

A Lucky Detective

Chance Enabled Him to Make
Some Important Arrests

Going for a Shave and Catching a Murderer
Luck Plays a More Important
Part Than Shrewdness in
Detective Work

The luck and ill luck of detective life is something wonderful. The luck we hear of every day. The ill luck is suppressed as much as possible. In the month of June, 1867. I was spending a few days with relatives of mine on a farm near Oberlin, Ohio. I had been in detective business about five years. I drove into the town one day. On the way in I got out of the wagon and picked up a copy of a Cleveland paper which was lying on the highway. The first thing I saw was an account of [a] murder at Peru, Indiana, several days before. An old man had been murdered and robbed of a large amount of money. Not the slightest clue of the murderer had been discovered. No one could say whether he was old or young, white or black, or which way he had gone. It seemed a hopeless case, and I felt a bit sorry for the two Chicago officers who had been sent for to work the case out.

The first call I made after reaching Oberlin was at the post-office. I then visited a [barbershop], but the two chairs were occupied, and I had to wait about ten minutes. Having nothing to occupy my mind, I looked the two barbers over in detail, and then turned my attention to the customer in the nearest chair. I began at his feet first. He wore No. 8 gaiters, and they were a new pair; indeed, they had never been blackened. His trousers were frayed about the bottom, and, as I came to look closer, I saw that they were old and threadbare. On the left leg, which was nearest me, between the knee and the ankle, were several stains. They might have been made by either blood or acid. When the man sat up straight after his shave I saw that his coat was also old, and I looked over to his hat on the hook to find it very rusty. The barbers were not speaking to either of the men, so that both must be strangers in the town. My man had reddish hair, which he had had clipped close before I came in. His neck was sunburned and dirty, and, after looking him over from toe to crown, I said to myself:

“This chap has all the looks of a professional tramp. That suit was probably given him, but ten to one he stole those gaiters. Wonder if he can scrape up enough to pay the barber.”

The bill was thirty-five cents. The man gave me a furtive look as he got out of the chair, and while being brushed he felt in his pockets for change. He had two ten-cent shinplasters, but as these were not enough he half turned from me and fished a greenback out of his pocket. The barber had to go out to change it, and the man was so impatient and nervous that he could not stand still. When the barber returned he had the change for a twenty-dollar note. He began to count it out, but the stranger muttered his confidence that it was all right, and reached out for the pile and crammed it into his vest pocket. He was about to go, when I rose up and said:

“My friend, I want to have a few words with you, if you are not in a big hurry.”

“But I am!” he replied, trying to push past me without looking me in the face.

“But you’ll have to wait just the same. I want to know who you are.”

There was a back door to the shop. He wheeled and sprang for it, but it was locked. As he turned on me again he pulled a revolver from his bosom and leveled it on me and fired a shot which went over my head and through the window. Before he could fire again I had him jammed against the wall, one hand [holding] the weapon and the other on his throat, and I choked him until he sank down in a heap. Who did he turn out to be? The Indiana murderer who had been dodging about the country for six days, and who had run the gauntlet of a hundred officers. It was blood on his trousers, though we did not have to prove it, as he made a full confession. It was simply my good luck.

About fifteen years [ago], while connected with the force in Chicago, a jewelry house on State street was robbed of \$12,000 worth of jewelry. Aside from this there was a package of Government bonds amounting to over \$17,000, which had been deposited in the safe for security. The robbery was committed by professional cracksmen, who left their tools behind but no clue. I was at this time at Bowling Green, Kentucky, after a counterfeiter. I got a false clue, which led me down to Franklin, and when I started to return I took an accommodation train. It was at night, and there was but one coach on the train, and that contained only five passengers beside myself. Three of these were natives, sure enough, while the other two talked about a coal mine in Tennessee, and seemed to own land in that State. I gave them little attention, being three seats in the rear, and was talking with the conductor on general matters, when the two men suddenly became interested in something one of them held in his hand. Their heads were together, and they were evidently deeply interested, when the report of a pistol was heard, followed by a cry of agony and a yell of alarm. The object of their curiosity was a derringer, and it had accidentally been discharged, the bullet entering the leg of one of the men just above the knee. In his pain and fright the wounded man sprang up, and turned fiercely on the other with the exclamation:

“Curse you, but you did that on purpose! You wanted all the swag to yourself.”

The conductor and I were beside them in a minute. The wounded man fell back on the seat, and he evidently regretted the break he had made a few seconds before, for he said, as we came up:

“Tom, old fellow. I had my own finger on the trigger, and pulled it off. You are not a bit to blame.”

