

Detective and Prisoner

Two men sat together in the rear seat of a smoking car on one of our railroads and chatted familiarly of the ups and downs of a miner's life, the topic being suggested by a landscape dotted with coal roads.

The freedom and interest of their conversation did not seem to be dampened by the fact that the younger of the two carried a revolver, while his companion wore a pair of those uncovered articles of jewelry which are known in criminal circles as "bracelets."

The few passengers who had observed them learned from the confidential brakeman that they were a noted detective and his prisoner on the way to trial. As far as ages went the pair might have been taken for father and son, the fine gray head of the one contrasting strongly with the crisp brown curls of his captor.

What crime had been committed the brakeman didn't know, but hazarded a conjecture that "it must have been a pretty bad one, or George Munsen wouldn't have took the trouble to put them things on his wrists."

Presently the brakeman and the conductor satisfied the joint demands of etiquette and curiosity by stopping to exchange a few words with the detective; the former then perched himself upon the coal-box directly behind the prisoner, and the latter dropped magnificently into the seat in front. The train was sweeping around a curve and past a ruined trestle on the hillside at which both of the passengers looked with some interest.

"I remember that place," said the older man.

"So do I," responded the younger; "I was born there. Came near being buried there, too," he resumed after a moment's pause.

"How was that?"

"It's a pretty long story," said the detective, "but I guess we'll have time for it between this and the next station. Way up there in the slope is the little settlement where I made my debut, so to speak. From it to the bottom of the hill there used to be a gravity road—a long, winding track reaching from the settlement down to the top of a bank wall of earth where a slide occurred the year I was born. On both sides of the track grew saplings that had sprung up since the disaster (what I am telling you happened five years later), and they crowded the road and hung over the old rusty rails on which the coal cars used to run. You must remember that the houses were built near the mouth of the pit—that was one of the first mined worked in this country, and one of the first to be abandoned. Time I am talking about some men were walking up track, and a lot of children playing near the top, climbing in and out of an old car which had lain there since it made its last trip with the broken spraggs still on its wheels.

"The men were miners, all but one of them, who questioned his companions about their work and the country they lived in. He was evidently a stranger.

“Presently, as they talked, a shout from the top of the slope attracted their attention, and they looked up just in time to see the car begin to move slowly down the grade.

“There was an impatient exclamation from the oldest man in the party. ‘Them brats is always up to some mischief,’ he said. ‘They have started that old thing off at last; I’ve been expectin’ to see it go at any time this five year. They’ll be breaking their necks yet with their tom-fooling.’ And another of the group added. ‘We must dust out of this lively, unless we want to get our necks broke; she’ll either jump the rail or go to pieces at the bottom; lucky there ain’t no one aboard of her.’

“The stranger was looking anxiously up at the approaching runaway. His quick eye had caught sight of something round and golden above the car rim.

“‘There’s a child in that car,’ he said quietly.

“It was a second or two before his companions realized the awful meaning of that statement. A child! That was as if he had said that in a few moments someone—perhaps one of themselves—would be childless.

“With one impulse they turned to look at the broken rails at the edge of the fault. Shuddering, they fixed their eyes again on the approaching mass, then hopelessly on each other. They could not dream of stopping the progress of the car. But, quick as thought almost, the stranger took hold of a sapling and bent it down till it nearly reached the track. ‘Hold it,’ he said to one of the men, ‘it will help to check her.’ A rod further down another and then a third and a fourth were held in the same way. So four of the party waited for a few breathless seconds, while the two remaining ones hurried further down; but one more effort and the car was upon them. The first obstacle was whipped out of the hands of the strong man who held it and rushed on to the second with hardly lessened force. Again the barrier was brushed aside, but this time the speed of the old wreck was perceptibly less. By the time the fifth obstruction was reached the newcomer was able to clamber aboard and throw the child into the arms of his companion, but before he had time to save himself the old truck had regained something of its momentum and was plunging on toward the precipice.

“Well, the man jumped just as they reached the edge, just before his vehicle shot over into the air, but he had very little time to choose his ground, and so landed, as luck would have it, on the only heap of stones in sight. The others picked him up for dead and carried him up to the settlement, where the miners held a regular wake over him. But he came to life in the middle of the festivity—the obsequies, I mean—and found that he was only crippled for life.

“The miners, folks not easily moved, were enthusiastic about the affair, and gave such testimonials as they could to show their gratitude and appreciation. One of these expressions took the form of a souvenir, signed by every man in the place, stating in very grandiloquent language what the poor fellow had done. His quick quit seemed to them more wonderful than his courage and devotion, in a community where neither quality is unusual at all.

“The man who takes his life in his hand every day, and has frequently to fight for the life of some companion values a ‘brainy’ action. In the box with the testimonial was a purse of \$50 and a curious gold cross that had been treasured by the mother of the lad who was saved, as her one piece of finery. On it was rudely engraven these words:

“Given by the miners at the Notch to the man who risked his life for a child.”

“That was all. The poor fellow went away, and would have been forgotten, only that the old miners told the story sometimes to their children.”

The prisoner was looking out of the window. The conductor rustled around as though ashamed of the interest he had shown in the story—a story which he did not doubt was pure fiction. Only the brakeman gave way to his sympathy, and asked whether the man had ever been found.

