

The Night of Peril *A Detective's Story*

Of course it is to be expected that in a life like mine I should often be exposed to danger of a personal character; it is the lot of all detective officers, and I have been no exception to the rule. In the course of my life I have been subjected several times to extreme peril. In the following pages I am about to give an instance of such peril to the reader.

One day I was sent for by the president of the Bank of Commerce. When I arrived there I found the whole bank in a state of consternation. The safe had been broken into during the night, and all the specie abstracted. I immediately proceeded to examine the safe, and found that the locks had been forced; but a single glance was sufficient to show me that it had been forced after it had been opened, or, in other words, that whoever had taken the money had wished to convey the impression that it had been forced open from the outside. Of course I came at once to the conclusion that someone connected with the establishment had taken the money. While examining the spot, I found on the ground a single leaf of a white Provence rose. It is the observation of small things that makes a good detective, for it is often the most trivial circumstances, which supplies the first link in the chain. I did not pick up this rose leaf, nor indeed appear to notice it. After the scrutiny was over, I went to the president's, Mr. Cameron, apartment.

"Well, Brampton," said he, "what do you make out of it?"

"Do you suspect anybody connected with the bank?" I asked.

"Certainly not! It is impossible that anybody connected with the bank could have committed the robbery; it must have been the work of burglars. Did you visit the cellar where the robbers entered?"

"Yes, and found that the bars had been filed from the *inside*."

"Indeed!—but what do you make out about the safe?"

"That the lock was forced after the safe was opened."

"What do you infer from that?"

"That someone connected with the bank is guilty of the robbery; and he has endeavored to make it appear that it is the work of professional burglars. But he has done his work very bunglingly."

"You must be mistaken," replied the President. "I would answer for all in the employ of the bank with my life."

"I am afraid you would lose it," I replied, with a smile, "for there can be no doubt about the truth of my assertion."

“But how will you prove it?”

“That remains to be seen. How many have you in the employ of the bank?”

“Twelve, including the porter.”

“Who has care of the safe?”

“Mr. Charles Munsel.”

“Have any of your clerks a special fondness for flowers?”

“That is a strange question. But since you ask it, I remember that Munsel generally has a flower in his buttonhole.”

“Who is this Munsel?”

“A very worthy young man. You surely do not suspect him?”

“I shall be very much surprised if he does not prove to be the robber.”

“You astonish me! He has the reputation of being very pious.”

“Very well, we shall see. Where does he live?”

“No. — East Broadway.”

“What time does he go to dinner?”

“At two o’clock.”

“Just point him out to me as I go through the bank, and I will see you again tomorrow morning.”

Mr. Cameron did as I requested. The young man I suspected was about twenty-five years of age. He was quite handsome; it might have been my fancy, but I thought there was a hypocritical look about his face. I glanced earnestly at him, so that I might engrave his countenance in my memory, and then passed into the street.

I directed my steps at once to East Broadway, and calling at the clerk’s residence, I found that it was furnished in gorgeous style, far beyond his means. The door was opened by a shrewd old woman. I asked to see Mr. Munsel, but was of course told that he was not at home. But my purpose was answered by my visit, for in the hall, I saw a quantity of choice flowers in pots, and among them a fine *Provence rose*. I employed the rest of the day in making inquiries as to the private life of Mr. Munsel, and found that he was very extravagant in his habits, and also discovered that on that very day he had deposited a large sum of money under a false name in the

Manhattan Savings Bank. The next morning I went to the bank for the purpose of reporting progress to the president, and to advise the immediate arrest of young Munsel.

“Well, you were right about that young man,” said Mr. Cameron to me, the moment I entered his private room.

“You have come to that conclusion, have you?” I replied.

“Yes; after you had gone yesterday, I caused his accounts to be examined, and found a terrible deficit, amounting to \$30,000 dollars. I called him into the room, and asked him for an explanation —”

“The worst thing you could have done,” I interrupted.

“You are right—he has escaped.”

“I expected as much. And where has he gone?”

“He left last night by the Southern train—at least so we suspect. He has an uncle living about fifteen miles from Augusta, Georgia, and it is very likely he has gone there. Now, Brampton, you must follow him.”

“If you had left the matter in my hands, he should have been arrested without any trouble.”

“I acknowledge I am at fault, and I am more than anxious to have him captured. Come, I will pay you well. Say you will go.”

It was the middle of summer, decidedly not the best time to travel in. But the affair was imperative, and I was obliged to undertake the journey. The same afternoon at 5 o’clock I had started on my expedition.

