

Leaf The Twenty-Seventh
A Terrible Night In Baltimore

A YEAR or two ago I was dining with an old friend of mine, Jonathan Gunby. After dinner, when the wine was on the table, he asked me to relate him some of my experiences as a detective officer. Willing to do anything in my power to amuse I told him of my adventure in Dieppe, which I have already given to the reader.

“A very good story that, Brampton,” said Gunby when I had finished, “but I know something better which occurred to me.”

“Indeed, pray let me hear it,” I replied.

He thereupon related the incident which follows, and which at my request he afterwards wrote out for me, and which I now give to the reader *vebatim et literatim*.

I am no politician. I am a provision dealer—a wholesale provision dealer, doing business in New York City. Having commenced my veritable history with the above assertion, it is necessary that I should inform the reader how it was that I was a member of the New York delegation to the Democratic Convention held in the city of Baltimore last year.

One evening in the latter part of May, I was seated with my wife in our pretty house in Eighth Street, enjoying a fragrant cup of tea, for if there is one thing that I’m a good judge of it is tea. My wife had been shopping, and while I was sipping my Hyson flavored with Orange Pekoe, she was showing me her purchases. She was expatiating on a “love of a bonnet,” when we were both startled by a violent ring at the bell; and in a minute or two afterwards a servant entered, informing me that Mr. Lawrence Ardew wished to see me immediately. As Ardew was a particular friend of mine, I immediately ordered him to be admitted.

“Gunby,” said Ardew, as soon as he had paid his respects to my wife (I should have told you before that my name is Jonathan Gunby), “Gunby, I want you to do me a great favor.”

“What is it, my dear fellow?” I replied. I could afford to be affectionate, for I knew that Ardew was too rich to want money.

“You know I am a politician,” said Ardew.

“I know you are,” I returned, “and much good has it done you. To my certain knowledge you have not received a cent benefit from it yet; on the other hand you have spent a good many hundred dollars.”

“Just wait till — is elected president; and then you will see what you will see; but, that is not the question. I am a delegate to the Baltimore Convention, and I want you to act as my substitute.”

“What!” I cried, jumping up from my chair in excitement, “I, Jonathan Gunby, wholesale provision dealer, act as a member of a political convention! never, my dear friend, never!”

“But you must. I will pay all expenses, and the trip will do you good. I have noticed that you seem to be a good deal thinner than you used to be, a change is the very thing for you. Baltimore is a beautiful city. The fact is, I have an important law suit coming on, and it is utterly impossible that I can leave New York. You must do this favor for me, my dear Gunby.”

“But, Ardeew, I never attended a political meeting in my life,” I replied, somewhat softened by the fact that all my expenses would be paid. “I should make a blockhead of myself, for I know nothing of the rules and regulations of such assemblies.”

“You don’t want to know anything; all that you have to do is to vote through thick and thin for —.”

“But I don’t like the man.”

“You have nothing to do with that. I do like him and you will be voting for me.”

“You are right—I forgot that.”

“Jonathan shall not go to that awful rowdy city, Baltimore,” said my wife. “He will be killed by the ‘Plug Uglies,’ ‘Blood Tubs’ or ‘Black Snakes.’ It’s not safe to walk the streets there. I’ll never consent to his going.”

“You need have no fear on that head, madam,” said Ardeew; “they have got a new police there, and Baltimore is now one of the quietest cities in the Union.”

I need not detail any more of the conversation, suffice it to say, that Ardeew persuaded me to act in his place, and a hint of a handsome present from the monumental city, so modified my wife that she too gave her consent.

On the appointed day, provided with the necessary vouchers, I started on my journey—having first faithfully promised my wife that I would not venture in the streets of Baltimore after dark. I shall not detail the particulars of my journey; were I to do so, I might describe how crowded we were; and how annoyed by a squalling infant that it was utterly impossible to silence; how we were delayed in the crossing of the Susquehanna by some accident to the ferryboat; how everybody talked politics until I was perfectly sick of it; how I tried to read, but could not on account of the perfect Babel around me; how I endeavored to make fun of the boys who sold apples, and had the laugh turned against me by those youthful vendors of that wholesome fruit. All this, and a great deal more, I might tell, but as every traveler goes through the same experiences it would only be repeating an old story.

