

Written for *The Flag of our Union*

## *An Amateur Detective*

BY JAMES D. M'CAHANE

The little town of B— was the last place in the world where one would have expected to find a thief. Since the settlement of the colony, it had been famous for its piety and good works, and like the village in the old German legend, it seemed to be proof against the wiles and attacks of the devil. The townspeople prided themselves on this; they boasted that their place was the one bright spot in all the Union, and anyone who could have had the audacity to doubt this for a moment would have been pronounced worse than a heathen. It was the standing boast of the place that as far as crime was concerned, courts of justice were useless in B—. A robbery would have created an excitement in the place equal only to one of those panics which were so common in Wall Street during the trying times of the late civil war; and a murder within the limits of this happy community would have been taken by common consent as the forerunner of the end of all creation. Crime and violence had been unknown in B— for so long that the people were not so unreasonable in their feelings and opinions as they might seem to be at the first glance. Deacon L— had lived in the town, as boy and man, for fifty years, and since his majority, had been a magistrate, and he frequently declared that had he been dependent on this office alone for his support, he would surely have starved. This feeling of security which I have mentioned strengthened day by day, and year by year, until the good people of the town, without really meaning to be self-righteous, came to regard themselves as the salt of the earth.

Imagine, then, the feeling of consternation which spread through the town one fine spring morning, when it was announced that after so many years of exemption from sin, the devil had at last invaded the community. In plain English, it was told, one morning, that during the previous night the house of Deacon L— had been entered, and robbed of two thousand dollars in bank notes. The deacon had just sold some property in the county, and this was the purchase money. He had brought it home with him, intending to keep it over night, and deposit it in the bank the next morning. He had not the remotest idea that there was danger in such a proceeding, for, as I have said, no one in B— would have dreamed of a robbery. As for Deacon L—, he often boasted that he would be willing to sleep all night with his house door wide open, so great was his confidence in the integrity of the people of B—. Now, however, the confidence of the good people was suddenly destroyed. A robbery had been committed in the town, and its proportions were, in the eyes the natives, enormous. Two thousand dollars in good money had actually been stolen from the house of the leading man in the town. The dream of security was rudely shattered, and, after all, B— was no better than any other place.

As soon as the news became known, everybody flocked to the Deacon's residence. A large crowd — that is, large for so small a town — especially assembled before the house, gazing at it with wonder and horror. It was a strange sight in the town — a house in which a robbery had been committed — and many persons were disposed to regard it as an accursed place. At last, someone mustered up courage to rap at the door and ask for Deacon L—. The good man came forth in a half-bewildered, half-excited state. He seemed to fear that some of his fellow townsmen would hold him individually responsible for his loss — that is, that they would regard

it as a visitation upon him for some secret sin; and this he dreaded, because he had honestly striven to establish a reputation for piety in the community. Some persons were disposed to quote against him the text that his sin had found him out, and this feeling grew stronger as the day wore on.

In answer to the questions of his neighbors, the deacon stated that on the previous day he had sold a house and lot, and had brought home the money—two thousand dollars—with him. He had put it in his desk, intending to take it to the bank the next morning. He had gone to bed feeling perfectly sure that he would find his money safe the next morning; but when he woke, he discovered to his surprise and dismay, that his money was gone. He had searched the house over, but it could not be found. There was no sign of robbery anywhere, save the disappearance of the money. The doors of the house were all locked, as they had been on the night before, when the family retired to rest. The deacon's chamber door was still locked on the inside, and the key, which was always removed from the lock at night, was found hanging in its usual place, the next morning. Nothing in the house was disturbed, but the money was gone. Unless the money had disappeared through the agency of the Evil One, the house had certainly been entered; but how, or by whom, no one could say. The whole affair was wrapped in a profound mystery.

As may be imagined, the excitement in the town was prodigious. Nobody knew exactly what to think or say about the strange affair, and the mystery in which it was shrouded set all their conjectures at defiance. As is usual in such circumstances, they satisfied themselves by agreeing that a matter which no one could understand could not possibly be altogether creditable to the deacon. This was the state of public opinion in B—that night when people went to bed. Old Amos Sharp, the principal grocer of the town, was especially severe on his afflicted brother, and his last words that night, addressed to his wife before he dropped off to sleep, were:

“Depend on it, my dear, *I* should feel very uncomfortable in this community, to be concerned in such a strange affair as this.”

Next morning, the old man's words were verified. He did feel “very uncomfortable,” for upon rising, he discovered that his watch and purse, and his family service of silver, valued, in all, at about one thousand dollars, had disappeared during the night as mysteriously as Deacon L—'s money had gone. The old man literally staggered with amazement, when he discovered his loss; and by breakfast time it was thoroughly known all over town, and the scene of the previous day was repeated, at the grocery store of Amos Sharp. This robbery was more audacious than the other, for this time the purse had been taken from under the pillow of the victim. Still, there was nothing about the house, or any of its doors and windows, to indicate that it had been entered from the outside; and yet, that such had been the case, no one could reasonably doubt.