“But what about the ‘swag?’ ” I demanded, as I stood over them.

“He meant our coal mine,” replied the one called Tom.

“Yes; we are partners in a coal mine,” added the wounded man.

“O, that's it. Well let's see what can be done for you?”

It was a bad wound— so bad that I knew his leg would have to come off, as the big bullet had shattered the bone, and I suggested to the conductor that he make as fast time as he dared to Bowling Green, where medical attendance could be had. To my surprise the men asked to be put off at some highway crossing, near a farmhouse, saying that a country doctor could manage the case well enough, and that the quietness of the country would be best for the patient. This satisfied me that they were suspicious characters, and I assumed the authority to remove the one and handcuff him to a seat at the rear of the coach, and to search both. The one had a revolver and the other the derringer, and before I was through searching I brought to light all the stolen bonds and jewelry. It was sheer luck again. Four of our men were out on their trail, but on false scents. They were supposed to have gone East, while I picked them up in the South. The fellow who was shot not only lost his leg but his life. The other was returned to Chicago, and he received a long sentence for his crime. There was a great deal of newspaper talk about my shrewdness, but I didn't deserve a word of praise. The case simply came to me. The ripe fruit dropped into my hands. Things fall that way to a lucky man, no matter what business he is engaged in.

One of the bits of luck which fell to me several years ago, and which was much talked about at the time, came about in a very singular way. I had been sent down to Augusta, Ark., to identify a man who had been arrested there, and was supposed to be a robber wanted in Chicago. He did not prove to be the man we hoped he was, and I was making ready to return when a resident of the town, who was an old acquaintance of mine, put forward a speculation. He had just purchased a saw mill a few miles down White river, and he believed there was big money to be made in buying a large tract of timber contiguous to the mill. This tract was for sale at a low figure, but my friend could not raise the cash. The result of our talk was that we took a boat next morning and were left at the mill landing. While he was overseeing some change of machinery I started out to get some idea of the value of the timber. The first thing I knew I was lost in the forest, and I did just what all other people do under the circumstances—headed the wrong way. Instead of going toward the river, I went away from it. It was in July, and although the mosquitoes nearly devoured me, there was no danger of suffering from the inclemency of the weather.

It was about ten o'clock in the morning when I started out, and by mid-afternoon I had walked at least ten miles, and knew that I was entirely bewildered. I couldn't keep a straight course for the creeks and swamps, and the day was so cloudy and the forest so dense that there was no sighting the sun to guide me. It was just five o'clock in the afternoon when I reached a good-sized stream, and the first thing I saw was an old [houseboat] tied to the bank. There was smoke coming out of a stovepipe thrust through the roof, and I congratulated myself that I had reached shelter and something to eat. There was a plank reaching from the boat to shore, and I ascended it and entered the cabin unannounced. A white man and a negro were sitting in the rude room, and a fire had just been kindled in the cook stove. There was a door at the other side of the boat. It stood wide open, and the instant the men caught sight of me both sprang for the door. In the rush

they bumped into each other and both rolled to the floor. The white man was the quicker of the two, and while I stood looking and wondering he scrambled up and flung himself into the water and swam to the opposite shore.

“Doan’t shoot! For de Lawd’s sake doan’t kill me!” yelled the negro as he rolled over and over on the floor.

“What does this mean?” I demanded.

“It means dat I surrenders!” he replied.

“Very well. Now sit up and tell who you are and what you are doing here.”

“I had to come along, boss. I didn’t want to, but dey said dey would dun kill me.”

“Who owns this boat?”

“Why, dat Harding gang, in co’sse.”

“And what are you doing here?”

“Dun hidin’ out, I s’pose.”

I was so stupid that I did not realize what luck had come to me until the negro gave it away. Then I secured him against escape and searched the boat, and in that old hulk I found over \$6,000 worth of dry goods, clothing, boots and shoes, jewelry, hardware and other stuff, the proceeds of a dozen big robberies along the river. There was a gang of four men engaged in the work, and the negro was their cook. The boat was hidden away in a branch of the White River to wait for a rise of water to get down to the Mississippi, and three of the gang were off that day to spot a country store some seven miles distant.

The negro and I stood guard all night, for I soon found that I could trust him, but if the fellows returned to the neighborhood we did not see them. Next day we got the boat down to the mill, which was hardly four miles away, and from thence she was taken to Clarendon and the goods returned to their owners, as far as possible. The robbers were all identified by name and person by the negro, and within a few weeks were either captured and sent to prison or run into the swamp and shot down.—*N. Y. Sun*.

The Red Cloud Chief, June 7, 1889