

## Incident in the Life of a California Detective

Some years since, the stage line in the southern part of this State suffered from frequent depredations by "road-agents." The express company offered liberal rewards and the local officers displayed commendable zeal, all to no purpose. Some of the officers of the company, with whom I had been acquainted while sheriff of one of the mining counties, requested me to take the matter in hand and see if I could get any clue to work upon. Suspecting that some of my former acquaintances who had served a term or two in the penitentiary had returned to their old vocations in "pastures new," and believing that if such was the case I could soon get upon their track, I readily consented.

The day after I had received my instructions, I was on the road to the scene of the last robbery. I represented myself as a stockraiser looking for feed; and, as it was an exceedingly dry year and feed very scarce, my representations were readily accepted. The numerous robberies were the most frequent topics of conversation among the very sparse population on the line of my road. I affected indifference to the subject, but carefully noted everything said.

At a certain station where I had remained two days and had vainly sought evidence upon which to found a theory, I hired a horse of a native Californian, telling him and others that I was going across the mountains to the coast to look for grass; tied my blankets behind my saddle and made other preparations for a journey. While I was thus engaged, a man rode up to the station with the information that the stage had been robbed the night before, about ten miles south.

Pretending to pay but little attention to his narrative, I got all the information he had to impart, and then started on the trail leading to the coast. This trail I followed about a mile and then struck across to the stage road, and hastened to reach the scene of the robbery while the tracks were yet fresh.

I had but little difficulty in finding where the stage had been stopped. After about a half hour's search, I found the spot where the express-box had been broken open. It was in a ravine a few hundred yards from where it was thrown off. It was evident from the pieces of brown paper, such as is used by the express company in wrapping up packages of coin, scattered around that the robber had made a good night's work.

I examined the ground carefully, and came to the conclusion from the tracks, made evidently by a high-heeled boot, that but one man had been engaged in the robbery. The ravine was rocky and the tracks only occasionally visible, but they seemed to go up the ground. When I had satisfied myself of this, I went back after my horse. I found, however, no horse in the place where I had left him; he had broken off the branch of the small tree to which I had tied him and was out of sight.

The rope and branch as he dragged them along left traces easily followed, and just before sunset I found the horse quietly grazing at the junction of two small canons. I had but little difficulty in catching him, and, as I found a little water, I concluded to camp there

for the night. So after picketing my horse I made my supper of the dried beef and crackers that I had brought with me, rolled myself up in my blankets with my saddle for a pillow, and slept until daylight.

In the morning when I went to get my horse, I found the tracks of another, and in the moist ground near the spring to which I led my horse for water, I could easily distinguish the difference between the tracks of the two; mine being barefooted while the other was shod forward; and in examining carefully I discovered that about an inch was broken off from the inside of the off shoe. I also found boot tracks that corresponded with those I had found at the place where the express-box had been broken open. Beyond the moist soil near the spring, the ground was hard and rocky and the tracks difficult to follow. Being convinced, however, that they pointed up the canon and that I could find them at some point to the west, I mounted my horse and, to make better time, rode up the narrow ridge that runs parallel with the canon.

I continued up this ridge about two miles, until a dense thicket of chaparral compelled me to turn down into the ravine again. It had become less rocky and in spots somewhat moist. Here I could occasionally find tracks of the broken shoe. Following up the bed of the canon about a mile, I came to a perpendicular bluff, but just before reaching it found that the horse I had been following had gone out of the ravine up the steep bank to the right. Here the soil was less rocky than in the bed of the canon, and quite a trail had been made, so that I had no difficulty in following the tracks.

This I did for a distance of, as I judged, about twenty miles, when the trail seemed suddenly to stop. So I unsaddled, picketed my horse, and taking some crackers and beef in my hand, continued my search on foot. I found that I was now almost on the summit of the mountains and that the tracks forming the trail had here taken different directions, all, however, leading down towards the coast. After a close examination I selected that which appeared to be the freshest, and followed down the mountain some distance until the tracks turned short to the left and crossed a canon. I then returned for my horse, and, as the mountain was steep, led him, still following the tracks, which I noticed here, as before, appeared to seek the roughest ground on which it was possible for a horse to travel. This served to confirm me in the belief that I was on the right trail. I walked as fast as I could lead my horse down the steep, rocky mountain side, and after crossing two steep canons, I came suddenly in sight of a small log-cabin.

