant evidence upon which a detective must often, jeopardize the liberty of two citizens. In this case the evidence was no more than a guess. The story also illustrates how swiftly, and even brutally, the police power must be used to force a confession once the suspect is caught, confused and apparently on the brink of it. I had guessed at the guilt of the per-

petrators of a crime—even guessed at their identity. They were imprisoned and held on that guess. As a last resort the men were put through a severe version of the third degree, and a deception was employed by which the confession of one of them was obtained. The result cleared up a mystery which had been agitating the State for many months, and fastened the responsibility for a brutal deed where it belonged.

While I was still a patrolman on the Pittsburgh police force I used to dream of being a detective. Or, rather, I learned the detective branch of my profession while the other policemen dreamed; for most of my nights were passed in scouring the town in the

company of communicative crooks and ex-crooks. I had an instinct for the work. My happiest hours were spent in my old clothes, after the blue uniform was off for the day and when my time wasn't being paid for. I have always had a curiosity as to causes, and a touch-and-go association with the underworld put me into touch with the causes of crime from an angle that a patrolman never sees. Of course, I was able to be of frequent use to the Detective Bureau. Finally I was promoted to the detective staff.

The murder of Gotthardt Wahl occurred a few days after my promotion. It was the sensation of the day and every detective within fifty miles of Pittsburgh was looking for the criminal, whether he was detailed on the case or not. Dozens of suspects were brought to Headquarters but there was not enough evidence to hold any of them.

The crime was commonplace enough as murder stories go. Gotthardt Wahl was an old German who owned a farm in Ross Township, near Allegheny City. Half way between his home and Allegheny City, on the Perrysville road, lay the tavern of Jacob Born. On the evening of Nov. 11, 1874, Wahl left the city at dusk for his home. In the one-horse buggy with him rode George Jacobs, a quaint old fellow who eked out a living as a peripatetic clock mender. Both were fond of German songs and fonder of German beer. Several times on the way they quenched their thirst, and at last reached Born's tavern so filled with lager and jollity that the dark woods re-echoed to their songs.

As if further to call attention to his helplessness, Wahl flourished his leather wallet at the Born bar. It looked fat to bursting and so it was—but with pennies and nickels. The bulging purse in reality contained \$1.37. Still, its musical chink attracted the eyes of two loafers—trampish fellows, mere passing fellow drinkers—whom no one noticed at the time. They hurried ahead of the slow horse with its tipsy driver and waited in the ravine a mile beyond the tavern.

The robbery itself has been duplicated scores of times. It was a job for amateurs. One man stepped from the shadows and held the horse's head, while another climbed the wagon wheel and thrust a pistol into the face of the noisy German whose coins he had heard jingling in the saloon. Wahl attempted to parley, the clock mender attempted to get out of the wagon and the nervous horse jumped. The pistol was fired, leaving a bullet embedded in the old farmer's neck. The dark figures made away, not seen fully by any one—not even by Jacobs, petrified as he was with fear and liquor. The wallet went with one of them, containing the pitiful \$1.37, which eventually cost the lives of three men.

A team drove up from behind in a moment containing a Pittsburgh man-

ufacturer, who arrived in time to hear from Wahl's lips that Jacobs was not the murderer. Neither of the Germans could identify with certainty who the criminals were. Gotthardt Wahl died in a nearby house within an hour.

That was the sum of my facts, save at that time I began work on the case no one remembered that any strangers were drinking at the Born bar, beyond the usual allotment of hangers on. I knew that I must get the evidence for a conviction from the criminals themselves, if I ever found them. No one else could furnish a shred of decisive evidence.

Pittsburgh was not then the great city it is now. Through the small army of informants that I had attached during my years of preparation for detective service I could keep an eye on most of the comings and goings in the poorer parts of the town. Within a week it was made known to me that two strangers had come to board with a Mrs. Moore, No. 208 Third avenue. Strangers who stayed in their room all day and read carefully each edition of the newspapers were rare enough to excite comment in that quarter, especially when the news of the moment concerned almost wholly the futile chase of the police for the murderers of Gotthardt Wahl. But no one could punish them for that, or even arrest them.

I sat up nights to figure out a plan. The scheme came eventually and I worked it through the newspapers, those engines of publicity which make or break a murder investigation, as they make or break a foreign loan or war itself. On this occasion the newspapers made my success and apparently by the very mishap that police dread most—premature publicity. I arranged the premature publicity myself.

"We have found the murderers," I told half a dozen of my newspaper friends. "We've located their boarding house and we're going to surround it at sundown and capture the criminals. There may be a fight. I can't give you the address, but you are welcome to this much of the story. Print it, if you like. The tip is a straight one."

The reporters stared at me as if I had lost my reason, but I tried to look sane. Then with a concerted rush they all fled to their offices to make copy out of my lapse in discretion. I concealed myself near the gate of the house at No. 208 Third avenue and waited. It was then noon. In an hour the first extras would be on the street. A man came to the door and brought a paper of the first shouting boy. He vanished. The following ten minutes, while I stood watching that motionless door, were the most intense I can remember, even to this day. If the man and a companion reappeared, I had found the murderers. I was certain of it. At the end of the tenth minute they did come out, two of them hurriedly. I remember the interval to the

second, for there was a clock in the big tower across the street.

