

An Evening with a Detective
by James Franklin Fitts

THE ALIBI

IF there is anything more calculated to sharpen a man's wits, and keep him continually on the lookout than the detective's business, I don't know what it can be. A few years of the life that we in this peculiar business have to lead makes it a man's second nature to be watchful without seeming to be so at all, and to take notice of what is going on even when not engaged on any particular "lay," as the rouges say. I have two little stories to tell which will illustrate this.

One Sunday, about ten years ago, I found myself at Carlisle, a flourishing town on the Blank and Blank Railroad. I was considerably acquainted there, and had been there pretty often on business; but my being there at this time was the result of an accident merely. I had been three hundred miles west of this, trying in vain to find a clue to the whereabouts of an absconding defaulter; and coming back to take a fresh start, I found that a flood had submerged the track for several miles east of Carlisle, and that there would be no getting away till Monday, at the least. So I made a virtue of necessity, and telegraphing my detention and its cause to my family, I went up town.

After dinner at the hotel, I dropped in at the office of the district attorney, with whom I was well acquainted. I found him arranging the details of a number of criminal cases which were to be tried at the court which began the following Monday.

"Anything of importance?" I asked, rather carelessly.

"One, at least," he replied. "Joe Slifer, a notorious scoundrel, is to be tried for highway robbery. The victim was dragged out of his buggy on a lonely road, beaten insensible, and robbed of a thousand dollars. He identifies Slifer positively as one of the ruffians."

"What's the defence?"

"I can't imagine. I don't think there is any, in reality."

"Maybe he'll prove an alibi," I jocosely suggested. He shook his head.

"They'll hardly try that," he said. "The facts are too clear."

After some more unimportant conversation with him, I returned to the hotel, where I spent the remainder of the day.

The next day was Sunday. I awoke quite early, and found the promise of a beautiful summer day so good that I dressed myself and sallied out for a walk. Nobody was stirring yet about the hotel, and the streets were perfectly still. I walked around several squares, and returned to the hotel, meeting only one person on the way.

That person was standing in the doorway of a basement saloon as I passed. I looked down casually, and saw him standing there in his shirt-sleeves. His hair was tumbled, and he was gaping, as if just awakened. I did not discover that he was doing anything particular there; I thought afterward that it was quite likely that he had been left in a drunken sleep on the floor or on a bench in the bar the night before, and that waking up at this early hour, he had taken the wrong door in seeking for his lodgings, and had come out of doors instead of going to bed. My look at him was merely a side glance, but that was enough to photograph his face in my mind. It was a thin, bilious face, perfectly smooth, with a long nose, must twisted to one side, and a red scar over the left eye. I marked it instantly as the face of a rascal. How could I do that, I can't explain; our business learns us to read faces as most men read books, and the glance that I had at that face told me that the man was a lawless fellow. His actions confirmed the opinion. Sleepy as he looked and acted, no sooner did he see me passing than he dove back through the door and slammed it to.

I instantly understood him. "A scamp, on some 'lay' or other, and don't want to be seen," was my thought. And I walked on with his photograph in my mind, but ceased to think anything of him or of the circumstance before I reached the hotel.

The day passed; and bright and early Monday morning I took my satchel and went down to the depot. But it was to no purpose; the office was closed, and a placard on the wall informed the public that the road would not be opened before Tuesday.

I went back to the hotel, too much out of sorts to enjoy my breakfast. I did not understand, till the day was some hours older, that I was needed more here at Carlisle than anywhere else, just then.

I went from the breakfast-table into the reading-room, and after I had read an hour, I heard one man say to another:

"Let's go over to the courthouse; they're trying Joe Slifer." They went out; and remembering my little talk with the district attorney, my curiosity was excited, and I followed them.

When I entered the courtroom, the victim of the robbery was on the stand. He was a plain simple old man, and gave his evidence with apparent truthfulness. He testified that he was stopped about sunset, some months before, while passing from Carlisle to his home with one thousand dollars that he had drawn that afternoon from the bank. It was a lonely spot, and there was no house within half a mile of it. He was jogging leisurely along, when a light wagon drawn by two horses dashed up beside his buggy, and three of the four men in it jumped out, while the fourth held the reins. They were all masked. One of them seized his horse by the bit and stopped him, the second snatched the lines from his hands, and the third climbed half into the buggy, and taking him by the arms, demanded his money. He said that he instantly shouted as loud as he could; when the ruffian dealt him a savage blow with a slung shot which knocked him senseless; and when he came to himself again both robbers and money were gone.

