ESCAPADES

OF A

SPOKANE THIEF

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Escapades of a Spokane Thief

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Innocence is a matter of perspective.

And from the sheriff's perspective, it was clear the prisoner seated across from him was guilty as hell.

The eyes didn't seem capable of settling for more than a few moments, though there wasn't much to consider in the small, simple Pullman car stateroom. They kept wandering about the private compartment, taking in the green quilted cushions on which they sat, the confined distance from their seats to the sliding wooden door out to the hallway, and then back to gazing out the window of the train, as though hoping there might be something to distract at this breakneck speed.

The sheriff loosened his necktie around his stiff collar before resting his head against the back of the seat, letting his derby sink forward just a little over his high forehead, and clasping his hands across the tweed vest that accentuated his reed-like figure. Maybe if he affected an air of disinterest, the prisoner would get the hint and settle in for what should be a rather short ride.

But now the prisoner's hands wouldn't settle. They fidgeted, the right hand rubbing the left pinkie and then vice versa. Then they started rubbing up to the wrists, attempting to scratch under the iron clamps as though they were irritating.

What was irritating was the constant movement. Finally, the sheriff decided he'd had enough.

"I've always figured I could handle the likes of any thief," he said, standing to remove the clamps from around the prisoner's wrists with little hesitancy.

Shrewd green eyes rose to meet the sheriff's. A grateful smile followed.

The sheriff turned the latch key and the prisoner rubbed smooth hands—clearly this thief had never known an honest day's work—over chafed wrists as though they hurt.

"Now don't you go running off." The sheriff grinned like he'd made a joke as he plopped his meager behind back down in his seat, returning the clamps to his belt before running a finger over his sparse red mustache.

If one could call it "red" when the prisoner's shock of hair defined the color.

The thief gave a wide-eyed expression of pure innocence. "Of course not, sir."

The sheriff crossed his arms and leaned back once more.

The thief sat virtuously with hands clasped—and still, finally—studying the rows of planted wheat lining the rolling hills of the Palouse out the window as though they were fascinating and thought-provoking.

Really, the thief was counting the seconds between each small grove of trees they now passed, estimating they currently traveled at approximately sixty miles an hour. Too fast for jumping. But there was a water stop coming up that might be just what the prisoner ordered.

The thief recalled the length of their steps in order to climb in from the railway platform, figuring the height of the Pullman car in which they currently sat. The calculations stilled as the train began to slow.

Three short bursts sounded from the whistle, resembling the mooing of a cow more than anything. The new electrical lights flickered as the train chugged slowly, slowly to a stop with a screech of brakes that signaled to all passengers it was time for a brief respite.

All passengers but those in this private stateroom, of course.

"Don't move," said the sheriff, narrowing his eyes at the prisoner before standing to block the door and watch the other passengers shuffle by.

The sound of feet and laughter passed them as others disembarked, making use of the short time the steam engine required to refill on water to enjoy the end-of-summer sunshine and a leg-stretch, knowing the train would leave without them when it was finished if they weren't quick enough.

The thief sighed and went back to fidgeting slightly, rubbing fingers in a distracted manner.

When the sound of feet diminished the sheriff turned back to the thief and said gruffly, "Stand. This will be your only chance for a lavatory break."

The thief gave a grateful look like the sheriff had read the agitated fingers correctly. The sheriff prided himself on his ability to read people.

"All right. Let's be quick about it."

The sheriff opened the door to their compartment, giving a cursory glance up and down the hallway before allowing the prisoner to follow him out into the hall and down to the water closet. He peeked inside the tiny room before letting the prisoner enter.

"I'll be right outside," the sheriff said, letting his overcoat fall open enough to reveal his holstered gun and giving it a gentle pat. "Don't take long."

The prisoner gave one last smile, then closed the door firmly, finally relaxing the face. Smiling took so much more work to pull off when it didn't come naturally.

Inside the small closet along the far wall was a simple hole of a toilet; above the hole, there was a window about the width of shoulders and no more, but that was all that would be needed.

The prisoner placed one booted foot atop the toilet, pulled up to the window, and popped the pane out. Then, with the ease of one accustomed to such acrobatics, the thief hoisted up and out the window.

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The sheriff nodded at the passengers returning to their seats, eyeing each one carefully but only seeing everyday men and women, no shifty accomplices. He could hear the conductor outside calling in a carrying voice, "All aboard!" as the train gave a lurch and started moving east again.

He knocked on the water closet door.

When there was no response, he tried again, louder. His heart skipped a beat and a headline flashed before his eyes: "How the Prisoner Escaped" followed by his sad attempt to explain why he'd let a thief get the better of him.

Even as he continued to knock, he knew it wasn't possible. The prisoner *couldn't* have fit through a tiny washroom window—right? And the thief *couldn't* have leapt off with all those people outside…right? But the passengers were climbing back on from the south, not the north.

"I'm coming in," he finally declared before putting his shoulder to the thin door and forcing it open.

The room was empty and the window pane was gone.

He swore, then pulled the emergency stop cord.

By the time the train stopped, he had to walk back a good two hundred feet before finding the thief's simple brown hat. He swore again as he studied the hard-packed earth—but he'd tracked worse with less—and then out into the copse of trees to the north of the track.

The train conductor pushed his cap back on his balding head and whistled as he approached. "Who'd you lose, Sheriff?"

"A dangerous criminal," the sheriff answered gruffly. "I'll need to swear in a posse to go after the runaway."

"Ah, Sheriff, I gotta get this train into Spokane on time. Sure you understand."

"Of course, of course. Perhaps you would be so kind as to notify the police at the next stop to send assistance?"

"Sure thing, Sheriff. Sure thing. Good luck."

The sheriff held in his grumbles until the conductor had gone on aways. Would it really have cost the man so much to help for two minutes? The prisoner couldn't have gone far...

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The conductor gave the engineer a "highball" signal and the train picked up speed as it pulled away from the sheriff.

The no-longer-a-prisoner chuckled gleefully from a spot atop the passenger car, waiting until they'd turned a curve before reentering the water closet via the small window.

When the train pulled into Spokane with a *wheesh* of steam, the Red Rogue disembarked like any other passenger, glad to be returning after a long time away, and in need of a new hat.

Author's Note

This story is inspired by an actual event reported in The Spokane Falls Review, Feb. 21, 1885, entitled "How the Prisoner Escaped." To read the original article, and to learn more about what was based in real history, please visit my website: Patricia-Meredith.com.