

A Letter from St. Louis

A Detective's Story – District Telegraph Messenger Boys – Personal Mention, Etc.

[Special Correspondence of The News]

ST. LOUIS, June 7, 1883.—An old Texan detective told me the following story yesterday: “Imagine a clever, gentlemanly, bright and educated criminal—a forger and bank-robber—who was suspected of big jobs in nearly every large Eastern city. He and Dutch Heinrich were bosom friends, and although from policy they never operated together, it was pretty well understood that they rarely ever undertook a job without consulting each other sub rosa, seldom being seen together. The man of whom I speak had a pleasant way of saying when approached by his pals or the detectives who knew him, 'let us reason together,' and it is a fact that he did most of the reasoning. He had been operating in London and Paris ten years ago, and came back with a pot of money and bonds and intended, I believe, to settle down and give other boys a chance—at least, that is what he told me the last time I had a talk with him. I was at one time a perfect Javert to him, and haunted his steps for weeks at a time, unable, however, to get the punk on him, and I believe the fellow liked me. It was no use to shadow him, for he was the most clever drop I ever saw. I ran across him in New York soon after the elevated railroads were built and I tried hard to shadow him, but it wouldn't work. One day he left the Fifth Avenue hotel about 10 o'clock and turned down Twenty-third street toward the Sixth Avenue road. I jumped on a street car and passed him about midway down the street, keeping a close watch on his movements from the interior of the car. Arriving at the Avenue, I got off the car and ran up the steps leading to the ticket-office. I waited until he began to ascend the steps, and then purchased a ticket and entered the gate as the down train approached. He walked leisurely up, bought a ticket, and after glancing carelessly around among the passengers made a movement as though to board the train, which was by this time about to start. Feeling certain that he was going downtown, I swung upon the platform, and the brakeman closed the gate with a snap just as I saw my game recede from the platform of the next car and walk deliberately down stairs again. Of course I had to go with the train, as the platform gate had closed on me, and I was not such an ass as to jump off after the train had started and give myself away to him. Years ago I used to think I was fly, but the older I get the more satisfied I am that it is one of the easiest things in life for a suspect to elude a shadow. I got off the train at Fourteenth street, and crossing the track took the first up train, intending to get off at Twenty-third street, but as we approached the station I saw my man on the platform, he having evidently walked down the steps on the East side, crossed the Avenue, and then ascended to the West side. I kept my seat and watched him get aboard, take a seat in the car I was in and settle himself down to read his paper, as though going down to Yorkville. At Twenty-third street, however, he got off, crossed over, and ascended the steps of the down track, and deliberately bought a down town ticket. I remained on the Avenue undecided whether to follow him or let him go, and trust

to luck to pick him up down town by taking the train immediately behind his. At that moment an empty hack came down the avenue, and I beckoned the driver to stop.

“Can you get to Twenty-third street before the next train down?”

“For money, yes.”

“I’ll give you \$3 if you beat the train, and a cent if the train beats you.”

“Jump in.”

I sprang in and cabby drove like—excuse me, gents—and as I hastily handed him the \$3 I heard the train rumbling along. Up the steps I sprang, upsetting an old lady who was forcing ahead slowly and jostling an old swell in a white hat. The train stopped as I reached the ticket office and it started before I got my change, but I sprang through the gate and flung myself all over the brakeman who was forcing the passengers into the car so he could close the platform gate. I don’t know what that brakeman thought, but I knew I was aboard the train and I had every reasonable hope to believe that my man was there too. At Park place I saw him get off, and hurriedly leaving the car I joined the crowd and shadowed him to the Astor house, into which he walked by the main entrance, leaving it immediately by the ladies’ door. I followed slowly, and as I emerged saw him standing across the street piping the ladies’ entrance. As I came out he smiled once, nodded, and entered a bus to go up town. Of course I let him go, as he had evidently dropped to me.

The gist of the story is to come now. He told me a year afterwards that he was under surveillance everywhere and that life was beginning to be a burden to him, as he found it unupportable to dodge shadows wherever he went. There was nothing sure on him and no warrants out, so it was worse than useless to arrest him; the only thing to be done was to eternally shadow him in the hope of catching him dead to rights, and yet he dropped to and threw off every shadow in whatever city he visited. Three years ago he visited Galveston and the New York detectives followed him there, but he managed to elude them and for some time nothing was heard of him. I was working up a case for a St. Louis firm when I received a note from him to the effect that he wished to see me at a certain place just out of town. I kept the appointment and learned the following facts: Tired of being hounded, he had determined to so change his exterior that no one—not even his friends—would recognize him, and to this end he hit upon the plan of contracting small-pox. This he did and succeeded in pitting himself to such an extent that even his mother would not have recognized him. It was a desperate strategy, but he was in desperate straits, and for some time past he has been a prosperous farmer in Northern Texas, living a well-regulated and moral life. He pledged me to keep his secret for the sake of his family, and I did so up to the present moment. The reason I speak of the case now is that he died about seven weeks ago of Bright’s disease. Further than this, the detective would say nothing except that the deceased had left a wife and three children, well provided for, in upper Texas.

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The detective story is followed by a narrative about a messenger boy, with no transition between stories.