

On a Field Azure a Silver Star

The early fall of the year 1863 found me in the city of Boston, bent upon the execution of a mission most important to my future financial and professional prospects. Furnished with *carte blanche* to an unlimited amount in the way of necessary expenditure, and provided with every accessory in the way of credentials and assistance from my generous employers. I was vain enough to believe that my skill and adroitness would eventually result in the recovery of over \$50,000 in money and bonds stolen from the Mercantile Bank three days before my arrival.

I had received a telegram from Mr. Dawes, the president of the bank, directing my immediate presence at the scene of action. I was not able to leave New York, however, until the third day after the commission of the robbery, and I found Mr. Dawes somewhat annoyed and very impatient when I at length reached the bank and reported myself ready for action. He motioned me to a seat, and without any preliminary remarks plunged into the business on hand.

The bank had been entered between the hours of six P.M. and six A.M., evidently by a regular cracksman. The outer door leading into the hall had an ordinary triple bolt-lock, the catch operating on three steel bolts running at different sections of the door into closely fitting grooves. The lock had been tampered with but had not yielded. The sawing in two of the bolts was assayed, as the marks indicated, but had been abandoned as a bad job. Then the iron casing into which they ran had been drilled near the bolts and a saw inserted in the holes. The bolts had thus been reached, wrenched back, and an entrance effected.

I traced the robber from this door to the inner vault-room door, a thick oak door studded with beads, and heavily locked. This had been forced by a chisel applied so as to loosen the hinges, and the robber—for it was apparent there was but one—found himself in the same room where I now sat with the president.

Here a door having a Yale lock led into the vaults. This had been tampered with; but singular to relate, the audacious robber had picked away the plastering and laths for two feet above the door of the vault, and had lifted himself over the heavy plate-iron roof of the vault. Here he had drilled holes at irregular points through the sheet iron, and then with a chisel had cut a hole through, and dropped into the vault, with only the door of a burglar proof safe between him and his expected booty.

I was involuntar[il]y struck with a momentary professional admiration for the audacity and ingenuity of the burglar. He had proceeded systematically, with no bungling, at his work, and the blowing open of the safe, and the collecting of valuable papers, and the abandonment of others, showed a lack of haste on his part. He overlooked the most important treasure, for another safe, containing nearly the entire funds of the bank, stood in a corner of the vault leading from the counting-room, and the existence of which he was not aware of, it seemed.

Among his booty were two roleaux of gold eagles. One package was gone; the other he had dropped as he climbed over the roof of the vault again, and he had evidently stumbled in doing so, for there was blood on the edge of the iron plates, as though he had struck some portion of his body severely against it.

The broken package of scattered eagles furnished further proofs of the fact. The burglar had placed his booty in his pocket, had left his dark lantern and tools in the vault, and had silently stolen away.

This was all I could learn from a minute investigation of the surroundings, all except—a faint clue.

Ah! those faint clues are sometimes the silent detectors of crime which pursue the criminal with relentless fatality. The clue in this case was a piece of glass with a white, black, and blue series of rings, which resembled an agate, and was in reality a glass eye. It had been gouged out and fallen into the vault evidently when the burglar stumbled, for a tiny spot of blood had dried on its surface. I pocketed it quickly, took out my notebook, and turned its pages until I came to the following memoranda:

“William Harris, alias Slippery Bill, cracksman and forger, 1854 to 1857 at Auburn. Escaped two years before expiration of sentence; 1862, August recaptured; escaped from Albany officers on the train. August, 1863; evaded officers in New York; New Haven bank robbery—\$12,000; check on Corn National Bank of Norris, Pa., \$1,050. Thirty-eight years old,” etc., and here a description of the burglar followed.

“You have found a clue?” inquired Mr. Dawes, as I closed my book and arose to leave.

“Yes,” I said, quietly, “I think I have a fair chance of catching my man. I will report at the earliest opportunity.”

I left the bank thoughtful and puzzled. The local officials had attempted the case, and were even now engaged in working it up. I was positive of my man. I knew it was Slippery Bill. A dress from Worth is known from its superior style and finish; a painting from Landseer embodies the noblest attributes and poses of the animal delineated. The work of a cracksman is characterized by the same proficiency and marked individuality of execution. The work on the doors, the method of entering the vault, the nerve and audacity of the burglar, tended to one conclusion: Slippery Bill had cracked the vault. In professional parlance, the owner of the glass eye had “busted the gopher”; and Slippery Bill, as I had long suspected, was working in the New England States; and that glass eye of his—a substitution for one lost in a melee with some roughs in a prize-fight on Long Island several years previously—had been a “give away” on more than one occasion.

Billy was badly wanted for alleged complicity in a New Haven and Pennsylvania bank robbery.

