

The Torn Bill

by G. D. K.

It was in the spring of 1864 that the incidents which I am about to relate occurred. I was at that time postmaster in the town of L—. An unusually warm spell of weather had carried away much of the snow, left the roads very muddy, and rendered the traveling very bad. I thought of this as I closed the shutters about nine o'clock in the evening, and also remembered that, as it was Wednesday, the stage from C— was due at eight, but owing to the bad going it was not yet in. I therefore determined that I would, as I had often done before, lock the front door and the door between the inner and outer rooms, and, leaving a light burning, go to sleep, trusting to the driver to wake me by rattling the door.

It seemed but a few moments, so soundly had I slept, ere I was awakened by a pounding on the door. Glancing at the clock, which stood opposite, I discovered, however, that it was one o'clock in the morning, and that I had been asleep nearly four hours. As I hurried toward the door, I put my hand into my pocket for the key and found it was empty. The two door keys and both the keys of my safe, all of which I had when I went to sleep, were gone. Stepping to the rear door, in the lock of which I always kept the key, I also found that locked and the key gone. This so surprised me that for a few seconds I remained on the spot, utterly unable to do anything to solve the mystery.

From this state I was aroused by renewed pounding on the door. There was but one available mode of exit from my prison, and that was through a side window. Throwing up the sash I sprang out and hurried round to where I expected to find the driver. Mysteries seemed to have no end, for instead of meeting the driver, I came upon an excited crowd of about twenty. My appearance was the signal for all to commence telling me the cause of their excitement. Silence was, however, at last obtained, and then the Sheriff told me in as few words as possible the state of affairs.

It seems that one of the physicians of the town, Dr. Smith, was returning from a prolonged visit to a patient, and when about a mile from town, heard in the road ahead of him a pistol shot. Hurrying on, he found, about half a mile further on, the stage, for which I was waiting, drawn up by the side of the road, and in the middle of the road the body of a man. Bringing his lantern near the face, he found that it was the driver, and that he was dead, having been shot through the head. He found the robes, &c., of the team, scattered around on the ground, as was also the mail bag, but the latter had been *unlocked*, not *cut* open, and the contents were gone. He lifted the body up and placed it in the stage, and was just starting on for assistance, when he saw a revolver lying near by, which, from the fact that one barrel had been discharged, he decided was the weapon with which the deed had been committed. Arrived in town he aroused the Sheriff and a few neighbors; and while some were dispatched with the Doctor after the body, the Sheriff and others had gone to my house after me. Finding I was not there they came to the office, and just as I joined them the body arrived.

This was the substance of the facts related to me. It seemed strange that the Sheriff should have gone to my house instead of after the body, and I was about to so express myself, when he stepped forward, and laying his hand upon my shoulder said:

“I arrest you, John Blanchard, for the murder of Charles Smith, stage driver.”

If he had struck me, I should not have been more surprised. I tried to reason with him, but although very civil he was equally firm, and the result was that I spent the remainder of the night in the county jail, which building was situated in L—, that being the shire town. The examination the next morning elicited the following rather curious facts:

When the Sheriff searched my person he was surprised to find no keys, and indeed no wallet nor memorandum book. Sending to my assistant, he obtained the door keys, but the safe keys could not be found, and my clerk declared that I always carried them with me. Upon entering they found that the letters were all gone, the money drawer empty, and a few stamps, which the clerk informed them we always left out of the safe at night, missing. And no trace could be found of the safe keys. Supposing that I had disposed of them, in order that the trace of my guilt, which it was taken for granted I had concealed in the safe, could not be discovered, they brought a locksmith, and after much labor forced the lock. This labor served only to show them that the safe had been completely rifled, and that the sum of three thousand dollars, which had been in it the night before, was gone.

