

A Detective's Tale of the London Sewers

William Harvey, or as he was better known, English Bill, had that morning pleaded guilty to a crime which gave him to the State Penitentiary for life, and as I took him back to his cell he told me to come and see him the next day, and perhaps he could tell me something that would astonish me. We detectives are not easily astonished, however, and the oft-repeated assurance, by hopeless criminals, that they could and would astonish us with wonderful revelations, [too] often tell us little or nothing more than we know. A few new dodges, some robbery yet in its infancy and only conceived, and occasionally some really useful clues or information, generally being the substance of the prisoner's confessions, and made in the hopes of its being used to mitigate and shorten the present punishment and confinement. It was not with the expectation of hearing anything of consequence that I went, the next day, therefore, [to] English Bill's cell. That he was a celebrated burglar, thief, and criminal I had long known, but as I said before, it is seldom that reliable information, which can be made of use to us detectives, is furnished by such men.

Bill seemed none the worse for the severity of the sentence he had so lately received, though, to a less hardened criminal, the bare thought of confinement for life is generally so appalling as to age them in a few hours. But [Bill] had counted the cost over and over again, and now the game was up, the race run, and all chance gone; he was prepared to pay the penalty and meet his fate like a man.

It is such men as these that alone make the successful burglar or criminal; the coward when his doom has come will have been a coward before, and the chances are that the very innate cowardice has been the cause of unsteady nerve or hand and had led to his detection and capture.

After a few words of ordinary conversation with Bill, he plunged into the matter of his confession at once.

"You see, sir," he said (and I'll tell you it in nearly the same words) "I have something on my mind to tell you that I think you ought to know. You run me down in this 'ere game, and did it well. I ain't going to blame you for doing that; that's your business, not but what it's a mean kind of business, too, this running a man down; but somebody has got to do it, I suppose, and after all it ain't any meaner than a man like me, doing something which requires officers to run him down. However, that's neither here nor there, and I half forgive you for bagging me—I don't quite forgive you, you see—perhaps that'll come, if you and me put together in this little business, and you fix the folks as fixed me, the d—d villains."

I told Bill I could make no treaty or bargain with him, that all our dealings must consist of his confession to me, but if he was able to give me such information as would result in my getting on the track of any rogues, he might rest assured that I would follow up their trail and arrest them, and see due punishment meted out to them if it lay in my power.

“Well, that’ll have to do, I suppose; all I asked is to get them fixed and so here goes for what the parson used to call open confession. You remember that robbery of the Surf Bank, down on T—street, near the river[?] How it got pretty well stripped, and how no one ever got a trace of the fellows[?]”

I remembered it too well, for the non-success of the detective force in not being able to get the remotest clue, had been a constant gall to us and the papers had taken care that we should have a rub up on the old sore every two or three days.

“Well,” said Bill, “me and my pals fixed up that thing, and if the other fellows had worked square, I wouldn’t be here now. I’d be a virtuous farmer in Australia or respectable citizen out west, living on my money and taking good care of myself.

“That’s what I laid out to do it on, thanks to them villain pals of mine, and so I thought that I’d have another try to make me raise, and that’s what settled me.

“Well, you see, we had our eye on that bank a long time, and I’ll tell you how it chanced to come about.

“One night me and some fellers were out in a boat on the river looking around for something that might be handy, and coming around a pier, what should we run into but a police boat. Well we pulled for shore, and struck the butment hard and stove in the boat.

“The other fellers grabbed the wharf and run up it like cats and off they went, but I was kinder stunned and couldn’t run. I looked around for a moment or so, and right near me was the mouth of a sewer. I put into that like a streak and went up the pipe on a run. Sometimes I’d trip up and go on all fours in the slush which flows about six inches deep in the bottom.

“After a little I stopped to listen and found no one was after me. I had passed two or three glimmers of light as I ran and right ahead of me was another. Going up to it I found that it came down an opening from the street. Getting a foothold against the wall of the sewer, I clambered up, and stuck my head out of the opening.

