

Good Stories of the Present Day
Why I Was Sent to State Prison and What I Accomplished

It was the invariable custom of the night watchman of the Merchants' and Mechanics' Bank at Clio to throw open the front doors and raise the curtains at 7 1/2 o'clock each morning. By that time all the stores were open and the streets full of people. From 7 1/2 to 8 he swept and dusted, and the bells had scarcely struck the latter hour when the bank officials began to arrive. Then the watchman went home, the doors were closed, and at nine the bank was ready for business.

One September morning the cashier, teller, and two of the clerks arrived to find the heavy front doors still closed. Peter, the watchman, had been in service nine years, and this was the first time he had overslept his hour. The grocer on one side and the shoe man on the other had pounded on the bank doors at a quarter to eight, and not receiving any response, were certain that something out of the way had occurred. There were nine of us who entered the bank as the cashier unlocked the doors. The curtains had not yet been raised when we knew that robbery and murder had taken place. When we got the full light we saw Peter lying on his back on the floor outside of the railing. He was fully dressed, and had been struck on the back of the head; and the blow had crushed in the skull. The body was cold, showing that death had occurred some hours before.

Further investigation proved that the door of the vault had been drilled and blown open, and that the bank had been robbed of every dollar of its cash on hand. Taking the loss of bonds, stocks, and cash, the aggregate was about \$80,000, about half of which fell upon the bank. Burglar tools, fuse, a flask of powder, and other articles were lying about, and on a desk we found the loaded club which had dealt Peter his death blow. When we came to investigate as to how the robbers had effected an entrance everybody was at sea. They could only have come and gone by the front door. None of the windows had been raised, the back door was heavily barred, and the door leading to the cellar had not been tampered with.

Peter had no key to the lock of the front door. He could open it from the inside, but not from the other. The cashier and bookkeeper, both old and trusted men and stockholders, alone had keys. He must, we concluded, have admitted the robbers to the bank, but the fact of his having been murdered was proof of his integrity. Had he put up a job with them, they would not have finished him off. He was a sharp, shrewd fellow, and what excuse they could have urged to gain admission was beyond our figuring. Detectives were put to work on the case, but not the slightest clue could they get for weeks. It seemed as if the robbers had taken wings as they left the bank. Three months later two men, who were suspected of being "good fellows," were arrested at a point 200 miles away, and in another State, for stealing a horse and buggy. In following up this case to a conviction it was proved that they had arranged to do a bank in a country town, and that the rig had been stolen as a part of the programme. One of the men was recognized as a person seen in our town about the time of our robbery, and the bank people became satisfied that both of them had a hand in it. They had no proofs, and the matter would have been permitted to drop but for me.

The loss of cash was only about \$11,000. About \$35,000 in securities belonged to depositors, and the balance was the loss of the bank. None of the securities had been negotiated thus far, and it was my theory that the robbers had them securely hidden away somewhere. While I could not

be positive that either of the men arrested for stealing the horse and buggy was the party wanted for our job, two of our citizens were so positive in identifying one of them that I was ready to chance it. The bank had offered a big reward for the arrest of the robbers and murderers, and after due deliberation with myself and several consultations with friends, I determined on a plan. The men had been sent to prison for three years apiece. When arrested they made a fight, and burglars tools were also found in their possession.

I visited the prison and learned that one had been assigned to the boot and shoe department, while the other had gone to the chair works. I walked through this department and saw him engaged in chair painting. The two were so widely separated that there was no possibility of a meeting except in the chapel on a Sunday. The one in the chair department was the younger by several years.

One day, when I had my plans all laid, I entered a jewelry store in the city from which the men had been sentenced and asked to look at some watches. A tray of them was set out, and I grabbed one valued at \$40 and ran out. I could have got clear off as well as not, but my object was to be arrested. On my examination I pleaded guilty and was bound over. When the case came to the higher court a lawyer was assigned me, and had I worked with him the jury would have cleared me. I refused to answer any questions, admitted my guilt, and was regarded by some as light in the head. The jeweler did not desire my conviction, and but for my impudence I should have failed in my purpose. A verdict of guilty was finally reached and his Honor gave me a year in prison, though I believe he was ready to suspend sentence in case I broke down and promised reform.

When I arrived at the prison I gave my occupation as a chair finisher, and to my great satisfaction, I was assigned to that work, and soon found myself alongside the man I was after. He was recorded on the prison books as Jordon Hatch, No. 2,180. I was down as Charles Merritt, No. 2,185. We were at least thirty feet apart for the first three weeks, and I had been there a full month before we passed a word. Then, as we were carrying some work to the stock room, I got a chance to growl to him:

“I thought the horse thieves were put into the slop department.”

He gave me a fierce look and gritted his teeth, and the next time we passed he whispered:

“And I thought the cheap-watch grabbers were used as kitchen mops!”