We reached Baltimore at last, and I was immediately driven to Barnum’s Hotel. I had some difficulty in making my way up to the clerk’s counter, the hall was so crowded with people.

“All full, sir,” said the gentlemanly clerk, as I pulled the book towards me to enter my name.

There was no help for it; I went to the Gilmore House, and received the same reply. It was the same with the Eutaw, the Howard House and half a dozen other hotels. It was getting dark, and my case began to get desperate. I began to think that I should have to sleep in the hack all night.

“Try Old Tom, Bill,” said a friend to the hackman, who saw my dilemma.

“There are only third and fourth rate inns there,” said the driver, “and perhaps the gentleman would not like to lodge there for a night?”

“Anywhere that I can get a bed, my good fellow,” I returned. “It is no use being particular at such a time as this.”

The horses’ heads were turned round, and we proceeded down Baltimore Street over a bridge which spanned a muddy stream of water, called Jones’s Falls, I believe. We then plunged into a mass of intricate, narrow streets, and at last stopped before the door of a very ordinary looking tavern. It bore a nondescript looking sign which I was told represented a golden angel, by which name the tavern was known.

I entered and made my stereotyped inquiry whether I could have a bed there for the night. The landlord, a thick, burly looking man with a gleam of latent humor in his face, shook his head and repeated to me the hateful words—“all full.”

I turned to go away, but was recalled by the voice of the host.

“Would you mind sharing a bed with another party?” said he.

I glanced out of doors; it was quite dark, and a cold wind had arisen from the north.

“If there is no help for it, I suppose I must,” I replied, “although to tell you the truth, it is by no means agreeable to me;” and I inwardly heaped denunciations on Ardew’s head for persuading me to be his substitute.

“Your bedfellow is a quiet fellow when he is asleep—although I must say he is rather violent when annoyed. He sleeps very soundly, and all you have to do is to be careful not to awake him. He has been in bed some time.”

I must make a humiliating confession to the reader; I am not a brave man. I have often tried to persuade myself that I am, but stern truth compels me to state that a greater coward does not exist than myself. The landlord’s description of my bedfellow was anything but assuring, and I was on the point of declining, when the proprietor of the Golden Angel, no doubt reading what was transpiring in my mind, exclaimed:

“You are not afraid, are you?”

“Afraid! I should think not, indeed,” I returned, for I was too much a coward to brave being thought one. “I accept your offer of half a bed. Bring some brandy and water and a cigar.”

I sat down at one of the little tables in the bar-room, and puffing away at my cigar I tried to persuade myself that I was very jolly. It was a miserable attempt, however. I had previously supped at a restaurant in a more modern part of the city. After my cigar was finished, I asked to be shown to my chamber. The landlord took upon himself the task of being my conductor, and I followed him up a narrow, rickety staircase. We kept on ascending until we reached the top of the house, when we entered a moderately sized room, but much cleaner than I had expected to find it. The ceiling was very low, and inclined in front to the slope of the roof. The apartment contained but one bed, which was placed against the wall near the door. At the opposite end of the chamber was a table, placed between two windows which looked out on the roof.

The landlord placed the lamp on the table, and I noticed that he shielded the light with his hand as he passed near the bed.

“Be sure and don’t take the light near him,” whispered the proprietor of the Golden Angel; “nothing wakes him sooner than that. You see, I don’t know how he might like my putting another man with him; and he’s a very ugly customer when he’s riled, I can tell you.”

“I shall be careful,” I replied.

“That’s right! Good night,” he whispered, and left the room.