Confident that I had tracked my game to its lair, I paused a moment to deliberate as to what course to pursue. Deciding to go boldly up to the cabin and be governed by circumstances, I approached to within a few yards of the door without discovering any sign of life. What was my surprise then, when, probably called by the sound of my horse's feet, a woman came to the door. She was evidently startled, and I for the moment embarrassed. She was apparently about twenty-five years of age, and though her face bore traces of sorrow and pain, she was very handsome and there was about her an unmistakable air of refinement.

Recovering from my confusion at this unexpected vision, I saluted her respectfully, and telling her I was looking for feed for stock, asked permission to spread my blankets in a rude shed, which I noticed standing on a rocky point across a ravine about a hundred yards from the cabin.

She seemed confused at this request; said her husband was out hunting and would be at home soon; that he very much disliked to have any one trespass on his feed, and that there was much better grass two or three miles beyond, near the coast.

I pretended not to notice her embarrassment, and told her that I would lead my horse over the hill, for he was too tired to go far.

She seemed relieved at this, and advised me with great earnestness to go three or four miles further. I was at a loss to understand her earnestness. The sequel will show that she had reason for it.

I crossed the ravine to the point on which the shed stood; I noticed that it was near the edge of an almost perpendicular cliff of rocks nearly a hundred feet high, while the ground on each side sloped off gradually. On the south side was a spot of an acre or two, watered by a spring, a small portion of which was fenced with poles and planted with vegetables. A short distance beyond a horse was picketed. I led my horse past him, stopping a moment to take up his off foot. The shoe was broken—exactly in correspondence with the tracks I had followed.

A short distance farther on I found a spot of grass, unsaddled and picketed my horse, and walked back to the shed. It was a rude affair, containing only a saddle, bridle, and a few barley sacks. Thinking it would be a little better than no shelter, and that the sacks would add a little to my comfort, I took them up to spread them on the ground. One of them had three holes cut in it, and strings were fastened to it. It had evidently been used as a mask. Underneath the last one was a pair of boots, and on the sole of one boot directly in front of the heel was a small piece of brown paper of the kind used by the express company in putting up packages of coin. I found upon examination that there was sealing wax on the paper, which had adhered to the boot—a silent but certain witness.

Without removing the paper, I replaced the boots, and hearing footsteps walked out on the point. Here I saw a man coming up the ravine with a gun on his shoulder. He was looking in the direction of the cabin and did not see me until I spoke. At the sound of my voice as I said "good evening," he instantly brought his gun from his shoulder as if in expectation of an attack. I pretended not to notice this, and with as much composure as I could assume, told him my story about looking for feed. I said, that I had accidentally found his place, and that as there was in the vicinity considerable grass, I wished to buy his right. I told him that I was willing to pay a good price, and would give him the money the next day if he would go with me to the station on the road.

It was so nearly dark by this time, that I could not see his features distinctly; but he was evidently suspicious. He replied after a moment's hesitation, that he did not wish to sell

his grass; that he had some cattle, and expected to get some more, and did not want to be trespassed upon.

I disclaimed any intention of trespassing, and said that if he did not wish to sell I would try elsewhere; but that since it was now night and my horse tired, I should be compelled to camp there, and would go over to the coast in the morning.

He said rather gruffly that I could do so if I liked, and walked on towards the cabin.

Although he did not ask me to come, I followed a short distance behind him, trying to continue in conversation. He only replied, however, when I asked some direct question, and then very briefly. When he reached the cabin door, he went in without asking me to accompany him. I could hear him talking in low earnest tones with his wife, but could distinguish no words. Soon he came out, saying to her that he would go and move his horse and return for supper; and walked across the ravine, evidently in an unpleasant frame of mind.

I hesitated a moment. Just then his wife came to the door, cast a furtive glance after him, then, stepping back far enough to be out of his sight, exclaimed in a low but distinct and earnest, even beseeching tone,

"Don't stay if you value your life."

As he was now some distance from us, I tried to talk with her; but she repeated with still greater earnestness,

"Go, don't stop a minute."

As it appeared to distress her greatly to have me remain, I turned and walking fast after her husband, overtook him as he reached his horse. Assuming a composure I did not feel, I asked him if he knew of any grass that was not claimed; telling him that if he did and would go with me in the morning, I would pay him liberally.

He replied in a surly manner that he would think about it and let me know in the morning.

I found it impossible to engage him in conversation; but when I asked his permission to spread my blankets in the shed, he readily assented. This sudden change in his manner surprised me somewhat, but thinking he had become a little ashamed of his boorishness, I gave it little consideration, took my saddle and blankets, and went to the shed, while he returned to the cabin. In the shed I spread my blankets and lay down. But the fleas were so numerous and fierce, that I found it impossible to sleep.

