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A Run of the Mills' Detective Story

BY **DANIEL J. DEMERS**

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George Maxwell's murder, according to the *New York Herald*, wasn't a crime — "it was a butchery — a cruel massacre." The 65-year-old bachelor was found dead in his Franconia, New Hampshire home in December of 1867. The newspaper accounts related that Maxwell's face "had been pounded to jelly, the head was nearly split in twain and likewise almost severed from the body." Upon the supper table were two plates indicating "the kind hearted old man was preparing to share his hospitality." Evidence at the crime scene indicated the murderer calmly sat down with hands "unwashed of the blood...and very coolly and complacently...[ate] a hearty supper...[leav-

ing] pieces of biscuit including the handles of the fork and a teapot all daubed with blood." After supper the murderer broke open a trunk stealing several articles and \$25 "or thereabouts in money."

The murderer then stole the old man's buggy and horse, remembering to take a bag of oats to feed the horse, and then drove off to Gorham, Maine where he boarded a train. At this point New Hampshire police lost his trail. The Franconia Town Board voted to employ a detective — Moses Sargent — recently retired as Boston's chief of detectives. By then, 28-year-old Samuel Mills was identified as the prime suspect. Mills was known to have been employed as a miner and Sargent distributed to various mining districts a flyer with "a description of the murderer, his habits and character."

He believed Mills would return to the profession in which he had been trained.

In short order Mills was apprehended while working in a Galena, Illinois mine. Sargent traveled to Galena and proceeded to bring Mills back to New Hampshire. The result of his police training and experience, Sargent immediately had Mills pull his pockets inside out and, sure enough, found Mills had put his bloody hands in his pocket. Sargent cut out the "stained" pocket as evidence of the crime. The duo climbed aboard a train for the 1,600 mile return trip. Stopping in Chicago, Mills, an expert locksmith, was placed in jail in leg irons. During the night, he managed to get a piece of wire from a broom handle, then unlocked the manacles and relocked them. The following day while on the train, he intended to remove the irons while in the bathroom and jump out the train window into a snowbank.

Sargent, the wily detective, however, refused to allow him to close the bathroom door, thus thwarting the escape.

When in Franconia, Mills confessed to the crime and was bound over for trial. While in jail he spent his “time...almost wholly occupied in devising means of escape.” On one occasion he skillfully removed the “thirty pound chain around his ankles” and attacked the sheriff. After a “severe struggle” some fellow townsmen joined the sheriff in subduing Mills. A couple of weeks later he sawed the jail bars and “displaced his manacles.” He got as far as Dalton (a town forty miles distant) and was recaptured and returned to his cell. The sheriff had a local blacksmith build a “special cell and new manacles [about] which the smith declared “with an anvil, chisel and hammer they could not be removed.”” An hour later, Mills had rid himself of the manacles, opened the cell door and walked out of the jail. Once again he was pursued and recaptured. He was returned to the cell, manacled and chained to the floor and a guard was posted outside the cell door. Managing to slip his manacles once again he

nearly escaped when he was caught removing “some of the stones from the walls.”

Finally on May 6, 1868, five months after George Maxwell’s murder, Sam Mills was led to the gallows located 12 feet from his cell. His execution turned “into a general holiday or a sort of a jubilee,” declared the *Herald*. Mills enjoyed his last meal asserting it “was good.” He had a last smoke and “loosened his clothing and took therefrom a lot of tools which he had ingeniously made from a portion of the [wood] stove...with which he could have affected his escape in an hour if left alone,” wrote the *Herald* reporter.

Five thousand curious spectators gathered to eagerly watch the execution. They came by carriage and by special trains—“hundreds started at midnight and trudged into town on foot to form a part of the novel and imposing throng.”

Mills met with a clergyman and claimed he had made his peace with God. Addressing the crowd, he told them that he was guilty and had “shown himself a man and he will die like a man.” He apologized seconds before the trap was sprung saying, “Good bye, gentlemen, and

good luck to all of you.” Someone in the crowd responded “Good bye, Sam — bully for you.” The crowd let out a laugh. Sam’s body dropped eight feet and, according to the *Herald* “the law was vindicated, justice served, and the multitude departed [knowing] the world is relieved of at least one of the most heartless wretches that ever disgraced it.”

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/30684087/george-maxwell#view-photo=13482350>

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