

A Detective's Story

“HARD case up this way,” said the telegram sent in my direction by Harney. A break-out of convicts.—Warden Bates killed. Deputy Warden Locke dangerously wounded. Two prisoners escaped. Get up here on the 1.30 train for further details.”

Flung on my coat, got under my cap, swung on at the rear car just as the train was moving, and got into Knox county in due time.

Found things even worse than represented by the lightning. These were the particulars:

As Warden Bates made his usual rounds to ascertain if all was right in the prison cells, he was unexpectedly set upon by a desperado, who from some outside source had been helped to a knife, and was stabbed in several places, the keys torn from his grasp, and other convicts were speedily released.

An unusual sound in the rear of the jail buildings had alarmed Deputy Warden Locke, who rushed to the scene, as he went arousing other jail officers. They were met by a half dozen of the liberated wretches, and a fierce fight still raged fiercely.

At this juncture a young fellow, lodging in a house near the jail yard, hearing the unusual outcry, sprang out of bed, and plunging into his pants, in his shirt sleeves and bareheaded, seized the first thing that came to hand, which was a heavy oaken club, and with a short run and a marvelous leap that would have done credit to a gutta percha acrobat, seized the top of the fence inclosing the jail yard and flung himself down inside where the fight was raging hotly. But it were better to use his own words:

“I mowed around me briskly, helping to lay down quite a windrow of them, and gradually made my way to the gate. At that moment a thin, slight fellow charged upon me, intending as I thought to attack me with a vengeance. I braced myself for the shock, when with a light, elliptical spring he vaulted quite over me, and caught by the spikes upon the top of the gate. I was fearful that I had lost him, for he drew his rubber legs immediately beyond clutching distance of my hand; but swinging my club over my head, I calculated upon giving the fellow a compound fracture; instead I only smote against his stockinged foot, and a splinter of my battered club caught in that useful article, jerking it off the fellow's foot.

“He got off, however. It was just about here that I stood—and—faith! here's the stocking now.”

I stooped and picked it up from the little hollow where Tom Saunders had tossed it from his club the night before. There were marks of blood upon it. I turned it inside out, and, sticking to the fibre of wool was the entire great toe nail.

“Jove!” ejaculated Tom, turning away with a shiver, “how do you like my style of paring toe nails? A clean slice off. Thunder! how it smarts about this time if the fellow has stopped long enough to find out that he has left horn enough behind him to make a hair comb.”

Probably the fellow belonged to a gang outside, who would aid him to avoid discovery.

“Photograph him!” said I to Saunders.

“Slender, medium height, young, and light complexioned,”

“Manner? What’s his usual appearance?”

“Sullen as a thunder cloud. Lowering brow; seldom speaks.”

The jail officers agree in their descriptions with Tom.

“You get down by stage or some way to Bayton. In every other direction a stream of fire is ahead of him. To Baytown no especial thunderbolts penetrate. He may cross by water there, strike the stage route, and reach Bath. Then he might get out of our reach and bother us.”

I took the 6.30 train down toward Bretford, and it was a matter of doubt whether I should be able to connect with the stage there, as it would be ten o’clock by the time I arrived in that place.

It was late in the fall and chilly. The elections were just over, and there was considerable exciting talk in the car.

I got my attention fixed upon one loquacious fellow, plethoric and excited, who kept [everyone] within hearing in a roar of laughter. I rather regretted being across the aisle, for I lost the pith of the jokes entirely. He spared neither party, and his humorous contrasts or parallels pleased in spite of themselves the opponents who could at least appreciate wit from any source.

I was pleased, on leaving the train at Bretford, to find that the old fellow also got off, and still more pleased to find him heading, wheezy and aldermanic, towards the one hotel.

“Really, gentlemen,” said mine host, in fat, sweetened tones, “ I hardly know what to do. There’s a horse race here [tomorrow], a sort of wind-up to the fair, and I’m just chuck full. Howsoever, if you don’t mind sharing the same room and ten chances to one the same bed, why, walk in, walk in, gentlemen.”

“Land alive! I can’t be put out in no way,” says my companion, flashing his heavy gray eyebrows loosely about.—

“You remember me, Nash, of course, Dyer, always at the races always—bet and invariably lose.”

“Dyer! yes, seems to me I remember you,” says Boniface.

“No doubt, no doubt, come one year to lose, the next to win—never win, but still continue to come to punish myself.”

After partaking of a hearty supper, the landlord informed us that a fire had been kindled in our room, but, of course I expected the social chap would spend an hour or more in the bar-room; on the contrary, he declared he must get to bed, so as to be clear-headed on the morrow, and thus be able to use judgment on horse-flesh.

We sat some time before the cheerful fire in our room, telling over some comical or other incidents, and smoking our cigars; but directly my feet feeling uncomfortable in a pair of new, rather tight boots I drew them off and placed my feet on the fender. My companion prepared to do the same. One boot was removed, and he began on the other, but soon desisted with a violent contortion of the facial muscles.

“Corns?” queried I.

“Bunions—real John Bunyans at that.”

