

Sharp Detective Work
The Story of a Government Detective
by James Bagley

One day last winter I was sitting in the small waiting-room of the West Shore ferry-house at New York, looking through the dingy panes of glass at the icy river in hopes that the boat would come some time. I was in a hurry to cross to the Jersey shore and was impatient at the delay. The ferrymaster, a kindly old man with gray whiskers and a ruddy, smiling face, had told me that the boat would leave at 3 o'clock, and now, looking at my watch, I found that the hands marked quarter past three. Would the boat ever come? I had an engagement at Weehawken at 4 o'clock, and did not want to miss it. I saw the ice crush and crackle as the pieces were jammed against each other by the moving water, and the snow drip from the beams of the bridge and make little rivulets in the furrows of the much-worn planks, but I saw no boat. Just as visions of the little steamer lying wedged in the ice or sinking beneath the blow of some heavier vessel rose before me, I saw the object of my anxiety poke her blunt nose around the pier head and come throbbing into the slip. A deep voice behind me exclaimed, "It's time." Another impatient traveler, I thought, and then something familiar in the voice caused me to turn around. I was not mistaken. The owner of the voice was an old friend of mine—John Sullivan De Belle, United States Secret Service officer. I reached out my hand to him cordially—we had not met in ever so long—and together we entered the boat. In answer to my inquiries, he said he was crossing the river on "business." With natural curiosity I wanted to know what the "business" was.

"Business for the Government" (noncommittal).

I am of a very romantic turn of mind and this reply somewhat piqued me.

"I did not suppose it was for the good of your health," I retorted, with an attempt to be sarcastic, which attempt was lost upon my companion, for he only laughed.

"No," he said, "I get walking enough without making footprints in the snows of Weehawken. Therefore you are right. It is not a walk for the good of my health."

"Tell me what it is, won't you?" (persuasively.)

"It isn't anything in which you could possibly have an interest."

"Then you won't tell me?"

"Well, I will. Whisper—"

"Yes."

"I'm hunting up a den of counterfeiters. Now you musn't tell any one."

"Oh, of course not. Where are they?"

“That I’ll have to find out.”

“And you are looking for them now?”

“Yes.”

“John,” and I said this solemnly, and as if there was no possibility of a refusal, “I’m going with you.”

“You?”

“He stared at me in blank astonishment for a moment, then burst into a laugh.”

“Yes, I,” I nodded with emphasis.

“Impossible! A pretty figure I’d make, hunting up counterfeiters with a woman in tow.”

“I won’t be in tow.” I said, severely. “We’ll sail abreast. You needn’t shake your head and laugh. If there’s one thing in life I dote upon it’s hunting up counterfeiters. I never did hunt any, it’s true, but I want to begin. Now John, (coaxingly) do let me go with you; that’s a dear, good fellow. I won’t be in the way.”

“Why, the idea is absurd.”

“Oh, is it? I know why you don’t want me with you. You are afraid you won’t succeed, and don’t want me to be a witness to your failure. If you won’t take me with you I’ll hunt them up myself, there!”

This was the last arrow in my quiver, and I thought it would strike home. It did.

“Well,” he said, “if you’ll run the chances, come along.”

As the concession was made the boat was fastened to the slip and we went ashore. A dozen cold-looking people were hungry to catch the train and a sleepy policeman stood at the gate as we left the ferry-house for the road. Perpendicularly from the railroad track rise the rocky walls of the Palisades. They were covered with snow in patches and looked as if some giant hand had unevenly sprinkled them with fine white sugar. Snow and slush filled in the space between the railroad ties. Two long and lean hackmen told us it was a “smart” three miles to the Weehawken police station. My companion muttered something about its being only a mile, and hack fare being a necessary adjunct to a woman’s company, whereupon I independently offered to pay half the fare. This was imperiously declined, and we were soon bumping over the straw-covered rocks and sand to the police station. There a little withered old man in a cardigan jacket and a cap several sizes too large for him on was placarded “station keeper;” he volubly volunteered all the information he knew about the den of counterfeiters. It wasn’t much. He knew that “somewhere” in the Palisades there was a small house, and that there the sound

of hammering metal had been heard at night, and smoke had been seen coming out of the chimney. Yes, the police were working on the case, of course, and had learned a great deal about the counterfeiters. They were only waiting to find out where the place was and then they would arrest the men. When they exacted to find the men was a problem for the future, how near or far the “station-keeper” did not know.

