

The Struggle for Life

by A New York Detective

News was one day brought to the office of the chief of police, that the residence of George Templeman, Esq., situated in Union Square, had been burglariously entered and completely sacked of its valuables. A large amount of money had been stolen as well as all the plate and jewelry. The family were out of town at the time, and the house was left in charge of three servants, a footman, housemaid, and cook. They had heard no sounds in the house on the night of the robbery, and were very much surprised to find every room ransacked when they awoke in the morning.

Some policemen were immediately dispatched to the spot, and made an examination of the premises, but they discovered no clue to the perpetrators of the robbery. It was then that I was consulted.

I found that an entrance had been effected by the rear of the dwelling, and a single glance was sufficient to tell that it had been the work of experts, in fact, I at once came to the conclusion that it was the work of English burglars.

The gate leading in the yard was studded on the top with sharp spikes, and on one of these spikes I found a piece of cotton handkerchief, with a red ground and blue spots. It was evident that the house-breaker, had raised himself up by it, and that it had given way, leaving a portion of it remaining on the spike. This little piece of handkerchief, then, was the only clue I had. I carefully preserved it.

It is a well known fact that the English burglars are the most expert in their calling. An experienced detective can at once recognize their handiwork, and they are generally so careful that they leave nothing behind them by which they can be traced. I could only account for this piece of handkerchief being left behind by the fact that the night on which the robbery was committed, was very dark, and in all probability, the burglar was not aware that his handkerchief had been torn.

My proceeding was plainly to find out to whom the handkerchief belonged, and to effect this, I determined I would visit the haunts always to be found in great cities where criminals congregate together. I disguised myself as well as I could, and plunged into the classic regions of the Five Points. The first place I entered was a wretched low tavern, and calling for a glass of ale and a pipe, I sat down to watch everyone who might enter.

I had not been there long when a noted English burglar named Bristol Jem came in, accompanied by a woman. They took a seat some distance from me, and began to converse in a low tone. I kept my eyes fixed on them without really appearing to notice them. I soon had the satisfaction of seeing Bristol Jem pull a handkerchief from his pocket, which had a red ground covered with blue spots. I felt certain now that I had the robber of Mr. Templeman's house before me; but I

knew also it was necessary that I should receive some further proof of his crime in order to convict him, and I waited patiently.

After conversing together in whispers for some time, Bristol Jem and his companion began to quarrel about something. Their tones grew loud and furious, and at last the woman having made some bitter remark, the ruffian struck her on the side of the head, and knocked her senseless on the floor. He then rose up and left the tavern. I immediately ran to the woman, and raising her up, succeeded after a little time in bringing her to her senses.

“Where is that villain?” were her first words.

“He is gone,” was the reply.

“The scoundrel! I will pay him off for this.”

“It was Bristol Jem, was it not?”

“Yes. How dare he strike me when he knows he is in my power?”

“If you want your revenge you can have it now. I am a detective officer. I know that he was concerned in the recent robbery of Mr. Templeman's house, but I want proof against him.”

The woman wrung her hands and scarcely seemed to heed what I was saying.

“To think only how I have watched him when he has had his awful fits. Many and many a time he would have been buried alive had it not been for me,” said she, as if speaking to herself.

“What do you mean?”

The woman explained to me that her companion was subject to cataleptic attacks, in which condition he appeared exactly as if he were dead and that several times he had been in great danger of being interred prematurely. This Bristol Jem was a noted character. He was one of the most fearful villains that as yet had escaped justice. He had several times been tried, but always managed to escape punishment. It would be a great feat for me if I could manage to bring this crime home to him.

“I saw his assault on you,” said I, to the woman, “and I was disgusted at his infamous behavior. I am surprised that you should take up with such a miscreant as that.”

“Yes, he struck me as he would a dog; but by heavens, I will have my revenge. I loved him once, but now my love is changed to the bitterest hatred, and before tomorrow dawns, he shall feel the weight of my vengeance.”

“You have an opportunity of being revenged at once. Did he not commit the burglary at Mr. Templeman's?”

“He did,” returned the girl. “I know all about it, and will point you on the right track, where you can obtain all the evidence you require.”

She then entered into full explanations respecting the matter, informing me that a greater portion of the booty had been conveyed to Mother Adams, a noted fence house, and that the rest was concealed in a mattress in his lodgings, which was in a miserable dwelling in Water Street. After a little more conversation we separated. When she was leaving me, she stated her determination never to see him again, and hoped he would meet his deserts.

I immediately procured the assistance of three police officers, and we proceeded to the house in Water Street, which we entered, and found the plate hidden in the mattress, but Bristol Jem had not yet returned. We waited till next morning, and yet he did not come back. I sent one of the men to get some information about him. He soon returned, and stated that he had traced the burglar to the New York and Erie railroad depot, and he had no doubt he had gone off in the early train.

I was very much vexed to think that he had escaped us. But by some means he had received information that we were on his track. I have since thought he must have detected me through my disguise when in the tavern, for I was aware that he knew me well in my professional character. Be that as it may, it was certain he had left New York.

