

Experiences of a Bow Street Runner

One of my journeys called me away to a town in Suffolk, where I was ordered to take charge of a prisoner to be discharged the next day from one of the local jails, in which he had been undergoing a year's imprisonment for a criminal assault. The man had been let out on a ticket-of-leave from the Defence hulk at Woolwich, and had speedily, as it appeared, got into trouble down in the country. As he was merely "wanted" to complete his original sentence—having broken his ticket-of-leave—there could be no bother about apprehending him inside the prison, and using such precautions for his safe keeping as seemed best to my judgment.

Just as I was about to leave the office in Bow Street, one of my comrades, with whom I was rather intimate, came in, having finished a journey such as I was myself about to set off on.

"Going out, Tom?" he asked and on my telling him where I was bound for, he continued, "Better have this 'barker,' Tom. You may find it useful."

At the same time he produced a small pocket-pistol, which he held out for my acceptance.

"I have not got any powder," he added, "but here are some caps and bullets."

It seems needless to remark that this was before the days of revolvers and patent cartridges. We had then to load in the old fashion, and had merely got as far as the introduction of the percussion cap. I had never before carried any thing more deadly by way of protection than a life preserver, but as my friend seemed to mean a kindness, I made no ado about accepting his offer, and having "capped" the pistol there and then, I consigned it to the side pocket of a pilot coat which I wore buttoned over my uniform.

My journey down to Suffolk calls for no particular notice.

In due time the railroad deposited me at my destination, and left me with ample leisure to call upon the governor of the prison overnight with a view to arranging for my carrying off my charge the next morning. I asked what kind of a customer I would have to deal with, and must confess I did not feel much encouraged by the reply.

"He is what I call a nasty customer," was the answer. "He has given us a deal of trouble while we have had charge of him, continually breaking prison rules, and more than once he has tried to commit suicide in the most determined manner by tearing open the veins in his arms with his fingernails."

This account of matters was not, as may well be supposed, at all enlivening and when the governor added that the man was a perfect giant, and had been a "navy" before he fell into evil courses, I began to fear that my work was cut out for me. However, there was no help for it. We Bow Street runners had as fickle customers to deal with as any of your modern detectives. All I could do was to ask that the prisoner should be detained until I got over in the morning. I told the governor where I had put up, but he did not seem disposed to offer me his company for an hour or two in the evening, and to me he hardly appeared the sort of a man I could ask in an offhand

way to take a friendly glass: so my arrangements being thus far completed, I there and then left him.

The inn where I had taken up my quarters stood right opposite the jail entrance, and as the street was somewhat of the narrowest, the most complete view of all comers and goers could be commanded from the front of my temporary residence.

As my landlady knew the errand I had come on, and had a most becoming respect for the representative of the law, she kindly accommodated me with her own private parlor as a sitting room, and a very pleasant evening I spent in the company of the intelligent daughter of the house, business leaving her mother but little time to bestow upon me. Next morning found me seated at a very comfortable breakfast, and the weather being fine, the window of the private parlor was left open, affording a perfect view of all that might take place at the prison door opposite. While I was absorbed in the good cheer before me, I was startled by an exclamation from both the landlady and her daughter, which caused me to look up and instinctively to glance across the street.

“Did you ever see such a big, coarse and clumsy looking woman?” exclaimed the younger of my entertainers.

“Or is it a woman at all?” added the mother.

My attention was at once riveted upon the newcomer, whom I could not avoid connecting with the criminal it would soon be my duty to apprehend. Without saying a word to the two ladies, I carefully and closely watched every movement of the party opposite during the remainder of my morning meal. More than once I caught myself mentally repeating my landlady’s query:

“Is it a woman, after all?”

The *it* must be excused, as the point was so entirely doubtful. For a woman, the individual was very considerably above the average height, and her whole physique indicated far more than the average strength of womankind.

There was a swagger in her walk, too, most unlike the carriage of a female and once during her pacing in front of the jail door she stopped to adjust a boot lace, or some such matter, in a fashion that showed an entire absence of delicacy, and at the same time showed a portion of a limb which might have done credit to an athlete in the highest state of training. I was fairly puzzled, and none the less so that I had twice noticed her ringing the prison bell, and that I knew there was but one individual to be discharged that morning, and it was close upon my time to go and look after him. I had barely finished my last cup of coffee when one of the prison wardens came across to say that the wife of my prisoner was waiting outside, and had twice made a demand to see him but that the governor did not care to accede to the request without first consulting me. After casting the matter over in my own mind for a minute, I told the warden that I did not mind the woman being admitted, but that the two ought to be very closely watched during the interview. The man re-entered the prison, and within a few minutes I observed that the woman was called in.

Punctual to my time, I crossed over to the prison, and found my charge waiting for me, his wife being still with him, and no one in the room but the governor. Contrary to my expectations, the prisoner held up his wrists and submitted to be handcuffed with the most lamb-like docility.