He always made a big haul when he essayed work, and invariably laid low sometimes for months afterward, evading arrest oftentimes under the very noses of the police. He had escaped by the most ingenious ruses more than once. False flesh socks on his feet had skillfully concealed steel saws and enabled a successful sawing of cell bars; feigning sickness had induced his removal to the hospital, whence he easily “lit out”; and the adoption of spectacles and a white wig had deluded the police, while searching his place of residence, into the belief that he was an innocent

and aged water-rate collector. These and other like artifices had gained for Harris the sobriquet of Slippery Bill.

I was not unacquainted in Boston, and I sought an early opportunity to disguise myself as effectually as possible, in order to conceal my true identity from the thugs and cracksmen of the city.

Having completed as thorough transformation as was possible in my personal appearance, I at once laid myself out to take a general tour through the low dives of the city.

The date resulted in positively nothing of importance. I found no clue to my game and I was returning disheartened and discouraged, for I feared Bill had left the city, when, as I turned a corner near Church street, toward nine P.M., I came across—

“Slippery Bill, as I live!”

There was no mistake. The height, the glasses, the assumed wig and whiskers, which failed to hide the well-cut features, and sensitive mouth, and the slouching gait, told me he was the cracksmen and forger, William Harris!

I passed him, and then turned and followed in his footsteps. I took out my notebook and sent a note to the chief of police, asking him to send two efficient detectives to cooperate with me in a job I was working up. I sent my name and defined the case only as a bank case. I paid the man, bade him hasten, and then passed the store into which Slippery Bill had gone.

It was a large, roving structure, having a store-front which was closely barred up. From the sign over the door I learned that Solomon Slag, the occupant of the place, was a furrier, taxidermist, and dealer in stuffed and live animals, serpents and birds. The very singularity of this combination of bartering in objects of the animal creation caused me to speculate thoughtfully, and I was still cogitating when a man approached me so quietly that I was startled.

“Mr. Westlake?” he queried.

I nodded assent.

“Case?” he said, tersely.

I looked him in the face. There was no assumed brusqueness or undue sense of importance. He meant business and I was glad of it.

I defined the case in hand. He listened intently.

“Slag is a sly one,” he said. “To pull the house with twelve officers would result in nothing. There are more tricks in old Sol’s brain than in any ten cracksmen’s noodles in the city. Wait till morning. The game can’t leave the house till then.”

We walked up and down the street until morning. Then as the door opened and the shutters were taken down, my companion hailed an officer on the other side of the street. He went up to the man who was taking the shutters down, who turned quickly, and as if in surprise, gave utterance to a loud and peculiar whistle.

“You! Mr. Barry. Why—”

The detective stopped him abruptly.

“No lather, Sol. Slag. If I didn’t already know that you’ve got Slippery Bill in hiding here your warning whistle would have told me. Jim”—to the policeman—“go around and watch the rear door. Mr. Westlake you know your man. Sol. Slag, take him through your old shell from top to bottom or I’ll have you arrested on suspicion. No monkeying now. I’ll watch this door and the side windows.”

The old man, after viewing me with a cunning twinkle in his bleared eyes, led the way through the house. I examined every room. There were no false floors, no trap doors, no panels in the wall. I re-entered his shop and looked around disappointed.

The shop occupied the entire lower story. It was a perfect Babel of noise. There were birds of every description, stuffed bears and two live ones, monkeys, foxes, and several “happy families.” But for the presence of a boy, a keen-witted, sharp-eyed young lad of about fourteen, I could find no human being except ourselves in the place.

“Are you satisfied?” queried Slag, half sneeringly.

“No,” I said, quickly.

“Then why don’t you find the man you’re after? Slippery—what d’ye call him?”

I turned on my heel in silence and left the place. My brother detective evinced no disappointment, but seemed determined to believe that old Sol had played a trick on me; the man was hidden somewhere, he said. Patience would bring sure success.

And so we watched the place sharply. The officer maintained his place in the rear. Barry bade me go and get breakfast at a restaurant and saloon nearby, and I did so.

I had finished my meal and was about to arise from the table when in the outer room my eye caught sight of a boy. It was old Sol. Slag’s son. He purchased a quart of brandy in a bottle, and paid for it with a gold eagle!

If I had entertained any doubts as to my game being housed under the roof of the taxidermist, they were dispelled now. Eagles were rather scarce at that time, and slippery Bill was notoriously fond of brandy. I allowed the boy to leave with his change, and then returned to Barry with my report.

We conversed for over an hour, then we entered the store together.

“Remain here,” said Barry, as I stood in full view of the interior of the place. “Now, Sol. Slag, I’ll go through your place.”

They were gone upstairs for about half an hour. The detective’s face bore a disappointed look as he returned to the store and with myself went the round of the room.

