

Mystery of the Bearded Stranger

by William T. Brannon

Art by Ed Augustiny

WHILE HER MOTHER WAS attending church on a Sunday evening in September, 1866, Mary Mohrmann disappeared from her home on Orkney Street in Philadelphia. Six hours after the police began searching for the 18-year-old girl, her body was found in a brickyard three blocks away. She had been strangled.

In addition to scores of uniformed policemen, Detective Joshua Taggart was assigned to the case. Moving quietly about the vicinity, he questioned the neighbors.

John Hanlon, who lived half a block away, told of seeing a man walking through the alley carrying a heavy bundle of some kind. He described the stranger as tall and very thin, with a beard that came to a point.

Three young women, all friends of the slain girl, told of seeing Mary with a bearded stranger, at different places and different times, on Sunday evening. One said she had seen the bearded man twice after that, once only a few blocks from the Mohrmann home and again on Callowhill Street, three miles away.

Taggart again contacted Hanlon, who agreed that the descriptions given by the three women fit the man he had seen carrying the bundle.

The mayor and the district attorney offered rewards for the capture of the suspect, while tension mounted in Philadelphia. Several men wearing pointed beards were picked up and cleared. Then a tall, thin man with a goatee was arrested and confessed the crime. Hanlon and the women said he looked like the man they saw.

An angry mob formed outside the police station with a telegraph pole to use as a battering ram. Men swearing vengeance were about to break down the door when attendants from a mental institution arrived. They said the suspect had escaped only that morning and that he would confess anything with a little prompting! The mob dispersed and the man was returned to the asylum.

The police worked ceaselessly for several months and got nowhere. Finally, because of the press of other work, they were called off and only Detective Taggart remained on the case. As the months passed, most of the city lost interest.



Friends of the slain girl said they had

But one man, City Judge William Hines, couldn't forget it. His court was only a few blocks away, and he had known Mary Mohrmann as one of the sweet young girls of the neighborhood. Judge Hines met with Detective Taggart and John Hanlon. The three formed an unofficial committee to keep working to find the killer.

Hanlon prowled the neighborhood and kept an eye on the brickyard on the theory that the murderer might return to the scene.

Detective Taggart agreed to spend all his spare time on the case.

Judge Hines suspected the bearded man had been caught in another crime and was in prison. He began visiting Eastern jails, but without success.

AS THE MONTHS grew into years, the "committee" became discouraged. Hanlon said it seemed useless to continue the search. Detective Taggart himself had so many other assignments that it was impossible for him to devote much time to pursuing the investigation.

But Judge Hines wouldn't give up;

his determination to find the killer was now an obsession and he became a familiar figure to the officials of many penitentiaries. When his duties prevented his leaving the city, Judge Hines made periodic visits to Moyamensing Prison in Philadelphia.

One day as he wandered through the gloomy corridors of the ancient jail, he glanced through a glass partition and started at the sight of a tall, slender figure. To avoid being seen, he dodged into the shadows, waited a few moments, then hurried off to find Detective Taggart.

They returned to the prison and asked the superintendent to look up the tall man's record. It showed that his name was Charles Harris and that he was serving a five-year sentence for attempting to assault a young girl. He had no beard now nor when he was arrested. But he was tall and thin, and otherwise fitted the familiar description.

"We'll need evidence," said Judge Hines. "Can you think of a way to get a confession?"

"Maybe," said the superintendent.

He sent for a convict named Mike Dunn, who was acquainted with Harris, and said: "We think Harris is guilty of another crime. I won't tell you what it is; you'll find out if you can get him to talk. Do you want to try—and perhaps have your sentence commuted?"

Dunn, a burglar and something of an actor, nodded eagerly.

That night, Harris was moved into the cell occupied by Dunn. Thrown together constantly, the two soon became friends. Then, one night, Dunn had a nightmare; he began screaming and clawing at the air. Harris awakened him, but he wouldn't talk.

Dunn had other nightmares and Harris urged him to talk. Finally, speaking in a low whisper, Dunn confessed that he feared he would be deported to England, where he faced a murder charge. "Those Scotland Yard men are pretty smart," Dunn said. "I'm afraid they'll discover I'm here and send me back to England."

