

Baffled

by a Secret Service Detective

In the winter of 1863, it became plain to the Secret Service Bureau that there were a number of people in Washington who made it their business to secure information for the rebel government. Now and then such people had been unearthed and sent to Forts Delaware or Lafayette as prisoners, but now it seemed as if the information came from a different class. Secrets which could have been known to less than a dozen high military and civic authorities were betrayed to the rebels, and plans hardly lispied beyond the Cabinet became known in Richmond before they could be acted upon. President Lincoln firmly believed there were official traitors in his camp, and the Chief of the Bureau received instructions from him direct. He was commanded to spare no one, and to shadow any official of whom he felt the slightest suspicion. I was detailed on the case, if case it could be called. The orders were to do my best to find the leak. Several other men were given the same orders, but no two of us worked together.

Just what move to make was a puzzler, being that I suspected no one. Luck, however, soon furnished me a pointer. One night, at a late hour, as I was passing along Maryland avenue, I came upon two half-drunken officers who were pulling a civilian about in a reckless manner, and threatening to do him up. I, of course, interfered on behalf of the latter, and he returned thanks, and he gave me his card. He was a private secretary to an important civil functionary. Two nights later, on the same avenue, I passed the secretary, and to my astonishment he was in disguise. He had on a false beard, an old slouch hat and a pair of goggles. How did I recognize him? He stood for a moment under a gas lamp to consult his watch and look around. I was under a wooden awning close beside him. I saw the gleam of a diamond pin on his necktie and the glitter of a diamond ring on his finger. I also noticed that his pants and boots belonged to a gentleman. Without recognizing the person as the secretary I followed him for a suspicious character. He led me a walk of seven or eight squares and then furtively entered the front door of a fine-looking mansion. He remained two hours, and I waited for him. I then shadowed him until he entered a place I knew was a high-toned boarding house. Before entering it, and while in the center of a square where the darkness was greatest, he pulled off his hat, beard and spectacles and replaced the hat with a cap.

I entered the house soon after him to warn the landlady and to make an arrest if circumstances warranted, and I was not long in ascertaining that my suspicious character was the private secretary. Before noon next day I discovered that the other house was occupied by a suspicious widow. She was not only suspected on the grounds of morality, but she had, while living in Baltimore six months previously, been looked upon as a rebel sympathizer. I then set myself to watch her house and found that the secretary visited the place every evening at sharp 8 and remained until 10. At quarter past 10 another man in citizen's dress showed up, but remained only a few minutes. After the third night I followed and arrested this man, and while taking him to prison he chewed up and swallowed a paper. When questioned he would make no statement, and no one could identify him. I had better luck at the house, however, to which I returned in the morning. I plumply told the widow that the man had been arrested with written information for the rebels in his possession, and had made a full confession. She was terribly frightened, and

promptly confessed that she had been pumping the secretary and sending off his news. An hour later she grew defiant and denied everything, and as the “pal” refused to peach, and we had no real evidence, the bureau had to content itself with driving the pair from Washington.

When the secretary was informed of what had occurred he went to pieces like a boy and attempted suicide. When given his liberty he disappeared, going no one ever knew where, but unmolested by the government.

Two weeks after his disappearance our chief received an anonymous letter asking him to send me to the railroad depot 10 o'clock the next night. I would see a man dressed so and so, and from him would receive a pointer as to the whereabouts of a certain counterfeiter. As I was in New York at the time, the chief sent another man, having but little faith that anything would come of it, but not caring to throw anything away. The detective was met by the person described, walked out on the platform, and of a sudden was dosed with vitriol in a way which blinded one eye and disfigured his face for life. The punishment was no doubt meant for me, and the vitriol-thrower was some friend of the suspicious widow's. In the confusion he made his escape and no clue to his identity was ever had.

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Detroit Weekly Free Press, August 14, 1886

North Australian [Darwin, NT], April 16, 1887

Editor's Note: The US Secret Service was not founded until 1865.