He recognized only one of the four; the man that struck him. As he drew back to give the blow his mask dropped, and revealed the face of Joe Slifer, the prisoner at the bar. He knew it—he

was perfectly positive of it—and all the ingenuity of the cross-examination could not weaken or shake his evidence upon this important point.

No other witness was called for the prosecution; none seemed necessary. The prisoner's lawyer got up and made a plausible statement to the jury that the complainant was mistaken about recognizing Joe Slifer on the occasion referred to; that Slifer was not there at all, but that he was at Norcott, fifty miles north of Carlisle at the very hour of that robbery, and that he should prove it by at least two good witnesses. He sat down and called out, "Caleb Wye," and everybody leaned forward expectantly.

The witness came forward with a slow, limping gait, leaning on a cane. He was apparently a man of middle age, and was dressed in a suit of sober black, with a white choker about his neck. His hair was silver gray; and as he mounted the stand, and leaning on his cane; turned his eyes placidly to the prisoner's counsel, he presented an appearance that would attract attention and respect anywhere.

I saw him; and though I did not betray any surprise, I know that my heart gave a tremendous thump. For I saw the bilious, thin face, the crooked nose, and the scarred forehead of the dodger whom I had seen twenty-four hours before in the doorway of the saloon. With this difference, however, the hair of that man was almost black, while this man's was silver gray.

I edged my chair quietly up beside that of the district attorney, and while the man was testifying I managed to whisper in the officer's ear without attracting the attention of the witness. The latter testified that he was a dealer in ready-made clothing at Norcott, and one of the firm of Wye & Pleasants. That on the day testified to as the day of the robbery, both he and his partner were at their store at Norcott, and there was an unusual call for goods. Joe Slifer was then in town; they knew him well, and had often employed him to help in the store. On this particular day they sent for him; he came immediately; and he remained at the store, waiting on customers, from two o'clock to eight, without once leaving it. Mr. Pleasants was in court, and he would testify to the same facts.

The first question of the district attorney made the fellow start and shiver.

"Are you in disguise, sir?"

"Wh—what?" stammered the man.

"Have you a silver-gray wig over your dark hair?"

The man looked amazed and then frightened, but said nothing; and before he could recover his self-possession, the district attorney had stepped forward and removed the wig, revealing a smoothly-brushed head of dark brown hair!

"What does this mean?" he asked, sternly.

"Only a fancy," was the sulky answer. "I've worn that wig for years."

“Have you, indeed? Did you wear it all day yesterday?”

“Yes sir,” was the confident response.

“Where?”

“At Norcott, to be sure.”

“All day?”

“Certainly. I was there the whole day.”

“When did you arrive here at Carlisle?”

“At seven-twenty this morning.”

The district attorney gave me a triumphant wink; and when he stated to the court that he desired this witness to be detained till the close of trial, the sheriff was directed to take charge of him. Mr. Caleb Wye came down from the stand with his wig in his hand, and took a seat by the sheriff, looking decidedly more bilious than I had yet seen him appear.

Mr. Pleasants was now loudly called for by the defence; but no one came forward. The unexpected reception that the last witness had met probably chilled the ardor of his confederate, and he wisely chose to keep himself in the background. This then was all of the defence; and my evidence at once blew it to the winds. I looked directly at Mr. Wye (so called), while I was telling the jury when, where, and under what circumstances I had seen him the previous day, and I saw him tremble like an aspen-leaf. The jury convicted the prisoner without leaving their seats, and the witness was locked up for further consideration.

I left Carlisle the next morning, and heard nothing more of this affair for several weeks. Then a letter from the district attorney, thanking me for the assistance I had rendered him, conveyed more details.