As I have said before, there were two live bears, at least so Sol. Slag affirmed, as we passed by the cages. I stopped abruptly by the ursine candidates for public exhibition. The cage was divided into two compartments, and the bottom was covered with sawdust. One bear was exceedingly active and playful. The other with closed eyes and head between its forepaws, was suspiciously quiet and unbruin like.

I stopped here quickly. There was a suspicious taint of liquor in the air and a start on the part of the venerable taxidermist as I looked at him sharply. Then I leaned forward quickly. In the sawdust at the bottom of the cage was a glass tumbler which had evidently contained liquor. I composed my startled nerves as best I could.

“A fine animal,” I said to Slag, pointedly.

“Yes,” he said, uneasily. “A little sick. Look at this monkey now,” and he attempted to distract our attention quickly.

I jerked open the door of the cage with a quick movement of my hand, and ere the taxidermist could prevent me had seized the bear by the ears. The skin gave way, for a bear’s skin it was, and a human form sprang from its place of concealment.

It was Slippery Bill!

I covered Sol. Slag with my revolver, for his hand had sought his pocket, while Barry did the same with the burglar. The latter had no weapon, and unhesitatingly came out of the cage, and the darbies soon encircled his wrists.

A new glass eye supplied the place of the other one, and there was a cut on the upper eyelid, thus proving my theory of the fall on the roof of the bank vault. We found nothing but a few eagles on the burglar’s person.

Despite every ruse to draw him out, Slippery Bill kept mum, and a week went by with no clue to the hidden money, when one day Barry came to me.

“I’ve two important points,” he said. “I’ve found out where Bill’s room is, and I’ve intercepted a message from him to Sol. Slag. Come with me.”

He led me to a building in James street, about one mile above Slag’s store. It was let out into sleeping apartments. At the door of one of the rooms on an upper floor he stopped. A skeleton key opened the door, and we stood in the room of the burglar.

We searched the place thoroughly. There was a trunk filled with clothing and a miscellaneous assortment of burglar's tools, but no money; we pulled up the carpet, ripped open the bed tick, searched every available nook and corner. We were finally compelled to abandon the search without success, and were about to leave the room when Barry handed me the letter he had intercepted.

It was a puzzle to me I must confess. I had met with curious ciphers and enigmas in my professional experience, but this one for the time being was utterly incomprehensible. It read:

“S. S.—On a field azure a silver star. W. H.”

“Well,” I said, looking up at Barry with a puzzled look.

“The key,” he said tersely.

“To what?” I asked.

“To the secreted money and bonds.”

“Nonsense,” I replied. “It is utter gibberish.”

“And gibberish is usually the patois employed by the cracksman to convey a meaning. Come Westlake, set your wits to work. What does a blue field and a silver star mean?”

I did not reply. I took a seat, placed my feet on the mantel, and fell to meditating, while my wandering eyes studied the picture before me.

Suddenly I sprang up with a new idea flashing through my brain.

“What is it?” asked Barry.

“The pictures!” I said, excitedly. “Let us examine the backs of them.”

Barry shrugged his shoulders skeptically, but bringing a chair began to take down the pictures. I mounted the marble slab of the fireplace from a chair and unloosened the cord from its fastening in the wall, it being the large[s]t picture.

Vain search! no false backs to the pictures, no expected layers of bonds and greenbacks to be found. I remounted the mantel piece and was replacing the picture, when my eye lit upon the picture-brad with its ornamented head. Down went the picture to the floor, and a loud cry of joy escaped my lips.

“On a field azure a silver star!” I shouted, forgetting for a moment my professional reputation for reserve and perfect calmness, accorded to us detectives under all circumstances.

Yes, it was so. The picture-brad was ornamented with a glass head, the brass rim of which surrounded a circular piece of glass, having for its background a blue surface, on which stood in broad relief a silver star.

I tugged at the brad strongly. It gave way and drew with it long piece of the papered wall into which it was screwed, and which consisted of a piece of board which was papered into the wall, and which fitted into the wall, making no break in the paper, so nicely had it been constructed.

I looked into the aperture. Then I thrust my hand into it and drew forth a large pocketbook. It contained every dollar, except the gold, stolen from the bank.

I hastened to Mr. Dawes with my friend Barry at once. When an hour later the bank president handed me a check for ten thousand dollars as my reward, which I divided with my fellow detective, allowing the police officer a liberal reward, he said, jocularly:

“I’ll have to identify you, Mr. Westlake, or you’ll have to take off your disguise.[”]

Slippery Bill got his just des[s]erts, and I returned to New York and received the congratulations of my friends for my successful capture of the burglar and the recovery of the booty.

Warren [PA] Ledger, August 30, 1878