

TRUE DETECTIVE STORIES

THE CLEW OF THE CHECKERED HAT BAND

(From a Reporter's Recollections)
BY CHARLES SOMERVILLE

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ON Christmas Day, 1899, I was sent by my newspaper with a corps of assistants to investigate the strange disappearance of George B. Eyre, of Chester, Pa., and the course of a few days' zealous search made it more and more certain that if the light of inquiry were ever to solve the deep mystery it would be to bring forth the ghastly, grotesque face of murder out of the darkness.



Charles Somerville
Photo by Vanderweyde

This truth was as pitious to contemplate as it was horrible, for George Eyre had seemed to be one of those whom Fate had in most kindly keeping. He was young (twenty-five years old), robust, big and kindly; of a popularity attested by his repeated elections to the presidency of the Alpha Boat Club of Chester, an organization of young men of the best families of the community. He was well to do. His father had left him a fortune of about \$100,000. He stood as the sole heir of his grandmother's fortune, which was more than double that figure. He made his home with his mother and his grandmother, and they both worshipped him. And there was a third woman, too, who loved him—some scarcely more than a girl—to whom he was affianced. Their wedding day was marked for the approaching June.

Eyre on the Saturday preceding his disappearance went to Philadelphia to make Christmas purchases. He remained in Philadelphia over Sunday and came back to Chester on an early morning train Monday. A little before nine o'clock he telephoned his mother that he had arrived in town but would not be home until afternoon, because he intended to go duck hunting. He went to the Alpha Club, on the shores of the Delaware, put on a hunting jacket and cap, leaving his other clothing in the locker, and put out in a skiff with his oars, a pair of paddles and his two shotguns. This much was readily understood from an examination of his effects at the club house.

Afternoon did not bring him home, nor nightfall; nor did he appear on Christmas Eve. The whole community took up the alarm over the disappearance of the popular young athlete. All day before Christmas his friends, in skiffs and launches, searched the desolate, soggy, brown marsh lands of Raccoon Island, the most frequented hunting ground in the vicinity that lay about a mile and a half from Chester on the New Jersey shore. There was a sort of tradition of a hunter who years before had been caught in the deep mud and brambles of desolate Raccoon Island, only to be found days later frozen to death. I found when I arrived in Chester on Christmas Day that the most generally accepted theory was that Eyre, returning in the darkness from his duck hunting expedition, had been run down by a steamer, his boat smashed and himself drowned. Manifestly this was a poor explanation. The steam had gone up and down the river for miles, and if such an accident had befallen Eyre, bits of his boat and his oars and his paddles must have drifted in somewhere with the tide. Not a chip of any of these things had come under anybody's eye.

Woman in the Case.

Next we worked on the possibility of Eyre having a reason for desiring to disappear. Rumors that he had been faithless to his sweetheart and had become entangled with an adventurous woman were proved groundless. To be sure the fact stood out that he had sold his large stationery store in Chester only about two weeks before, but his family and friends declared that he had, in the first place, only purchased the business as a speculative venture, and there was proof that he had sold it at a handsome profit.

And there was no rival in his love affair. There was the fact of his being his grandmother's sole heir. Did somebody exist who might have designs on this fortune? There was only, aside from his mother, a distant cousin who might, with George Eyre eliminated, ultimately lay claim to the money. But it was quickly found that this cousin at the time of George Eyre's disappearance was thousands of miles away.

These facts communicated to my newspaper, my editors agreed with me that the sign that pointed most clearly to the solution of the mystery was the red hand of murder. I was instructed to spare neither effort nor expense in a search for Eyre's body and a general investigation of the mystery.

The District Attorney, not having an over large appropriation for the expenses of such a search and investigation, readily consented to co-operate with us and became my companion on the grim hunt. It went on for days. In tags and launches searching parties organized of Eyre's fellow club members and of the professional duck hunters and fishermen of the Delaware searched the shores and beat the marshes for miles and miles. No sign of the body, no trace of the boat, no trace of paddles or oars. I had become convinced that had Eyre gone down the river that day in his boat he would have been seen and recognized, for he was very well known on the water—in his stily handied sloop in summer; in his launch and duck hunting skiffs in winter. He had been killed near the lonely shores of Raccoon. I decided, and his boat and paddles and oars made away with.