Railway traveling in July! Who is there that has experienced it, that does not vividly remember its discomforts. The hot glaring sun, the dust, the intolerable thirst, and the warm water in the coolers, are all evils of such magnitude that they make an indelible impression on the mind. Why at the very thought of it at this moment, my throat feels choked up, and I feel the prickling of the flinty dust in my skin. And these the view from the car window; how hot and glaring everything looks. The poor cows are panting in the meadows, the dogs at the stations appear to be on the verge of hydrophobia, everybody and everything is lazy, excepting the flies; and it appears to be their particular province to keep passengers from dozing, so that they (the passengers) may not lose any of the beauties of the scenery.

The longest journey must eventually come to an end, and after three days really hard work, I reached the pleasing town of Augusta, in Georgia. I was, however, in a very bad humor. I was annoyed at the banker’s want of thought in allowing his dishonest clerk to escape. Now, when a man is in a bad humor with a journey he is obliged to take, he is very apt to consider the town at which he is compelled to stay as the most odious place in the world. I was no exception to this

general rule. I hated Augusta, I detested it, abominated it, I—but I cannot just now think of any other word to express my abhorrence of that unoffending Southern city. I went to the best hotel in the place and entered my name in the most savage manner, actually blotting the book in the act, much to the disgust of the precise looking clerk, who stood looking at me while I made the entry.

At last I partook of supper, and I must confess after that genial meal “a change came over the spirit of my dream.” After all, Augusta was not such a very bad place. I actually began to think that it possessed some fine streets and elegant houses. A cup of tea will sometimes work a marvel. I determined I would go and explore the city till bed time, and make inquiry after the absconding bank-robber.

The young man’s fondness for flowers seemed to be the greatest misfortune that could befall him. I have mentioned that a single bud remained on the rosebush in his hall. During my investigations this bud had blossomed. When he absconded from New York he took this flower with him. By means of it I had no difficulty in tracing him in Augusta. There was something peculiar about the rose; it was a large white one, and fortunately attracted the attention of all the conductors on the route. My business now was to visit all the hotels in the city to see if he had been there. The very first one I entered immediately settled the question in my mind that Munsel had left Augusta, and this, too, before I made a single inquiry.

I entered the bar-room, and the first thing I noticed was a faded Provence rose on a chair. On the back of this chair was a newspaper. I took it up, and my eyes at once fell on a paragraph containing an account of the bank robbery in New York; but I was immediately struck with the fact that where the person of the defaulter was described the paper was mutilated, seemingly accidentally, but sufficiently so as to mar the description. This paper was the *New York Herald*, and from its date I knew it had only been delivered in Augusta that morning. I walked up to the bar and called for something to drink. While the barkeeper was preparing it, I said to him carelessly:

“There was a young man here this morning with very black hair and dark eyes; he was of medium height, but stooped a little.”

“I suppose you saw him here,” replied the bar-keeper. “He did not stay long, however, but left with Mr. Theodore Munsel, of Parkville.”

“You know of Mr. Theodore Munsel of Parkville, then?”

“Yes, indeed.”

“What sort of a man is he?”

“A very rough customer.”

“How do you mean rough?”

“He has been tried for his life, twice, but managed to escape.”

“You say he lives at Parkville?”

“No, that’s his post town; but he lives in the woods five miles from the village.”

“How can I get there?”

“You had better drive to Parkville, which is twelve miles off, and then inquire your way—his house is rather hard to find.”

The next day I got a horse and buggy and drove to Parkville; the horse, however, fell dead lame just as I entered the village, and could proceed no further. I drove up to the tavern, and determined to proceed the rest of the way on foot. After making particular inquiries as to my road, I set off on my 5 miles walk. I did not suppose that I was known to Munsel, and my intention was to verify his actual presence, and then return the next day with the proper officers and arrest him.

It was a beautiful July evening, just good enough to render walking a pleasant exercise. It was dark when I started, and I did not walk a mile before it became quite dark. But I had informed myself so well as to the right road, that I thought I could not mistake it. It soon, however, became apparent to me that a great change had taken place in the scenery around me. Instead of the long road clear and open, as it was when I first set out, large trees loomed up on each side of me, and the road became very bad—entirely different from the smooth graveled surface I had first passed over. But I still pressed on, not suspecting that I had mistaken my way. I began to get tired. I must have walked at least two hours before any doubt entered my head.

By this time the broad road had degenerated into a narrow path. I knew, then, that there must be something wrong, for the people of the town, of whom I had inquired, had informed me that the road to Mr. Theodore Munsel’s house was pretty good all the way. I paused for a moment irresolute, and did not know whether to retrace my steps or press forward. It had now become pitch dark, and I determined to go on, well assured that I could never find my way back. I had not proceeded many steps before I became convinced that I was wandering about in a forest. The underbrush began now to seriously impede my progress, and I found great difficulty in keeping on my feet.