“Not that I know of,” replied the detective.

“And was you the boy what he saved?”

“I was the kid.”

“And you never heer’d tell what became of the man—what would you do if you shu’d come across him some time?”

Evidently the brakeman had an imagination which was trying to assert itself.

“Oh! I’d try to even things up somehow. I suppose common decency would demand that. I’d treat him as well as I knew how.”

“Look here,” said the prisoner, turning from the window with an apparent effort to change the conversation which for some reason, had not seemed to interest him—“look here, old man, I’ve got a little keep sake that your story has just now reminded me of; and if I could get at it I’d ask you to take charge of it till—till this thing is over. If you will put your hand in there and pull out that bit of ribbon so—”

“The conductor almost jumped out of his seat. ‘Blamed if it ain’t the cross that you’ve just been telling about,’ he shouted.

A month later the detective was under a cross examination by the conductor and the brakeman.

“Yes, he was a bad lot. Oh, yes, he didn’t have a leg to stand upon. The facts were all as clear as day. All true about the cross and the rest of it? Just as true as gospel. What had he been doing? Throwing bombs the last thing. Punished? Well, to tell you the truth they won’t be apt to punish him till they catch him again, I guess. Fact is, he got away from me somehow, that same night. Who, me? Oh, no, I’m not on the force any more. I’ve been bounced.”

Published in

- *Springfield [NY] Journal*, December 30, 1887
- *The Wilmington [NC] Messenger*, January 3, 1888
- *Springfield [OH]Daily Republic*, January 7, 1888
- *The [Newport, PA] News*, January 21, 1888
- *The [Lawrence, KS] Evening Tribute*, January 31, 1888
- *Mansfield [PA]Advertiser*, February 1, 1888
- *The Bottineau [ND] Pioneer*, February 2, 1888
- *The Worthington [MN] Advance*, February 2, 1888
- *El Dorado [KS] Republican*, February 17, 1888
- *Mansfield [PA] Advertiser*, February 22, 1888
- *The Bloomington Daily Leader*, February 25, 1888
- *The [Lincoln] Nebraska State Journal*, February 26, 1888
- *Carlisle [PA] Weekly Herald*, February 29, 1888
- *Bloomington [IL] Weekly Leader*, March 2, 1888
- *Shepherdstown [WV] Register*, August 24, 1888
- *Shenandoah Herald [Woodstock, VA]*, October 19, 1888
- *The Pioche [NV] Weekly Record*, April 6, 1889
- *Lewiston [ID] Teller*, August 14, 1890

Reprinted as

"A Detective's Story" in

- *Bristol [IN] Banner*, March 9, 1888
- *The Morning Oregonian*, November 10, 1888
- *Western [Dodge City] Kansas Ensign*, June 6, 1890
- *The Cuba [KS] Daylight*, August 8, 1890
- *Lewison [ID] Teller*, August 15, 1890
- *[Blackfoot] Idaho News*, September 6, 1890

"A Detective's Story: Why He is Not on the Force Any More" in

- *The Topeka [KS] Daily Press*, September 21, 1888
- *Arkansas City [KS] Daily Traveler*, September 27, 1888
- *Kansas City [KS]Daily Gazette*, September 28, 1888
- *The Belvedere [IL] Standard*, October 3, 1888
- *The [Lawrence, KS] Evening Tribute*, October 8, 1888
- *Barbour County Index [Medicine Lodge, KS]*, October 10, 1888
- *The Times [Clay Center, KS]*, October 11, 1888
- *Deseret News [Salt Lake City, UT]*, November 28, 1888
- *Independence [KS] Daily Reporter*, February 1, 1889
- *The Osage City [KS] Free Press*, February 7, 1889
- *The Pioche [NV] Weekly Record*, April 6, 1889
- *The Capital Evening Journal [Salem, OR]*, January 4, 1890

"A Detective's Story: The Prisoner to Whom He Told it Afterwards Escaped" in

- *The Kiowa [KS] Herald and the Barber County Constitution*, July 12, 1888
- *Douglass [KS] Tribune*, July 13, 1888
- *Ford [KS] Gazette*, July 13, 1888
- *Ness County [KS] News*, July 14, 1888
- *Waukesha Republican Freeman*, July 14, 1888
- *The Argos [IN] Reflector*, July 19, 1888
- *Leoti [KS] Standard*, July 19, 1888
- *The Pittsburg [KS] Daily Headlight*, July 19, 1888
- *Nonchalanta [KS] Herald*, July 20, 1888
- *The Tribune [Union, MO]*, July 20, 1888
- *The Osage County [KS] Sentinel*, August 16, 1888
- *Hinds County Gazette [Raymond, MS]*, August 4, 1888
- *The [Athens] Alabama Courier*, August 16, 1888
- *The Carrol Democrat [Lake Province, LA]*, August 18, 1888
- *The McDonald [KS] Times*, November 1, 1888

"The Detective's Story" in

- *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, August 5, 1889

"A Detective's Story: How He Came to be Bounced from the Force " in

- *Woodston [KS] Register*, December 14, 1888
- *The Plainville [KS] Times*, February 7, 1889

Many of these sources credit their source as either "The Epoch" and "Lowell Mass Courier."

After 1891, it was published as "Paying a Debt."