I found that the causes which led to suspicions being fastened upon me were the three following: First, the revolver with which the deed was committed had upon the butt a silver plate on which was engraved my name. The clerk took oath that the weapon was mine, and that I always kept it in the office. When they produced it I could not doubt for a moment that it did belong to me. Second, that the bag was unlocked and not cut open, showing that it must have been done by someone having in his possession a United States mail key. Third, that I had not been at home during the evening, and that when summoned at the post office I delayed so long in making my appearance.

To combat these facts I argued that the state of the office proved conclusively that it had been robbed; and that without doubt the keys and the revolver had been taken at that time. Also, that no trace of any of the stolen articles was found about me, my house, or my office; and that further, if I had desired to rob the mail I might have waited until it had arrived at the office and thus saved myself the crime of murder. Against the third statement I told the reason of my remaining in the office so late, and brought forward witnesses to prove that I often did so on Wednesday evenings, in order that the mail might be delayed as little as possible. Further, that the reason of my remaining so long in the office was that I could not open the door, and brought forward the fact that the keys were missing, to sustain my declaration.

Although these arguments were by no means fully satisfactory to those who took the ground that I was guilty, still they were so far that I was released on bail of five thousand dollars, which I readily obtained. By consent of the Post Office Department, I turned the

affairs of the office over to my assistant. I was thus left free to pursue every means to prove my innocence, which I felt could only be done by discovering the guilty party.

I accordingly placed the best detectives at work, with orders to communicate to me the first suspicion that they entertained, for I found that it was anything but comfortable to be looked upon as a murderer, although I knew that I was innocent.

Thus three weeks passed without anything of interest occurring, and at the end of that time I could endure the suspense no longer. Therefore, I wrote to an old friend of mine, who was then on the detective force of P—, and he getting leave of absence came to me in L—, and together we set about the search.

A week passed without bringing more to light, and causing us to despond, for we feared the murderer had so covered his track that it would be impossible to discover him. We had been at work two days in the city of G—, and being about to leave, I entered the hotel office to settle. Having no small bills, there was considerable change handed back, and among it a ten dollar bill, which had been torn in two. As I turned it carelessly over, I found that the parts had been fastened together with the margin of a couple of postage stamps, which had printed upon it “No. 15—Plate,” but the “No.” and “Plate” had been crossed out, and substituted in their place was “Mar.” and “1864,” making it read “Mar. 15—1864,” which was the day before the robbery and murder. This may seem all common enough, but to me it was a ray of light and hope; for the change was in my own handwriting. I also remembered perfectly well making the change; also, that I had placed my initials on the under side, and that the bill must have been in the safe at the time of the robbery. Calling my friend, we went into a side room, and there carefully removed the paper. On the underside we discovered, as I had suspected, the letters “J.B.” much blurred from wetting, but still legible. My friend agreed with me that it was a very important discovery, and in order to press it forward we called in the landlord and questioned him.

He remembered having received the bill that morning, and had rather questioned taking it on account of the tear. On being asked to describe the man, he said:

“As near as I can recollect, he was about five feet ten inches in height, and quite stout in proportion. He was dressed entirely in black. The only peculiar mark that I noticed was a deep scar running across his face, and his left eye was gone—the place being supplied by a piece of black silk, which he showed very plainly when he winked.”

I think I must have started very perceptibly when I heard this description, for I recognized the man immediately as a runner for the firm of Bagley & Nason, of Boston, who had been in our town for about a week previous to the murder, and had left the same morning. His name was James Burnham.

As we could learn nothing more from the landlord, save that he heard him order the hackman to drive to the Boston depot, we dismissed him, and held a consultation. We both agreed that it was best to go immediately to Boston, see Bagley & Nason, and, if

possible, learn of Burnham's whereabouts. Carrying out this plan, we learned from the firm the following facts:

James Burnham was a good, reliable business man. He had been in their employment for about fifteen years, and they were willing to trust him with any amount of their funds. He was now in Vermont, where he had been since leaving L—, and had not, to their certain knowledge, been at G—.