My position was anything but agreeable—in the midst of a forest on a dark night. I cannot tell how I passed the three ensuing hours—they appeared three centuries to me. I suppose I must have walked the same path over and over again. I was at last completely overcome by physical fatigue, and sank exhausted on the stump of a tree.

I rested my head upon my hands, and determined to pass the night there, being now certain that it was perfectly futile endeavoring to find my way till morning. While in this stooping position, I thought I saw a light glimmer through the trees. I looked earnestly, and became convinced such was really the fact. I immediately determined to make for it, hoping to find shelter for the night. I advanced in that direction, and soon reached a dilapidated house built entirely in wood. It was a

miserable looking abode, and had it not been for my tired condition, I should have hesitated seeking its shelter. But anything was better than spending the night in the forest, so I resolutely knocked at the door. My summons was for some time unheeded, and it was not till I had knocked again and again, that the door opened, and a gruff voice asked what I wanted.

“Can you give me lodging for the night?” I replied.

I was told to come in, and found myself in a room of moderate size, miserably furnished. A log-fire was burning on the hearth; and two persons occupied the apartment. The one that opened the door to me was a man about fifty years of age, very stoutly built, and possessed of a very sinister expression of countenance. The second occupant was none other than the absconding clerk. I then knew that I was in Mr. Munsel’s house, and I congratulated myself on my good fortune. I noticed that as I entered he cast a scrutinizing glance at me; but as I feel assured he did not know me personally, I experienced no alarm.

“I have lost my way in the forest,” said I, in answer to their looks of interrogation, “and if you will afford me shelter for the night, I shall be happy to repay you for your hospitality.”

“Be good enough to sit down,” said Mr. Theodore Munsel, his eyes sparkling when the word “repay” was used.

“Where are you going?” asked his nephew, fixing another searching look on my face.

“I am going to Centerville. I left Parkville at six o’clock, but I suppose I mistook the road, for I have been wandering about the woods ever since.”

“You are fifteen miles from Centerville,” said the uncle with a kind of leer.

“You do not belong to this part of the country?” said the banker’s clerk.

“No,” I replied, “I am from Virginia.”

“What is your business?”

“I am a collector for a house in Richmond.”

“I should have taken you for a Yankee,” said the young man.

“No, indeed,” I replied, with an attempt to smile.

The uncle and nephew now left the room, and I could hear them whispering together in the next apartment. Still I did not feel any uneasiness, for I relied on the fact that I was unknown to the absconded clerk. They soon returned to the apartment where I sat.

“We have only one room in the house,” said the uncle as he entered; “if you will not mind sleeping with a son of mine, you can have part of his bed,”

I, of course, immediately consented, glad enough to find any place where I could rest my weary limbs.

After a pause of a few minutes, I pulled out my watch, and said I should like to go to bed. I noticed at the time significant looks pass between uncle and nephew when they saw my watch. It was a fine gold one—a real Cooper—and had been presented to me by an importer of watches for services I had rendered.

“You will find my son next the wall,” said the uncle. “You will have the goodness not to awaken him, for he has been sick lately, and has to get up very early.”

I replied that I would certainly avoid waking him. The uncle took up a candle, and showed me to a room upstairs; it was the only habitable sleeping room in the house, and was situated over that in which we had been seated. Cautioning me to put out the light as soon as I was in bed, he left me.

I found myself in a room the exact counterpart of the one below, excepting that this one had a bedstead. Snoring on the bed next the wall was a man some years younger than myself. I cautiously brought the light to bear on his face. The first thing that struck me was, that the man below had deceived me when he told me his son was sick. He was undressed, and wore on his head a night cap.

A vague sensation of uneasiness crept over me. I regretted having entered the house, and looked round the room for means of exit. There was only one door in the room, that by which I had entered. Opposite to the door was a window. I walked up to it, and endeavored to peer through the outside darkness, but could distinguish nothing. I tried to reason away my forebodings, and succeeded in doing so to some extent.

I began to prepare for bed, and had already taken off my coat and waistcoat, when I fancied I heard a step on the stairs. I immediately extinguished the light, and waited in breathless anxiety; the door gently opened, and the uncle cautiously thrust forward his head. In the gloom of the chamber he could not perceive me; and finding the light extinguished, I suppose he thought I was in bed, for he closed the door very softly and descended the stairs again.

I was now worked up to the highest pitch of excitement. I felt certain that something was going to happen. I remembered my lonely situation—the inquisitive questions of the men below. There was no possible means for me to escape except in going through the room in which they were seated—and such a course I knew would be perfect madness. I summoned up all my philosophy, and determined to wait the *denouement*, and tried to persuade myself my fears were groundless. But when I thought of the significant looks that passed between the men when they saw my gold watch, I must confess that the effort was a failure. And then the thought suddenly struck me, if, after all, the clerk had recognized me, it was certain that he would never let me leave that place alive. Five long minutes passed away, and I heard nothing. At that moment a light flashed before my window. I went directly to it, and saw the uncle digging in the garden. I watched him with eager eyes; he was digging a hole about six feet long and three broad.

