

A Mountain Adventure

Few men in the Secret Service have attained a higher reputation or encountered more perils than Ambrose Beckham. I knew him for years before I could ever prevail on him to recount any of his adventures; but meeting him in Boston, about a year ago, I succeeded in getting several interesting stories from him, among them the following, which he related in his modest way:

Not many summers ago, well executed fifty-cent notes were widely circulated in the Southwest, and for a time all efforts to trace them to their source were in vain. Four detectives—Messrs. Melhorn, Wilson, Baird and myself—had followed a fancied clue to Knoxville, Tennessee, where all trace disappeared. My companions were convinced that we were on a false scent, and resolved to depart for Richmond, Virginia, from which base they had reason to believe they could work successfully. I did not share their views, and remained in Knoxville, with an understanding that we should communicate by telegraph, in cipher.

They departed, and had barely time to reach Richmond, when, just as I was beginning to grow discouraged, I made a discovery that led me to believe—in fact to feel sure—that the skillful counterfeiting was not done in any city or large town, as we had conjectured, but in the mountains of Eastern Tennessee or Western North Carolina. I immediately sent an explanatory dispatch to my friends in Richmond, and started southeastward, intending to do all I could toward finding the location of the counterfeiters before my colleagues could join me.

Owing to the direction it was necessary to take, I could not go far by railroad, and so started across country on foot, for it was likely that I might soon be in a position where even a horse might be a burden to me. I carried only a light satchel, and to all whom I conversed with on the way, I represented myself as an agent of a Western mining company, on the way to the mountains to prospect for lead and copper. You know it doesn't do for a detective to make his business known on all occasions. I therefore made many inquiries at taverns I stopped at, as to what reports had been heard of indications of ores in the mountains.

About four o'clock on the fourth day from Knoxville, after climbing a narrow, winding mountain road all day, I found myself high up in the Allegheny Mountains, and stopped at a tavern which I shall call the Half Way House. It was an ordinary country tavern, whose bar furnished only whisky and cider, and whose table was spread with plain, substantial food. I told the landlord I should take supper and lodging with him, and gave him my satchel which he placed on one end of the bar—for one room did duty as bar-room, sitting-room and office.

While I was waiting for supper, several persons came in and patronized the bar, the last one being a tall, muscular man, in the garb of a farmer. But the moment I saw his face I suspected that he was not a farmer. I have made face-reading a business, and at the first glance I detected an indescribable expression on his countenance that told me there was something hidden beyond. I felt a deeper interest in him when he laid down a new fifty-cent note to pay for his drink. Having received his change he sauntered out, bestowing a mere passing glance at me.

“I suppose that's a farmer,” I remarked to the landlord, carelessly.

“Yes, I guess he is,” replied the landlord, “I don’t really know him; he may belong in some of the little farming valleys, some miles away.”

I was sitting by a window looking toward the east. I was anxious to see which way the “farmer” went, but I did not move from my seat, knowing that should he go eastward I should see him, and that failing to see him go eastward, I might safely conclude that he had gone westward. He probably stood a minute or two in front of the tavern, for it was that length of time before I saw him stroll off toward the east. He walked in a leisurely manner, never once looking back.

When he was out of sight, I went to the bar and drank a glass of cider, laying down a one-dollar bill in payment. My object was to get that fifty-cent note in change, and I was not disappointed. It came, and with it four well-worn ten-cent notes that looked very wretched by comparison. I thrust the change carelessly into my vest pocket and resumed my seat by the window, from which I was soon afterward called to supper.

After supper I told the landlord that I should take a walk and look at the scenery, and strolled out upon the road. It was the usual narrow mountain road, hemmed in with trees and bushes. A quarter of a mile away, it began to wind around a tall hill, so that on the right a rocky wall rose up to the height of several hundred feet, while on the left was a deep declivity, covered with ragged rocks, bushes and stunted trees, which descended into a deep gorge.

The scenery was wild and grand, but I had no time to stop and admire it then. I had more urgent business.

Safely beyond view of the hotel, I left the road, and carefully descended the declivity, which was so steep that I had to grasp the saplings to avoid tumbling headlong. When a few rods from the road, I sat down on a shelving rock perfectly concealed by the surrounding bushes, and eagerly examined the fifty-cent note.

It was for this purpose that I had sought a lonely place. A brief examination developed the important fact that it was unquestionably one of the counterfeits so widely circulated. It was not wrinkled much, and had never been folded. It was “fresh from the mint”—and the mint could not be far away.

I returned to the hotel, where I made inquiries of the communicative landlord concerning indications of lead and copper ores. Before retiring that night I paid my bill, saying that I should rise very early—probably before daylight—and proceed to the next town, a distance of four miles, before breakfast, and do less traveling in the heat of day.

