

Caught At Last

by Paul Plume

The city of W—, today, presents a very different appearance from the little quiet town it was twenty-five years ago.

In those times, day in and day out, the same tedious monotony characterized its inhabitants and the self-same sights and sounds met the eye and ear.

Lazy negroes loitered about the streets, or unwillingly performed their allotted tasks, and there appeared to be no enterprise whatever. The grass grew so fast in the streets that it was with difficulty the solitary contractor could keep the principal thoroughfare from looking like a country lane. Yet in those days the town had its august Mayor and Common Council who, with grave rigor presided over the destinies of the diminutive commonwealth, and whose anxiety and official watchfulness was to see that the bellman rang the town hall bell every night at 10 o'clock, as a warning to the colored people that they must no longer be found upon the streets, except furnished with a pass.

Matters have changed in a quarter of a century in W—. For a good while ago the 10 o'clock ordinance fell into disuse. I have no doubt the Mayor breathed more freely when it was permanently discontinued, for it was rarely rang on time. The bellman (who had occupied the post for forty years), was either asleep or tipping with companions in a neighboring tavern when the hour rolled round, and the perpetual reprimands he had received had so blunted his moral nature, that the town fathers had long given him up as incorrigible. But when the old bell ceased swinging at night their trouble was over, and the ringer's occupation gone.

If the people of W— were slow in business pursuits, they were active enough in politics. The local elections were conducted with a zeal and bitterness that seemed to suggest an anomaly in the character of the citizens, while the great or general ones fairly set the voters mad, and it was no uncommon occurrence to find a dozen murder cases resulting from this cause.

It was a damp, chill evening in September (for the Summer had been short), that Mark Mooney sat in his home, while a heap of newspapers and letters lay scattered on the table before him. Mark was a candidate for the mayoralty of W--, but he had some misgivings as to his election, for there was one Davy Blaine, a noted local

politician, who was his bitter enemy, and had arrayed a strong opposition against him. Mark Mooney was a man of very limited education, but he possessed great shrewdness, and this supplied, to a considerable extent, the lack of mental culture.

Mooney had commenced life without a penny, and by dint of roguery and perseverance had amassed a snug property. He had been elected sheriff of the county, and held several minor offices, in all of which he managed to make it pay. He never had an opponent in the field until Davy Blaine came upon the political scene then matters underwent a change; for Davy Blaine was better educated than Mooney, and could make stump-harangues, which Mooney could not do. Blaine was a carter, and owned his horses and his house also. But he was not as well off as Mooney, and it was a common thing to find his property frequently threatened by the sheriff. His friends, however, always got him out of his difficulties, for he was too useful a party man to be allowed to “go to the wall.”

At length the [all-important] day for the election of a new Mayor for W— came, and Mark Mooney was overwhelmingly defeated. The triumphant party had a torchlight procession, and Davy Blaine was the chief marshal. They halted before Mooney’s residence, and Davy Blaine proposed three groans, they were given with dolorous vigor. Mooney who was concealed behind the Venetian blinds, saw and heard it all, and mentally vowed that he would compass Davy Blaine’s ruin if it were possible to do so.

Mooney’s house adjoined the post-office, and in the rear stood a small frame building, which he owned and rented to a woman known as Bess Wingate. The day succeeding the election, Mooney walked into Bess Wingate’s dwelling without knocking at the door. She was engaged in washing and did not hear his approach until he stood beside her tub. Then she suddenly looked up and spoke.

“Now you’ve come for the rent,” she exclaimed, “and I haven’t got it. You must be easy with me, for since I scalded my arm, I have scarcely done a day’s work.”

Mooney sat down upon a bench and commenced to kick his heels together. At length he spoke:

“I don’t care about the rent,” he replied, “and if you will oblige me, I won’t ask you for any for a year to come.”

Bess Wingate put her hands upon her hips, and with her arms akimbo, surveyed Mark Mooney with astonishment.