When we got into the street I suggested, as there was time to spare, that the stalwart pair should have a bit of breakfast at my expense, before starting on the journey for town. I thought the woman seemed a little taken aback at my invitation; however, it was acceded to, and we entered the inn parlor, where I requested the landlady to produce a plentiful supply of ham and eggs and, as the pair preferred ale to tea or coffee, I ordered them a pint apiece. I had, of course, to unlock one hand in order to allow my prisoner the free use of his knife and fork and, after what I had heard the night before, I thought it was rather a risky thing for me to do, as, though he might not attempt to do me any mischief he might try to inflict some serious mischief on himself. All, however, passed off safely, and when breakfast was finished, I told him he must bid his wife good-by, as I did not want to attract any attention at the railway station. A kiss was accordingly exchanged, the bracelets were again adjusted to his wrists, and we set off at a brisk pace.

When we got to the station, I learned that the next “up” train was an express and that I would have to look sharp, as it might be expected immediately, and made but a brief stoppage. The train, in fact, came in almost to a minute after the information was communicated to me, and I hurried across the platform, got my man into a second-class carriage—the compartment I had only just time to notice was empty. The whistle sounded, and the train was beginning to move, when the door was flung violently open, and in jumped the prisoner’s wife, taking her seat right opposite me. There was but time for the porter to slam to the door when we were off. It need not be said that I was very far from being satisfied with the look of things, and that I had made up my mind to be carefully on my guard. I said nothing, being fully determined not to betray any uneasiness, though it must be owned I felt much. Before we had gone any great way, my prisoner turned sideways to me, and said: “Master, my missus and me have some small matters of our own we would like to talk over, and, as they don’t concern you in the least, p’raps you wouldn’t mind looking out o’ winder for a minute or two while we have our talk.”

“That I could not possibly do,” was my immediate answer. “My duty is to keep you always under my eye and control and, beside, as you have just said, your domestic arrangements can be a matter of no concern to me, so you can discuss them as freely as you please without minding my presence.”

This answer seemed to disconcert both of them but, as if by way of compromise, I at the same time leaned toward the window of the carriage for a moment, and glanced outside. My hearing is sharp enough now, but at the time I speak of, it was even more acute. Just as I turned my head I heard, or fancied I heard the man whisper the words “Both together.” Instantly the suspicion flashed across my mind that these words related to myself, and I turned round and faced the couple in a moment. What I saw in the expression of each of them seemed to warrant my acting with immediate decision. I seized the man between his manacled wrists so that he could not raise his hands. With an instinctive thought, I plunged my right hand into the pocket of my pilot coat, pulled out the pistol my mate had handed to me, cocked it with my thumb, and holding it within a few inches of the face of the woman opposite, I looked steadily into her eyes and said, with

emphasis, "If you attempt to stir before we reach the next station, you will certainly be a dead woman!"

It was something fearful to notice the immediate change on that woman's countenance. She became of a pallid whiteness, and her lips had the purple bluish tinge that indicates so unmistakably an excess of deadly fear. In the highly dramatic positions I have just described we sped on until the next stopping station was reached, and that occupied more than twenty minutes. The moment the train came to a stop I thus addressed the woman, keeping her "covered" with the muzzle of my pistol: "Leave the carriage and, if you value your liberty, make what speed you can to get into hiding."

She disappeared instantly and I felt a heavy load of anxiety lifted off my mind as she left us, for all the encounters I most hate, an encounter with a woman is so be classed foremost. From the moment I saw the change in her face, indicative of such intense fear, I knew I was master of the situation but still I was glad to be rid of all further risk of a struggle. Not a word passed between my prisoner and me during the remainder of the journey to London, which we were no great while in reaching, and where I duly delivered him into safe keeping at the Bow Street police office.

Next morning I had to conduct my prisoner to Woolwich, there to deliver him to the authorities of the hulks, from whom he had obtained his ticket-of-leave. He seemed to have recovered from his scare of the day before, and on our journey spoke freely enough, and with an earnestness that left no doubt of the truth of his communication.

"Master," said he, "I am main glad you kept your head yesterday, and did not lean out of the winder. Had you done so, missus and I meant to have pitched you out, and taken our chances after of getting off."

"I was not very likely to be so easily put off my guard," was my laconic answer.

"Ay, but, master, your danger was not over then for missus and I had made it up that she was to pin your arms—and she could a done it easy—while I was to smash your head with the 'darbies.' We should then a took the key, got off the bracelets, and heaved you out a winder afore you could come to yourself. That pistol fairly put us out, for it cowed missus, and she isn't easily cowed, I tell ye."

"But the pistol was not loaded," said I "nothing but a cap and an empty barrel."

"All the same, master, I'm glad we failed. Now I've thought it over, I know I could not have escaped. It was known I was left in your charge, and that missus joined us. When your body was found, we'd a been spotted at once, and most likely both on us would a swung for it. I'm main glad, I tell you, that you got out o' the mess, and I don't bear you no ill will for having done your dooty as a man and a hofficer."

Never before to my knowledge had I been in such deadly peril, and truly thankful did I inwardly feel for the providential escape I learned I had just made. I was glad to give my murderous-

minded charge over to the care of the officers of the Defence and I am thankful to add that I never heard more of him, or wished to do so.

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