I slept soundly for some hours. On waking I lighted a match and looked at my watch. It was only half-past three; but not wishing to go to sleep again, lest I should sleep too long I arose, and in fifteen minutes was ready to leave.

By lighting several matches successively, I found my way down stairs into the bar-room. No one being astir, I took my satchel from the counter—where it had been left on the previous afternoon—unfastened the door, and passed quietly out.

It was the period of long summer days, and the darkness was already beginning to give place to the gray dawn of morning. I had left the hotel two hundred yards behind me, and was moving along at a leisurely pace, when I was thoroughly startled by a dark object that rushed out from among the bushes on the right of the road, and stopped in my path.

In an instant my hand was on my revolver, when my alarm gave way to astonishment at discovering that the object was a woman—at least, it was a person in female attire, though in the imperfect light I could not discover whether the face was that of a woman or man.

“Who are you?” I asked, watching every movement of the intruder.

“Don’t you know me, sir?” asked a female voice.

“Can’t say that I do,” I replied, still wondering.

“Well, I live at the hotel.”

“Ah! was it you who waited on the table last evening?”

“Yes.”

“I begin to recognize you now. Why are you up so early?”

“Speak low!” said the girl, mysteriously. “I heard you leave and hurried out here through a short path to get ahead of you, and warn you of your danger. I did not dare do it near the hotel.”

“Danger! What danger?” I asked in a low tone.

“They have discovered,” she replied, looking carefully around, and scarcely speaking above a whisper “that you are a detective.”

“By what means?” I asked, rashly committing myself.

“They examined your satchel after you went to bed.”

“But there is nothing in it showing me to be a detective.”

“No, nor nothing to show that you are a prospector. They think that if you were, you would have certain instruments. I watched and overheard them. They suspect you are a detective, because they are convinced you are not a prospector, as you said. Now, whether you are a detective or not, you are equally in danger, because they think you are. You are in great danger! I have warned you for your own sake. You won’t betray me?”

“Certainly not, and I thank you; but perhaps the danger is not so great as you think.”

“I assure you that I am not mistaken, and I beg you not to proceed on this road.”

“What do you know of these men?” I asked.

“I don’t know anything of them; I only suspect what they are.”

“Does your father know anything about them?”

“The Landlord is not my father. I am only employed at the hotel. I was raised in Knoxville.”

“Well, do you think the landlord knows anything about them?”

“I don’t believe he is in the league with them. If he knows or suspects their business, he would not dare to say anything; they murder him. Now I have warned you, and I beg you be careful. I must hurry back, as it is getting light. You will never let them know that I warned you?”

“Certainly not, girl, and I repeat my thanks, be careful. Have no fear that there will be anything like a murder. Good-bye!”

“Good-bye,” she responded; and gliding into the bushes she disappeared.

A nervous shudder ran over me as I found myself once more alone on the quiet mountain road, and I looked keenly on all sides, with a feeling that danger was near me. All was quiet, not even the footsteps of the retreating girl being audible.

I stood motionless and undecided for a full minute, then moved slowly on, carefully watching the bushes on either side, to see if anything like a path left the road—for I felt confident the counterfeiters’ den was some way between the Half-Way House and Campbell’s tavern, four miles eastward.

The road was dry and dusty, and the light of the morning soon enabled me to discern fresh tracks of human feet. I had gone three-quarters of a mile, with the towering hill still on my right and the deep gorge on my left, when I was struck by the discovery of fresh tracks directly across the road.

Examining the lower edge of the road, I found, not a path exactly, for the declivity at that point, for the bushes showed that they had many times been thrust aside right and left, while some of the smaller ones were trampled down and broken.

While I was carefully noting these facts I was startled by a low, harsh voice in my ear:

“Well, sir, what are you looking for?”

I turned about quickly, and found myself face to face with the tall man who paid the fifty cent note at the Half-Way House.

He scowled savagely, and with a long hunting rifle in his hand, he reminded me of the Giant Despair calling Christian and his companion to account for encroaching on his domain.

My mind took in the situation at once. It was useless to attempt to conceal my true character, and there was nothing left me but to struggle with that powerful and desperate man. I must not allow him to escape, or it would defeat my object; and moreover I could see, by a savage gleam in his eye, that he did not allow me to escape if he could help it. Plainly he intended to murder me.

These thoughts passed through my mind like a flash, and summoning all my coolness and tact, I somewhat surprised him with by calmly replying to his question:

“Oh, I was just looking for you.”

He had expected that I would be startled and confused, and my complacency surprised him and threw him off his guard.

Quick as thought I dropped my satchel and snatched his rifle, intending to knock him senseless; but his hold upon it was firmer than I had thought, and instead of getting possession of it in a twinkling, as I had hoped, I now had to struggle for it.

