

A Detective's Adventure

Turning over the leaves of my note-book—kept daily for more than a quarter of a century—my attention is riveted upon a brief memoranda, which alludes to one of the most exciting and dangerous passages in all my detective experience.

The notation reads briefly: “Capt. Burleigh, schooner ‘Dart,’ 12:50 A.M.” and, as I con it over, the remembrance of the events to which it is the key grows keener, until all the details come to mind with a force and distinctness absolutely painful, and of which I cannot, even at the present moment, think without an emotion of horror.

It was a little after midnight, early one Sunday morning, as my book shows, when I was hurriedly summoned to the Central Office by a special messenger.

“Sorry to disturb you,” said the inspector as I came in; “but the case is an urgent one. Here is a sailor who says he is a deck hand on board the schooner ‘Dart,’ moored in the North River, and that his captain has been murdered and robbed. You had better go down to the barge office, get a boat and board the schooner, and take such steps as may be requisite; now my man,” he added addressing the sailor, “you go with the officer.”

On our way to the barge office, the sailor informed me that the schooner ‘Dart,’ was a coaster plying between Eastport and New York; that the captain, M. James Burleigh, had come on the schooner at a late hour on Saturday afternoon, having with him two canvas bags, containing one thousand dollars in gold each—that he had taken an early supper and gone ashore, telling the watch to keep a sharp lookout for river thieves.

The sailor thought it must have been about ten o’clock when the captain returned, and that it was nearly twelve when he heard a violent noise in the cabin which awakened him. Calling one of his companions, they burst the cabin hatch, and upon entering, they found Captain Burleigh lying on the floor, bleeding from numerous wounds and apparently dead.

In about half an hour after leaving the office we were on board the schooner. The interior of the cabin indicated that a terrible struggle had taken place between the captain and the assailants. The cabin table had been broken down, and there were marks of bloody hands upon various articles scattered about, and also upon the sides of the berth.

The captain’s night dress had been torn to shreds, and his hair was disheveled and matted with gore. Kneeling close down to the body I fancied there were signs of life about it, and had commenced staunching the flow of blood, when the surgeon arrived from the Central Office. Leaving the captain to his more skillful offices, I began picking up the threads likely affording some clue to the assailants.

A careful search on the floor by the light of the bull’s eye revealed little tufts of hair in various places, some of which was black, some in sandy color, and some nearly white. Captain

Burleigh's hair was almost white; and an examination of his hands, which were covered with blood, disclosed some of the black and sandy hairs adhering to his fingers. A further search disclosed a small list slipper evidenced the fact that they had been accompanied by one of the "wharf rats," as we term them—a class of waifs, without homes or parental restraint, who live about the wharves and piers, and are used by the old river thieves in affecting entrances to places intended to be robbed.

A leather pocket book lying on the cabin floor was among the other articles found. It had been rifled of its contents with the exception of a few papers, and among these was a receipt from one Josiah Grandle, of West Thirteenth street, to Capt. Burleigh for two bags of gold, each containing one thousand dollars. The receipt was dated the very day of the robbery, and bore upon the margin the words: "This receipt was given to me at two P.M." but the sailor had informed me that the captain had come on board at four o'clock on the afternoon in question having the gold, for he had seen the gold. This was hardly reconcilable.

I gathered up the tufts of hair, the slipper and the pocket book, and went ashore. Day broke as I landed at the barge office, and took my way to the residence of Josiah Grandle, whom I found with much difficulty. He said he knew Capt. Burleigh well, and upon being shown the receipt found in the pocket book, he said:

"Yes, I gave that to the captain on Saturday."

"But how came the captain to take the money away and not return this receipt?"

"Bless your dear soul," said the old man, "he didn't take it away. He left it here." And in a few moments he produced the two bags.

This complicated matters still more.

Bidding Mr. Grandle good morning, I drove to the Central Office. The surgeon had returned from the vessel and left word that Capt. Burleigh had recovered consciousness; that his wounds were not necessarily fatal, and that he had been brought on shore to the City Hospital.