So, again taking my bedding, I went up the mountain side about fifty yards, and shaking my blankets to rid them of the insects as much as possible, I lay down under a manzanita bush and was soon asleep.

I must have slept several hours, for when I awoke the moon was shining through the treetops, and all objects excepting those in the shade were distinctly visible. I lay awake some time, revolving in my mind what course to pursue on the coming day. I was about dropping into a doze again, however, when I heard the cabin door open; it was hung on wooden hinges, and made a creaking noise that could be heard for some distance. This aroused me. Looking in the direction of the cabin, I saw the man come out. I could see that he had something in his hand, which I at first took to be a rifle; but as he crossed the ravine coming toward the shed I saw that it was an ax.

He walked slowly and stealthily until he reached the shed. Here he stopped a moment as if listening, then stepped in, and instantly I heard the sound of his ax striking the ground apparently a heavy blow; then, "curses not loud but deep." Presently he came out, still muttering curses, and went to where my horse was picketed.

I improved this chance to take my blankets and find a more secure place farther up the hill-side, where I could watch him unseen. After looking around for some time among the grass he went back to the cabin. I wrapped my blankets around me, and sitting on the ground with my back against a tree, kept watch until full daylight, for I now knew that I had a desperate man to deal with, and that in all probability the next few hours would decide the fate of one of us.

When it was fairly daylight, I took my saddle and blankets to the place where I had left my horse, saddled him, and made preparations for starting. Then I carefully examined my pistol and went back toward the cabin. It was now quite light, and I could see from the smoke coming out from the chimney that the inmates were up.

Soon the man came out and came across the ravine towards me, evidently with the intention of going to his horse. His face wore a fierce, surly expression, and he answered my morning salutation very gruffly.

When he came in sight of my horse, saddled, he remarked in a savage tone that I appeared to be getting ready for an early start.

I replied "yes," and asked him if he had concluded to go with me.

He said that he had plenty of work to do and could not spare the time.

I repeated my offer of the night before, to pay him liberally for his time, but he stubbornly refused.

I saw that he was determined, and was deliberating how to proceed, when a hare came hopping along towards us and stopped about forty yards off. Just at this moment his wife came out of the cabin and called her husband to breakfast. He pointed to the hare and told her to bring his rifle.

I remarked that that was unnecessary, drew my pistol, and shot the hare through the head.

Turning towards the man I saw at a glance from the expression of his face that I had "given myself away."

"You are a good shot," said he. "Let me see your pistol."

"Excuse me," said I, "it is a self-cocking pattern, and I came near losing my life once from the careless handling of it by a stranger. Since then I never let it go out of my hands."

At this his lip curled with a sneer that made his fierce countenance hideous. Glaring at me savagely a moment he turned and walked rapidly towards the shed about twenty yards distant.

I was convinced that any further duplicity would be useless and that the time for prompt action had come; so I followed a few steps behind him, and just before he reached the shed, I ordered him, in a sharp, decided tone, to stop. He turned suddenly with a motion as if to spring upon me. I had kept my pistol in my hand all the time, and as he turned and faced me, I brought it up with a click that he well understood; and standing about four or five steps from him, I said :

"There are still five balls in my pistol. Do just as I say or I'll put every one through you; I am an officer and I arrest you for robbery. I shall take you to the station over on the road, and from there to S— for examination."

He was standing a few feet from the cliff that I have spoken of before, his back towards it. Turning suddenly around he dashed to its edge, and with a wild yell sprang over.

I felt spell-bound for an instant, but I can distinctly remember hearing him strike the rocks below. As soon as I recovered my senses, I rushed to the edge of the precipice and could see his lifeless body hanging on the jagged rocks.

In the excitement of the past few minutes, I had entirely forgotten his wife. As I turned from the horrible sight to go around the point to the corpse, I saw her coming towards me with a slow unsteady step. I could see from her manner that she was not ignorant of what had occurred. Approaching her I said,

"Madam, your husband has fallen over the cliff, and is, I fear, badly hurt."

"I saw it all," she said, and sank fainting to the ground.

I brought some water and bathed her forehead, and she soon recovered consciousness sufficiently to say, "Go and see."

I understood her, and going around the point, climbed up the rocks and of course found life extinct. I went back and told the poor woman it was all over, and helped her to the cabin.

Sitting down, still pale and weak, she said, "When you come to know the history of my life, particularly for the past few months, you will not think it strange, or me unfeeling, when I tell you that the death of that man is an actual relief to me.