He knew then, as I suspected, what I had been sent for. No convict is in prison a week before his offence is pretty generally known. As we passed again I whispered:

“It’s a good thing sometimes to be laid by.”

His reply to this was:

”Then don’t size me up for a horse thief.”

During the next two weeks, owing to the illness of one of the finishers, and the fact that another was pardoned, I got nearer to Hatch, but while I seemed to be utterly indifferent to him I several times caught him looking me over as if interested. He was very handy, and very tasty with brush and stencils, and as I was equally, so it finally came about, after I had been in prison about three months, that we worked side by side at the same platform. There was one overseer for fifteen of us, and we had only to exercise prudence and discretion to be able to communicate in whispers. I carried out the idea that I grabbed the watch on purpose to be laid by until the hue and cry over a big job had died out and by abstaining from asking him any question about his past I gave him no reason to distrust me.

I had been in prison for seven months when I was called to the office one day to see a friend, one of the few who were in the plot. He had called to ask what progress I had made. Upon my return to the shop Hatch was curious to know what had passed, and I informed him that I had got word that a pard of mine who had been in the big job with me, but who had escaped arrest, had converted our hidden swag to his own use and gone to Europe.

“I’d kill him!” he replied. “My pard hadn’t better try that on me!”

“But he may.”

“Not this pull. Isn’t he here with me?”

It was a month before I made another move. I then feigned sickness and got four days in the hospital and when I returned to work I had some news for Hatch. It was to the effect that another horse thief whose name I could not remember but who was in the shoe department had been receiving the visits of a lawyer who was doubtless seeking to get him a pardon or a new trial.

“The – he is!” hissed Hatch, jumping to the conclusion I hoped he would.

I purposely prevented any other conversation for several days but it was plain enough that my shot had told and that my man was greatly worried. I pretended to have no interest in the matter, and one day when opportunity offered he observed:

“I’d give a thousand dollars to get a letter out of here to a certain party.”

“Better not try it,” I briefly replied, and I let him worry again for a week.

It so happened then that I was detailed to the yard for a couple of days, to assist in repiling some lumber and when I returned I had some gossip for Hatch. It was to the effect that the Governor was being worked for a pardon for one of the shoe men, and it was reported that the lawyer who had the case in hand was to get \$10,000 if he was successful. I could not give his name, not having heard it, but ventured the opinion that the man must have rich relatives at work for him.

“Rich—!” he replied. “He’s selling some one out on the quiet.”

It was a week before anything further was said. I had saved my good time and was almost ready to go. Four days before I was granted my liberty Hatch handed me a piece of paper on which he had written about a dozen figures and as many letters of the alphabet, and said:

“It is to my mother. She will understand it. If you can get this out with you and mail it to the address on the back, enclosing your own address, you will receive at least \$1,000 within a week. That shoe man is my pard. If he is working the Governor it is to beat me. I’ll take the chances of trusting you. We were in a big diamond robbery in London last year, and the swag is secreted in New York. If this gets to the old woman she will put it in a safe place.”

“But the address is Chicago,” I said, as I got a look at it.

“That’s all right; she’ll understand,” he said.

I had a sore finger, and I carried the note out hidden in the rag wrapped around the digit. I went straight to Clio, put the paper in the hands of the bank officers and detectives, and after working over the cipher for three days we were no wiser than at first. The address was, “Mrs. Ann Walsh, Chicago, Ill.,” and on the second day after our arrival in Chicago a woman dressed in mourning called at the ladies window and inquired for the name. We followed her to a saloon and restaurant on State street and discovered that she kept house upstairs, while her son, a young man of about twenty-five, ran the business below. The place was looked upon by the Chicago police as suspicious, and with their aid a search warrant was procured and a search made. In a tin box in an old trunk in the garret we found the securities stolen from the bank at Clio. Jordan Hatch’s right name was Billy Walsh, and the woman was his mother and the young man his brother. Both claimed entire ignorance of the securities, proving that Billy had the run of the house when home and that he had every opportunity to bring home and conceal stuff. It was not until after their acquittal that we found the key to the cipher. The note then read:

“Put the swag in a safe place at once. Don’t reply to this.”

Hatch had promised me a thousand dollars, but he did not mean I should get it. Mother and son both knew he was in prison, but were afraid to visit him for fear of being suspected of having the securities.

Upon leaving the prison the men were tried for murder and robbery. They admitted the robbery, but denied the murder. They explained that they knocked on the bank doors, and told Peter that his wife was dying. In his confusion he opened the door and both pushed in, and as he staggered back he fell and hit his head on the tile floor. It had been so long since the murder and their lawyer made such a plausible theory that they were acquitted of murder though doubtless guilty, and sent for fifteen years apiece on the other charge. *New York Sun*

NY Sun, April 7, 1889

"A Convict's Secret" *Spirit Lake Beacon*, May 24, 1889

"The Bank Robbery" *The San Saba [TX] News*, July 5, 1889