It was struggling for life with me; with him, for liberty. He [was] much larger and stronger than myself, but I was more used to handling men than he. With my skill against his strength, it was an equal match. I need not describe how we went swaying to and fro in that fearful contest; how we went down to the dusty earth together; how we rose struggling to the edge of the road and nearly tumbled down the declivity.

The contest lasted fully five minutes, and I began to feel my strength failing, when, by a desperate effort, I seized a slight advantage and tripped him, throwing him heavily to the earth. He released the rifle as he fell; but it seemed that he had cocked it before accosting me, and it was discharged at this moment, its sharp report striking keenly on the mountain air. He struggled to his feet, but with one tremendous blow I laid him out like a log.

I would have clapped a pair of hand-cuffs upon him, but that moment I heard loud, excited voices, and glancing down through the bushes, I caught a glance of four or five rough-looking men, armed with rifles scrambling up from the deep valley below.

It was a run for life now, and I dropped the rifle, and seized my satchel, and with new strength, lent my by the peril of my awful situation, I ran away eastward—like the wind. A run of a hundred yards placed me beyond view of the scene of the struggle, and I paused for a moment to listen. I heard angry voices, then clattering footsteps, and I knew they were after me.

I knew that to come within range of their rifles was death, and I darted away again. After a run of three hundred yards, the bushes and trees suddenly grew sparse and I saw in advance of me a stretch of straight road a quarter of a mile long. I knew they would reach this open space before I could run half the distance, and thus bring their rifles to bear upon me; and without a second's hesitation, I sprang out of the road, on the lower side, where it was not so steep as at the point I

had recently left, and a few yards from the road I found a group of large rocks. Between two of the tallest there was a crevice three or four feet wide, and I dashed into it to see where it would take me to. It was somewhat winding but, at a distance of fifty yards from the entrance, I suddenly came upon a bare, open space of about an acre, nearly level, and entirely devoid of vegetation. Just then I stumbled and fell headlong, and before I could rise, I was seized roughly by the arms by several strong men, while one exclaimed:

“Now, sir, we’ve got you!”

I won’t try to describe the terror of that moment.

“A word and you’re a dead man!” said another, pressing the cold muzzle of a pistol against my temple.

“See if he had any weapons,” suggested another.

“This will fix him,” said one, who still held me to the earth, and something cold touched my wrists. “Now get up.”

To my amazement, I found a pair of handcuffs upon my wrists; and as I rose almost paralyzed with the terror of a moment before, I beheld standing around me, with revolvers in their hands, Baird, Wilson, and Melhorn.

“Why, Beekman!” they all exclaimed in a breath.

“Hush!” I said, in a low tone, “our men are near.”

And while they took the handcuffs from my wrists, I hastily explained the situation.

Creeping back among the rocks, we found the five ruffians standing in the road engaged in conversation. They had lost my trail.

“Counterfeiters. I command you to surrender!” shouted Baird, in a tone of thunder. “Resist, or try to escape, and I shall order the soldiers to riddle you with carbine bullets. You are surrounded!”

With this he stepped boldly out from among the rocks, while we followed, making as much noise as possible. The counterfeiters looked at one another with amazement and chagrin.

“Throw down your arms this instant or I shall order the cavalry to fire!” said Baird in an authoritative tone. “I’m the marshal.”

They were completely taken in, and meekly dropped their rifles. We then advanced and placed handcuffs upon them all. They were all very pale.

“It’s all up!” said one of them in a husky voice.

“Certainly it is,” said I. “You didn’t know I ran from you just to get you in an ambush, did you?”

We marched our prisoners back to where I had encountered the “farmer,” and there we found the gentleman sitting, with his back against a tree, rubbing his head. He was a little astonished at the new state of things, but he was too weak to try to resist or try to escape, and he soon wore ornaments like those which graced the wrists of his companions.

Well, we found the counterfeiters’ den deep down in the gorge, where human feet seldom tread. Their number was six, and we had them all. In their rendezvous we found some of the finest instruments for counterfeiting and much counterfeit money, all of which we seized.

On returning to the Half Way House we took the landlord into custody, but nothing could ever be proved against him and he was released. I rewarded the girl with a five-dollar bill.

You will wonder how Baird, Wilson and Melhorn so opportunely happened to be at the spot where they mistook me for a counterfeiter. I will tell you:

On reaching Richmond they received my dispatch and instantly started to join me in the mountains. They had come by way of Raleigh and Ashville, and had left Campbell’s tavern early that morning expecting to meet me near the Half Way House. They had left the road to examine the cluster of rocks, thinking the abode of the counterfeiters might be there, when I came rushing through, and strangely enough the novel idea struck them all at once that the fugitive was a counterfeiter running away from me.

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