

Entrapped

A Detective's Story

Some twenty years since, I was a poor detective, doing but a small and not very remunerative "business" in the city of L——, in Kentucky. Too much leisure made time hang heavy on my idle hands, and oftentimes had I engaged a team, and taken a drive around the country, sometimes making a circuit of twenty miles.

It was in one of these excursions of mine that I became acquainted with Birdie Reynolds, the daughter of a wealthy retired banker of L——, whose residence was situated within a few miles of the city itself. It was an acquaintance which could not long remain casual, for, two months after our first meeting, I had been so imprudent as to fall irretrievably in love with her; and she—darling girl!—had promised to love me always, despite the frowns and anger of the paternal Reynolds, who soon found a way of preventing out clandestine meetings.

It was a long time before I could muster sufficient courage to enter the grounds of the Reynolds mansion, but, at length, wearied with watching for Birdie at the usual trysting place, I donned my best suit, and summoning all my self-control, pulled the elegant little bell-knob, and was soon ushered into the drawing room, the servant, as requested, conveying my card to the paternal relative of my little pet, my love for whom I was about to avow to that choleric individual. Some oversight on my part caused me to send the wrong card; for, instead of the ordinary "Harry Leeds," I had delivered my professional card, bearing not only my own name, but my business, and the detective agency by which I was employed. In a few moments; therefore, Mr. Reynolds entered the room, nervously twirling the card in his hand.

"You could not have arrived at a more opportune moment," he said, grasping my hand warmly, to my no little astonishment, "although I was unaware that intelligence of the robbery had reached the police headquarters as yet."

"I—I—simply called—" I stammered out.

"Of course, by orders of the chief of police. Please accompany me to the library, and I will give you the full particulars of the affair," interrupted he, leading the way to that place, and seating himself, after waving me to a chair. "There is no clue to the perpetrator of the robbery, but you detectives are sharp enough to make much out of nothing. —I have met you before, Mr. Leeds," he said, suddenly recognizing me as the companion of his daughter on several occasions.

"I am slightly acquainted with your daughter, sir," I replied confusedly.

"Ah, yes; I remember now. But to proceed to the business on hand. Late last evening, or early this morning, this room was entered by one or more persons, and a small tin box, containing over seventy thousand dollars in United States bonds, was abstracted from that desk," pointing to a solid mahogany desk in a corner of the room. "The party or parties entered by that window from the veranda, and in forcing the lock of the [desk], used this instrument, which I found lying on the floor, dropped there apparently by the burglar in his hurry to escape."

He handed me, as he spoke, a small instrument, some four or five inches in length, and constructed so durably as to stand any amount of straining without breaking, and evidently a new invention for the forcing of locks or fastenings. I looked at it curiously, and, in turning it over, read on the reverse side: "Weldon—Pat. 18—." To all appearance it had been but little used, and I knew it to be of recent manufacture, from the fact that no implement of the kind had ever before, in my recollection, been found in the possession of a cracksman.

"It is all the clue you can possibly find," said Mr. Reynolds, after a pause; "and, although I feel almost certain you will have but little success in detecting the thief, I will pay all your expenses, whether you succeed or fail: and should the former be the case, a reward of ten thousand dollars!"

"I will undertake the case, sir," I replied, "but require nothing more than I usually receive—my expenses and ordinary fee. Should I succeed, however, I may have a favor to ask, which, were I certain of its being granted, I would imperil my life to recover the bonds."

"Well, we will talk of that hereafter," replied my host, apparently misunderstanding me; and now to business."

Two hours later, after having closely examined the servants, and the grounds about the house, I found myself in L——, searching the directory for the name of "Weldon," which name was impressed on the tool in my possession. Only one name of the sort occurred, and the address indicated a locksmith shop in Knox street, whither I wended my way.

An old man, of perhaps sixty or more, greeted me at the door, as I knocked for admission, and querulously conversed with me for a short time; then, upon my informing him of my business, took down from a shelf the exact counterpart of the small "jimmy" I held in my hand.

"It is a new thing," he said, proudly pointing out its advantages over an ordinary implement of the kind, "and to men of my trade is invaluable; but some men put it to a bad use, and I had a hard time in getting it through the patent office."