“What’s going to happen?” she said. “You were never so easy on your tenants, Mr. Mooney, so you must forgive my surprise. Don’t you remember how you put my poor husband in prison for the little debt he owed you, and you kept him there till I worked my fingers off to earn money to get him released? Well, he’s dead and gone now, and I suppose we must forgive like good Christians and try and forget, too. But what is it you want me to do?”

“You wash and clean up the post-office, don’t you,” asked Mooney.

“To be sure I do, answered Bess, “everybody in W— knows that.”

“When do you go there next?” asked Mooney.

[Concluded tomorrow]

[Concluded from yesterday]

“Saturday at four o’clock. The two clerks don’t close the office till eight, and I get the job done by half-past seven.”

“This is Tuesday,” said Mooney, in a musing way. “I want you to send for Davy Blaine to come to you while you are cleaning up the post-office, and simply ask him if he won’t have your son Dick appointed bridge-keeper. He can do it if he pleases, for old Simon is going to resign.”

“Do you mean this, Mr. Mooney?” asked Bess, in a quick voice.

“Certainly,” replied Mark.

“And you are going to give me a year’s rent free for getting my boy a place?”

“Well, if you must know it,” returned Mooney, “I have never felt satisfied about the way I acted with your husband, and I want to do you a good turn and kind of get it off my mind. Had I been elected Mayor, I would have provided for your son.”

“I’ll go to Davy Blaine’s this minute if you wish it,” replied Bess.

“Softly,” said Mooney, “it won’t do. You are to be guided by me, and do exactly as I bid you. If he refuses, and I don’t think he will, I wish the clerks to hear his reply.”

“Very well, I will do as you wish,” replied Bess.

One mail left W— daily, and the office was always closed at eight in the evening. Mark Mooney knew this, for living in the adjoining house, he could see the clerks depart every night.

On Saturday morning after the mail had departed, Mooney went into the office with two one hundred dollar bills, which he placed in a letter to be registered.

“If you had been half an hour earlier it would have gone today,” said the postmaster. “Now it must lie over until Monday.”

“That’s all right,” replied Mooney, “But wait a moment,” and he took the letter and tore off the [envelope]. “I wish you to take the number of these notes.”

“That’s useless,” said the postmaster, “we never do it.”

“In this case please oblige me,” said Mark Mooney.

The postmaster took the number of the notes, and Mooney addressed another [envelope] and left the office.

Then he went straight to old Simon Parke, the bridge-keeper, and told him he thought he could offer him a situation worth five times that he was receiving. Simon professed a ready willingness to accept Mark Mooney’s offer, and the latter, cautioning him not to mention the conversation until he heard from him further, left the old man to rejoice over the good luck that was likely to befall him.

“Mr. Blaine,” said a small boy, “Mrs. Wingate is at the post-office, and wants to know if you won’t step over there; she says she would come to you, only she’s scrubbing and don’t look fit.”

“I’ll go and see what she wishes,” said Larry, the eldest son of Davy Blaine.

“Never mind, Larry,” replied his father, “I’ll just step over.”

Blaine entered the post-office, where he found the two clerks perched on high stools to get out of Bess Wingate’s soapsuds, as she washed the floor.

When he heard the woman’s request, he informed her that he thought she must be mistaken, that he had heard nothing of it. But Bess insisted the rumor was correct, and Blaine promised to let her know before she went to bed if he could assist her.

The post-office was closed at the usual time, and scarcely were the clerks out of sight before Mark Mooney, by means of false keys, was in the room ransacking the

letters. He got his own registered letter, and several more which contained money, and made his escape from the office without being detected.

About ten o'clock Davy Blaine stopped for a short while in front of the post-office to speak to a bad character called Tom Simms. He was one of Davy's tools at the election polls, and was now begging him for money. By-and-by they went away, and Mooney, who was watching near, slipped ahead of Blaine and gained the former's door-step as he saw him in the moonlight coming down the street. Taking the two hundred dollars from his pocket he placed them in the full light of the moon directly in Blaine's path and then concealed himself behind a shed.