"But first," she continued, "I beg you to promise me that this event shall not be made public; I have suffered so much that I do not feel equal to the additional suffering that publicity would inflict. We have no neighbors. The nearest family are native Californians, and live about fifteen miles distant. You and I are the only human beings that know of it, and no possible good can result from making it public."

I sincerely pitied the poor woman, and recognizing the force of her reasoning, I unhesitatingly promised the secrecy she requested; and to her question if I could bury the corpse, I replied that I could, and left her to look for implements with which to dig the grave. I found only a broken shovel, and an ax—the one with which the man whom I was now about to bury had attempted my life the night before. With this I broke off the pieces of rock that held the head before I could move the corpse. Then I dragged it down the hill a short distance, and began digging the grave. It was slow work with the tools I had, and the afternoon was advanced before I had it completed. I thought it useless to harrow the poor woman's feelings by asking her to witness the burial, and as I did not believe that any prayers she might offer could affect his condition in the next world, and was positive that mine would be of no avail, I rolled the corpse into the grave, covered it up, and went to the cabin. I found her here, still pale and weak. She thanked me for what I had just done, and insisted that I should eat some dried venison, and biscuit that she had made.

She saw that I naturally felt somewhat curious to learn something of her life, and while I was eating she told me her story, which I give as briefly as possible, and substantially in her own words:

"I was born in a small village in Massachusetts. My mother died when I was a child, and my father, a Unitarian minister, when I was a little past fifteen, leaving me with but one relative in the world, a maiden aunt. I lived with her until I was eighteen, and then took a situation as teacher. The following winter, after an illness of three months, my aunt died. Her illness and burial consumed the scant means of which we were both possessed. While I was trying to find employment as a teacher, I had become acquainted with a family who had come on from Minnesota to visit some friends. They now offered me a position with them as governess. This I gladly accepted, and in two weeks' time was on my way with them to their home. I lived very pleasantly there for nearly two years; then the head of the family failed in business, gave up everything to his creditors, and sold their furniture to get means to come to California. As I had saved in the time I had been working for them enough to pay my fare, I decided to accept their invitation and come with them. They were not, of course, in circumstances to employ me after our arrival in San Francisco, so I sought a situation as a teacher. But as I had no acquaintances, I found this very difficult to obtain; and finally when my means were entirely exhausted I had no choice but to take a place to do chamber work in a hotel.

"While thus employed I became acquainted with this man, whom I understood to be a clerk in some railroad office. I was without a home or acquaintances—for my Minnesota friends had in the meantime gone to some point in the mines—and when, in less than three months from the time I first saw him, he made me an offer of marriage, I accepted it.

"We took rooms on Market Street and lived there about a year. My husband was moody from the first, but I had no actual unkindness to complain of until we had been married about six months. He was frequently out until a late hour, saying that he had writing to do. I often asked him about his employment, but it seemed to annoy him, and seeing this I finally discontinued it. One night he did not come home until past two o'clock and had evidently been drinking. I was sitting up as usual, and being tired and sleepy reproached him for staying out so late; upon which he became dreadfully enraged and abusive and struck me a blow on my head that stunned me. When I recovered consciousness it was daylight. I was lying on the floor just where I had fallen, and he had gone. I saw no more of him until the following night, when he came home earlier than usual, and showed some feeling and penitence. It did not, however, continue long, though never until last night did he again strike me.

"Not long after this occurrence he came home in company with a police officer, saying that he had been called as a witness in some case and should not be at home that night. I saw him no more for nearly a week; in the meantime I had been compelled to dispose of my last article of jewelry to pay my room-rent, and had been out nearly every day trying to find some work. One night I was awakened by a tapping on the window near my bed, which opened into the hall. I found it was my husband, and let him in. He was evidently very much excited. His coat was torn, his face bloody, and one of his arms seemed lame. He said a friend of his had got into trouble and that he was going out of town; said he was sorry he had treated me so harshly and would do better in the future. He gave me some money and told me if any one asked for him to say he had gone to Virginia City, but directed me to go at a certain time to a point south of San Francisco and wait for him. He said he had a brother who had a large farm and would help him; that he wanted to leave the city and get away from the men he had been associating with. Exacting a promise to meet him as he directed, he hastily left.

"During the following day, I saw the officer who had called with my husband on a former occasion apparently watching the house. In looking over a morning paper I saw a notice of the escape of four men from the jail the night before, who were charged with burglary; that a jewelry store had been broken into and robbed by, as the officers suspected, the same men who had escaped; that the watchman of the building had discovered them, and, calling an officer, attempted to arrest them; that in the struggle that ensued the watchman received wounds that would prove fatal, and that one of the burglars was wounded in the head and arm. I would not permit myself to believe my husband a criminal, but could not stifle my apprehensions.

