

[Written for the Flag of Our Union]

The Ambitious Policeman
by W. L. Merriam

SCENE—*Station House.* TIME—*Morning.*

“Well, Fag, what’s up?”

“Eh?”

“What’s up?”

“Don’t hit a fellow so hard on the back!”

“Or your back will be up, eh?”

“Don’t impose on Fag’s good nature. If he hasn’t made any important arrest since he has been on the roll, which is now nearly a year, I suppose, for one, it is because he is lying in wait for something big, and don’t trouble himself about small fry offenders, like the most of us.”

“Ha, ha!” laughed half a dozen policemen.

“O, Fag knows what he knows, if he does look a little sleepy. He don’t say much, but he thinks the more.”

“Catch a weasel asleep,” chimed in another.

“Still sow sucks all the milk.”

“Fag is deep—deep as a well.” He thinks so much that he can’t see a fight, or a thief, or a drunken fellow.”

“They don’t dare come in his way.”

“That ain’t it, neither. He is too humane to make an arrest, without awful provocation.”

“Wouldn’t arrest an incendiary, unless he burnt a church.”

“Ought to belong to some benevolent society.”

“Keeps his uniform clean. But he’s in love. Who is she, Fag?”

“O, don’t bother,” replied Fag, blushing.

“Don’t interrupt his schemes. He’s plotting something—something grand—you may depend. I’d like to be let into the secret, Fag; help you, and go halves in the glory.”

Fag, posed, muttered something about “many a true word spoken in jest;” and all his brother stars laughed heartily at him again, before dispersing to their several beats.

“Good, Fag, good. You’ll come out bright yet. You’ll come out right side up with care.”

“Let me put a flea in your ear,” whispered one, audibly. “There’s an old woman in River Street who sells three apples for a cent. Must have stolen ‘em. Keep an eye on her. Good morning. Come home safe.”

And the patrol departed in high glee, like the hearty, good-humored body of man-snatchers that they were. Fag called one of them back.

“Posh,” said he, with a rueful face, “you’re a man of serious mind—some sense.”

“Thank you; Fag.”

“I want some advice.”

“Welcome to all I can give.”

“How many years have you been on the police?”

“Five, next January.”

“You’re a man of experience in the business, and can afford to give me a hint or two.”

“Any scheme you’ve got in mind I shall be happy to forward.”

“I knew you would!” exclaimed Fag, grasping his hand hopefully; “but,” he added, with an ashamed look—“I ha’n’t got any. Can’t you give me an idea?”

“O, you want an idea, do you?”

“You see how they all laugh at me.”

“And you wish to be put on the track, to distinguish yourself, and stop the fun?”

“That’s it, precisely. I am ambitious, even if I haven’t been lucky. What shall I do?”

Posh was a broken reed for Fag to lean upon. Posh was a sober-sided man. But he was a dry wag. His fun never moistened his eye. He laughed without a smile, whatever was the joke.

“Of course,” said he, “Fag, you know all about when to make ordinary arrests, whether you make them or not. You want, as I understand it, hints regarding extraordinary ones, which require unusual ingenuity to ferret out, and pursue with success, to get your name up.”

“That’s just it.”

“Lend me your John Anderson.”

Fag handed him a paper of tobacco, and Posh helped himself, and forgot to return it—he was so deep in thought.

“You might distinguish yourself in the projected sign and lumbered up sidewalk business, if you followed it up without fear or favor; but—”

“That don’t require any *genius*.”

“That’s true—only pluck. You might—let me see—you might devote your attention to cruelty to animals—watch unlawful amounts of load—unmerciful whippings—small feed and poor shelter—and get half a dozen drivers on a string at once; and then give the items, for smart paragraphs, to the reporters, on the day when the men were hauled up; and you could easily persuade the papers to say—in view of the humane movement—‘It was reserved for that faithful officer, Policeman Fag, to hunt up and bring to punishment these inhuman creatures, as a warning example to all similar offenders, etc.’ and why not try that?”

“That would be good. Tell me something else. O, you tell me what to do, and I’m bound to put it through! Leave me alone for that.”

“An idea I’ve had for a long time you might use. Get jolly among the loafers, and tell them you’re one of ‘em. You might trap a good thing that way, after you got into their confidence. Or take a pawnbroker in tow, and by threats, or getting into his good graces, get a clue to some rogue’s doings who hasn’t been on the square with him. That, I think, would be an enormous idea.”

“I think it would! Tell me something more.”

“If you want to do a little in the youthful panic line—easy—just watch the junk-shops, and arrest two or three score of boys and girls on suspicion of stealing what they sell there. It would make a howling rumpus at any rate; and whether they were convicted or let off, people would make a great inquiry who *you* were; and you’d get the name of being vigilant.”

“That’s good. Tell me something more.”

