

An Old Detective's Story

A Curious Episode of Wartimes

How a shrewd Police Agent Rounded Up a Female Who Tried to Pass for “a Dapper Little Fellow with a Good Deal of Bluster”— Queer Use for a Bean

[Special to the News]

Washington, May 31. —An old and well-known detective relates the following story of the rebellion period.

Our Civil War brought many characters to Washington, male and female, who were disappointed in politics, business, or love. To prevent the enemies of the government and the spies in the interest of the Confederacy carrying out their nefarious designs, surveillance was continually exercised over suspected persons. These precautions were necessary, for reasons best known then to those in authority. I had been many years identified with the local interests of Washington and was well known as a vigorous opponent of slavery. Occupying this position, I was soon brought into active service, and aided in keeping under surveillance those who by their actions invited attention.

One of the characters coming under detective surveillance was a dapper little fellow with a good deal of bluster and open talk in his sympathy for the Confederacy. This young man was reported to the military authorities to be an important personage and was supposed to be the bearer of dispatches to the Confederacy, though upon close observation of his movements it was found that he did not mingle with any of the leading confederate sympathizers of Washington, and was evidently unacquainted with the road to Richmond. The revelations tended to befuddle the detectives, and I was requested to ascertain the status of the supposed confederate spy.

On the corner of Thirteenth and D streets there was a restaurant, where the supposed bearer of dispatches was located; and to this establishment I immediately repaired to take in the situation. When I arrived he was sitting in a chair in proximity to the bar in such a position as to enable him to observe the faces of those who came up to indulge. I noticed a smooth-faced, bright-eyed person, with determination, desperation and recklessness strangely working in his countenance. A suspicion arose in my mind as to the sex of the party and I at once resorted to some well-known detective ruses for the purpose of ascertaining the fact.

I asked him to take a cigar at the same time raising my hand with the weed in it as if I were going to pitch it to him. He threw up his hand with a quick impatient gesture, as if to ward off the missile and said curtly, in a queer, rather feminine voice: “I don't smoke.”

“Well, take an orange then,” I said, and picking one up I pitched it toward my supposed spy. He immediately extended his knees apart as if to make his lap bigger, and caught

the fruit. This fact convinced me that “he” was a woman. It is not widely known that men when they try to catch anything pitched to them bring their knees together, while women invariably extend their lower limbs apart when they are about to catch anything thrown at them. By these methods I satisfied myself that the party was a female, though not a southern woman. No sooner had I arrived at this conclusion than I at once perceived that my suspicions had been detected by the supposed confederate bearer of dispatches, and although my dress indicated that I was a southerner, this shrewd individual manifestly surmised that my visit and scrutiny boded no good.

In less than three hours from the time of the above visit this party was safely lodged in the Old Capitol prison. There were three ladies in the prison at this time who were ardent sympathizers with the confederate cause; all of whom however were subsequently exchanged or sent to Richmond. In proximity to these ladies I directed my subordinates to arrange a room where the new-comer was to be quartered.

This character was attired in a nicely fitting suit of masculine clothes and was nobby in appearance. She played her part remarkably well. The first inquiry of the new prisoner was to see the commending officer of the prison. After some little delay I visited her room and announced myself as the superintendent in charge. Her indignation at my appearance and announcement knew no bounds. She seemed staggered for a moment, and her bright eyes flashed with indignation. I was recognized at a glance as having been the visitor at the saloon, and defiance was at once adopted. After some skirmishing I insisted that it would be more becoming for her to change her breeches for petticoats and that I would then treat her with proper consideration. I inferred from her manner and education that she merited kind treatment, and that she should be so treated when she put on the clothing that was proper for her sex. She declared that she would remain in her chosen costume, asserted that she had important friends, and threatened me with vengeance and destruction for the part I had taken in her incarceration.

I found on investigation that the lady was Mrs. McCarthy, from Utica, N.Y., and I subsequently arranged for her release on condition that she not return to Washington until the close of the rebellion. A decree was signed for her release, a costume was fixed up for her, consisting of proper apparel for a female, and when she had put this on she proved to be a very agreeable and accomplished lady. Before parting I insisted upon knowing who her Washington friends were that she had promised would be the gallant knights in rectifying the wrongs which I had been supposed to be the means of bringing on her. This declaration and my subsequent action gave her some little annoyance, but we parted with a mutual admiration of each other’s audacity.

I have remarked that when I met her in the restaurant I was struck by her peculiar voice, which was deeper and rougher than a woman’s, but lacked the volume and tone of a man’s. Upon her resumption of feminine garments, her voice assumed feminine quality. Commenting on the change, I said to her: “Did the breeches carry a man’s voice with them?”

“No,” and she laughed. “That’s a trick, and I thought you were sharp enough to detect it.”

“Tell it to me,” said I, “and save me the trouble of working out the matter.”

“Well, here’s the secret,” she replied, taking a bean out of the pocket of her dress and handing it to me. “I kept this in my mouth and it roughened my voice considerable.”

The Galveston Daily News, June 1, 1885