“The witness Wye,” he wrote, “whose real name is Nicholas Bray, was indicted for perjury. A very slight investigation showed me that we could prove that he had no right to the name of Wye, that neither he nor any man by the name of Pleasants ever kept store in Norcott, and that neither of them was known there at all. This, with your evidence, would have been sufficient to convict him; and understanding it as well as anybody, he concluded to save trouble and plead guilty. So he and Slifer are both in the penitentiary, and will stay there for a term of years.

“But do you know what I think of this gang? I think that both Wye, alias Bray, and Pleasants, alias somebody else, who was doubtless in the courthouse during the trial, were both present at the robbery, and took part in it. Don’t you?”

It was shrewd guess, and, I am inclined to think, a correct one. So intricate and powerful are the combinations of rogues; and yet, how they sometimes betray themselves by a trifle!

THE EXPRESS ROBBERS.

THE most trivial incidents will often lead to the detection of criminals, as was illustrated in the case of the great Express Robbery of a quarter of a million that startled the country last summer. There were a good many detectives employed in ferreting out the guilty parties, and some of the newspapers gave some of them a great deal more credit than they did me; but I care little for that. Between you and me, I was the first man that got a clue to the robbers, and that was really what overhauled them in the end, after a three month's chase all over the United States, with no end of telegraphing and secret working.

That clue came by chance, as is very often the case. I was at the depot, waiting for a train that was to bring a man who had some important business for me. There was quite a crowd at the station, and during the ten minutes that I had to wait, I walked up and down the platform. There wasn't the least reason that I then knew of for me to keep an eye out for anything or anybody; but the sequel will show that the ruling passion was as strong with me as ever.

The lightning express for the east was to leave just as the train that I was waiting for came in. As I neared the end of the depot in my walk, I saw three men pass out and to the left of the doorway, together. I walked straight out after them, and saw them standing close together, talking fast and eagerly. I gave a loud "hem!" to make them look up, which they all did, at once, and I saw their faces. It is unnecessary for me to describe them; I marked each of them at a glance, and saw that they were fellows who lived by their wits. When they saw me, they hastily withdrew along the side of the building, and I passed into the depot again and resumed my walk.

I had walked across the platform once, and when I turned to go back, I saw one of the three men whom I had just left approaching me. Another of the three passed between us, so close to the first that he could have touched him with his outstretched hand; and although they looked directly into each other's face there was no nod, no word, no sign or expression of recognition. I saw the three within the next five minutes, each man by himself, and meeting continually as they mixed with the crowd, but never betraying in any way that they were aught but entire strangers to each other.

All this would seem strange to any one; but I understood it at once as the extra precaution of accomplished rascals, and I concluded that some deep and important game was afoot. As the whistle of the approaching train sounded, the bell of the departing one struck, and the conductor shouted "all aboard!" and watching now in earnest to see what became of these men, I saw them take the outgoing train from the side *opposite* the platform, each one entering a separate car.

This was at five o'clock in the afternoon. The robbery was committed about one o'clock the next morning, in the express car of this train, and the fact was discovered about daybreak. Before a word was in print about it, I was summoned by telegram to the headquarters of the company, where I met a dozen more detectives that evening.

Of course, the officer who telegraphed to me did not suspect that I was in possession of any knowledge on the subject; but when I sat down at that first secret anxious conference, and described the men whom I had noticed at the depot at ——, and their actions, one of the detectives present who lived at a place a hundred miles away from the line, instantly recognized the description as that of three burglars well known to the police of his town.

Some months afterwards the last of the three was captured by the aid of this clue, and with him the greater part of the money. They had worn masks or blackened their faces, for the robbery, and taken every precaution against detection; and it was remarkable, though not at all unusual in this kind of business, that their detection and capture, as well as the recovery of most of the money, should result from their meeting a total stranger at a distant city, eight hours before the robbery.

Ballou's Monthly Magazine, September 1870

This story was reprinted as “How to Prove an Alibi” and without the introductory paragraph or second story under “The Express Robbers” in

The Cambridge [OH] Jeffersonian, May 4, 1871;

The Stark County Democrat [Canton, OH], March 23, 1871;

Fayetteville [NC] Observer, June 8, 1871;

Keowee Courier [Pickens, SC], November 24, 1871