“Offer your special secret protection to some low, vagabond kind of grog-shop keeper, in exchange for useful information about any rogues who visit his place. If you ain’t afraid of a broken head, you might do nobly in that line. Tell him you’re above simple drunks, and are determined to strike high, and will befriend him in any extremity.”

“And that’s a happy thought. Much obliged, Posh. Don’t say anything about what you’ve told me. In two or three days, you’ll see that Fag—your obliged and grateful friend, Fag—has made his mark, somewhere.”

And the two stars parted, to shoot along their appointed courses.

“He had better leave well alone,” muttered Posh, looking after Fag. “Ambition should be made of sterner stuff, as Shakespeare says. He’ll get enough of it. I’ll send Joe Bellwing to him, in disguise.”

“Might be made chief in a few years!” thought Fag, as he sauntered his rounds. “I’ll keep my eyes and ears open and improve on Posh.”

In the evening, as he was passing under a market awning, the shadow of which darkened the faces of all pedestrians crowding along beneath it, Fag was accosted by a seedy-looking stranger, with heavy moustache and whiskers, and green spectacles.

The man paused in front of him.

“Mr. Fag, can I have a few words with you?”

“Certainly, sir.”

The man drew him aside to a closed “coffee and cake” stand.

“What I say must be in confidence. I can disclose to you many valuable secrets.”

“If you tell me of any offender, I shall feel it my duty to make an arrest,” said Fag, with dignity.

“It might not be for your interest to do so at once,” said the stranger. “If I choose, I can keep my secrets to myself, or for some other officer, who is not more nice than wise.”

“Tell me first, then I’ll see.”

“Only one condition. Promise that whatever I tell you, you will never arrest me, if you can possibly avoid it. Otherwise, I shall leave you no wiser than you are now.”

Fag hesitated, but finally agreed.

“You must know, then, that I have been in this country only about six months; I am a London cracksman; but I am well posed in this city, nevertheless. I want to put you on the track of a chap who has done me an injury. If you work your card right, you are sure to make capital out of the affair. Do you know the Ship and Sandwich?”

“Three squares from here, down cellar? Yes.”

“Kept by Jack Blufftop?”

“I know it well.”

“Change your dress, so that nobody will know you, and go and stay there; drinking occasionally, to avoid suspicion. If you see a man with a red nose, a *very* red nose, mark him! He will be sure to be there before you have been there long, and I say, mark him! Let the red nose be your guide; for it will be a beacon-light to lead you to distinction.”

“Suppose I do watch him, what shall I do then?” inquired Fag, dubiously.

“Watch all his movements. Watch the most trifling. Trifles are of the utmost importance sometimes. Take a notebook with you, and when nobody sees you, mark him down! Write what he says, who he says it to, who he talks longest with, who most familiar with, what he drinks, how often, and what effect it has on him.”

“That’s easy enough. But what then?”

“Don’t lose sight of him, at any sacrifice. Watch when he goes, and where he goes, and which way. Follow him up. Inquire about him, cautiously. Write down what people say of him; but don’t be put off the scent by it, nor place too much dependence upon it. I shall see you afterwards—at your station-house, if you say so, and shall be able to put this and that together, and turn it into powerful evidences against him.”

“Who is the man with the red nose?”

“I can only say, now, that he is an escaped Australian convict. I shall tell you more hereafter. He has been guilty of great crimes in this country. With the evidence you collect you will be able to make a great stir, with, no doubt, proof enough to hang him, and imprison others for years. Do your best to make the chain of evidence perfect. Be patient, persevering. Don’t leave him till you find where he lives, and inquire much about him in that neighborhood. But be cautious as you can. I will meet you tomorrow morning. Good-night!” and the stranger abruptly vanished.

“I’ll go and see Posh!” said Fag to himself, at once; and as himself did not object, he did see Posh, straightway; and Posh said the information was a godsend.

“Follow your luck,” said Posh. “Rely upon it, I shan’t interfere to deprive you of the credit you will get. I partly suspect *who* the red-nosed chap is, but I won’t say anything now. Go at once, and be sharp.”

Fag doubly assured, did so—first encasing himself in a rusty suit, and darkening his face.

He descended into the Ship and Sandwich and was delighted to find as he walked up to the bar with a shuffling gait, after the manner of an inveterate dock-loafer, and called for gin and sugar—that even Old Blufftop did not know him. Swallowing the nauseous dram, he sat down to watch for the coming of the red nose.

Many forlorn looking, desperate, ragged, bloated, pale-faced and other wretches came and went; but a difficulty, unforeseen, arose.

There were several with red noses!

Some were pale when they came, and red when they went. Some were adorned more or less with carbuncles. Some had unmistakably St. Anthony's fire. Some were only pink compared with cadaverous cheeks; while others deepened, shade on shade, into genuine rum-red. Of course Fag was puzzled. He took notes of several of the reds; but crossed them out, as more luminous noses made their appearance; but at last he settled upon a regular sockdologer of a red nose, red as fire; one which seemed to warm the air when it entered.