We hired divers. But when they came from Philadelphia ready to don their big helmets and rubber suits and brass soled shoes and search the river bottom a new difficulty appeared. A frigid spell had frozen the river solidly along shore. Permission, however, was obtained from the Fish Commissioners, who were authority in the matter, and great holes were dynamited in the ice, through which the grotesquely clad divers found their way to the bottom. They found nothing.

So much for the hunt for the body. But another hunt had begun—the hunt for the possible murderer. And in these days while the body was being searched for this other hunt had taken positive direction. And it began to close about a thin, gaunt, shifty eyed riverman, with a thin black mustache over a drooping mouth, and long, skinny fingers that constantly tugged at the thin black mustache.

Jim Pierce was his name, and as this is a true detective story, which does not lend itself readily to the literary construction of a "surprise," I may as well admit at the very outset that this man Jim Pierce was



THEN QUITE SUDDENLY WHEELED AND HELD OUT HER SHAKING HANDS TO US.

the murderer; that in the end with a fish line rope of his own making he was found hanging to his cell door, a starting, self-slain thing of horror. But of the curious building of circumstances against him; of how while we searched for the body he walked defiantly in the streets of Chester and even sought the society of the rural groups that assembled in the little police station on evenings to discuss the strange case; of how the clew of the checkered hatband finally led to the complete exposure of his ghastly offense; of how it guided us to the woman who betrayed him, who told the story of his wild crime the while she held in her shaking hands the glittering jewels stripped from a dead man's fingers; of how when he snarled against her that she lied the very deed rose up to give her story full corroboration—these are the incidents that make my story, and out of them you may if you will follow the faint film that now stands as it develops into a picture bold and clear.

Drawing the Net.

The first important discovery came on the very day we began our investigation—Christmas afternoon—when two reporters whom I had detailed to canvass all the houses in the streets by which Eyre could have gone from the railroad station telephone to the boat club, and find out, if possible, if he had picked up with any companion, or, at least, with an old couple in a cottage by the river side were positive they had seen George Eyre enter the club house that morning, and with another man! The name of this man they did not know, but they said they had often seen him starting with George Eyre on these gunning trips. They described him—tall, sunken cheeked, gaunt, and on this day, they declared, he wore instead of the customary corduroy hunting cap a black derby. When this description, in form much more full at the time, was laid before George Eyre's friends, with particular stress on the fact stated by the old couple that he was often Eyre's companion, the name of Jim Pierce was the only one called forth from their lips. He, they told me, always worked aboard Eyre's sloop in summer, and on hunting trips usually did the paddling while Eyre did the shooting. And then there was the fact that Eyre had taken two paddles in his boat to corroborate the old folks' story of a companion.

In organizing the searching parties next day I offered Pierce a job on my boat. He hung back. But I offered \$3 for his day's work, and, noting other river men casting curious glances at him, for the wage was big for men of their class, he accepted. On the way across the river I flatly asked Pierce if he had been with George Eyre on the morning of his disappearance. He flew into a rage in denying it. But when we arrived at the island and paired off to beat particular sections of the shore, Pierce accepted with a show of good humor my invitation that he should stick by me. On the trip my suspicions had received unexpected support. Pete Sheets, one of the river men, came to me and declared that he was willing to make affidavit that he had seen Pierce looking for George Eyre on the morning of the latter's disappearance. "He said he expected to go hunting with him," said Pete.

"Did anybody else see Pierce then and hear him inquire for Eyre?"

"Yes," replied Pete, and gave the name of a reputable grain merchant of Chester.

So when Pierce and I were alone I told him of these things and he again became more engaged.

"But, Pierce," I said, "you're no right to go off the handle. In a case like this every man should be willing to stand for having his movements looked into. If you'll listen to me you'll make up your mind right

now to give me a statement accounting for all your movements on that day. It's the simplest way of settling this thing right off. Once you've made it clear you've had no part in the affair talk will stop."

He was still surlly, but he began an account of his doings on the day that Eyre had gone away. It appeared that he had left his house about eight o'clock and did have some idea that he might meet Eyre, but had no appointment with him. Not seeing Eyre, he visited his sister's home and then the home of his father, and that took up all his time until about one o'clock in the afternoon, when, he declared, he had gone to the Consumers' Ice Company's wharf and worked at loading ice until four o'clock in the afternoon.

