

The Express Messenger's Story

In the summer of 1863 I was serving as messenger on the British and American (now called Canadian) express. My route lay between Portland and South Paris, though my office was in Norway, a mile and a half distant from the latter station, between which two points I traveled with my own team. As three, and sometimes four lines of stage, connected with the Grand Trunk road at South Paris, through all of which our express did business, my route was an important and a responsible one. I ate my dinner and then went into the Portland office to get my freight and my orders for the country. After the porters had taken out the various articles consigned to my charge, Mr. Prindle, our agent, called me to his desk, and exhibited a package, directed to a party in "South Paris", containing three thousand dollars.

"Do you know that man?" he asked me, pointing to the superscription.

"Yes," said I.

"Do you know where he lives?"

"Yes."

"How far from your depot?"

"A mile and a half, I should think, on the old Rumford road."

"Well," he pursued, "I don't care to have this lay over at the depot, and you had better deliver it yourself."

I told him I would do so.

I may here remark that we had no regular office at South Paris. It was my custom to deliver such matter as was consigned to parties living in the village, within a radius of half a mile or so, while packages going beyond those limits, I usually left with the station master to be called for. And so, even at Norway, it was understood by our patrons that we did deliver express matter beyond the limits of the village corporation.

As I was leaving the office I observed one of the porters, assisted by a clerk, lifting a soldier into the wagon of the Kennebec express. Said soldier's right leg was swathed in thick bandages from the knee to the toes, and he hobbled upon crutches; his uniform was worn and soiled, and he appeared to be one who had seen hard service.

"Poor fellow!" said the clerk, as he met me upon the sidewalk. "He got two Minie balls through his leg wounded at Gettysburg. He started down from the International for the depot on his crutches, but he gave out here."

And at that time, when the great battle was yet a thing of the present, a hero of Gettysburg was an object of interest to me; and I felt almost like taking off my hat to the war worn and shattered veteran; but he had gained his seat and was driven away before I had an opportunity to salute him.

At the depot I saw my freight safely in the car, and after we had started I took a turn through the train. I found our Gettysburg hero in the forward car occupying a whole seat with the rim of his old slouched hat pulled down over his face, probably asleep. Poor fellow! He was weak and weary.

We arrived at South Paris at half past three P.M., where I found my team waiting for me—a common express wagon drawn by a horse which I considered rather superior to express horses in general. As the last package was placed in the wagon I observed the veteran of Gettysburg hobbling toward the platform. I had strapped up the tail board, and was on the way to my seat, when he addressed me.

“Say, my friend, which way are ye going?”

“Just around the village, to deliver freight,” I told him.

He looked disappointed.

“I was in hopes,” he said, “that I should find somebody going up the old Rumford road a piece. My leg is played out.”

I remembered the package I had to deliver on the same road, and I told him if he didn’t mind riding around through the village, I would take him as far as the old Jordan place. He said that it would be a great help to him. So, with the assistance of the station baggage master, I helped him to the seat. He was a large, heavy man, and as he seemed unable to help himself in climbing, the labor of hoisting him up was not a light one.

“I shall come down easier,” he said, laughing.

“All right,” I replied as I took my seat by his side.

I made quick work of delivering my stuff in the village, and when we had struck the old road beyond, I asked my companion his name. He said it was John Smith. Then I led him to tell me of his experience in the army, and more particularly at Gettysburg. He said he was a Maine boy, but was not in a Maine regiment. He was in Ohio when he enlisted and joined a regiment in that state.

I asked him which one.

He told me the Forty-eighth.

This staggered me; I proceeded with my questions and ere long had gained from him all he knew of Gettysburg, and more, too.

I don't like to be sold; but I had been sold now, certainly. The man by my side was a humbug. In the first place, I knew that the Forty-eighth Ohio was at Vicksburg with Grant, while Gettysburg was being fought.

And then I heard the whole story of Gettysburg from wounded officers who had come from the field and this man's story was not like the story they had told. I had made up my mind that the fellow was a "Sucker" or a "Sponge," when I was interrupted in my meditations by a sudden lurch of the wagon, one of the wheels having dropped into a slough-hole upon that side on which the war worn and shattered hero sat. I expected, when I had recovered my own balance, to see him pitched from his perch; but not so. I saw that bandaged leg, which first had been as useless as a dead man's leg, suddenly straightened out; the swathed foot was planted flatly and squarely upon the board, and with a full pressure upon the disguised limb he held himself and regained his equilibrium.

