

For Honor's Sake

"Tell you a story!" said Mark Devine, as he lighted a fresh cigar, and gave his chair a new hitch, to incline it against the wall of the sitting-room where we sat smoking. "I never saw a youngster with such an insatiable appetite for stories in my life."

"But your detective experiences are so valuable to me," I urged.

"Oh! you want a story of my experience as a detective. Let me see. I don't think of any just now that would give you any hints for your own guidance save what I have already told you. But there was one instance of pluck that happened under my own eyes down in Maine that I never told you, I guess. Did I? Did I ever tell you about the stage coach affair?"

"No. You never told me about any stage coach affair in Maine," I said, positively.

"Well, as we've got to wait here till that down-train from Memphis comes in, I'll tell you now. Perhaps it will clear the air a little to imagine we are in New England."

For we were seated at the open window of the depot at Grand Junction, upon a sultry July day, waiting for a train from Memphis, upon which was traveling in fancied security one of those clever rogues whose exploits in the paths of crime furnish employment for honest men in their detection and capture.

I, being yet young and new in the service of the "force," was associated with Mark Devine, who had grown gray in the line of duty I was entering upon.

No fiction had the charm for me that the actual experiences of my companion possessed, and I never omitted an opportunity to gather instruction and entertainment from his lips.

Taking a long pull at his cigar, Mark commenced his story:

"Twenty years ago, I was employed as private and confidential detective in the firm of West & Rawlings, of the city of New York.

"They were wholesale importers and jobbers of dry goods, and one of the wealthiest firms in the city, doing an immense business in the New England States, and especially in Maine. Mr. Rawlings himself was from Bangor, and more than once I had been sent to watch suspicious customers in the Pine Tree State.

"One morning, the last of May, I had been lounging about the store, apparently waiting for customers, really keeping my eye on three new clerks, who were unpacking some recently arrived cases of valuable laces, when a message was given me that Mr. Rawlings desired to speak to me in his private office.

"I put on my coat, and went down-stairs at once to ascertain what new duty was required.

“The old gentleman was alone in the office as I entered, and one glance at his face proved to me, whatever the business was in which he wanted my assistance, it was one that interested him very deeply.

“He greeted me curtly but pleasantly, and motioned me to take a chair.

“‘Mark,’ he said, as I obeyed, ‘do you remember Brianfeld?’

“‘I do,’ I answered, very much astonished, for I must tell you here that this same Brianfeld had come under my professional notice when I was but a young man, and inexperienced in life.

“He had been a confidential clerk of West & Rawlings when they were a comparatively new firm, and had succeeded in—well, we will say, *appropriating for private use* thirty thousand dollars of the money intrusted to his care.

“I was one of those who tracked him to a European steamer, and knew of his escape. There was no Atlantic cable in those days, and our orders were to let him go!

“I had thought it queer then that the case was dropped so sudden, but 'twas none of my business to ask questions. Still I had heard that Brianfeld had gambled away his ill-gotten fortune, had led a wild, dissipated life abroad, and finally committed suicide ten years before the time when Mr. Rawlings recalled him to my recollection. So I let my astonishment show itself in the answer.

“‘I thought he died ten years ago! You don't mean to tell me Brianfeld has turned up again?’

“‘No, Mark,’ the old gentleman answered, in a sad tone. ‘Brianfeld will never trouble us again. He fills a suicide's grave in France. But I must recall him to your mind before I send you upon the most important and the most confidential errand you have yet undertaken for West & Rawlings. We are sure you can be trusted, Mark, so I am going to tell you what is not only a secret of the firm, but a piece of family history.’

“‘You *may* trust me,’ I said, briefly, though I was really moved at the confidence and the expression upon Mr. Rawlings's face.

“‘You do not know,’ he said, ‘the secret of our leniency toward the unfortunate man I have named. When he died, he left a widow, and one son about twelve years of age. That widow was my first cousin, and had been brought up by my parents, so that we were like brother and sister. I loved her as dearly as if she was indeed a sister, and for her sake I tried to like the man she married. At my request he was taken into the counting-house, and trusted as one of ourselves. You know how he repaid that trust, and can also understand why he was allowed to escape so easily. I could better afford to lose thirty thousand dollars even then than to bring further disgrace upon my afflicted cousin. Crushed by the weight of her husband's guilt and desertion, she lost her health, and died in a few years, leaving her boy to my care. He was old enough to know the legacy of shame he had inherited, and willingly agreed to my suggestion to take his mother's name, and try to live down his father's disgrace. I educated him, gave him a home in my own family, and when he left school, put him in our counting-house.’