Tracing the Clews.

The fact that he laid all his movements on that morning in the bosom of his family, so to speak, was unsatisfactory but not incredible.

"Pierce," I asked finally, "did you ever own a black derby hat?"

"Never in my life," he retorted. "I never wear nothing but one of these caps. Once I owned a black soft hat, I guess I got it yet. Wear it sometimes on Sunday."

"No sooner did our boat touch shore than instructed reporters were sent in four directions. Particularly were they sent in haste to the homes of Pierce's father and his sister. They came back with reports that his father said, "Sure, Jim was to see me that day," but had given us the time of the visit, the hour when Pierce had said he was visiting his sister—and his sister did not recall a visit from him at all! The other two reporters brought back from the commission merchant a corroboration of Pete Sheets' statement, and from the foreman of the Consumers' Ice Company's wharf gang a queer announcement. It was that Pierce spoke the truth when he said he worked from one to four loading ice, but that he had appeared and, without asking for the work, took up one of the prongs, labored diligently, spoke to many of the other men, and had gone away at four o'clock without stepping up to be paid. When the rivermen did work on the gangs they were paid by the hour and collected the money always before leaving. Pierce had never come around since for the money. If Pierce is regarded as trying to establish an alibi the significance of this fact becomes apparent.

Stranger news than that reached us that night. A riverman brought to police headquarters an old negro who lived in a hut by the shore and who said he had seen Jim Pierce and his brother, Pinney Pierce, on the night of the day of Eyre's disappearance leave in a skiff and go off in the direction of Raccoon Island. He had heard them heaving their boat at the landing by Pierce's father's cottage and seen them come ashore at dawn, which meant that they had been away more than six hours. Now, professional duck hunters often go out at night, in the hope of getting roosting ducks in the marshes, and usually succeed. The old negro said the light was sufficiently clear for him to see that neither of the men carried any ducks of the boat.

We found Pinney Pierce and asked him about that various night trip. He denied that he and his brother had gone in the direction of Raccoon Island. He said they went ten miles down the river in another direction.

"What for?" I asked.

"Ducks," he said, unconcernedly.

"Get any?"

"A pair, that's all."

"What in six hours of hunting?"

"Yes, that's all a pair," he said, looking sheepish in spite of himself.

"What did you do with them?"

"Sold 'em," he answered and gave the butcher's name.

We saw the butcher. He admitted the purchase on Tuesday morning of a pair of ducks from the Pierce brothers.

"But," he added, "they were so stale, so game I had to throw them away."

Startling News Comes.

I had hardly returned to my rooms in the Washington Hotel when news of a remarkable character came. The young acting president of the Alpha Boat Club and boyhood chum of Eyre sought me out. He was greatly excited.

"The boat club's been robbed!" he cried. "Every locker upstairs has been ripped open."

I accompanied him to the club house. It was as he said in regard to the lockers. Most of the members crowded into the room as the news got among them. Curiously, as each examined his locker he could report none of his effects missing, and among the things were clothing, guns, cartridges and other things valuable to any thieving hunsman. Sails and spars and oars that would have made the picked plunder for river pirates remained untouched.

Suddenly it became very plain to me. The man who conducted a search for George Eyre's body and had left some clew behind and had come back to retrieve it. He was evidently not a member of the club, who would have had a key. The lock of the front door had been torn out by way of gaining entrance.

I asked the young acting president to get the other members to disperse very plain to me. The man who conducted a search for George Eyre's body and had left some clew behind and had come back to retrieve it. He was evidently not a member of the club, who would have had a key. The lock of the front door had been torn out by way of gaining entrance.

For lying under it was a black derby hat!

And yet if the man who had gone away with George Eyre had left the hat there under the boat, surely he would not have been at pains to search in the lockers for it. So I asked my companion:

"Do you know whose boat this is and whether it has been lately placed here?"

"Yes, the owner just brought it in yesterday. He went out on a hunt by himself in the hope of finding some trace of George."