This rather perplexed us, but at last we determined that he must have deceived his employers; and although we did not think that we had sufficient cause to arrest him, still we determined to track him a while with this purpose we went to Vermont and fell in with him in Montpelier. For a week we observed his every motion, but at the end of the time had discovered nothing, save that he would stay in the town about one week longer. Feeling that my friend was fully capable of watching him alone, I determined to go to Boston to see if I could learn anything new; and accordingly on the morning of the 21st of April left, having first arranged a system of cipher, by which we could communicate with each other if occasion required it.

Early on the morning of the 22d I was standing on the steps of the — Hotel, when a paper dropped at my feet, apparently from one of the upper windows. Stooping down I picked it up, but discovered that it was but an empty envelope, and was about to drop it again, when the name upon it caught my eye. It was that of a leading merchant of L—. Looking up at the window, I saw to my surprise the face of James Burnham, and that he turned deadly pale when he saw me. Feeling certain now that he knew my errand, I saw that it would be safe to let him escape me no longer. I immediately determined on having him arrested at all hazards. Hurriedly writing a dispatch which to the operator would read: "Join me in Portland tomorrow. Immediately upon the receipt of this you may close the bargain which I spoke to you about yesterday," but to my friend, "James Burnham is in Boston. Why are you not? I have a clue. Shall arrest him immediately." I sent it to the telegraph office, and then hurried to the police station. Here I told my story in as few words as possible, and in fifteen minutes more was at the door of the room from which the envelope had come. A noise as of someone moving rapidly about told us that the occupant was still there.

The door of the room was not fastened, but as the officers approached, Burnham sprang forward to do so; but they were too quick for him and had entered before he could get it done. As we came in he stepped back and in no gentle tones demanded the cause of the intrusion. In answer to him, one of the officers said:

"I arrest you, James Burnham, for the murder of Charles Smith, and the robbery of the post office at L—, on the night of the 16th of March last."

The effect was instantaneous. He turned deadly pale and sank into a chair near by, but after a moment roused himself and said:

"You have mistaken your man. My name is not James Burnham, but William Chase."

We considered this, however, as but an attempt to bully us, and he was accordingly led away. The search which followed brought to light considerable money in bills, and a number of checks, many of them payable to certain merchants in L—, and some of them from citizens of L—, payable to persons living in Boston.

I immediately telegraphed the particulars of the arrest to my friend, and he joined me the next morning; but strangest of all, *James Burnham came with him*, and I then saw that it was a case of mistaken identity. But it was not to be wondered at, for I think I never saw two men that looked more alike. We also telegraphed to the landlord at G—, and learned a thing we had neglected before, namely, that the man who passed the torn bill went by the name of William Chase.

Little remains to be told. The man finding that there was no hope for him, made confession soon after his arrest. From this it appeared that he was a notorious criminal, who, after some bold deed, had been lying for a time in the country, and that while there, accidentally hearing that some valuable mail matter would arrive in the mail from C—, had determined on a little professional business, and had accordingly come to L—. There he saw me receive a large payment of money on the 14th of March, and had that evening, after I shut up, entered the office, and removing the keys from my pocket and getting possession of the revolver, robbed me as described, and made off with the booty, still retaining the keys, which we found in his possession. From the office he had gone up the road, met the stage, and finding that he could not accomplish his purpose without committing the murder and then opening the bag, had just time to secret himself when the doctor came along. By a wide circuit he came back to Boston, and arrived there by another train on the same evening that I did. When I picked up the envelope he recognized me, and made up his mind he had better leave, and was preparing to when arrested.

A few days more saw me back to L—, my innocence fully established, but I could not be prevailed upon again to assume the duties of postmaster, and my former assistant was appointed. As for William Chase, he was executed the following July.

Detroit Free Press, June 9, 1866

The Union Democrat [NH], July 17, 1866

The Tioga County Agitator [PA], August 15, 1866 1/4