My professional pride was wounded at letting the criminal escape through my fingers. It is true, all the stolen property was discovered, for the remainder was found at Mother Adams's. My mind was soon made up what to do. I determined to follow him, and if possible bring him to justice. I had an idea that he had gone to Minnesota, as I knew he had relatives in that State. I arrived there without much delay, and there received information that the burglar had visited his relatives, but had left for Davenport, Iowa. To Davenport, accordingly, I directed my steps.

In due time I reached it, and found a long straggling town, not half built up. I need not detain the reader with an account of the search I made. Suffice it to say I was entirely unsuccessful. I believe almost every town and village in the territory was visited by me. Many times I received descriptions which made me believe that I had at last got on the right track; but perhaps after a journey of a hundred miles, I would find myself as far off the scout as ever.

Two months were wasted in this manner, and I gave up the matter in despair. I must acknowledge I felt considerably crest fallen. It was the first time I had ever been foiled, and I hated to go back again to New York and run the gauntlet of the jeers of my companions, who my previous successes had already made very jealous. But there was no help for it, and one fine morning in August I started on horseback from Dubuque in the direction of Iowa City. I should say that I was habited in the garb of a farmer, which disguise I thought the best for my purpose. I had concealed on my person a revolver and a bowie knife, so that I had no fear from any single antagonist; but I determined to keep out of the way of the numerous Indian bands who were traversing the whole territory.

My road lay through a magnificent prairie, and I traveled for hours through one vast undulating ocean of grass, without a single tree or shrub to be seen, as far as the eye could reach. The day

was intensely hot, and both my poor beast and myself began to feel the effects of it. I have no idea how many miles I traveled that day. I had been told on leaving Dubuque that I should reach a tavern after I had proceeded twenty miles on my road. But I was certain that I had ridden more than twenty miles, and no house made its appearance. Nothing but the same unbroken sea of prairie grass as before. I then became conscious that I had lost my way, for the road from being a well broken track, every hour showed less signs of travel, and by-and-by I found myself floundering in the midst of the long rank grass, without a sign of any human foot having passed that way before.

I am not naturally of a nervous or timid temperament, but it was impossible for me to shut my eyes to the danger of my situation. The day was now closing, and it was in vain I looked for some sign of human habitation. There was nothing before, behind, on each side of me, but a vast unbroken desert. I stood as it were in the center of an immense round plain, bounded everywhere by the fiery horizon. To add to my discomfort, I began to suffer horribly from hunger and thirst, and the poor animal I bestrode doubtless suffered from the same cause, for its tongue lolled out of its mouth, and it every now and then uttered a most distressing sound.

The sun sunk slowly beneath the horizon, and intense darkness soon followed. The wind began to rise, which was very grateful after the intense heat of the day. The stars were also obscured by clouds, and a distant rumbling presaged a coming storm. At last it came upon us with the most intense fury. The thunder roared and the lightnings flashed, but strange to say it did not rain. Even in the horrors of my situation, I could not but be struck by the grandeur of the lightning as it descended in distinct blue streaks from the heavens to the earth. At one time it appeared at a considerable distance from me. At another time it came directly in front of my horse, and for a moment blinded me by the vivid glare.

My situation now was perfectly horrible. I saw no prospect before me but death – and a fearful death, too—death from thirst, hunger and exhaustion. My tongue felt as if it were swollen enormously. My throat was dry and husky, and when I spoke to my horse, I was astonished at the harsh, grating sound of my voice. My head, too, began to grow dizzy, and I could scarcely keep my seat. My faithful horse, however, still continued his course. At the very moment when I had given up everything as lost, we entered a clearing, in the midst of which was a hut. I immediately dismounted, led my horse to the hut and knocked at the door. It proved to be the very tavern I was in search of. My summons was answered by an old woman.

“I want lodging for the night,” were the first words I uttered.

She invited me in, while her husband took charge of my horse. I found myself in a dreary looking room which was feebly lighted by a single tallow candle. The only thing that looked at all cheerful was a stove, in which the wood burned brightly. The furniture was of the most meager description, consisting of a deal table and two or three chairs. About ten feet from the stove, standing about three feet apart, were two trestles on which was placed a flat board. On this board lay something evidently bulky, which was covered over with a white sheet.

After I had had a copious drink of water I felt considerably revived, and asked the old lady if she could give me something to eat. She immediately spread on the table the best that her house

afforded, which was not much, but hungry as I was it tasted perfectly delicious. Soon afterwards the tavern keeper entered, having watered and fed my horse.

“By the way, stranger,” said he, as soon as he sat down, “are you afraid of a dead man?”

“Afraid of a dead man! what do you mean?”

“I ask you the question because you will have to have one for a companion tonight.”

“Indeed!” I replied, glancing at the board placed on the trestles; the something on the top of it I now recognized as a corpse.

“Yes, this is the only room we have to spare. This morning a traveler arrived here, and he was seized with a fit and died. He now lies there waiting for the coroner's inquest. It will meet tomorrow morning.”