"Boys, you're under arrest," I said to them as soon as they reached the sidewalk. It didn't take long to get the handcuffs on, for both men were as white as chalk and in no condition to put up a fight. One of them was so rattled that he blurted out, after I had walked him a few paces:

"I suppose you want us for the Perrysville murder. You've got the wrong men!"

"You're a good guesser," I said to him, grimly. I really made the remark to myself, however. It was a little bouquet I thought I had earned. For whether or not I could ever prove the crime, I was sure that I had never made a better guess in my life.

The men gave their names as Frederick Meyers and William Murray at the station house, and were locked up. Both denied, of course, any connection with the murder. They were poor, shaken fellows, apparently out of work for a long time, who could give no clear account of their movements for the past month, and who had arrived the day after the Wahl murder at the boarding house, where they had not been able to pay their bill. A search of their room failed to bring any damaging evidence to light. What evidence we had was certainly not enough to convict them, nor even to hold them in jail very long without additions. And I could furnish none.

What followed was the ruse which has been employed, in one form or another, ever since there have been crimes and criminals. Murray was taken alone into the chief's office. There every imaginable argument except physical force was used to induce him to confess. He remained adamant. After Murray was locked again in his cell, Meyers was brought to the chief. He managed to stand several hours of merciless grilling without incriminating himself. At the end, when every other resource had failed, Meyers was told that Murray had confessed—charging him, Meyers, with having fired the murderous shot.

The words were enough; the prisoner's taut nerves snapped. He confessed, flinging back a counter charge to his companion as to the actual killing.

No one attempted to find out the truth concerning either statement. The one confession was sufficient. Under Pennsylvania law, both men were equally guilty, for they had killed Wahl while attempting to rob him. After a short trial they were convicted of murder in the first degree and sentenced to death.

Eventually Meyers told the truth. During the respite of a few days after the sentence—his last lonely days on earth—he called the sheriff to him and confessed that he had fired the gun. He wanted to die, he said, with that lie off his soul.

Both men were executed early in the morning of June 6, 1876.

A BISHOP WITH A COUCH OF STRAW

WHEN the long arm of Rome reaches out across the world and places the purple mantle of a bishop on the shoulders of a barefooted monk whose identity has been buried a quarter of a century in a simple Christian name and whose life has been spent in poverty, penance and self-denial, there is an interesting tale to be told.

Pope Pius X. created the new diocese of Corpus Christi, Texas, several months ago. While speculation and suggestions were being offered concerning the ruler of the new diocese, announcement came from Rome that the "Rev. P. J. Nussbaum, C. P.," had been chosen for the see. Inquiry revealed Rev. P. J. Nussbaum, C. P., to be Father Paul, Passionist monk and missionary.

Many priests and high officials of the Church in this country asked: "How did it happen that an obscure monk in Hoboken, N. J., was chosen for the hierarchy?"

Those who asked did not know the history of Father Paul.

A small group of church dignitaries stood in the shadows of the great dome of the Church of St. John and Paul in Rome. There were two cardinals, an archbishop, a superior general of a religious order, several monsignori and a young barefoot monk. The monk was a tall, powerfully built man with an uncommon personality. In contrast to the splendid physical development was a face that proclaimed him all mental, a typical intellectual. The dark brown hair was combed back straight from the brow. It was the brow of an ascetic, as was the nose—the brow and the nose of a Savonarola. The eyes, which were large and full, were the eyes of a dreamer. The mouth was sensitive and finely chiselled. The lines of the

chin were sharply drawn, and the muscular development of the jaw bespoke the heart of a fighter.

A new bishop had just officiated at a service and the honors of his office were the subject of discussion. It was an important post. The eyes of the world were on the See in question. Various comments had been made. Finally the elder cardinal said:

"What do you think, Father Paul?"

"I think," said the young monk, "that the weight of a mitre is greater than its sheen. After all, the honors we wear are soon forgotten by men, but the work we do and the work we leave undone is never forgotten by God!" Then he added with a characteristic twinkle in his eye, which is almost Celtic, "and, as I have some work to do, I must bid this very charming company good evening."

"Who is Father Paul?" asked the Archbishop.

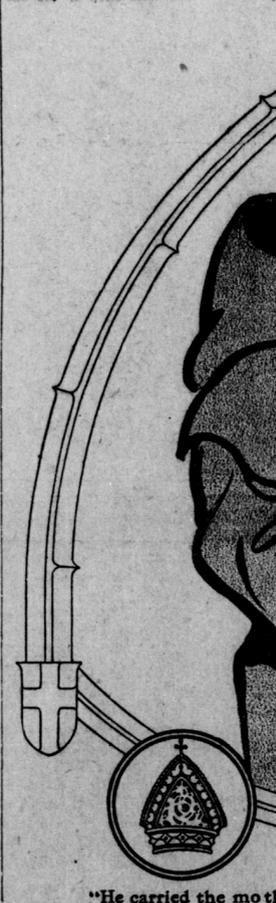
That was eight years ago. Several members of that group have since been elevated by the Pope. The man who asked "Who is Father Paul?" is now a member of the Sacred College of Cardinals.