“It was one of those long and narrow surface openings which enter the sewers under the sidewalks at the street corners. It was big enough for me to get my head and shoulders through, but no more. The gas above was burning brightly, and as I looked round the first thing I saw was the Surf Bank right close to me, the width of the sidewalk only separating. Just then I heard the slow, steady walk of a policeman, and tucked in my head. He passed within three feet, and the first thing that struck me was, now if I’d a grudge against that feller how easily I could out with my revolver and shoot him; and then I thought who’d ever look down in the sewer for the man who shot him—and get off. It flashed over my mind—if a feller was to rob a place and a friend down the sewer, how nicely he could hand him the swag, and then walk home with his hands in his pockets, and if caught, nothing could be proved.

“These things set me thinking, and I concluded I had dropped on a first rate thing. You know yourself there ain’t any difficulty worth mentioning in the way of fellers getting into any bank in

the city, but the police catch us as we go home with the stuff. It ain't the getting that bothers us, but it's the way to fetch it home through the streets. Well, to make a long story short, I laid out to break into that very bank which was so handy to the sewers. I had the choice of pals, and I picked out those I could trust. I was mistaken in that, but I'll fool 'em yet. I got a feller to hire the basement under the bank, and then for a month or so I let the matter lay still, only I was maturing my plan all the while. At last all was ready, and six of us had sworn to stand by each other through thick and thin and to share equally the danger and the stuff, only I was to have ten per cent. on the share of the five others for finding out and planning the lay.

“Scotch Rob, and me, and Gentleman Tim, and Jerry Mudge was to be inside the basement. Gentleman Tim was the man that hired it for a broker's office, and Charles Ferris was to be in the sewer, and Cute Jack was to be in the street.

“We all four were to be in the basement one Saturday, and as the time for locking up came, three of us got into a big press supposed to be full of papers. Gentleman Tim then walked out of the office and gave the janitor the key of it. He then came back and opened the door which he had not locked, and came into the office.

“He then locked the door from the inside with a false key, and joined us in the press. We locked the door of that inside, and there were four fellows, packaged together like sardines. Soon we heard the janitor open the office door and come in to clean out. He swept around the office and arranged things a little as we could tell by the noise he made, and then cleared out and left us. I wanted to sneeze real bad when he was in the office, but I managed to stop it. After he had gone we stepped out. We had abundance of time before us only we had to keep still for a time, as the janitor was most likely sweeping the bank [upstairs]. So we had a good snooze, and got to work about midnight. The first thing was to get down the plaster overhead without noise, which we did by holding a blanket under it and in picking it off gently and in small pieces. We then got to the laths, and Jerry Mudge, the carpenter among us, cut them off with a fine saw. I forgot to say that we hung blankets before the windows, and there were iron shutters too, both noise and light were kept from the street. For a month previous Gentleman Tim had been bringing to the office, in small quantities, such things as we needed, and we had a good stock of everything on hand.

“We then struck the floor of the bank, and Gentleman Tim, standing on the press, soon sawed out a piece some three feet square. Luckily there was some loose matting on the floor overhead, and not a tacked-down carpet, and it lay exactly over where we had cut. You see, I had often been in the bank and had taken the bearings of things. Well, we clambered up through the hole and surveyed the things. Scotch Bob was a safe-lock maker, and he thought he could open any combination lock if he only had time. So to work he went. We fellows went below and left him to himself, as he could work better that way. You see, we had not intended to remove anything that night. The time would be short. We were only to get ready to go through the vault safe and get away with the stuff on Sunday night. All night Bob worked, and I watched and listened while the others slept. We knew the janitor visited the bank on Sunday about noon, so Bob came down through the hole about eleven the next day, and carefully drew the matting over the opening.

“Jerry then rigged up a prop or two with the piece of floor on top, and made it quite steady, and no one could see from above any change. About noon the janitor came in. The bank folks

thought he didn't do his duty, or he'd have caught us; but bless you he couldn't see anything wrong—we fixed all that. Well, Bob went back to his work and worked all afternoon, but with no luck, and so when nine o'clock came that night, Charley and me took hold of things. We got our jimmies and our plug-uglies, and fixed up a prop to work the opener against. I was bound to open any safe, if once I got a purchase with my opener. They can't stand long against it.