I pretended not to notice; but I had noticed and reflected. That right leg, so carefully nursed, was as stout, and as strong, and as free for use as my own. Had the fellow taken all this trouble of deception for the sole purpose of getting a ride? I could not believe it. Had he done it for the purpose of exciting sympathy that he might beg with better success? He did not look like a man prone to beg. Then why was this[?]

I had been in my present position of messenger nearly two years, and as I never went upon my route without more or less money entrusted to my care, I had learned to be suspicious. This man had been present when Prindle gave me the money package of three thousand dollars, and had probably overheard the agent's directions. He meant to rob me, or he had come with me for that purpose. I looked into his face, and now that I regarded him no more as a war-worn veteran and hero, I discovered him to be an ugly, repulsive looking person. And he was a powerful fellow, to boot – I should say, almost twice as heavy as myself. But I was not to remain long in doubt.

We had entered a secluded part of the road, with a deep wood upon my left hand, when my companion drew a revolver from his pocket and pointed the muzzle towards me.

"Give me that pocket book of yours!" he commanded. "Don't make no words! Give it up or die! Quick!"

My pocket book, besides the three thousand dollar package, contained full two thousand dollars belonging to parties in Norway. My instinct was born of office. I thought more of the property entrusted to my care than of myself. Just then I heard wagon wheels in the distance – something coming up behind us. Should I try and gain the next house? Just beyond was the brow of the hill and at the foot of the hill a farm house. I struck my horse with the whip, and as he leaped from under the blow, the ruffian caught the reins with one hand and grasped my throat with the other, the pistol falling upon the foot board as he did so. As soon as he had given my cravat a twist or two that stopped my breath, he let

go the reins and made a grasp for my pocket book, thinking, no doubt, to seize it, then leap from the wagon and make for the woods. And this he might have done but for an accident, for he was a perfect Hercules in comparison with me.

When my opponent let go the reins, I had sense enough to catch one of them – the near rein – and give it a smart pull, which movement brought the horse so suddenly to the left that the wagon over-turned and we spilt out into a muddy ditch – I upon the top of the robber. In the course of my struggles my cravat gave way and I was for a moment free; but the burly rascal caught me by the leg and had brought me to the earth when the team that had followed us drove up, and I recognized Sumner Burnham and his son – two of the best detective officers in the State.

My friend had not thought of the approaching wagon; but he saw it now, and when he observed it had stopped, he would have leaped away; but now it was my turn to try the leg game; I caught him by the ankle and tripped him up; and before he could regain his feet, Otho was upon him, and very shortly afterward old Sumner himself, with his two hundred and eighty pounds of compact, leviathan corporosity, laid his huge hand upon the villain's shoulder.

“Well, well, my boy,” said Burnham, when he looked into my hero's face, “I'm afraid I've interrupted another of your little games. What were you up to here?” As he spoke he snapped a pair of handcuffs upon my war worn veteran's wrists.

The latter gave one more look into the ruddy face of the Cyclopean officer, and then subsided.

I told my story in a very few words, after which Mr. Burnham informed me that my hero was a notorious rogue. He had never been to the war, but had enlisted four different times, and ‘jumped’ a big bounty each time. He had also robbed a settler at Augusta, and done various other wicked things. A telegram had been sent from Portland to Norway, informing Burnham the rascal was on the outward-bound train.

“The telegram did not reach me,” said Mr. Burnham, “until after the train had left South Paris. I telegraphed to Bryant's Pond and to Bethel, and I was thinking to wait for the next freight train, when Dunham, the baggage master, told me of the man who had ridden off with you. When he had described him I knew you had my man; so I had only to find your track in order to be sure of his.

I will only add that my wagon was not seriously damaged, and while the officers turned back with the bounty-jumping [settler]-robbing hero, I drove on, and delivered the money package safely to its owner; and furthermore, that from that day to this I have made it a rule never to allow a stranger a seat by my side upon my express wagon.

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