

The Telegraph Detective

It was in a railroad car that my vis-a-vis, to while away the time—we were obliged to wait, owing to a broken rail—told the following story:

“Ten years ago I was a telegraph operator in a small town in New Jersey, but, my health failing, I gave up my situation, and taking an agency, traveled westward until I finally reached San Francisco. While there I took a fancy to visit the mining regions; so, selecting suitable goods to sell among the miners, I went, satisfied my curiosity, and made a little money, and was returning in the stage coach, when the incidents I am about to relate occurred, or at least began [t]o occur.”

“There were besides myself three inside passengers; an old gentleman of sixty and two roughly-dressed men, apparently miners. These two men sat at opposite ends of the coach, not appearing to know each other, while the old gentleman and myself sat close together. I noticed that the old gentleman had a heavy tin or iron box between his legs, which he seemed anxious to keep out of sight.

“After a short conversation with him on general subjects I allowed myself to drift gently into a doze; and while in that condition my ear, trained as it was to the intelligent sound of the telegraph instrument, caught a faint tic, tic, which resolved itself into the following words:

“Bill, the young one is going to sleep, and I will tend to him while you pitch the old one out over the precipice when I make the signal and secure the box.

“I was now as wide awake as if I had been called by an operator to receive a message, but I pretended to be still dozing while I listened intently. Then I heard the coach window rattle, and it read:

“All right, Bob. We will be to the Big Jump in twenty minutes and then give the word and out he goes.”

“Taking a cautious look from between my eye-lids, I saw that one of the villains was telegraphing by vibrating a knife-blade between his teeth, while the other used the window for that purpose, neither of them appearing to notice the other.

“I knew the precipice to which they referred, a terrible place, where a miner had once jumped off in a fit of despair at his bad luck, from which it was known as the Big Jump. How to communicate to the old gentleman I was at a loss to determine, but finally I took out a newspaper and underscored the words in a lengthy editorial which, if read consecutively, would read: Be cautious, sir. The two villains here intend to murder and rob us in ten minutes. When I arise you attack the one with the moustache and I will take the other. Kill if necessary.

“Then handed the paper to the old gentleman, saying: ‘Have you read this, sir? It’s a most excellent editorial.’”

“He took the paper, put on his glasses and commenced to read. Soon the under-scored words drew his attention and he began to study them. Then I saw him grow pale and feel for his box with his foot. Handing my back the paper he said significantly:

“Do you believe that, sir?[""]”

“I know it to be true, sir,[""]” said I.

“Horrible!” said he slipping his hand into his breast-pocket, a stern look coming in his face as he added: ‘I believe that I’d feel like shooting some one.’

“I saw I had a man of courage to help me, so I cared little for the villainous smile which his remark brought to one of the ruffian’s face. I saw we were near the Big Jump and were going down a steep grade at a lively rate, when one of the villains telegraphed:

“Now!”

“The next minute I was on him, knocking him senseless with my revolver. The old gentleman did equally as well, the ruffians being taken completely by surprise by our sudden attack. We had passed the precipice now, and calling the driver to stop, he and the one outside passenger helped to bind our prisoners, whom we left inside, while we climbed to the top. But when we arrived at Sacramento we found that the robbers had released each other and dropped out along the road.

“The old gentleman introduced himself as Mr. Stamford, a Sacramento banker, and insisted on my accepting the hospitality of his home, saying that I had saved his life and a large amount of money. I consented, and was driven with him to his handsome residence on the outskirts of the city, where I was introduced to his wife and two daughters, the former a kind, motherly woman, and the latter a handsome brunette and a pretty blonde.

“Three weeks stay at Rose Hill, Mr. Stamford’s home, with its lovely walks amid a wealth of tropical flowers, and the society of Ella and Blanche Stamford, lovelier, if not more beautiful, than the flowers which bloomed around them, only served to make me wish for a longer stay, and, when Mr. Stamford offered me a position in his banking-house, I most gladly accepted it, not failing to take courage from the evident delight of the fair Blanche—whom I thought the lovelier of the two sisters—when I told her of the offer and decision.

“About this time Mr. Stamford, at his wife’s request, replaced two Irish servants with two Chinamen, much to the former’s violent denunciation. Mrs. Stamford was loud in her praise of the new help, who seemed to be quiet, active, orderly fellows, always ready, always willing and always to be found at their posts.

“One quiet summer night I had retired to my room in the second story, and lay thinking of the happy possibility of Blanche Stamford returning the love I felt for her, when my attention was attracted by the rattling of a hall window. There was not a breath of air stirring to produce such a sound, and I was about rising to ascertain the cause, when it ceased, and a window on the next floor began to rattle. Then I caught the meaning of it. Some one was telegraphing with the sashes.

“I listened, and presently the second-story window telegraphed:

“Everything quiet up there, Bob?”

“Quiet as a stiff. Old one blowing his horn. How is the yunker down there,” answered the up-stairs window.

“All quiet on the Potomac. Are you ready?” asked the down-stairs window.

“Not quite yet. When I write ‘Go,’ then do your best. Dead men tell no tales. As soon as you finish your man come up here and help me with the woman.”

“It was our old stage-coach robbers at work again, no doubt. How they had gained access to the house I was at a loss to account; for it was guarded by a burglar-alarm and a watch dog. Arising and partly dressing, I took my revolver, and stepping softly out in the hall, where I found Ah Lee standing.

“What are you doing here!” I demanded. ‘Come to lookee see. Think heah some mans hoppee out the window,’ said he, blandly.”

“Well,’ said I, “you go down stairs and fetch me a glass of water and a lemon to my room.’

“All litel, mi will,’ said Ah Lee, as he glided down the stairway. As soon as he was out of hearing I took hold of the window and telegraphed:

“Yunker is awake and coming up stairs. Go hide in the hall closet till he comes back.”

“All right,” answered the up-stairs window.

Then I went up stairs softly in my stocking-feet, and softly turned the key in the hall closet, after which I telegraphed with the up-stairs window:

“Keep quiet down there. Yunker is up here talking to old one. Hide in the library till he comes back and goes to bed.’

“Does he suspect anything?” came back from down-stairs.

“No,’ I answered. “He is telling the old one he is going to Frisco early in the morning. Hide! He is coming down stairs.’

“All right,’ came back, and arousing Mr. Stamford, I told him how matters stood, and we descended down stairs and turned the key in the library door. The desperado heard the click of the lock, and becoming frightened, raised the window to jump out; but I leaned out of the hall window and ordered him back. For an answer he turned and fired at me, the ball grazing my cheek and slitting my ear.”

“The next moment I fired, and the villain fell headlong into the garden. We then returned up stairs and secured Ah Wing, from whom we stripped paint and other disguises, revealing one of the stage coach robbers. Ah Lee, whom we found in the garden, dead, proved to be the other one.

“The next day we notified the authorities, to whom we delivered our prisoner, and gave bonds for our appearance in regard to the killing, from which the coroner’s jury exonerated us by a verdict of ‘justifiable homicide.’

“Three months afterward we were married, and I never hear a window rattle without thinking the warning it twice gave me, being the means of saving a number of lives and gaining me a lovely and loving wife.[”]

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