“Mr. Fred Euckart?’ I said.

“Yes. A young man, as you are aware, of great ability, handsome, prepossessing in manner, and promising to make a good man in business, or— or, Mark, a smart rogue. The same quick tact, ready adaptation to his company or surroundings, rapid calculation and power of conducting a complicated piece of business that distinguished his father are also possessed by Fred. I had rather see him stupid, slow, dull, Mark, than think he was going to tread his father's path. Having no children of my own, I look upon Fred in the light of a son, one who will probably take my place in the firm, and inherit my estate in the future, though I hold out no such hope to him. To add to my interest, he and Maggie West wish to marry.’

“I could not suppress a whistle. Mr. West, the senior partner of the firm, had but one child, a daughter, the prettiest girl I ever saw, and the idol of her father's heart. That he could give her to Brianfeld's son seemed hard to believe.

“West knows all,’ said Mr. Rawlings, ‘and he, like myself, trembles for the young man's own stability of purpose. Still, his daughter loves Fred. After many an anxious consultation we have decided to put the young man to a test, and we want your assistance.’

“I am ready, sir.’

“Prepare for a start on Monday morning, in any disguise Fred will not recognize.’

“Not difficult, sir. I doubt if Mr. Fred gives me one glance in a month. I suppose he does not know my real place here.’

“Not at all; you are one of the salesmen.’

“He will not recognize me on Monday, then.’

“We will send him on a collecting tour in Maine, with bills to the amount of fifty thousand dollars, all good names. Purposely there are left many apparent opportunities for falsifying these bills, of which, however, West and myself have a strict account. You are to watch him. Win his confidence, if you can; follow him every day; sleep near him every night, but keep your secret, unless he attempts his father's game. If he does, arrest him at once. I do not like any part of the plot, Mark, but we have too much at stake to stand upon nice points of feeling. My fortune, the future firm, the happiness of Maggie West, all hang upon the firmness of the principles I have tried to inculcate in Fred Euckart's heart. Mark,’ said the old gentleman, earnestly, ‘I believe he will prove himself true, but I owe it to myself and to West to save the money if we lose the man, and so I send you. Come to me Saturday afternoon for final instructions, and the money for your expenses.’

“I left the office, and set about my own preparations.

“You are aware that I am not a bad hand at a disguise, and I determined to travel with Mr. Fred as a drummer for a lace and ribbon house.

“Our own firm being a dry goods house, this would give me a ready entrance at the same places where my companion's business would call him, and if I secured any orders, they would be easily filled through Mr. Rawlings.

“As Fred had never seen me, save with my sandy hair and whiskers *au naturel*, I went to a barber, and sacrificed my beard and side-whiskers, tearing only a dainty mustache and imperial. I had my crop of sandy curls cut short, and my hair, mustache, imperial, eyebrows and eyelashes dyed black.

“Being assured by the barber that my own mother would not know me, I next exchanged my rather careless costume for a suit of stylish garments, procured shiny boots and a silk hat, kid gloves and a dandy cane, and was transformed from a rather seedy Hibernian of nearly forty to a spruce chap of slightly Spanish appearance, who could have passed for thirty.

“With a delicate valise, containing samples, a larger one for clothing, a stylish overcoat and duster, I appeared on Monday morning at the New Haven depot, in season to encounter Fred in the gentlemen's room, some ten minutes before the departure of the train.

“He looked cheerful and bright, as if going on a holiday trip, and when I caught sight of his handsome young face and active young figure, though I don't profess to be a praying man myself, I did menially utter a prayer that he might let his father's fate stand before him for a perpetual warning, not an example.

“He was carefully dressed, and in his hand carried a black leather valise, of moderate size, with the initials "F. E." painted in white letters upon one end.

“I purposely delayed the purchase of my ticket until Fred fell into the line at the ticket-office, when I secured the place next his own, following him into the cars, and taking my place upon the same seat he occupied.

“By the time we were well on our journey I had introduced myself, Charley Robinson, and my business, and having a list of Fred's destinations, carelessly mentioned the towns and cities to which I was traveling.

“The names at once attracted his attention, and the proposal to keep together in our journey came, as I intended it should, from himself.