"How many of them have you manufactured since the issuing of the patent?" I asked.

"I make them to order," was the reply. "Only yesterday I completed one for a gentleman who wished to use it in his factory for something or other. A nice young fellow, too, and he paid me liberally for it."

"Do you know his name?"

"No; he said he was a proprietor of a large establishment at N——, but wishing to remain in the city for a few days, he ordered four more. He is to call for them today."

"You think he wishes them for a legitimate purpose, do you?" I asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve often been deceived by such men, but, judging from the personal appearance, I am inclined to think he is what he asserts himself to be. I suppose you are working up a case, are you not?”

“Yes; and if you aid me so far as lies in your power, I will remunerate you liberally. Now, I wish to see this young man, and desire to remain here until he comes. When he makes his appearance I shall conceal myself, and determine my course of action by his conduct. Is this the tool you sold him yesterday?” I asked abruptly, producing the “jimmy.”

“It is wonderfull like it,” replied the old man. “I would not hesitate to pronounce it identical.”

A few moments later I had detailed to him all that I thought necessary for him to know, and had arranged all requisite to my obtaining a full view of the purchaser, when he should arrive.

Stationed behind an empty box in a dark corner of the room, as the town-clock struck seven that evening. I saw a flashily-dressed young fellow of twenty five or more enter the shop, and accost the lock-smith.

“Well; Mr. Weldon, I suppose the tools are done. I have barely time to catch the train [illegible] time to stay. Just roll them up in a wrapper for me.”

He turned his face full against the light as he spoke, and I recognized the features of Boyle Vradenberg, the most “accomplished” of the cracksmen in the city, but who, though well known to the police, had invariably evaded them or escaped detection.

“Thank you,” he said, handing Weldon a bill of large denomination, and taking the parcel in his hand. “I will call when I again come to L——. Good evening.”

“Not so fast, Mr. Boyle Vradenberg.” I said, coming from my place of concealment, and seizing him by the arm. “I arrest you for the robbery of Mr. Barton Reynolds, yesterday evening. You are my prisoner.”

He paled as I spoke, but instantly regained his composure, a derisive contemptuous smile wreathing his handsome face.

“A little slower, Mr. Henry Leeds. Proof and a warrant are necessary before I accompany you.” Then, observing me looking for the handcuffs in my coat, he continued: “Of course I’ll go with you, but you must be responsible for any inconvenience I may suffer.”

“You will be treated with all due respect,” I replied, opening the door, and leading the way to the police headquarters, where we soon after arrived. I at once communicated with the sergeant of police, who declined to commit the prisoner, but promised to retain him until morning, furnishing Vradenberg with a small room adjoining the station keeper’s office, which the prisoner entered with a light laugh, thanking him for the accommodation of a room, and requesting him to leave the door slightly ajar.

Stationing myself at a small barred window, with no glass in it, I watched the motions of the man of whose guilt I was almost positive. Seating himself at a table, he drew from his pocket a memorandum book, which he consulted several times, at the same time writing on a piece of paper before him. His investigations closed, he tore the leaves from the book to which he had referred, and holding them in the flame of the candle before him, watched them burn to a crisp. Then, once more placing his pencil to the paper, he wrote or drew for a few moments, and, lighting a cigar, threw himself back in his seat, meditating deeply upon some subject or other.

A half hour elapsed and the prisoner lay back in his chair, apparently asleep. Cautiously entering the room on tip-toe, I drew near the table, and, without disturbing Vradenberg, gained possession of the paper, and left the room as silently as I had entered.

The following morning Boyle Vradenberg was discharged from custody, there being no proof to convict him. The next day, and the next, I pondered for hours over the rude diagram I had in my possession. To give the reader a knowledge of the contents of the paper, would require time and tedious space. I will, therefore, only say that, on the evening of the second day, I had so far succeeded in unraveling the intricate mystery of the diagram as to feel confident that it not only was intended as a guide to the place where the box containing the stolen bonds had been secreted, but that I actually knew the place; and the developments of the two days ensuing substantiated my supposition.

