

Written for *The Flag of Our Union*

A Police Story
by Will Rochester

Thomas Linchpin, hackman, was driving down the main street of the city in which he lived, with his wife and three children, his thoughts busy on the particulars of the late horrible tragedy that occurred at Washington. Thomas was a man of about twenty-nine, with a very fair understanding of matters and things in general—was well posted on all affairs with which a hack man's life would admit of his coming in contact, and withal had a hackman's shrewdness. He drove his well-matched and showy team of bays slowly down the street, and had just reached the railroad depot, when the express from the east came thundering across the road. A stranger with a travelling bag in his hand leaped off the platform of first passenger coach, and with a few quick strides was inside Linchpin's hack.

"Where to, sir?" asked Thomas, getting hastily down from his seat and eyeing his customer inquiring.

"Road running north—and drive lively, will you!"

The stranger had a way of biting his words off sharply and a nervous roll to his eyes—both of which circumstances attracted Thomas's attention. The unusual direction, too, was a strange thing and—

"Come, come, man; don't be staring there all day!"

"Beg pardon sir, you said drive to—"

"Out on the road running north. Do you understand now?"

"Yes sir; all right, sir," and he shut the door, mounted his box and drove briskly off.

The above incident and conversation occupied a space of about thirty seconds—just time enough for the train to run into the depot and come to a stop. The usual bustle and crowding, and scenes attending the arrival of the cars in a large city, followed, during which a couple of highly excited individuals might have been seen jostling their way hither and thither through the crowd, evidently very anxious to meet somebody.

The general appearance of these two persons was decidedly against them in the opinion of a trio of policemen who happened to be on hand, and they determined to keep watch of them, but in living up to their determination found livelier work than they had been accustomed to in a long while, for their game rushed around in a sort of frantic manner—first through a car, then into the sitting room, then through another car, then into the street, then back again into cars and through the crowded rooms, till the fat and well-fed guardians of the peace were well nigh exhausted. At length the train went puffing on its way west, and the two eccentric individuals were discovered standing on the track, gazing sadly at its retreating shape. Policemen crept cautiously up behind them, and overheard the taller of the two remark to his companion, "He's off, sure!"

“Yes—damn the luck!”—A literal translation of the short one’s reply.

“It’s your fault,” ferociously exclaimed the long one.

“O, you be blown!” replied shorty—and this answer falling on the ears of anyone but an excited and prejudiced policeman would have convinced them that the man who uttered the words was a horticulturist, merely making use of one of his favorite expressions when talking to his plants and flowers. But the “stars” didn’t view it in the same shade and without waiting for further developments, laid their arms of the law heavily on the supposed agriculturists and invited them to take a promenade in their company.

“What’s this for?” indignantly protested the tall one.

“We ain’t done nothing,” chimed in the short one, “what do you want to arrest a couple of respectable coves like us for?”

“Never you mind what for!” was the very satisfactory explanation. “You just come along quietly.”

“Vell, see here, bummers; if you don’t prove nothing against us, mind your eyes for false imprisonment—that’s all.”

At this sally each policeman winked at his neighbor in a rather ironical manner—if you can imagine such a thing—as much as to say, “no fear of that, boys—we know the ropes!”

Five minutes later their victims were snugly locked up in separate cells, and when the police justice took his seat an hour afterwards, the “stars” with much dignity reported the arrest of two suspicious looking and acting individuals who might be pickpockets, escaped prisoners, deserters, or other dangerous characters, for aught they knew to the contrary. The magistrate was on the point of ordering the prisoners to be brought forth, when the startling news came in that Thomas Linchpin had been found murdered on the north plank road, about a mile out of town, and his team and hack were nowhere to be seen! Instantly everything was bustle and confusion; two or three rushed off for coroners; others crowded around the breathless farmer who had brought in the news; some made instant preparations for departure in search of the murderer, and one was dispatched to inform poor Tom’s wife of the calamity that had befallen her.

In a very short time the chief of police, mounted on a swift horse, had reached the toll-gate where Linchpin had been carried and found that report, as usual, had been exaggerated; Tom was not dead, but had a very severe wound on his head. Every attention was paid him, and as soon as he could talk he told the chief how the stranger had got into his hack, how his manner and the direction he gave had excited his suspicions, how his suspicions had ripened into a firm belief that the stranger was a felon endeavoring to escape from justice, how he studied for a plan to frustrate the man’s design, and how his passenger had suddenly jumped up on to the seat beside him and with some iron instrument in his hand, knocked him off into the road and drove swiftly away. Linchpin was barely able to whisper the foregoing particulars, when he fainted from loss

of blood, and a description of the person who had committed the outrage had necessarily to be deferred. However, detectives were despatched in every direction, and the chief returned to town and telegraphed to all points to look out for the culprit.