This is the story that he heard. It is the answer to "Why was an obscure monk in Hoboken, N. J., chosen for the hierarchy?"

Father Paul was born in Philadelphia forty-three years ago. His parents were intellectual people and devout Catholics. He began his education with the Christian Brothers in Philadelphia. When he reached his seventeenth year he felt that his vocation was for the priesthood. The active but austere life of the Passionist Monks appealed to Paul Nussbaum. He sought admission to their monastery in Pittsburgh. There he began the hard life of a mendicant.

The Passionist Order combines the solitary life of the Trappist Monks with the activity of the Jesuits and the Lazarists. Five hours are spent every day in the choir, chanting the Divine Office or in meditation. Every night in the year the monastery bell at midnight summons the monks to chapel, where they kneel one hour and a half chanting the Matins and the Lauds. They abstain from flesh meat three

days in the week throughout the year and during the whole of Lent and Advent. Their habit is a coarse brown woollen tunic and they wear only sandals on their feet. Every hour of their day is filled with study and work among the poor and wretched. When the day is done and they seek their



rest they lie down on a rough pallet of straw with a pillow of the same hard substance. There is no mark of comfort, no suggestion of luxury, no ornament in their habitation. The floors and walls are bare, the furniture consists only of hard chairs and plain tables. The monks of this order are

forbidden to own property, either personal or real.

Into that life of austerity and mortification Paul Nussbaum carried his stalwart youth, his earthly possessions and his brilliant of mental endowment. Ambitions, boyhood ties and even his family name were left behind. From that time until his ordination he was known as "Brother Paul."

After five years of study Brother Paul went with a band of missionaries to South America. His first real work began in Brazil, which was then in the throes of a revolution. The rebel forces and the federal troops were in the thick of battle the October morning that Brother Paul entered the bay of Rio Janeiro.

"Better not land just yet," advised a young officer of the boat.

"On the contrary, this is the time for me to land. I might be of some service in there," was Brother Paul's answer.

"Anybody who steps into a South American revolution this early in the morning is likely to be shot," warned the first officer. "They will knock off fighting in the heat of the day. We can get in then."

"If you can lower a boat and get a man or two to help me I will row in," was the young monk's answer.

And he landed. He ministered to the dying and later in the day he buried the dead.

That was Brother Paul's beginning. His next heroic work was at Rosario. He had just completed a mission and had started back to his monastery, when he was warned by a villager to hurry away because the town had suddenly been gripped by bubonic plague. Brother Paul turned back. That night he buried fifteen victims. He carried a score of motherless children to the chapel, where he cared for them. He stayed in that pest-ridden village until the plague had passed.

That winter Brother Paul was ordained to the priesthood in Buenos Ayres and became known as "Father Paul." Before his ordination he had gone among the people, preaching, and by his wholesome, kindly philosophy had created a following. Two missions were established as a result of his labor.

After his ordination Father Paul went back into Brazil. There he preached, taught the people, organized missions and built churches and schools.

Two years later he was in the Argentine when that record epidemic of yellow fever swept hundreds of lives

into the trenches. He went among the victims, making a record of the identified dead, marking the trenches where they were buried. He organized hospitals which were temporary affairs then, but which grew into permanent institutions. He fought for sanitation. He preached cleanliness with godliness. The people knew he feared neither pestilence nor bullets, that he would defend their interests at the risk of his life. So they listened to him and he became as a prophet and a reformer to his people.

Rumor of this man's work finally reached Rome. The Provincial General of the Passionist Order looked into the record of the young American monk called Father Paul and then called him to the head monastery of the order in Rome.

When the story of Father Paul had been told the venerable Cardinal said:

"He would make a great bishop."

"If he were not a monk," added an American Monsignor. No Passionist monk had ever been made a bishop in this country.

"He is still very young, and precedent is a transitory thing," was the Cardinal's comment.

Five years ago Father Paul asked to be sent back to his native land. He was appointed consulor of the Eastern Province and assigned to the monastery of St. Michael in Hoboken. He has given the past five years of his life to work among the poor. Very few of the richer churches know him at all.

The vows of self-denial which were taken by Father Paul were life vows. Back of the Bishop, the administrator of a big diocese, he will still be the monk. When the pomp and ceremony of his office are done he will adhere, as far as lies in his power, to the rules of his austere order. In his house he will wear the rough brown woollen habit and the sandals. His sleeping quarters will be as the bare cell of a monk and his couch a bed of straw.

It will be a strange turn of life for this monk. From the desolate halls of a monastery to the comfort and dignity of a Bishop's residence; from blind obedience to a position of authority and great power.

Two years later he was in the Argentine when that record epidemic of yellow fever swept hundreds of lives

"He carried the motherless children to the chapel, where he cared for them."