By and by, with a huge gasp, and a careful twisting, the useful article was removed.

The last uncovered foot, however, was not advanced readily to the fire, and I really sympathized with the cork screw pain that I calculated he felt.

After stooping forward to knock the ashes from my cigar, I was seized with an idea so sudden and extraordinary that I wonder I did not cry out something and betray myself.

What had I seen that led to this extraordinary idea? Only a huge bunched up place in the stocking of my companion just where the great toe would naturally be located.

I felt that the surface of my body was undergoing that curious transformation known as “goose flesh,” although I at the time mentally portrayed myself as a fool. It was a fine time of day if an honest man couldn’t have a sore toe if it pleased him without giving a neighbor ague fits. The idea was very disagreeable, and although I talked on briskly and shook myself, the thought, like a leech, still stuck to my brain.

How could I be so absurd as to cling to this idea? How reconcile the anatomy of this man before me with my pocket memorandum?

“Slender, medium height and young, sullen and lowering brow.” Antipodes!

Just then my companion tipped forward to knock aside the ashes. His coat collar stood back uncompromisingly, showing a slender neck draped in front with a small cataract fall of grey whiskers. Looking still closer, I found as he just then laughed uproariously at something which I had said, that there was no rising, falling, or wrinkling of vest or coat. The man who laughed was but the core of the plethoric form before me.

What then?

Evidently the bulk was made of stuffing.

If a legion of ants had been crawling over me just then it would not have produced a more disagreeable sensation. Here I was, closeted with a ruffian of the most ferocious dye, whose hands were even now stained with a fellow creature's blood, and the least sign to betray that I suspected his identity would be my death warrant. Yet I must have him, and I must also have help to secure him.

Directly I fumed out about the cigars, and wondered if the landlord had no better ones—said I'd find out before he had gone to bed.

I went whistling out, not unmindful that a sharp pain from a stiletto might be the result.

As I ran down stairs I tore a leaf from my pocket memorandum, and I scratched upon it these words:

BRETFORD, 11 o'clock. — "Harney—Quick! get down on the midnight express. Come prepared to do up a sore toe.
CARNES."

"Here! landlord," I exclaimed, "get that telegraphed to A— in two minutes—quick—caution—and you shall have a suitable reward."

With this I snatched a handful of cigars and went whistling back to my room, while a score of thoughts more vivid than pleasant ran through my mind.

I found him still seated unsuspectingly before the fire—offered him a cigar, and again resumed my smoking.

The cautious reader may wonder that I did not either remain at a safe distance below stairs, or give the alarm and secure him immediately. Neither plan appeared feasible to me. In the first place it was my business to catch just such fellows as this one before me; in the next place an alarm given among a crowd of persons, undisciplined, not knowing how to act, invariably results in defeat. No, I must wait developments just then. The night express would be in at 1 o'clock, and Harney would come prepared for the emergency; and it was only 11 now. How would the next two hours pass? and what might not occur?

At half past 11 my companion proposed retiring—and as it providentially happened that the room held the two beds, I could not object.

"I never take off my clothes," he remarked, "on such times as this—and then if there is fire one is prepared."

I pronounced the advice excellent, and believed that I should adopt it, and to further win his confidence I suggested that we should place our watches and purses under our pillows. He made a show of doing this, and we flung ourselves upon our couches.

In a short time he began to snore, and not doubting but this might be a feint, I also began breathing even and heavily.

At twelve o'clock some slight noise occurred outside. There was a rustle and a creak in the other bed.

"What's that?" he questioned, and I noticed that his voice was hardly the same as I had listened to an hour before.

"Ur!" I sleepily muttered.

He listened intently for a moment, and then fell back and began snoring again. I had no doubt he had planned to rob, perhaps murder me, and get off before the house was astir.

A quarter to one o'clock the train came blowing into the heart of the place. A hot flush passed over me. Was Harney there? and what would follow the attempt to secure this desperado?

At 1 o'clock precisely there was a creak upon the stairs. The landlord was vigilant and understood his business. At the sound, the heavy breathing in the other bed ceased. Then came another long, tremulous creak of the stairs; evidently some heavy person was trying to cautiously ascend them. As the second unmistakable sound came into the room a prescient feeling drew my muscles into a ball, and I dropped between my bed and the wall. None too soon, for in a minute after I had left my bed a dull thud told me that a knife had been aimed at my vitals. He had taken in my actions at a glance.

The door was flung open. I rolled like a ball under the bed, caught the rascal by the ankles, and gave him a jerk that floored him, allowing Harney and Officer Copps to master him before receiving any dangerous wounds.

The landlord being near with a light, we soon had off the wig and beard and [eyebrows], the wrinkles being penciled on to perfection. The stuffing being taken care of, there lay before me the exact memorandum—

"Slender, of medium height, sullen and scowling."

Harney brought word that the other convict, who was thought to have escaped, had been so severely wounded in the affray that he had fallen into a ditch in the rear of the jail, and, being unable to extricate himself, had drowned.

So we got the sore toe and the corporeal system attached to it nicely bound up for a long term in the penitentiary.

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