“Yet to anticipate a little in the close daily, almost hourly, intercourse of the next three weeks, not once did Fred Euckart admit me to any confidence regarding his business, not once did he admit me to the privacy of his sleeping-room, not once did he let my hand rest upon his black valise.

“Cordial in manner, frank about himself, even to admitting to me that he was in love, and on probation waiting for paternal consent to his marriage, ready to spend his leisure time in my company, generous in sharing the expenses of our theatre visits or other amusements, he was yet close as wax whenever business was under discussion.

“In vain I confided to him all my aspirations, my hopes and plans; I received no confidence in return.

“It really required all my ingenuity to find out that he was succeeding well, and collecting in the name of the firm large sums of money daily.

“Every morning he courteously bade me farewell for the day, and started about his business, and if he met me showing my samples in the same stores where he was transacting his own affairs, he gave me the polite greeting of a friend, and left me, never joining me or inviting me to bear him company in hours when he was serving the firm of West & Rawlings.

“From the first I had given him cordial liking, but to this I was rapidly adding my sincere respect, and a fervent wish for his well-doing.

“By the time the money he had been sent to collect was in his hands, I was as anxious as West & Rawlings themselves for its safe, honorable delivery.

“We were at Thomaston, a town on the coast of Maine, one lovely afternoon in the latter part of June, and our faces were turned homeward. We had left Bangor the day before by boat, but our next destination was Bath, and to reach that we were obliged to travel by the stage-coach, which carried the mail, and left Thomaston at three o'clock.

“In the black valise, marked "F. E.," were bonds, receipts, and money to the amount of over forty thousand dollars, every cent of which, by Mr. Rawlings's contrivance, was available for Mr. Fred's private use, if he was open to temptation. There was one more bill to collect at Bath, and then we were free to return to New York. I say we, for I was identified with Fred, by our own friendly compacts as well as by my private mission.

“The day had been soft and sunny, and we walked to the stage-office, each carrying a valise, congratulating ourselves upon another day away from the probably oppressive heat of the metropolis. The coachman was standing by his horses as we approached, and drawling out, in the strongest nasal twang of Yankeeism, his opinion that there was thunder in the air, and the prospect of a wetting before night.

“‘You'd better put your baggage right in here,’ he said to us, when he found we were going to Bath. ‘It's the safest place on the coach, and you can sleep easy, for it's under my feet all the way, and thief-proof.’

“He opened, as he spoke, the end of a box under his seat, showing us the usual black-hole for the reception of small baggage. I thrust in my bags at once. Fred hesitated, and then put in his

precious valise, watching attentively while the end was closed again, and secured by a network of leather straps and buckles.

“There was a seat for two behind the driver, and a seat beside him. The latter Fred took, while I took one of the former, sharing it with a tall, rawboned fellow, who informed me he was only going three or four miles, to ‘tend to some quarry business.’

“Two ladies and a gentleman took inside places, and the four horses receiving intimation that their services were instantly required, we started off punctually at three o'clock.

“My companion on the seat behind the coachman beguiled the time by a lively description of the road over which we were to travel by night, informing me that the road on each side for several miles was between immense quarries of granite, some of them seventy to a hundred feet deep. The meadows on each side were fenceless for a great part of the way, and if the horses in the dark were to take a notion to turn off the road, there was nothing, he said, with a loud laugh, to prevent our finding out what the bottom of a quarry felt like, after a fall of seventy feet or so.

“At this point the driver informed my communicative friend that he was a ‘blarsted idiot,’ and, farther, that ‘he was driving that 'ar' couch, and the critters knew every inch of the road.’

“A lively discussion as to the safety and danger of the ride occupied the time till my companion left us, when the driver continued his side of the argument for our edification, giving us the history of the road for years, and proudly defying us to give one well authenticated story of an upset.

“‘As to them quarries,’ he said, scornfully, ‘they lay across meadows, and hosses, as a rule, kept along a well-beaten road in preference to meandering over sich places.’

“We jogged along uneventfully till nearly sunset, when our driver pointed out to us the quarries referred to, extending for miles, and plainly visible from the top of the coach, though lying some distance off the road. As the sun went down, heavy clouds began to gather, and flashes of lightning, with growling thunder, announced a storm brewing.

“The driver strongly advised us to go inside. There was plenty of room, and the storm threatened to be a heavy one, so I descended, supposing Fred would follow me.