We saw this member of the boat club. When we did the whole thing was made clear. He had brought his boat in and was storing it when he noticed that it lay in a corner of the room. He had observed that it had been lying covered with dust, so to protect it, believing it to be the hat of one of the members, he had slipped it under the boat.

That explained the tearing open of the lockers by the desperate man who had forced his way into the club house to take away the damning clew. He had identified which he knew to be there. When he had left it he had concluded that it had been picked up and locked in one of the compartments for safe keeping.

I carried the hat, wrapped in a sweater, to my hotel. It was a cheap hat and had only a fanciful whole-sale maker's name. But the odd thing about it was the band. It was of the usual dull black silk glossing that along the borders ran a series of tiny crossing checks. I had never seen such a band on a derby hat before.

The Clew of the Hat.

One of my fellow reporters went to Philadelphia the next morning with the hat to consult the makers as to what retail shops they had sold headgear to of that class and pattern, the while I took a searching party along the route that Pierce and his brother said they had taken on their hunting trip on the night of Eyre's disappearance. On a deserted strip of New Jersey shore, ten miles below Chester, we found a mound where a fire had been. Its embers were so entirely reduced to ash that we could not determine what the character of the fuel for this fire had been, but the suspicion rose strongly that here was all that remained of George Eyre's boat and paddles and oars. It was strengthened, by inquiries made on the opposite shore, where two men reported having seen the fire alight on the spot on Monday night very late. Of course we reasoned at first that the Pierce might have simply lighted a fire to warm themselves, but this fire, the men said, had burned high and very brightly, while the bramble branches and drift wood of the marshes could only be with difficulty ignited into smoldering fires. Jim Pierce and his brother Pinney were not with us. They

had declined to have anything further to do with our hunting trips.

Out of the information brought back from Philadelphia by my assistant, however, it was that the big revelations came. At first the manager of the factory had declared that he could give him little help.

"We've sent out so many thousands of those hats," he said.

"Isn't this an odd band? Isn't this checkered band peculiar? Surely there are not many of just this style that have been sent out and sold?"

At that the manager glanced swiftly at the checkered band.

"Oh, those; that's different. They will not be hard to trace. We just put out a few as samples—East, West, North and South. Just wait a minute."

There were no sales at Chester, but there was at Wilmington, Del., only a few miles away. And to the address of the hat store in Wilmington I went the next morning.

"Yes," said the proprietor, "I sold that hat about three weeks ago."

"Can you describe the man you sold it to?"

"Certainly," he said; "I know him. It was Jim Pierce, of Chester." He grinned. "He's down this way often," he said. "He's got a girl down here; lives just up the street. But I guess Jim wouldn't like it known—about the girl. Jim's married."

The next minute I was possessed of the name and address of this girl. There was no trouble in the matter of an introduction. She was just a little unfortunate creature, habitué of waterfront resorts.

The instant I made mention of the name of Jim Pierce the girl's fright was palpable. At first she denied that she knew him at all. But a companion sneered at her openly.

"What are you yin' for?" she demanded. "Fraid of bein' hauled up in a divorce suit?" And as the girl I had sought frowned at her the other continued:—"You know mighty well Jim was here to see you Christmas night."

The girl rocked apprehensively in her chair.

"What if he was?" she asked.

"Nothin', 'ceptin' you needn't lie about it."

I asked the other girl to leave us. Then I said:—"What did Jim Pierce come to see you about?"

"Nothin'," she answered.

"You'd better tell me," I said. "It's always the best way. It will save you a lot of trouble." I tried for a chance effect. "It might save you from going to prison."

"I couldn't—I couldn't," she said, trembling.

"Why?"

"Oh, God!" sobbed the girl, and she flung up her hands to her eyes.

I told her that she must not try to leave my company, and the frightened little thing obeyed. She heard me telephone to the District Attorney at Chester to come down on the next train. He did, and when he came picked up the Chief of Police of Wilmington. We all went finally to the girl's rooms. We talked kindly to her, and, perceiving from certain pictures on the wall that she was religious, made our demands for a full, frank statement on impressive grounds.

And suddenly, without a word, with her cruelly marked young face white with fear and a sick trembling of her lips, she tottered to her bureau, opened a upper drawer with a key that she took from her purse, and then quite as suddenly wheeled and held out her shaking hands to us.