"American detectives are just as smart," said Harris, "but I've completely fooled them." He then con-



on her with a bearded stranger.

fessed the murder of Mary Mohrmann, who had resisted his advances. Later, he said, he had appeared before several witnesses wearing a false beard. He had then destroyed the beard and walked about Philadelphia with impunity while a frantic search for the bearded stranger was made by police. "So you see," Harris concluded, "you really don't have to worry."

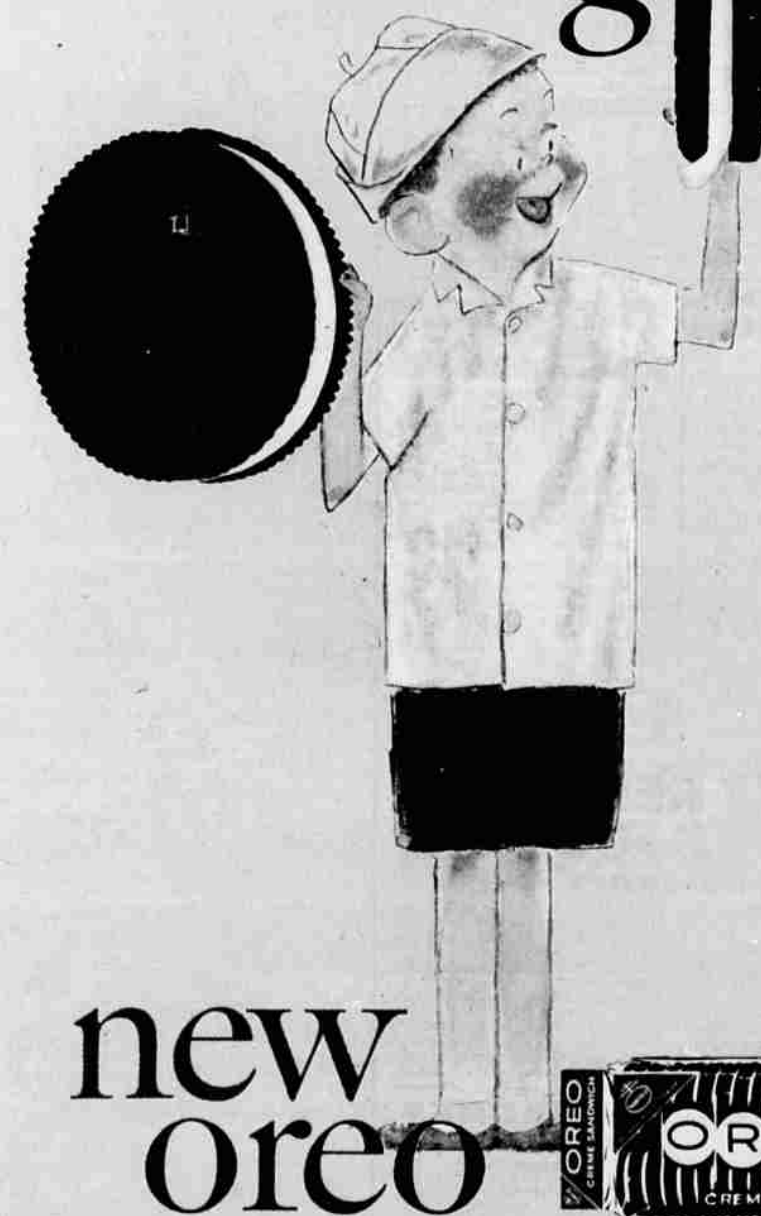
"That makes me feel better," said Dunn. "Now I can sleep."

Some days later, Dunn collapsed and was rushed to the prison hospital. There were rumors among the prisoners that he was dying of a heart attack. Actually, he was in the office of the prison superintendent, relating his experience to Judge Hines and Detective Taggart.

Charles Harris was charged with the murder of Mary Mohrmann and convicted. He was hanged at Moyamensing Prison on Feb. 1, 1871. From the beginning, Judge Hines and Detective Taggart knew that Harris was an assumed name.

The right name of Mary Mohrmann's killer was John Hanlon.

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