“Well, we’ll take a tramp and see what we can find,” said DeBelle, “that is if you haven’t given up that absurd idea of accompanying me.”

“More determined than ever,” was my uncompromising reply, and we started to walk along the road at the base of the Palisades. The walking was horrible, and a grim smile played about the mustache of my companion as he saw me, with lifted skirts, hopping about in the snow and slush.

“Pleasant walking,” he said.

I deigned no reply. After we had walked about a mile I heard a faint sound like the ring of a hammer upon an anvil.

“Listen!” I said. “Do you hear that?”

“A blacksmith shop somewhere near.”

He was right. We turned an angle in the wall of rock, and jammed in a corner was a wooden shanty not much bigger than a corn-crib. The musical ring of an impromptu anvil chorus came from its interior. Inside a brawny smith was forging railroad bolts. He looked up in surprise as we entered, and paused in his labor. De Belle cautiously questioned him about the object of our search, but he knew nothing. We took up our march again. Along the stretch of road ran the towering wall of rock, and on our other hand stretched the icy Hudson. We picked our way through the dirty snow for another mile or so, when we came to a break in the wall of rock. It seemed as if the stone had been split and parted, leaving an irregular path between the sides. This path went upward at a steep angle, but we managed to toll up. It turned and twisted so that when we had gone several rods we lost sight of the river; rocky walls shut us out from the roadway we had left. I was nearly breathless when the path ceased to go upward, and we came to a level. Here it narrowed, and DeBelle, turning to me, said:

“I think we are on the wrong track. This path probably ends near here. It looks, though, just like a place where my game might house themselves. We’ll go on a little further, any way.”

A little further, and the split in the rock became so narrow that we could not traverse it without touching the sides of the walls. We kept on, however, and when we had about made up our minds to turn back, we suddenly came upon an upon basin. It was circular in shape, and was studded here and there with a gaunt tree. At the far side of this basin was a clump of trees, and from their top we noticed a thin column of smoke rising.

“See that!” said De Belle, in a whisper. “There’s our game.”

I was too excited to say anything.

“Now,” continued the detective, “you stay here in the shadow of the rock, and I’ll see what that smoke means.”

“Can’t I go with you?”

“No.”

I knew by the tone that this “no” meant no, and when I saw him take a heavy revolver from his pocket and cock it, I did not hesitate to obey. Telling me to remain perfectly quiet and await his return, De Belle started around the edge of the basin. He kept the trees between him and the smoke and made a circuit of the basin in order to reach the house, if there was one, behind the clump of trees. I watched his figure until it disappeared behind the trees at the far side of the basin. I strained my eyes in the direction of the den of counterfeiters, which I firmly believed that place behind the trees to be, and waited. The minutes dragged slowly along, and I thought I had been there half an hour when I looked at my watch. It was just ten minutes since De Belle had left me. I was afraid to disobey him, but my curiosity was rapidly getting the mastery over my fear.

Just then I heard the loud report of a pistol. It echoed and re-echoed around the rocky basin, and for a moment I thought that the single shot had been answered by a volley from a hundred muskets. Then all was still again. I could endure this no longer. Following De Belle’s example, I made a circuit of the basin and was soon on the edge of the trees. Then I walked on tiptoe through them, and soon came upon a tumble-down shanty. I quickly drew back to the shelter of the trees and watched the house intently. I was dying with curiosity, but I was afraid to advance. Perhaps that shot had killed De Belle. I began to tremble and had half made up my mind to run away when I saw De Belle come out of the low doorway. He came straight towards me, and I ran out to meet him.

“Did I not tell you to remain where I left you?” were his first words.

I paid no attention to the rebuke, but asked: “Are they counterfeiters? Have you captured them?”

“Yes, I’ve captured them, such as they are,” he replied; and I thought at the time that I detected a look of disgust in his face. “Come,” he added, “if you want to see a den of counterfeiters.”

I followed him across the opening to the house. We entered, and I saw an old woman and a crippled boy sitting on the floor. Piaster of paris images were strewn about the place, and the woman and boy were engaged in modeling other images in clay.

This was the den of counterfeiters. The hammering on metal that had been heard was when the boy was making molds in which to cast images. The shot that had so startled me was an accident. DeBelle had approached the place, and, in looking through one of the windows, saw the true nature of the “den” at a glance. In placing the revolver back in his pocket it had been accidentally

discharged. The woman and the boy were mother and son, and the boy sold the images in the cities.

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