"At the time appointed I left San Francisco, and arrived the second day at the place where my husband was to meet me. There I waited four days before he came. He said I would

have to wait a few days longer until he had seen his brother, but that he would come for me as soon as possible; he asked me if I could ride horseback. I had learned to do so in Minnesota. I noticed that his arm still seemed lame and asked him about it. He said his horse had fallen with him and bruised it. I reminded him that it seemed to be lame when I last saw him in San Francisco. This offended him and I said no more about it. He left in the afternoon, saying that he would stay with a friend that night about twenty miles away. The next morning it was reported that the stage had been robbed the night before at some point about twenty miles south.

"In a week from that time my husband rode up to the hotel leading a horse with a side-saddle and asked me if I could get up so as to start by sunrise the next morning. Accordingly, we started and rode, as I supposed, about thirty miles, stopped over night at a cabin with a rough-looking man, whom my husband appeared to be acquainted with, and came here the next day, where I have remained ever since. I occasionally asked my husband how far his brother lived from here and when he was going there. He invariably gave me a rough reply, sometimes saying he could make more money here than at farming. When I asked him how, he would sometimes tell me he was prospecting for gold, sometimes that he was going to get some stock on shares from a large stock-raiser: but of late whenever I asked him about his business he would tell me to mind my own affairs.

"During the months I have lived here I had seen but two men besides him until you came yesterday, and I have reason to believe they were both murdered. My husband was frequently away two or three days at a time, and would often start up at night and shout, 'Throw off that box.' When you came I suspected that you were an officer, and that your story was a pretext. He saw through your disguise at once and intended to kill you."

I here interrupted her, telling her of my narrow escape.

"When he returned to the cabin," she continued, "he accused me of having warned you. I then knew that he had been foiled. He was very violent, swore he would kill me, and choked me, as you can see," pointing to her neck where I could plainly see the marks of his fingers. "Do you wonder now," said she, "at my indifference to his death?"

I assured her that I did not, and expressed my earnest sympathy and readiness to do her any service in my power. She thanked me, but firmly declined any help, even to get from the cabin over to the stage road: she said that she could pack the little she had on her saddle as the horse was very gentle, and that she very much preferred going by herself.

Seeing that she was determined and that pressing my offer of assistance seemed to annoy her, I concluded to say no more upon the subject until the next morning, and went out to take care of my horse; in the excitement of the day I had left him saddled and tied to a tree. I moved him and that of the dead highwayman to a fresh spot of grass, and again spread my blankets under a tree.

I was up the next morning early and saw by the smoke from the chimney that the sole occupant of the cabin had arisen, and hoping that she had changed her mind and would accept my services, I went to the door and renewed my offers. She still firmly but politely declined them. She already had breakfast on the table and invited me to share it. After breakfast I said to her that as she seemed fully determined in her course I would not annoy her with any further offers of help. She replied that she had thought the matter all over, that it was not a foolish whim, but that she desired to avoid anything that might bring to publicity the recent terrible event; that she felt competent to take care of herself, and would start early the next morning and ride over to the stage road, and then be governed by circumstances; she should probably sell the horse and take passage for San Francisco. I therefore bade her "good by," led my horse up the steep mountain side, and returned home.

My present occupation sometimes calls me to remote portions of the State. Some months since, while traveling on horseback through one of the northern mining counties, I passed by a school-house. A short distance beyond it the road forked. I was not certain which way to take, and turned back to inquire of the children who were playing in front of the school-house. While I was talking with them the teacher came to the door, and I recognized her as the highwayman's widow. She knew me at once, expressed surprise at seeing me, and at first seemed afraid that my call meant further trouble for her. So I hastened to assure her that it was purely accidental, and that she had nothing to fear. Her fears thus relieved she seemed pleased to see me, and as it was late in the afternoon she dismissed her school and gave me a brief history of her life since I had seen her.

She told me she had ridden on horseback the entire distance from the place where I left her at the cabin to this place—a distance of more than four hundred miles; and to corroborate her story she pointed to the horse, which I readily recognized, a short distance from the school-house. She had taught in two schools besides the one in which she was now employed, and was engaged to teach one farther up the mountains after the close of this.

She found the people extremely kind and hospitable, and said she was much happier than she had supposed she could be. She had assumed her maiden name, and had, as she playfully remarked, but one annoyance, and that was the curiosity of the people with whom she boarded because she had no correspondents.

After a half hour's conversation, I again bade her "good by" and continued my journey.

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