That evening the papers contained the announcement of the large award offered for the arrest of the Washington assassins, and the excited crowd at the police office no sooner read it than they individually and collectively came to the conclusion that one of the dastards was in their neighborhood—had in mid-day, arrived in their midst and escaped unmolested—in short, that the man who had struck down Tom Linchpin was a person with a very large reward offered for his capture! Excitement immediately ran wild—the news spread like wild fire—citizens turned out *en masse*—scouting parties were quickly formed—business was entirely suspended, and a scene followed that baffles description. The bells were rung by order of the city authorities, and an immense amount of confusion, increased by the circulation of the usual sensational rumors prevailed.

In the midst of the uproar a report went out that two genuine assassins had been captured, and were in close custody at the police station. The fact was that order had somehow been established inside the above tribunal, and the two victims of our former acquaintance had been led tremblingly forth to trial. The taller of the two was very pale but self-composed, while the short one quaked and shook like a thing of guilt. In due course of time the magistrate adjusted his spectacles, stuck a pen behind his ear, and after a somewhat lengthy stare of dignified greatness, propounded the following question:

“Gentleman (very ironically), please favor me with your names.”

To which the tall one made response:

“My name is John Thomas, and my friend is Samuel Steal, Esq.”

“No doubt an appropriate name for him,” remarked justice, making a note of the above; “what is your occupation?”

“Contractors, sir.”

“Contractors! of what, pray?”

“Of the government, sir; filling quotas.”

“Ah! Scalpers!”

Here justice made another memorandum in his book.

“Please explain what brought you to this city.”

“Express train from the east, your honor!” shakenly piped the short one.

Justice frowned severely.

“No equivocation young man; I am now inquiring as to the nature of your business here. What is it?”

Here the long fellow made the following “clean breast” of it:

“Vell your honor, seeing as how we’ve lost our game, I’ll tell you the whole story. Sammy and I vas valking down the street this morning, ven ve noticed a cove in front of us as aroused our suspicions that something vas wrong. So says Sammy, ‘Let’s follow him,’ vich ve did into an eatin’ house, where he calls for ham and eggs. Sammy and I takes a stall opposite to him, and Sammy pulls out a paper and begins to read to me about the assassinations at Vashington, vich the stranger no sooner hears than up he jumps and goes right off without vaiting for his grub. I slap Sammy on the shoulder and say ‘He’s von of them! Ve’ll catch him and get the reward;’ to vich he replies, ‘Yes, and the thanks of all our feller citizens.’ “Feller citizens be blowed,” says I, ‘come along.’ So we put out after him, chases him all over town, and finally catches him—”

“You caught him, did you!” broke in the now highly excited justice; “why didn’t you hold on to him?”

“Vait and hear my story. Ve catches him jumpin’ on the express train just as it vas startin’ out; so ve couldn’t do nothing but jump after him. Vell, ve vatched him close till ve get to this ere bloody town, ven he gets off ahead of us, and vile ve are lookin’ for him up comes them big peelers, marches us off and locks up here for nothin!”

A stifling silence followed the relation of this extraordinary tale, broken by a voice, exclaiming, “Confound those meddling police! If it hadn’t been for them the fellow would have been caught.”

“Very true, sir,” responded the tall one, “them’s my sentiments exactly.”

“Silence in court,” ordered the justice; “return the prisoners to their cells for further exclamation. Clear the room.”

All night long the feverish and excited populace stood in groups around the street corners, and discussed the unusual occurrence. About two o’clock the next morning, a horseman, covered with mud and dirt, came galloping down the main avenue, crying at the top of his voice, “He’s caught! He’s caught!”

Everybody chased the rider down the street for further particulars, and when he reached the police office he found himself surrounded by more than half the inhabitants.

“Who caught him?” “Where did you find him?” “Is he alive?” “Which of ’em is he?”

The questions poured in thick and fast.

“Hold on a minute, and I’ll tell you. We traced the villain to Hags Hollow—ten miles—where the hack broke down, and he unhitched one of the horses and rode off on him. We followed on and about three miles further, found the horse cropping grass by the roadside. The fellow had here taken to the woods, which we surrounded and searched. In about five minutes we heard a shout, rushed in the direction of the sound, and discovered our man, standing under a tree, *preaching as a sermon to an imaginary audience!* Before he got to the ‘amen,’ we had the irons on him, and they are bringing him in.”

The breathless crowd listened to the man’s recital in silence and wonder—the idea of an assassin preaching a sermon took their breath away—and then they lingered impatiently about to catch a glimpse of this strange being, but before he arrived, there came a telegram from a neighboring city to the effect that a raving maniac had the day before escaped from his keepers and was at large. The description which followed tallied exactly with the captured man, and the disappointed people concluded that they had indulged in a sensation for nothing.

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