Why He Slew Him.

And in her hands were the gold watch and chain and the emerald and diamond ring that George Eyre wore the day he went hunting never to return alive. Inside the ring were engraved initials attesting that the jewel was a gift to Eyre from the girl who had expected to marry him in June.

"Jim—Jim," began the girl, announcing the queerest motive for murder probably to be found in criminal annals. "I killed George Eyre because he didn't have any money for Christmas presents for his kids and his wife and—and—me."

Then the girl, not knowing that we knew anything of the circumstances, told a story tallying with all that we did know in the matter of the crime.

Pierce had come there Christmas night. As the day that we had searched for Eyre's body and that he had talked to me he carried in his pockets the glittering proofs of his guilt that could have been furnished by George Eyre's jewelry. He was drunk and jolly at first. Then he had fallen asleep on a lounge and the girl did not disturb him. She had fallen asleep herself on a big chair in the room while she waited his awakening.

His horrible crime had caused her to leap from the chair and in the dim light of the lowered lamp stare at him with startled eyes.

He was yelling, "Yes—yes—you got me! I killed him! I killed him!"

The girl shook his shoulder and he had come out of his dream of terror so shaken and broken that, hardly realizing what he did, he threw the watch and chain and the emerald and diamond ring at her feet. The girl, not knowing that he would not meet Eyre that morning, though they had an appointment. He went home and changed his hunting cap for his black derby. But as he came out of the house again Eyre was approaching, evidently seeking him. And they had gone to the boathouse together. Eyre changed his street trousers for khaki breeches. Jim Pierce saw him transfer a watch and chain to his pocket and put his hand in a ring in a wallet and place them in an inside pocket of his hunting jacket, over which he tightly buttoned the coat. They went together to Raccoon Island. And all the way over Pierce had thought of how mean and poor a Christmas it was going to be on account of his poverty, for his wife and children and the girl of his infatuation. The friend who had talked to me for Eyre and that Eyre had for him, the many good turns by way of employment that Eyre had done for him, counted for naught. As George Eyre stood up in the bow of the boat to take a shot at a winging flock of ducks Pierce took up the other gun, and, as he sat behind him, literally blew his man's head off. All the time Jim knew that his brother-in-law Pinney was in the halling distance, he having been on the hunting grounds when they got there. The murder done, he shouted to Pinney.

There is a feudal loyalty among these fishermen's families. Pinney helped him procure a big stone on the shore; they cut the painter off the boat and tied one end around George Eyre's red stained neck and the other to the stone. The murder had occurred on the far side of Raccoon Island, near the Jersey shore. Right there they had flung his body overboard in about five feet of water. They beached the boat and oars and paddles in a deserted spot and came for them that night and toward the damaging, blood-stained things to the beach ten miles beyond the bench where the men had seen the high, bright fire. They had, of course, stripped the body of the jewelry and money. The sum of money was \$28. Eyre had cheated his assassin of much more because of his generous purchase of Christmas gifts before returning to Chester to be put to death. The two shotguns they had sunk.

Finally Pierce had groveled at the girl's feet, begging her to keep his secret and hide the jewels, for he felt that he would be arrested soon and did not want the accusing things found in his possession.

I saw next day the confrontation of the girl and Pierce, she with eyes wet with pity for him, he shaking his skinny fist at her and swearing that she lied.

The authorities had a puzzle still, however, for the law declares that before a charge of murder can be sustained the body of the dead must be produced to prove that a crime has been committed upon it.

Nature came swiftly to rescue the authorities out of their puzzle and fully corroborate the girl, for two days after she made her confession a thaw set in along the river and the tide flowing strongly slipped the rope of the rock that held Eyre's body at the bottom, and exactly where the girl had said Pierce told her he had flung it. George Eyre's body arose to the surface of the Delaware.

Pierce never confessed. He remained in the county jail from January until June. His trial was set for the first Monday of the month. That Sunday he asked permission to be allowed to work at weaving a fishnet, and the twine was given him. Instead he wove a noose for his neck and when the Sheriff came to bring him into court to stand his trial that official found a corpse.

Pinney Pierce, who had been indicted as an accomplice, was, however, never put to trial, for physicians declared him dying of consumption, with only a few months left to live.