“For a moment I forgot the precious valise, but recalled its existence when I found Fred retained his seat, in spite of the heavy drops of rain now falling.

“I had scarcely taken my place inside the coach when the storm broke in all its fury. If you have never heard thunder amidst stone quarries, you can form no idea of the additional reports it accumulates in such regions. It is as if each of the yawning chasms of stone was a separate battery of artillery added to the thunder rolling overhead. I was looking out at the window, awed by the grandeur of the storm, when a blinding sheet of lightning caused us all to shrink involuntarily. A cry from Fred: ‘The driver is struck! The horses are running away!’ roused us all.

“In the drenching rain we opened the stage-door, and while the terrified horses tore blindly down the road, the reins hanging, and no control restraining them, we, at the risk of our lives almost, sprang one after another from the open doorway—the women first, the men next, I myself last of all.

“Imagine my horror, when my feet struck the ground, to find it no beaten road, but the soft, wet grass of the meadows. The coach was being dragged toward the quarries with headlong speed. But as I raced after it, seeing it draw nearer and nearer to certain destruction, calling upon Fred, I heard his shout:

“‘I am here, on the coach!’

“On the coach! By the light of the Summer twilight, by the vivid glare of the frequent flashes of lightning, I could see him. He had swung himself down to the end of the seat, holding on to the iron railing by crooking his elbow, and with his open pocket-knife he was sawing at the leather straps that held fast the end of the box where our valises were stored. Faster and faster the terrified horses rushed to their certain destruction; nearer and nearer the coach was drawn to the yawning quarries, and still Fred hung on by one arm, severing strap after strap. I ran as fast as possible, screaming to him to let himself drop—that he would be killed to a certainty; but he persevered.

“One blinding flash of lightning showed me the edge of the quarry, the leading horses already over, the coach rocking as it followed, and Fred still hanging on. A second later, and above the roar of the storm, I heard the sickening crash that told me the coach was over. I staggered and fell, overcome with horror. A clear voice roused me. “Charley—Charley Robinson!”

“I was on my feet in an instant.

“‘Fred!’ I cried, ‘are you over?’

“‘No! I have hurt my foot! Can you come?—carefully, for I am on the very edge.’

“It was no easy task to reach him, for every moment increased the darkness. But, following his voice, I succeeded at last in getting sufficiently near to lie flat on the ground and reach him my hands. One of his grasped mine, and he dragged himself slowly toward me while I as slowly worked backward, till we were in a place of safety.

“‘Give me your other hand,’ I said.

“‘It is holding my valise,’ he answered. ‘I had not time to save yours, old fellow.’

“‘I am glad you did not try. There is nothing there worth your life. You were mad to risk it for your own.’

“By this time we were sitting on the soaked grass, enjoying an impromptu shower-bath, but in safety.

“‘Charley!’ Fred said, in a solemn voice, that trembled with emotion, ‘there is more than my life in this valise. My honor is there! If I had not saved it, I would have gone over with it.’

“And I believed then, believe now, he would.

“We sat a few moments considering the situation, and then were joined by the rest of our party, drawn to us by our voices. A shivering, soaking group we were, scarcely daring to move till the rain ceased and the moon rose, showing us the quarries not a hundred feet away. In the darkness we had heard the cries of the horses, proving some of them, at least, were yet alive, and the almost human-like shrieks had added to the horror of our painful position.

“The man who had been inside the coach informed us that there was a village about a quarter of a mile along, where we could hire a wagon, and undertook to go forward himself and send one to our relief.

“I will not bore you with any more particulars. The wagon arrived, and we lifted Fred into it, the ladies following, and I perching myself beside my plucky friend. The driver was found lying on the roadside stone dead, and disfigured fearfully by the lightning-stroke that killed him.

“We arrived at Bath the next day, and Fred was put to bed with a fractured ankle. By the first mail my statement of the affair went to New York and Mr. Fred was considerably astonished three days later when Mr. Rawlings himself walked into his room.

“There was a wedding in the Winter, and Maggie West was the bride. I don't know that Fred ever distinguished himself by any other feat, but I do say that he certainly did one plucky act in his life ‘for honor's sake.’”

“Train's in sight, gentlemen!” cried the station-master: and Mark Devine, tossing away his cigar, ended his account of one experience in his own life, and added a new one by accosting a clerical-looking individual, in green spectacles and a wig, and informing him that then was a pressing necessity for his returning to New York in our company by the most direct route.

Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours, August 1874