I sent a messenger to shadow the sailor who told me the story of the bags of gold, and then proceeded to the hospital, where, after an hour's delay, I was permitted to see Capt. Burleigh. He was a man of splendid physique, clear-eyed, bright-faced and intelligent. Although very weak, he managed to tell me his story in his own way, clearly, but slowly.

"I was very tired on Saturday night," said the captain, "and was no more in than I was asleep. I was awakened suddenly with sound as if something had heavily fallen to the floor, and although the binnacle light was burning dimly, saw two men and a boy in the cabin. They knew I was awake about as soon as I did. One of them struck at me with an iron bar, just as I was rising out of the berth, the end of the bar grazing my face and making an ugly gash.

"I knew it was to be a struggle for life, and leaping from the berth, grappled the one who had struck at me, wrenched the bar from him, and hurled it with all my strength at the other, who was

standing near the cabin window; but the bar missed its aim. Then we clinched and the struggle was fierce.”

“We must have gone several times around the cabin, they striking me repeatedly with a billet of wood, and I doing little more than holding and pulling them by the hair, until we all stumbled upon the table and went down by the run. This was all I remembered until I came to this place.”

“But the money, captain? How much money did you have aboard the ship?”

“Not a dollar, sir! Fortunately I had left my money with old Mr. Grandle, of West Thirteenth street, on Saturday afternoon.”

“I thought the deck hand was deceiving me, when he said you came aboard with two bags that day; but I am at a loss to understand his motive.”

The captain smiled.

“A more honest man than Tom Bracely never walked a deck,” he answered; “but we Downeasters are full of tricks. The fact is that when my gold was being put up in bags at the broker’s, I bought two empty ones, just like them, and filled them with cotton.

“The cab-man who drove me to Mr. Grandles’s might have been honest, but I did not know that. He saw me take two bags into the house and bring two out, but I left the cotton. This was to deceive him as to my having left any gold there; and these were the bags that Tom Bracely saw me bring aboard the ship.”

As the captain was growing fatigued, I left him, returned to the Central Office, calling the “shadow” away from Bracely, and gave myself the opportunity for a little reflection.

That same night a half-drunken sailor tumbled into one of the low slums, or thieving resorts, then abounding in Water street, calling for a glass of grog, and sat down amidst the general carousal. A group of three persons at the further end of the room seemed to attract his attention. They were two men and a boy. One of the former had densely black hair, black eyes, very short black beard, and a most ferocious countenance.

His companion was of exactly opposite complexion, having light eyes and sandy hair, wearing no beard. These two were playing cards and the boy was watching the progress of the game.

In a few moments the sailor reeled out of the place, turned toward the river front, passed into the open doorway of a tenement house, and was lost in the darkness. Five minutes afterward there emerged from the same doorway, Mr. Joseph Tracer, the “king of the shadows.”

“What luck, Mr. Tracer?” I queried.

“The whole party inside, sir. You say you only want the boy now?”

“That is all, until I get further evidence. When you capture him, bring him to headquarters. I shall lodge there for the balance of the night.”

It was about three o’clock in the morning when Tracer appeared with the boy, and gave him into my custody.

“Now, my lad,” I said when we were alone, “tell me about the night you went aboard the ‘Dart’ with those river thieves? If you tell me the truth you shall not be harmed; if you deceive me I shall send you to the penitentiary.”

“You kin send me where you like,” he sniveled; “if I don’t know nothing I can’t tell nothing, kin I?”

“Very well; if you don’t know anything, you shall be made comfortable. Pull off your shoes. Now put on this slipper—it is one of the kind that makes no noise, and carries many a boy to the State prison.”

The slipper fitted exactly.

“It’s no use trying to keep anything from you fly cops,” he blubbered again. “Will I be hurt?”

“Not if you tell me the truth,” I answered.