During the day, the people talked of nothing else. That night, a third robbery was committed in the town, attended with all the mystery of the other two. A perfect panic set in. A sort of desperation seemed to seize upon the townspeople. They seemed incapable of doing anything; and when that night a fourth robbery was added to the list, they became absolutely ludicrous in their terror. A public meeting was called, at which it was resolved to patrol the town nightly, with a strong guard, and to take every possible precaution to ascertain the cause of these unhappy events, and put a stop to them. The watch was set regularly at night, and, according to their own

statements, the patrolmen conducted their operations with the utmost vigilance. But for three more nights the robberies went on, as mysteriously but as surely as before. In this extremity, the pastor of the two churches which the town boasted, proposed that, as the matter seemed to be a special visitation, a solemn service and fast should be held in each church. The idea was eagerly caught up; but, though much confidence was expressed in this remedy before its trial, the result proved that it was not suited to the necessities of the case, for on that very night, the communion plate of the principal church, which was always kept in the sacred building, mysteriously disappeared.

Some of the townspeople were now for letting the matter take its course, and making no effort to deal with it; but others, aroused by the serious nature of the affair, proposed to send for a detective from New York, and let him try to unravel the mystery. The proposal met with but little favor, at first; for in this community a detective was generally looked upon as but little, if any, better than a thief. This opinion, though unjust in many respects, was strongly grounded, and it was no slight matter to attempt to do away with it. Some persons thought the presence of a detective, and especially a New York detective, would only make matters worse. But the bolder portion of the community persisted, and, having at last gained over the two clergymen and the town physician, carried their point. It was decided to send at once for a detective, and to pay the expenses of prosecuting the search for the thief, if a thief in human form it was, out of the town treasury.

The detective came down in good time—a man picked from all the force in the great city, for his professional skill. The case, he said, was very difficult and perplexing, but he thought he could manage it. The point settled, the people of B— breathed more freely.

The town was provided with two churches. These buildings were handsome structures, were well supported, and were the pride of B—. One was a new edifice, only some six years old, but the other dated its existence back to the days of the colony, and was the wealthier and better attended of the two. It was built in the quaint old style of the infancy of our country, and lay back amidst the white stones and thick foliage of a large and well-filled churchyard. Its tall spire towered high above all the houses in B—, and was the first object which the traveler beheld upon approaching the town from any direction. Its bell, pealing out sweetly from the white steeple, had summoned the people to church for more than four generations, and had rung for marriages and tolled for funerals of all who had ever wedded or died in B—. The place had an air of sacred repose which was the admiration of everyone who beheld it. No one would have believed in anything sinful being connected with this venerable building. Such a thought would have seemed impious; for if ever any earthly place had the appearance of heaven, that place was the old church of which I am writing.

Just opposite this church, and about an eighth of a mile distant from it, was the residence of the pastor, a pretty white cottage. Among the family of this worthy divine, was his youngest son, a lad of fourteen years. He was small in size, but was stoutly and compactly built, and was in strength a very Hercules. Unlike the rest of the good people of B—, he had from the first doubted the mysterious character of the robberies in the town, and had attributed them to the agency of some expert thief from some other community, rather than to the direct instrumentality of the devil. This young gentleman's ideas of crime had not been derived from his native town; for

among his other accomplishments was a decided familiarity with a certain species of literature commonly known as “yellow covers,” and devoted to the exploits and achievements of such heroes as Tom King, Claude Duval, and Dick Turpin, and others of more modern fame. Being well acquainted with the thieving community through these mediums, young Harper recognized at once the robberies as the work of some most accomplished burglar. As he kept his familiarity with the works I have mentioned a secret from his parents, he was unable to give any reason for his assertion that there was nothing superhuman in the affair, and was commanded by his father to hold his tongue in the future. Anxious to distinguish himself, and burning to excel the famous thief-takers of whom he had read, young Harper quietly formed the daring resolution of attempting to discover the thief who was committing so many depredations in B—, and to bring him to justice. His determination was strengthened when the authorities of the town offered a reward of eight hundred dollars for the apprehension of the burglar. He said nothing to anyone of his intention, but kept his own counsel. He studied closely every new development of the affair, and kept a far more vigilant watch over the town than was maintained by the patrol. During the night he scarcely slept at all, but, stationing himself at his little window, watched up and down the street, with an anxiety that would have made an observer smile. The boy had put his whole soul into the task he had imposed upon himself, and, though he had no reason to expect it, he was determined that success should crown his efforts. The presence of the detective in the town, so far from discouraging him, only stimulated him to greater determination. His very ignorance of the gravity of such an undertaking as that which he had imposed upon himself gave him confidence.