He had no sooner gone than I cautiously sat down, taking care not to make the least noise. I then calmly surveyed my position. It was certainly not a very enviable one. According to the landlord’s account, my companion for the night was anything but an amiable character. If I should chance to awaken him I knew not what might occur. He might assault me dangerously before I could enter into any explanation. I half resolved to pass the night in the chair, and not retire to bed at all. But it was one of those old-fashioned, high-backed chairs, and made such an uncomfortable seat that I soon got tired. I then ventured to glance round the room. My eyes naturally fell on the bed. There was one thing that consoled me, my companion appeared to be in a deep sleep, for he did not even move. I could see the ridge made by his feet at the end of the bed, and that was all. I also noticed that the bed was a very large one. The man who had possession of it lay near the wall, and there was plenty of space between him and the outside for me to lie without touching him. I screwed my courage up, and began to undress—but I suddenly remembered the landlord’s words, that the stranger was “an ugly customer when he was riled,” which made me desist. The thought struck me that I might manage to lie on the floor, but a moment’s examination settled that question in the negative, for the floor was entirely bare, and the wind blew very cold through the wide chinks in the planking. I cast my eyes up to the ceiling, and noticed for the first time that a heavy beam studded with numerous hooks ran through the apartment; but as I was not a bird and could not perch there, this discovery was but of little use to me.

Half an hour passed away in this state of indecision. I stole cautiously to one of the windows, and gazed on the beautiful city bathed in the light of a full moon. How quiet and calm everything looked.

But the air felt fresh and cold, and I closed the window and resumed my seat on the chair. I then found myself wondering what avocation my friend in bed followed. I had forgotten to ask the landlord. I suddenly cast my eyes on a heap of clothes which lay on a trunk, covered over with a handkerchief no doubt belonging to the sleeper. My curiosity got the better of my politeness, and before I scarcely knew what I was about, I found myself examining his apparel. The handkerchief, which covered them was a coarse cotton one, and his clothes were of a coarse homespun, and were such as are usually worn by drovers. My companion then was evidently a drover—a rough class of men who usually stand upon very little ceremony.

Partially undressed as I was, I began to feel very cold—but before I ventured into bed I determined to try an experiment to see if the drover slept soundly or not. I took off one of my boots, and holding it up let it fall to the floor. I had taken the precaution to leave the bedroom door open, so that I could make a run for it if necessary. I fixed my eyes on the bed as I let the boot fall. The drover was evidently a sound sleeper, for, although the noise made was considerable, he did not wake the slightest motion. This decided me, and I hastily finished undressing and crept into bed.

Of course I was very careful not to touch my companion. I do not know how long I lay awake, but the novelty of my situation drove sleep from my eyelids for some time. By degrees, however, the strangeness of my position wore off. I felt reassured by my bed-fellow's sound sleep, and the gentle, murmuring of the breeze outside caused me to follow his example.

I have no idea how long I slept before I commenced to dream. I suddenly, however, thought that my companion woke up, and sat upright in bed; that he glared around him, and at last his eyes fell upon me. He then uttered a terrible cry and threw himself upon me. In spite of my natural cowardice I saw that if I did not struggle I should be killed. I thought I seized him by the throat, and tightening my grasp, I saw him getting black in the face. His hands fell powerless by his side, a smothered groan escaped him, but still I pressed his throat tighter, and tighter—his face grew blacker and blacker.

In agony of fear I awoke, and what was my horror and dismay to find that my hand was really pressing my companion's throat! He did not move nor stir, and his body felt as cold as ice.

“Good God!” I exclaimed, aloud. “Can he be dead?”

I jumped out of bed. Morning had dawned, although the sun had not yet risen. I rushed to the window and pulled back the curtain. I then ran to the bed again and looked at my companion. My worst fears were realized.

He was dead—black in the face—strangled in my sleep!

I shall not attempt to describe my sensations at this horrid spectacle. My body was bathed in a cold perspiration, my hands trembled, and for a few moments I believe I was bereft of my senses. I recovered by degrees—but it was only to realize in a more acute degree the horrors of my situation. There lay my victim—and I was a murderer! My trial, conviction and the hideous gallows all passed in rapid review before me. What defense could I make? Who would believe me? I sat down, buried my face in my hands, and sobbed like a child. My wife, my own comfortable home, should I ever see them again?