"Hallo!" cried Davy, as he approached, "what's this? Bless my soul, whoever heard of money being found in the streets here. Well, well, this is luck; but I suppose I'll find an owner for it on Monday. I dare not spend it until I have waited a reasonable time."

On Sunday morning there was a consternation in W—, the post-office had been robbed. Bess Wingate rapped loudly at Mooney's door and gave him the news. A crowd collected on the spot, and wild rumors flew from tongue to tongue.

Before Davy Blaine had risen on Monday morning he was arrested, and part of the stolen money found in his possession.

To try and convict him was a speedy act. He was proved to have been in the post-office talking to Bess Wingate before the clerks closed up. He was seen again two hours later in company with a dissolute character standing before the office door. The bills which Mooney had mailed were identified by the postmaster, and Blaine, though protesting his innocence, went to the State prison for the term of ten years.

Before he had served out half his term he died. The Blaine family moved away from W—, and were lost to sight and quite forgotten.

Twenty years had passed away when there arrived at one of the hotels in W— a short, well-knit man, who declined to register his name. The clerk was on the point of refusing him a room, when he took the proprietor aside and, after a brief consultation, the latter ordered the clerk to provide the stranger with one of the best rooms in the house. For several days, the new comer rarely went out except [during] evenings, and then he was absent but a short time. He seemed to have no particular business, and was apparently desirous to escape observation.

In one of his evening walks he stopped before a small cottage situated on the outskirts of the city, and inquired for Richard Wingate. An old woman, who held a candle in her hand and shading her eyes, peered into his face and told him to walk in, that her son would soon return from his work.

“Did you ever see my face before?” inquired the stranger.

Bess Wingate took another and more lengthy look at his face, and then slowly replied:

“If it were not that he were dead, I should say that Davy Blaine was standing before me.”

A momentary flush passed over the face of the stranger, and then he spoke:

“And suppose it was Larry, the son of Davy Blaine?”

Bess sprang toward him and grasped him by both his hands, and it was late at night before Larry Blaine bid Dick and his mother goodbye. During the hours he had spent there he had learned much of Mark Mooney that he never before knew.

Mark had met with some great financial difficulties, and was no longer counted wealthy. But he never gave up politics, and had for a year past been appointed postmaster at W—. Latterly some daring mail robberies had been committed in that section of the country, and Postmaster Mooney had been indefatigable in his endeavors to discover the perpetrators of the crime, but still all was a mystery. At length Detective Larry Blaine was selected to work up the case, and he went to work in his own way. Before he had any conversation with Bess Wingate, he had come to the conclusion that Mooney himself was the culprit, and after his interview with the parties named he was without a doubt on the subject.

Late one night Larry Blaine left the hotel in company with a special officer of the city police. They took up their station near the post office and waited until 2 o'clock in the morning. Presently they heard a footstep approaching; a few minutes later a heavy hand was laid on Mark Mooney's shoulder, and he was a prisoner. He asked permission to be searched in his home, and thither they proceeded. The full proof of his guilt was found on his person, and he frankly confessed his crime, and offered to restore more of the stolen money if the officers would permit him to enter the bedchamber where his wife was sleeping. They acceded to his request, upon condition of his leaving the door open. Before he entered he turned to Larry

Blaine and inquired his name. As soon as he heard it he turned away with a white face and trembling step.

“Be quick, Mr. Mooney,” said Blaine, as he watched him searching his bureau drawers.

Suddenly Mooney raised his hand to his lips. Blaine detected the act and sprang into the chamber and dragged him into the entry. A small phial fell at his feet, and then Mark Mooney staggered, and, falling to the floor, died there the self-same minute. Only the piercing shriek of a woman, and the slow step of the officers of the law succeeded and then a dreadful horror fell upon the house.

My work is accomplished, said Larry Blaine, as he bid his companion goodbye; and yet the man who caused my innocent father to die in prison escapes the punishment he so well inherited here below.

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