For some reason which he could not explain, he had taken up an idea that the old church was in some way connected with the robberies. It was a singular idea, and this he admitted to himself; but once impressed with it, he could not abandon it. Being so young, he was compelled to conduct his operations in the day, the paternal discipline being too rigid to permit him to take advantage of the hours of darkness.

One night, as he sat at his window, looking at the old church, he was startled by a sight which was, to say the least, unusual. High up in the air a small light was shining. At first, the boy thought it was a star, but a glance at the heavens convinced him that he was mistaken, for the sky was covered with clouds of inky blackness, which every moment threatened rain. Leaning far out of his window, the boy gazed intently at the strange light, and by degrees made the surprising discovery that it was no star, but a gleam of artificial light, and that it came from the steeple of the old church. For a moment he thought that perhaps the sexton had gone up into the bell tower to fix the bell, which might perhaps be out of order; but a closer examination satisfied him that the light was some twenty feet above the bell, and he at once concluded that it came from an unused apartment in the upper part of the steeple. He remembered to have seen this apartment, and to have descended from it with a feeling of disgust, it was so dark, and so full of dirt and insects. His quick brain at once mastered the mystery of the light. The steeple, and especially the part of it referred to, being rarely used, was, as a matter of course, safe from observation. The thief, whoever he was, had chosen this place for his concealment, and from it he conducted his operations. This was the cause of the light in the steeple, which was no doubt betrayed by a crevice in the woodwork. The whole thing was very clear to the boy’s mind, and he was confident that he had really found the key to the great mystery. It was necessary, however, to prove this, and the only manner in which he could do so was by going at once to the church, and

examining the matter for himself. Such an undertaking required great courage, but in this quality the boy was not deficient. It was not late, and many of the townspeople had not yet sought their beds, and he might have easily summoned help; but being anxious to win the whole credit of the attempt, if his suspicions should prove correct, he determined to go alone. By saving his pocket money, he had managed to provide himself with that object of most boys' ambition, a pistol, and this he now loaded carefully; then securing the key of the church tower, he left the house stealthily, and set out on his dangerous errand.

He reached the churchyard in safety, and passing through it, quickly approached the door of the bell tower. It yielded to his touch, being already unlocked. It was in total darkness, but, being familiar with every foot of it, the lad mounted the heavy ladder slowly and noiselessly, and in a few minutes stood on the platform by the bell. He had removed his shoes at the base of the tower, and as he stepped across the loose flooring, made no noise which might betray his presence. Glancing up overhead, he could see a bright light shining through the crevices in the floor of the loft above. A long ladder communicated with this apartment, which was entered through a hole in the flooring, and through this hole the light was now streaming. There was no sound in all the tower, and the boy could not tell whether the thief was in his hiding-place or not. For a moment he thought of going back again and summoning help, for, for the first time, the full danger of his attempt flashed upon him; but he thought that once having engaged in the undertaking, his best chance for safety lay in going through with it. Therefore, summoning up all his resolution, he prepared to ascend the ladder. Cocking his pistol, he placed it between his teeth, and clutching the ladder firmly with both hands, he commenced to ascend it. He moved along slowly, but the time seemed to him to pass quickly. No sound had yet betrayed his presence in the tower, and in a few minutes he reached the opening in the flooring of the loft above. One step more, and he had passed half his body through it. As he did so he jarred the planking, and this sound caused the occupant of the loft, who had been sitting with his back to the opening, packing a valise, to spring to his feet. He was a large, powerful man, and as he saw the boy standing in the opening of the floor, he uttered an angry oath, and sprang towards him. As he did so, however, the lad, who had detected the movement, raised his pistol and fired, and the man fell to the floor, wounded and helpless. The boy now sprang into the loft, and securing the valise, rapidly descended the tower, and sought assistance. His story was scarcely credited, at first; but when he produced the valise and exhibited its contents, which were nothing more or less than many of the articles which had been stolen during the past fortnight, aid was promptly offered.

The thief, who had been rendered helpless by the wound given him by the boy, was secured, and removed from the tower. The detective, as soon as he saw him, recognized him as one of the most skillful burglars in the country, for whose capture heavy rewards had been offered by various cities, but who, until now, had always managed to elude the police. Young Harper was a hero in the eyes of the villagers. The rewards offered for the capture of the burglar were paid him; the greater part of the stolen property was found in the church tower and restored to its owners, and the great mystery was at last solved, to the satisfaction of everybody in B—.

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