“Before we went to work Gentleman Tim went to the bank door and with a fine brace and bit he made a small hole through the panel of the door, then he tied a bit of cord to a wire and stuck the wire through the door; he felt it pulled on the other side and knew Cute Jack was at his post. Leaving the wire through the door, we rigged a spring and hammer so that it would strike on a book and make a dull thud instead of a clear noise like a bell. Jack was to pull the wire and keep us posted by it of outside matters and dangers. Then we got to work and I got the opening to bear. We made little or no noise, still we stopped work whenever Jack's bell gave one thud, which meant danger, two thuds meant go ahead again, while three thuds meant that [someone] was either coming into the bank or that some policeman was searching along under the stoops, and would when he got to the bank stoop, and most likely discover Jack as he lay curled up. Should this happen he was to feign sleep, and, at the worst, could only be made to move on. However, everything was propitious, and the bell only sounded the one rap whenever the policeman drew near the bank. We had worked an hour, and I felt sure a couple more would let me through the door, when Bob, who had not discontinued his attempts to unfold the combination of the lock, uttered a joyful exclamation, and the ponderous door swung. He had hit upon the combination partly by luck and partly from his knowledge of locks. The inner door was of but little hindrance to us, and we were soon in the vault itself. Gentleman Tim produced some large India rubber bags which he had provided, and into them we hurriedly placed the wealth of notes, stocks, and bills, which we found. A lot of depositors' tin cash boxes were ranged around, and these we broke open and added the contents to our pile. The bags now became full and yet more was to be had for the taking. It would not do for one of us to load himself with even a single dollar, for if arrested on suspicion, we must have nothing traceable to the bank about our persons. A long, low trunk was in the vault, and by measuring its thickness we found it would just enter the sewer at the corner.

“Now came the most dangerous part of the work. By pulling the string, the wire end of which was in Jack's hand, we communicated to him through arranged signals that we were ready to come out. In answer he informed us through the same channel that the police was still near. After waiting fifteen minutes, Jack telegraphed that the coast was clear, and one by one we slipped out of the bank by the front door, and handing the bag of stuff which we carried down the sluiceway to Charley, passed on in different ways, to meet at the mouth of the sewer. I came out of the bank carrying the trunk, which I gave to Charley, and then passed down towards the market.

“I waited an hour and then went to the sewer mouth and waited in the shade of the pier an hour or more, but none of the fellers came. At last I slipped up the sewer, and found no Charley.

“I then saw how I had been fooled. The villains had come together and made off with the spoils before I got there.

“I never set eyes on one of those fellows since. If I had, one would have died, be it me or him.

“The bank offered a big reward, and I had my doubts as to whether it wouldn’t be better to peach and claim it, and so get something. But as I had no bonds to return to them, and poor clues to give them, I feared they wouldn’t act square with me. Now I’m fast and may as well make the best of it. If you can do anything to catch ‘em I’ll be right glad; if you can’t, it can’t be helped. Only if you do your best, why, as I said before, I forgive you clean for hunting me down.”

Little more remains to be told. The clues given me by English Bill were sufficient to enable me to trace his fellow villains; but safe on unextraditable soil, they lived in wealth, and no doubt daily rejoiced in the fruits of their most successful robbery. I visited Bill the other day and told him of their safety. He didn’t enjoy the news at all, but with many curses compared their fate to his, and damned them for their treachery. As I left he said, “I don’t know as I forgive you quite, but if I ever get out of here, and have a chance to shoot you from a sewer, why—I won’t, that’s all.

The Conservative [McConnelsville, OH], July 1, 1870

Dubuque [IA] Daily Herald, July 17, 1870

Reprinted as

“The Surf Bank Robbery, A Detective’s Story” in *Ashtabula [OH] Weekly Telegraph*, September 17, 1870