Some ten miles from the city of L——, and live from the residence of Mr. Reynolds, was an unused coal-pit, which had been excavated to a considerable depth before the war, but had been abandoned, partly on account of its barrenness, and partly for the non-success in engaging experienced miners. An old bucket or tub, used to remove the coal from below, still hung suspended by a strong chain over the coal pit, the bottom of which was some thirty feet below the surface of the rugged hill above. It was here, I felt confident, that Boyle Vradenberg had concealed his plunder, and on the fifth night after his release from duress, I started for the place known as the De Haes Pit.

The moon was shining brilliantly as I struck off from the main road, in a northwesterly direction, over the long, barren stretch of country, and the sense of utter loneliness was oppressive to the mind. At length I reached the sparsely wooded highland, and, securing my steed to a tree, moved more cautiously in the direction of the De Haes Pit, which was about three hundred yards distant from where I dismounted. Rumors of escaped law-breakers finding a safe refuge in this lonely place had reached my ears, and I was not entirely unknown to the light fingered, but heavily knuckled, gentry of L——; discretion was therefore necessary.

Suddenly I stopped in my course, and crouched down behind one of the bushes which grew so thickly on the brow of the hill. Not fifteen feet before me, and plainly visible as they stood in the full light of the moon, were two men on the very edge of the pit, conversing in a tone of moderate loudness.

“When I whistle three times, Bob, do you hear?”

“Ay, ay, cap. I’ll let you up.”

“It’ll be a good night’s work for you, old boy; and we must make tracks as soon as we get the box. Now unwind the chain, and let me down slowly;” and the speaker, in whom I recognized Boyle Vradenberg, stepped into the tub, and his pal at the top began to unwind the chain slowly, which creaked and strained as if it would burst into a thousand pieces.

A few moments later he ceased his operations, and it was evident that Vradenberg had reached the bottom of the pit. Bob, the man at the top, seated himself on a stone, lighted his pipe, and awaited the signal from his master.

I knew I had but little chance against the two of them, and I determined upon a course of action which, I felt sure, would succeed. With a quick, stealthy tread, I approached the man, whose back was toward me, and, with one powerful blow from the butt end of my revolver, knocked him senseless upon the ground.

A short time elapsed, and then I heard the signal from Vradenberg below. It required some strength to raise the tub and its occupant; but a few moments sufficed to bring it to a level with the earth. I averted my head as he stepped once more on the ground, so that he should not discover my identity.

“We must cut, now, Bob, for the cops will be watching me, and if the box were found in my possession, it might lead to unpleasant relations. It was a good idea of mine—secreting the bonds down there.” He spoke in a jubilant tone, “Here, hold it for a moment till I adjust my collar;” and he handed up the object of all my search and trouble.

“Boyle Vradenberg, you are my prisoner!” I said dropping the box, and pointing a revolver at his head; “and one word, or show of resistance, and I will send—”

He was taken by surprise, but he was too cool-headed and desperate to lose his presence of mind; the next moment the pistol was struck from my hand, and he had caught me by the throat with a grip of iron.

I clutched at him wildly, scarcely knowing what I did, in the intense excitement of the moment. Then my foot slipped, and we both fell to the ground. He released his old as we fell, but was on his feet in a moment again[.] I had arisen on one knee, and was on the very verge of the pit. With a tremendous effort, he attempted to force me over the height; the moldy earth crumbled beneath his feet; he lost his footing, partially relaxed his grasp on me, then fell downward over the edge of the pit, dragging me after him.

As we fell, I caught at the rim of the bucket, while he went whirling down through the darkness into the depths below.

It was with no little effort that I once more regained a footing on the earth. When I did, however, I was not long in securing the box, and the pal of Vradenberg, whom I tied hand and foot; and then moving, as speedily as my bruised condition would allow of, to where my horse stood, I rode rapidly forward to L——, and reported the occurrence at headquarters.

The detachment of police that were sent out to the coal-pit returned the next morning with only the dead body of Boyle Vradenberg, his pal having, by some unknown means, managed to escape.

I am growing too old now to attend to cases where sharp professional tact was necessary, but my oldest boy, Harry Reynolds Leeds, will not be long in gaining a high standing among his fellow detectives.

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