“I don't suppose a dead man will do me any injury,” I replied, “and as I have no option, I must be content to pass the night with him.”

We now turned the conversation to other subjects. I found my host to be quite an intelligent man. We discussed the crops, the state of the country, and the future destinies of Iowa. At last he and his wife rose up (the latter had prepared me a bed on the floor) and lighting a candle, left me.

I must confess when I was alone with the corpse I felt an involuntary shiver running through me, which I was ashamed to confess even to myself. The confined, heavy atmosphere of the apartment appeared to exert a depressing influence on my nervous system, and I almost repented that I had not asked the landlord to contrive a bed for me in some other room. I strove, however, against this silly feeling, and reasoned with myself that a dead body was nothing but a collection of gases. I succeeded at last in dispelling in a measure my uncomfortable feelings.

I threw myself back in my chair, and lighting a cigar, began to puff at it furiously, and tried to persuade myself that I was very comfortable. All at once a sudden desire seized me to go and examine the dead body. I tried to combat it, but it was irresistible. I felt that I must see what my companion was like. The candle had gone out and the fire was very low, giving but a very feeble light in the apartment.

I advanced to the bier and turned down the sheet which covered the body, but there was not sufficient light to distinguish his features. I could tell, however, that it was a strong, powerful man that lay before me. I passed my hand over his face, and its icy coldness sent a chill through my blood. I could also distinguish that his face was very black, as if it were congested with blood.

I reseated myself by the side of the stove with my back to the body, and endeavored to think of something else, but he haunted me still. I almost fancied he was sitting upright on his bier. The supposition was too hideous, and I moved my chair so as to face the body again. I had forgotten to replace the sheet over him, and the moment I turned round his black congested face met my

eye. By a strong effort I rose up and again advanced to the body. I took up the covering which had fallen to the ground, and replaced it over his head; while doing so the peculiar form of his hands arrested my attention. They were exceedingly long and bony, each of his fingers showing that his hands had been endowed with great strength.

I returned to my seat beside the stove and endeavored to think of something else. I remained musing there an indefinite length of time, for I became so much wrapped up in my thoughts that I could not tell whether it had been ten minutes or an hour. At last I thought it was time to go to bed. I threw a couple of fresh logs on the fire, undressed myself and threw myself on the pallet.

I soon fell asleep, but how long I slept I cannot tell, for I was awakened by a dream. I fancied that the corpse came to life again and rose up from the bier. When I awoke the logs of wood I had thrown on the fire were burning brightly, shedding quite a vivid light through the apartment.

I instinctively turned my eyes to where the corpse lay, and fancied that I saw the sheet move. No, it could not be, it was only a hallucination of my senses, and I endeavored to chase away the idea. Again I thought I saw the covering move—there was no mistake about it this time—the fact was plainly visible to my senses. I gazed horror-stricken. I could feel the blood receding from my cheeks. The movement in the covering continued. O, heavens? what was it that I saw? One of his long bony hands projecting beyond the sheet, the fingers convulsively opening and closing in the palm of the hand! I was benumbed and could not move hand nor foot, but could only gaze in mute horror at the terrific spectacle.

Slowly the body of the corpse rose to a sitting posture and glared round the room. His horrible features seemed familiar to me, but I did not at first recognize them. In a moment the truth flashed across my mind—it was Bristol Jem, the burglar, that I saw. He had had one of his cataleptic fits, and had been supposed to be dead. He was a powerful man, possessing three times the strength that I did, and my clothes in which my weapons were concealed were on the other side of the room. The hideous monster had found me out. When he saw me the devilish smile which crossed his features told me that he had recognized who I was, and he gibbered and glared at me like a maniac. He continued to work his hands convulsively. I remained spell-bound, and could not utter a word.

The burglar continued his hideous contortions for some minutes, when, imagine my horror, to see him slowly getting off the board on which he had been placed. Yes, I could see his leg emerge from the sheet. He endeavors to reach the floor—he succeeds. He slowly draws his body after him, and stands erect in the middle of the room. Good God! he approaches me with outstretched hands—he is walking towards me. I utter a cry of horror, and starting up from my bed move away. The burglar follows me, his eyes all the time fixed on me with a basilisk's glare. I endeavor to turn my eyes from him, it is in vain. He still approaches. I dart round the room—he follows me with a horrid laugh. He gains upon me. I can feel his hissing breath on my cheek. His hand is on my shoulder. I sink exhausted to the ground. The demon raises another mocking laugh and clasps my neck with his long bony hand. His grasp tightens—I am suffocating—I am dying! I can feel my eyes protruding from their sockets. I can no longer breathe.

At this critical moment I heard a crash followed by a blow, and the grasp was released from my neck. I looked round and saw my host with a thick club in his hand and Bristol Jem extended his full length on the floor.

To bind him securely was but the work of a few minutes. I then entered into a full explanation with the tavern keeper. The next morning Bristol Jem was on his way to New York, and in six weeks he was tried and sentenced to the State Prison for life.

Ballou's Dollar Monthly Magazine, August 1862