“Good God!” I exclaimed to myself, “he is digging *my grave*.”

I now felt certain that the young man had been left in the room below to prevent my escape. But I determined to satisfy myself if such were the fact or not. I opened the door noiselessly, and stole cautiously down stairs in my stocking feet. I glanced through the keyhole of the door which opened into the room, and saw that my suspicions were well founded, for the absconding clerk sat beside a table with a revolver all ready cocked within his reach. I returned to the bedroom again.

I again took my position at the window. Five minutes more of agonizing suspense ensued. I had nothing with which to defend myself, and was completely at their mercy. A sudden calmness now took possession of me. I suppose it was the calmness of despair, but withal my faculties were perfectly clear, and I turned over a hundred plans to escape the doom that awaited me. All this time I was eagerly watching the actions of the uncle.

The soil was very light, and he soon succeeded in opening the hole to at least four feet. He then threw down his spade and entered the house again. I expected every moment to hear them ascending the stairs, and made up my mind to sell my life as dear as possible, when a purring sound attracted my attention.

I now perceived for the first time that the light from the room below penetrated through several chinks in the floor. I lay down on the floor, and looking through one of the cracks, found that I could perceive everything in the apartment. One of the men was sharpening a large knife on a grind stone, and it was this that made the purring sound that I heard. He felt the edge, and finding it sharp enough, discontinued his employment. They then began to converse, I could hear every word they said.

“Are you certain, Charles, that this is the detective?” said the uncle.

“Perfectly certain!” returned the clerk. “I know Brampton as well as I do you.”

“It is certain he must die then. I suppose he has plenty of money with him beside his gold watch.”

“Yes, he must be well provided with funds, and his business here is evidently to arrest me.”

“Come, then, let us finish the business at once,” said the uncle.

“Do you think he is asleep yet?” returned the clerk.

“No matter if he is not, he’ll sleep well enough afterwards, anyhow.”

The clerk laughed—hideously, I thought.

“Will you do it, or shall I?” said the nephew.

“O, you may go, but be sure you make no mistake. Bill, you know, lies next the wall, he has a nightcap on, the detective has none. Leave the light outside the door, for fear of waking Brampton; and above all, be quick about it.”

In a moment my plan was formed. Bill was fast asleep. I gently turned him over to the outside of the bed, and pulling off his nightcap, put it on my own head. I accomplished this without waking Bill. I then cautiously laid myself in his place near the wall. The agony of the next few minutes was intense—my heart seemed ready to cease beating. I heard a step on the stairs; it advanced; the door opened softly, the floor creaked with the weight of a heavy tread. The murderer approached the bed. I could feel his hot breath on my cheek. I had the presence of mind enough to imitate a snore. I felt his hand passing over my head—it rested on my shoulder. O, agony of agonies, he had found out my *ruse*, and was about to kill me! My whole body was bathed in a cold perspiration.

Suddenly I heard a heavy thud on the bed, which was followed by a groan, and then all was still. The blow had been struck, and I was not the victim. A pause of some moments ensued, and then I heard the uncle ascending the stairs. They wrapped the body of the unfortunate Bill in a sheet, and conveyed it at once into the garden. They had no sooner left the house than I leaped out of bed and ran to the window. They had evidently not discovered their mistake, for the body was already in the grave prepared for it, and they were filling it in.

I lost not a moment to put on the rest of my clothes, and creeping quietly down stairs, escaped through the front door and I ran as fast as I possibly could, and by chance the right road. In less than an hour I was in Parkville. I roused the whole village and in a few hurried words told my story. A large party of men immediately set off for the scene of the tragedy accompanied by myself.

When we entered the house we found the front room still occupied by the uncle and nephew. When they saw me they turned deadly pale, and I really believed they thought I had risen from the grave, for they had not yet discovered that they had sacrificed Theodore Munsel’s son. When they saw that I was really alive, they assumed an air of bravado, supposing that I had only come to arrest the clerk for the bank robbery. Their dream, however, was soon dissipated, for in a few moments the body of the murdered man was exhumed, and they were confronted with their bloody work.

It was shocking to see the uncle’s agony when he discovered that his son had been murdered. Neither of the criminals attempted any defense. Three months afterwards they were tried, convicted and executed.

M’Kean Miner [Smethport, PA], April 25, 1865

Dodgeville [WI] *Chronicle*, May 18, 1865

Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J. B. Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865