

Joe Belden

On one occasion, in my detective experience, a long and arduous search had led me on the track of a noted counterfeiter, known among the fraternity as a wholesale dealer in bogus issues, or one who sold spurious money in large quantities.

Whether it was that a leak had occurred through one of my subordinates, or that an instinctive idea had entered the man's mind that he was getting into the toils, I could never divine.

The first real fact was that evidence sufficient to consign him to the penitentiary had accumulated, and, armed with the proper warrants, I disguised myself and visited his usual place of rendezvous, only to learn that he had fled the city.

As near as could be ascertained, he had gone to a little town on the borders of the Erie Canal, and thither I followed him.

It was in the month of December. The canal was frozen solid, and, as there were numerous locks at this point, many boatmen were laid up there in winter-quarters with their barges.

A row of frame houses, one story and a half high, with gable roofs[,] had been built years before upon the immediate borders of the canal, and were occupied mainly by the boatmen, among whom a number of disreputable and worthless fellows had ingratiated themselves, indicating habits of gambling and excessive whisky drinking, which soon gave the locality a bad reputation.

Joe Belden, the man I was after, had here found a congenial abiding-place. In the end house of the row, looking to the south, a bar-room had been established, and at night it was an easy matter to stand upon the outside and get a good view of all the frequenters.

Belden was evidently somewhat cautious, as it was not until the third night of our watch that we observed him, crouched by the stove, in one corner of the room.

As we had not seen him enter, we concluded he must lodge in the place, and have come from one of the rooms overhead.

It was Saturday night, and the bar-room was too full of people for myself and one assistant—Tracer, “the shadow”—to attempt to make a dash and take him out. As the evening rolled on, Belden appeared to indulge very freely in stimulants, and we determined to stand watch by turns until morning, when there would be few people about the place, and he would be stupefied by his potations.

It was just breaking day when Tracer came on board the canal boat where I had concealed myself for rest and shelter, and reported that some one was moving about the bar-room, and he believed it was Belden.

Ten minutes afterward we had him in custody, and were out of the house, at least one hundred rods away. He had awoke burning up with thirst, he said, and had come down to get a morning dram, which he had just drank as we dashed into the place and took him.

He made no resistance, remarking that he had been fairly caught and was perfectly willing to go, but would like to get his overcoat, and we could go with him to his room for it.

We could see no objection to this, and we re-entered the bar-room. Tracer remained below while I was to go with Belden to his room. I took the precaution to be near enough to place my hand on his shoulder, if he attempted to run or play any tricks.

We passed behind the bar, through a doorway leading to a square room, in which a very old and very stout lady was making an apparently feeble effort to sweep the floor.

It must have been that he gave her some sign, which I did not perceive but which she understood, for she dropped the broom, approached closer to Belden, and said:

“Good morning, my son!”

Then she approached me with a like salutation, and in a second of time threw her arms about my neck, with a grip like a vise. At the same instant, Belden darted through a doorway leading from the other side of the apartment.

My first impulse was to brain the old woman with the butt of my revolver, but I checked that, and, with a tremendous effort, disengaged myself, the force of my exertions hurling her into a corner of the room.

The door closed behind Belden with a spring-lock. Tracer had heard the noise, and, coming into the room took in the situation at once. We dashed ourselves against the door, and broke it through just in time to see our man on the top of a flight of stairs. It had all been the work of a moment.

To mount those stairs and break another door was about as quickly done; and this brought us into another apartment leading to one beyond, through which Belden had gone, and, after following him through three such, we were not only convinced that the entire row of houses—ten in number—were thus connected, but that we were committing an unwarrantable trespass, as there was not one of the apartments into which we had broken that was not occupied by men, women and children, the latter filling the rooms with terrific yells or “murder! thieves! police!!” etc.

“This won’t do, Tracer,” said I. “Hold on!” for he was about to spring against another door. “We must stop and go back.”

It was the only alternative, and we were compelled to accept it.

By the time we had reached the bar-room, it was filled with a motley assemblage, well intended to terrify the most resolute. The word had passed from one to another that officers had invaded the place, and exceeded their authority by breaking into apartments without proper warrants.

The crowd was so dense that we could not possibly get out, and the countenances upon which we looked were menacing. Tracer instinctively drew his revolver.

“Put that up,” I said. “It is merely a pepper-box here.”

“Kill the scoundrels! Cut a hole in the ice! Put them in the canal!” and similar expressions went up from all sides.