And with this assurance he made me a complete confession of the whole affair, giving me the name of the criminals, telling me that they had seen the captain when he went on board the schooner with the bags in the afternoon, and depicting their chagrin at finding them filled with cotton instead of gold.

“You kin never git them two,” he continued; “they’ll know I’m pulled, and they’ll go for the ‘dock crib.’”

The boy proved to be correct—The ruffians went for the “dock crib,” but under his guidance we located the place. The “dock crib” was constructed of rough boards, under one of the North River piers, and formed a cavity about twelve feet in length by seven in width. It was not more than four feet in depth, owing to the proximity of the water line at high tide, and had a point of ingress and egress from the pier. There was also a trap in the centre of the floor, which rendered it accessible from the water side, but this was available only at low tide.

Having made a reconnaissance of the place in daylight, I judged it best to make the attack first from the pier side, and as the tide would serve, to attempt it that night.

My plan was to run a boat under the pier as noiselessly as possible, and then to have men on the pier to make a demonstration upon a given signal. The criminals would necessarily resort to the trap, and we would take them in the boat as they came out.

The night was in every way favorable, but it was ten o’clock before the tide had ebbed

sufficiently for our purpose. As the boat approached the end of the pier, I stood up in the stern sheets, opened and closed my bull's eye lantern with such rapidity as to cause a flash of light, heard the whistle of the patrol in acknowledgement that they had seen and understood it, and glided under.

A faint glimmer of light came through the chinks between the boards of the box, but it was suddenly extinguished. There was a hurrying of feet above us, the trap lifted, and then we could hear the sound of our men on the pier, battering the place overhead.

One of the inmates lowered himself down, and as he did so his feet touched the gunwale of the boat. He knew he was caught and attempted to draw himself up again, when one of the officers seized him, and gave him a desperate pull and broke his hold. Unfortunately, the boat careened, and pitched him and the officer overboard. The man above us was about to follow, but discovering the situation, drew back and attempted to close the trap. The quickness of my movement defeated his object. I sprang up through the aperture, and grappled him, but, with his enormous strength doubly increased by rage and despair, he flung me to one side and closed and secured the trap.

I counted on being immediately followed by one of the officers, but they were so intent upon saving their comrade who had fallen into the water as to have apparently forgotten me. The door overhead continued to resist the efforts of the men on the pier, and I found myself caged with an infuriated and desperate criminal in a box not high enough to stand upright in, and that seemed impregnable from above and below, it was intensely dark. The situation was simply appalling, and yet demanded coolness and decisive action.

Crouching closely down in the corner of the box into which I had been thrown, I awaited the onslaught of my antagonist with an emotion impossible to describe. The din overhead precluded my hearing if he was making any movement; and in the absence of any better expedient I pointed my pistol in a straight line from my head and fired.

The flash of the pistol lit the box with a momentary glare, but sufficiently to show that my ugly companion was lying prone upon his face, with his long and muscular arms extended full length, as if feeling for his prey. The instantaneous flash had revealed my position also. The bullet sped harmlessly above him, and before I could fire again he was upon me with the fury of a tiger.

I could feel him coming as one feels the dead stillness before some awful explosion, and dropping close to the floor, I turned partially upon my side, and struck out wildly with the butt of my pistol. A terrible crash followed and in the same instant I received a terrible blow that rendered me utterly unconscious.

When I came to my senses I was lying upon the pier; my head being supported by one of the patrol, who was wiping the blood from my face. Near me were the culprits, ironed together and closely guarded.

I subsequently learned that the door on the pier side of the box had given way, just as my antagonist had sprung upon me and dealt the terrible blow that had deprived me temporarily of

senses, and that some excellent “club work” upon his own head had been the means of saving me.

The two who had fallen into the water had also been rescued, and in a little while were all at the Central Office. It was some days before I was able to resume my duties and appear in the court against the prisoners. No trial was had, however. Captain Burleigh had also recovered sufficiently to appear, and the boy being ready to testify in behalf of the State, the array made the case a hopeless one for the accused. They plead guilty and were each sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment and hard labor.

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