"I'll stick to this nose, at any rate," reflected he. "A man with a nose like that must be no common villain."

The owner was a rough, dark-browed, shabby-looking codger, and took no less than half a dozen drinks during the half hour he stayed—talking loud and swearing, like an obstreperous blackleg. Blufftop called him "Redbeak," several times, which made him swear all the more.

"Must be his name," thought Fag, putting down all he saw and heard; "and he is afraid to have it known. This is *the* red nose, and no mistake. I'll stick to him like a brother."

Redbeak, after brief chats with several of the votaries of poisoned fire, went out; Fag followed.

"*He* may go out, but his nose never can; unless he is hung. I wonder that he don't whitewash it, to escape detection, the daring monster!"

Having travelled a tortuous route through the streets, stopping at diverse and sundry suspicious looking liquor holes, for fuel for his nose, Redbeak began to stagger.

"Hope the monster won't drop drunk before he gets home," feared Fag. "Miserable fiend. Drinks to drown remorse, I suppose. Hanging will be the best cure."

Bold Redbeak reeled on for more than two hours, east, west, north, south, Fag following, fagged out.

At last the burning guide entered a saloon far in the upper part of the city, drank a pint of "Henglish hale," and went to sleep on a settee. Much to Fag's dismay—as he watched him from a neighboring stool, smoking a cigar to pass away the time. It was evident that the bar-keeper did not know Redbeak, for he asked Fag to "watch *that stranger's* nose, to see that it didn't set the house a fire," while he stepped out a minute. While the bar-keeper was out, Fag noticed a handkerchief sticking out of Redbeak's pocket.

"Now or never! Must be bold!" muttered Fag, hastily removing the article to his pocket. "It may be evidence. May have his name on it."

“Come, old hoss,” half an hour afterwards cared the bar-keeper, rousing the red nose roughly to his legs; “can’t sleep here. Past midnight. Must go home.”

To Fag’s delight—he was impatient of waiting—Redbeak, with a steadier step, went silently out into the dark, and Fag followed again.

“Must be near home by this time,” thought Fag. “If it’s a lodging house, I’ll stop all night myself.”

It proved to be—one of the most dirty, ill-kept, dilapidated kind. Redbeak entered the horrid, pipe-smoked, tobacco-juiced saloon underneath, and Fag followed, where he now saw four or five hairy miscreants, playing cards, in the most savage manner. Fag shuddered.

“Robbers and murderers!” thought he. “But they won’t attempt to rob me, I’m so ragged-looking.” He sat down and watched.

“I’ll take a hand in that game,” cried Redbeak, having taken another drink; and he did as he said, the game being for money. Other drinks ensued, and a dispute arose. Fag was called upon, to his great dismay, to be umpire, for he had watched the game. His decision was adverse to Redbeak. Redbeak tossed a glass of liquor in his face.

The game was up. So were all parties. The landlord, thinking a fight imminent, leaped over the counter to interfere, while the confused Fag put his hand into his pocket, and drew forth a handkerchief and wiped his face.

“He’s a thief! That’s *my* handkerchief, boys!” suddenly vociferated the red nose. “My name is on it. This chap,” and he snatched the article from the tremulous Fag—“he’s been following me about all night, all the way from —— market. I remember seeing him down at Blufftop’s. I thought he wasn’t worth minding, though I noticed how he eyed me. But it was eye and eye, for I eyed him. And now he comes here to dispute the game, after stealing my handkerchief. Here! Watch! Police! Policeman! Over here! Come here!”

Redbeak had gone to the door and summoned an officer, who came in quickly and nabbed Fag at once, after Redbeak’s accusation.

“Let me go. I’m a policeman myself. My name is Fag!” cried the alarmed detective.

“Fag you’re a wag, ha, ha!” responded the officer; “and you must wag along with me. You’re in for it. These gentlemen—”

“*Gentlemen!*” sneered Fag. “That man’s an escaped Australian convict, he’s a—”

“Ha, ha, ha, ha!” laughed the listeners. “Just as if we don’t know old Tom Lashpin, born and raised right among us here.”

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ambitiouspolice

“Come, come, Tag or Swag, start along with me,” growled the policeman; and away went the ambitious detective, woefully crest-fallen, to the nearest station-house.”

Nobody believed his story there, and nobody would go for his friend Posh, to explain matters, till morning; so that Fag had to come to cool his head, subdue his ambition, and make wise resolutions for the future, before daylight broke again.

In the morning, however, when Posh came and the whole story was told, Lashpin shook hands with Fag, and told him to beware of red noses in the future.

Fag “thought he should;” and went off with an elastic step, with Posh.

Posh insisted upon it that there must be some truth in the stranger informant’s story—he was no other than his brother wag, Joe Bellwing—but Fag shakes his head at all red noses ever since; and has concluded to remain safe and obscure.

Flag of Our Union, February 2, 1861