The crowd had closed in on us in such a way as to render any attempt at resistance useless, if not altogether impossible.

Several of the more aggressive ones seized us; a stout cord was brought, and in a few moments we were securely bound. Others had gone to the canal, and we could hear the dull thud of the axes cutting into the ice, and the sound did not reassure us.

To what extent the brutality of these men might be carried we could not say. Our overcoats had been removed, and we were hustled out of doors bare-headed into the keen December air, that shot to our very vitals.

Two capacious holes had been cut in the ice; ropes tied about our waists, muscular arms seized us, and we were dragged to the edges of the yawning apertures, and were about being thrust in, when a stentorian voice shouted:

“Hold—hold there, I say! Put those men into the canal, and I’ll put a bullet between the cowardly ribs of every one of yo[u].”

The crowd fell back as if panic-stricken, leaving us standing entirely alone, but still firmly bound.

Looking in the direction from whence the voice had come, I could see the towering form of a man above six feet in height, advancing with rapid steps, and with a six-shooter resting over his left arm, and pointed directly at our assailants.

“It’s Long Jim!” shouted one of the crowd, as the man strode forward. “He’s taken a new tack, he has!”

He was stout in proportion to his height, and wore a slouched hat, from under which the long black hair drooped about his face, adding to the effect of a countenance already resolute enough in expression to show that the speaker meant business.

In another moment, the stranger had reached the spot where we were standing, and drawing a formidable-looking knife, severed the cords that bound us, and turning to the crowd, exclaimed:

“Git back into that bar-room, every one of you, and take a drink at my expense. As for you,” he continued, addressing Tracer and myself, “you’d better go in with the rest and git warmed up. I’ll see that no harm comes to you.”

He was evidently a leader among the ruffians by whom he had been surrounded, and we felt we could trust him.

“My name is Grattan,” he said, “better known as Long Jim. I had just drove up here, and finding out what was going on, concluded to stop it. Come and licker up. I’ll take care of you, I tell you.”

The crowd retreated to the bar-room, and we followed with out heads a good deal confused by the peril we had been in, and from which we had been so unexpectedly, and, it seemed to us, almost miraculously relieved.

As we were walking along, Tracer nudged me in the ribs, then gave a knowing wink and cast a sidelong glance at our deliverer; all of which was intended to convey the intelligence that he had heard of Long Jim before, and, as he subsequently informed me, knew that he was an old offender, for whom the chief had been in search.

Of course it was utterly useless to attempt to take him then, and, as we were convinced he lived somewhere in that neighborhood, we felt sur[e] we could get him at some time in the future.

Upon reaching the bar-room, our overcoats were restored to us, and we took our departure, considerably crestfallen. Long Jim accompanied us a few hundred yards, and then suddenly halted.

“See here!” he exclaimed. “I understand that you fellows are detectives, and that your chief wants to see me in New York. Give him my compliments, and say I will come to his office within two days. Do as good a turn for me as I have for you.”

Long Jim was as good as his word; and, as the case against him was not a very strong one, he was allowed to depart, for the time being, as free as he had come.

As for Joe Belden, we looked for him in all directions, as we had a personal as well as an official interest in desiring to pay our respects to him. Time rolled on, however, until years intervened, and the pursuit seemed useless; but in the midst of all the other care imposed by my other duties[,] he was seldom out of my thoughts.

It was exactly nine years after the adventure above related that I left the office one night at a very late hour[,] and boarded a street-car to go to my lodgings.

Opposite to me, in a corner seat of the car, a very gentlemanly appearing man was twirling a small cane between his fingers, and looking about him with a somewhat suspicious air:

I had not specially noticed him at first; but, as his nervousness increased, my attention was drawn to him more closely, and in a moment more I recognized him as Joe Belden.

As I arose to take a seat beside him[,] he also arose to leave the car, and I laid my hand on his shoulder.

“It won’t do, Mr. Belden!” I said. “I know you, and you are my prisoner.”

“My name is not Belden, sir!” he replied, and at the same time struck me sharply in the face with his cane.

The blow stung me, but was not sufficiently heavy to do any great damage. It roused my blood to such a pitch, however, that I had no scruples in knocking him down with such force that he remained partially unconscious until after I had ironed him and removed him from the car.

On arriving at headquarters, he acknowledged his identity, and give us a most interesting account of his wandering from the time of his escape to his capture.

On the following morning he was arraigned in court upon the old indictment, and as the evidence was all at hand he pleaded guilty, and was given the opportunity for five years reflection in the penitentiary.

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