What was to be done? Should I arouse the house and make a clean breast of it? But what could I say? Tell them I had killed a man in my sleep? Not a soul would believe the story. Could I effect my escape? Impossible—the crime would be discovered before I could leave the city, and I should be arrested—and then the law would take its course and I should be hanged by the neck until I was dead.

“Hanged by the neck!” Yes, that would be my fate. As this terrible thought crossed my mind, I cast my eyes round the chamber, and they fell upon the beam with the hooks in it. From thence they wandered to the handkerchief covering the dead man’s clothes. A means of safety suddenly suggested itself to my mind. Suppose I could make it appear that the man had committed suicide. I determined to put it in execution.

I took the dead man’s handkerchief and advanced to the corpse with a great deal of repugnance, but with more courage than I could have anticipated, my own fearful situation no doubt animated me to an extent I should never otherwise have dreamed of.

I made a noose in the handkerchief, and slipped it over the dead man’s neck. I then lifted the body out of bed, and standing on a chair fastened the other end of the handkerchief to a hook in the beam. I now let the body go, and it swung in space!

I jumped into bed, and shut my eyes to close the horrid sight from my gaze. I determined to wait there until somebody should come into the room, and then pretend that I knew nothing at all about it, but that the man must have got up in the night and hanged himself.

I lay quaking and trembling for over an hour. It grew broad daylight. I felt the sun shining directly on the bed, but I dare not open my eyes for fear that I should encounter the dangling corpse. Suddenly I heard the steps of two men on the stairs. They appeared to be carrying something heavy between them. The long anticipated moment was approaching. In a few seconds more they would discover the body. My life depended in a great degree upon their opinion. If they were deceived by my *ruse*, others might be also.

The door opened, and two men entered the chamber, placing something heavy on the floor.

“Well, I’m blessed if the man hasn’t bin and hanged himself again,” exclaimed a voice, which I recognized to be the landlord’s.

“By golly! that’s true,” said the other man. “No, I see how it is, the stranger found out the trick you played on him, and not liking the idea of sleeping with a corpse, he tucked him up there to get him out of the way.”

“You’re right,” replied the landlord; “well, he’s a cool ‘un anyhow, and would you believe it, last night I thought he was a coward?—that only shows how easy it is to be mistaken in people. And now he sleeps as sound as a church; let’s be careful not to wake him.”

I breathed freely; for I immediately understood the whole matter. The landlord had put me to sleep with a dead man. I heard them take down the body and put it into a coffin—for it was that they had brought with them. They carried it away, and I was left to myself. With my mind thus relieved I fell asleep, and enjoyed two hours delicious slumber. I then got up, dressed myself, and proceeded coolly down stairs.

“Good morning,” said I to the landlord, who was behind the bar.

“Good morning, sir,” he replied sheepishly; “I hope you slept well.”

“Splendidly,” I returned; “my bed fellow gave me some trouble at first, but I soon got rid of him.”

“I know you did,” returned mine host, with a knowing wink. “Well, I must say you are the coolest chap I ever saw.”

Not another word passed between us with reference to the affair. I afterwards learned from the conversation of people while I was at breakfast, that my companion for the night was a drover, who, having made a ruinous speculation in cattle, had committed suicide by hanging himself in the chamber the night before.

I left the Golden Angel that morning, having obtained quarters at Barnum’s Hotel. I went to the Convention; voted six hundred times for —, and returned home, having given full satisfaction to Mr. Ardew.

I told my adventure to my friends—not as I have told it to you, reader, but with the same construction that the landlord of the Golden Angel put upon it. Everybody thought that I had displayed extraordinary coolness and intrepidity. There is one thing, however, to which I have fully made up my mind, and that is, I will never attend another political convention as long as I live.

Leaves from the Notebook of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J.B. Ed. John Williams. Hartford: J. B. Burr, 1865.