

Catching Counterfeiters

An Interesting Yarn Spun by an Old Government Detective

I was a night telegraph operator, and in the summer of '72, feeling much depressed in spirits and badly in need of rest, I decided to tear myself away from the confusion and turmoil of city life and seek some quiet, secluded nook where I might do nothing but sleep and dream for two weeks at least at least, writes an old detective in the *Chicago Times*. But where could I go? A happy thought struck me, in looking over some old letters, to visit my old friend Will Wilmington, whom I had not seen for years, and whose shingle of "M.D." I knew to be swinging in the balmy breezes of Mississippi. A hastily written letter brought the following reply by telegram a few days later:

NATCHEZ, July 12.—Come at once. Daisy and I need you.

WILL.

"Who the deuce is Daisy, and what do they need me for?" I mentally ejaculated. I could not imagine for the life of me what the queer message really meant. I conjured all sorts of dire disasters and ran over in my mind the names of all the females I had ever heard him mention. Could Daisy be his wife, and had any trouble befallen the couple? But no; if he had embarked upon the uncertain sea of matrimony I would have known it.

All day long on the train that message haunted me—"Daisy and I need you." I was bothered by all kinds of queer, fantastic dreams, and when the train pulled in at the depot a haggard-looking individual alighted therefrom, who looked as though he had been on a protracted spree. The next instant I was in the arms of my friend, and a second later in a carriage rolling swiftly away, and I scarcely had time to collect my sense. The handsome features of my friend had woefully changed, but I attributed it all to time's cruel ravages, and so remarked. He smiled a faint, far-away smile and said nothing. He was not the same old Will I had known, and when the first greetings were over I fired question after question at him. "Who's Daisy? In Heaven's name what's the matter with you? Why do you need me?" etc. All he said was "Wait." We pulled up at his office, and I was soon seated at a steaming hot supper. After that we drew our chairs closely together, and from his earnest expression I knew that his secret was forthcoming. "When I left you at college that memorable day, Jim," he began, "I came directly here and opened up my shop."

"Business was wonderfully dull, and I gave it up. Through the kind offices of a friend I secured an appointment as Government detective. By advice from the department I retained my office and calling as a doctor merely as a blind. I was making money and was wonderfully successful, when one day I received notice that a gang of counterfeiters was working in my section, and was flooding the country with 'queer.' I worked day after day, and succeeded in obtaining a clew. I caught a sweet, handsome girl in the act of passing some of the dust, and, though my heart rebelled, I arrested her on the quiet and brought her to my office. She promised to say nothing of the arrest, and I released her. When she left she told me her name was Daisy, but would say nothing more.

“I hope you will succeed, sir,’ she said, ‘and it will be the happiest moment of my life when you release me from the bonds that bind me now.’ Well, I have never seen her since, and I want you to help me find her. I shadowed her when she left the office, but she gave me the slip. I must find her, and must capture that gang.”

I promised him my aid, heart and soul, and was immediately converted into a walking arsenal. He had in his possession a large number of the counterfeit bills.

“I am going to turn counterfeiter, Jim,” he said with a wan smile. “The telegraph ticker here is connected with one in the top of a tree near where I think the rendezvous is. You are to stay here as my assistant, and in case you receive a message come directly to the tree with the twelve men who will arrive to-night. I have the thing almost ready to close.” Toward evening, in a rough, dirty suit of clothes, he left. I sat in his office ruminating over the strange events of the last few hours. The twelve Government men, big, stalwart fellows, arrived and were distributed about the house under my directions and with a brief explanation. I sat through the twilight and watched that instrument, but no word came. I dropped into a restless doze, dreaming of Daisy and her strange story, when suddenly I was aroused and my attention attracted to the instrument’s sharp, clear ticking.

“Jim,” it said, “Daisy—and—I—need—you. Come—at—once.”

With a hasty answer, I aroused the men, and away we went, with guns handy, and muffled from head to foot. Through brush and swamp we stumbled, and finally reached the tree. Standing there silently as ghosts, I was aroused by a touch on the arm. Turning quickly, I peered into Will’s deathly pale face.

“Come,” he said simply, and we picked our way to an old deserted mill. The men were roused to a great pitch of excitement by sudden, queer flashes of light, and a rattling, unearthly sound occasionally heard. Under Will’s direction the men crept close to the mill and peered through the cracks. Nothing met their eyes but a strange mumbling sound caught their ears. Suddenly a piercing scream was heard and a door opened from nowhere. A woman came tearing out at full speed and the door closed as quickly. The woman ran straight into Will’s arms, and he wiped the blood from her brow, at the same time murmuring: “God bless you, my darling;” and I knew it was his sweetheart. She was in a fainting condition, but when roused seemed glad to see Will and told him that she had expressed her determination to leave the life she was leading. One of the leaders had struck her a crushing blow, and her father, while attempting to defend her, was killed. The time for action had come. She was thirsting for revenge, and it was planned that she should beg admittance, promising to stay by the gang. She led the way and our crowd followed. With drawn revolvers we grouped round the door. She knocked and piteously begged them to let her in, and as quickly was she whispered out of sight behind a huge tree. The door was opened and we rushed in. Not a man escaped and many packages of counterfeit bills were captured. The presses, dies, etc., were carted away the next day and sent to Washington. Any one who has any curiosity can find in the old record a story of “Kid Evans, Joe Benson and the Mississippi gang.”

And Daisy? Well, you can answer as to what became of her. Well, I have ever since that time been a detective, and live at Will's house with a sweet little Southern wife, whose proud little spirit occasionally asserts itself.

Iowa State Reporter, February 2, 1888