

Blinky Morgan and the Kid

by George Alfred Henty, 1832-1902

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BLINKY MORGAN was a very bad man; the very worst I ever encountered. Too bad almost to write about, and I assure you I would not mention him now only for the fact that the record might be considered incomplete if I failed to refer to the most notorious character that ever robbed a post-office or shot men down as one would mad dogs.

I regret to state that I have been unable to obtain positive information as to his origin and right name, and I doubt if anybody knows where he came from or who he is. It is possibly best that it is so. I first heard of him scarcely two years ago, when, with two others of his kind, he made a tour of Indiana, starring the larger towns cracking safes.

Morgan was a stoutly built man, of probably forty five years, though, as he always appeared in stylish suits, shiny beavers, eye-glasses and gold-headed canes, he appeared much younger. His partners were younger still, though equally as well appearing. One was quite small and the other was quite tall and slim.

Upon the trains and at the hotels they might easily be mistaken for genteel traveling men instead of as accomplished burglars.

At one well known town in Indiana the trio appeared one day. They did not enter the hotel together, neither were they assigned connecting rooms, and never were they seen in conversation; still they were there all the same. Quite a number of offices had already been cracked, and much was being said about the robberies in other parts of the State. After putting himself in trim Morgan sailed out to interview the sheriff. He was a fluent talker and could easily mislead any unsuspecting person.

He found the sheriff at his office, and when he told him he had called for a private interview the office was cleared. Morgan told the officer that he had been sent out from Washington by the Postmaster General, who was much displeased at the inability of the Inspectors to run down and capture the gang of burglars that were making such sad havoc among the Indiana post-offices. His instructions were, he said, to confer with the sheriffs at the principal county seats with a view of making them more vigilant. The sheriff was pleased to receive so much attention, and, after visiting for half an hour, the two went out to admire the beauties of the town.

Passing the post-office, they stepped in to pay their respects to the postmaster. The sheriff introduced the gentleman from Washington, who incidentally stated his business. He looked around approvingly, and finally with his cane marked the spot on the safe where the burglars had been in the habit of boring through the door to strike the combination. After eulogizing the Postmaster General on his efforts of reform, the stranger and the sheriff withdrew. Outside they separated. The gentleman from Washington told the sheriff he was going over to Peru and would be back to-morrow, when he would call on him again.

Those who have since come in contact with Morgan will easily understand how much like him this transaction was, and those who know him will scarcely be surprised when I state that on that night this post office was robbed, and that the safe door was bored exactly where the gentleman from Washington had marked it with his cane.

The most dejected man in town the following day was the sheriff, and the second most disconsolate was the postmaster. Every effort possible was made by the police and the local detectives to find the stranger, but he had changed his appearance and silently stolen away.

It was evident to me that the burglars were working northward and that we would next hear of them somewhere in Western Michigan; and sure enough we did. Manistee was the next town that was reported. Here they made a big haul, and, as usual got away with it.

The day before the robbery here the men were seen and suspected, for the reason that one of them—the small one—was identified by some one as Kennedy of Detroit, who had a terrible record. Search for Kid Kennedy, as he was known, was instigated and pursued everywhere, but without avail.

The next week two safes in Ludington went down in one night under the magic manipulations of Morgan, Kennedy & Co., but for some unknown reason the one in the post-office was spared. And here as elsewhere the burglars succeeded in escaping the officers. This satisfied me that they were very keen, for no town was

better equipped at that time for capturing robbers than Ludington. The sheriff and chief of police were rustlers of the old school, and they were made of the truest metal. Yet, for all this, you will bear in mind that no suspicious persons had been seen, no one had been suspected and nobody was captured.

The following week a gayly mounted circus was passing through the land and in its fancy flight halted for a day in Hart, the county seat of Oceana county. It is a well established fact that nothing attracts the bad men like the circus. Others go to purchase amusement, but they follow in its train because of the crowds and confusion which better enables them to operate unobserved.

Thus it was that we looked towards Hart for another attempt to deplete the post-office revenues, and our suspicions were proven well founded on the following morning by a telegram from the postmaster, which simply stated that his safe and two others in town had been robbed during the previous night.

I repaired to Hart as quickly as possible, where I learned that in the morning after the robbery a fine team and wagon had been stolen from the stable of one of the citizens, and that they had been tracked northward on the road leading in the direction of Ludington, and that at that minute the postmaster, the sheriff and others were following in hot haste.

About eight miles out they found the team unharnessed and quietly feeding by the roadside.

Two miles further on they were informed by a farmer that three men took breakfast at his house about two hours before, and that afterward they went northward across the fields toward a piece of woods, saying they were going through the woods to a road, beyond.

The farmer gave an excellent description of the men and said he believed they were heading toward Ludington. One of the pursuers was directed to return to Hart with the stolen team and to wire the officers in Ludington to be on their guard, while the others proceeded to the woods and continued a tireless and unsuccessful search.

Late that night a watchman on the south side of the river at Ludington was engaged to row three men across. They told him they had been out to a party near there and were just returning. Only for their general appearance, which indicated a long tramp and much fatigue, and their queer-looking bundles, the watchman possibly would not have been suspicious.

Fortunately, too, he had heard of the Hart robbery, so he lost no time in letting the police know what he had done, and on the following morning every officer in Ludington was quietly scanning the personal appearance of every stranger.

Shortly after nine o'clock a gentleman wearing eyeglasses and good clothes entered a restaurant, carrying a small hand-bag. After partaking of a hearty meal he asked the keeper if he would kindly care for the bag till he returned an hour later.

As the gentleman walked out on the street the keen eyes of the officers were upon him, and, observing the suspicious glances, the stranger turned and walked hurriedly away. The officers followed closely. The pace of the man was quickened, and seeing the officers were also good pedestrians, he sprang like a hound and ran like an antelope toward a piece of woods in the outskirts.

This was the signal for a lively race and skirmish, and it was instantly accepted by the officers and many others who pursued with eagerness. When about half-way to the woods the officers and others realized danger, for the fleeing man had halted long enough to turn and fire three shots at the enemy.

The exciting chase continued just the same, and just as the man was about to enter the woods he turned instantly and fired twice at the sheriff who was nearest to him. The shots were returned, but nobody was hit.

Men were coming in all directions, and five minutes the band of volunteers anxious to distinguish themselves in police duty had been swollen to several hundred. The piece of woods was quickly surrounded, and when the word came from the commander of the forces, the ranks slowly began to close in. Every man had his gun and eye cocked for game—something that sometimes wore eye-glasses. The ground was a little soft and marshy and the hunters were admonished to proceed with great care.

Larry Flanders, I think his name was, was walking a log intently attending to business, when he saw something glisten underneath, and, looking closer discovered the head of a man and the bright eyes of the mysterious stranger. The good news echoed and re-echoed through the pines, and three minutes later the body had been fished out and was being marched back to town in front of rifles, shot-guns and popguns. What had they captured?

The little bag in the restaurant was hastily examined and was found to contain, besides a large number of postage stamps, a lot of bonds belonging to the postmaster at Hart, and several old and rare coins that also belonged to the same postmaster, and which on the night of the robbery were in the safe in the Hart post-office. The watchman identified him as one of the men he rowed across the river the night before, and then there was no longer doubt as to what had been captured.

The burglar gave his name as Charles Conklin, and in the exciting efforts to arrest him his two companions were entirely overlooked, and, of course, made good their escape. The only trace found of them was a hat which had been left at a store, where a new one had been purchased. This hat had been procured in Detroit, to which place I sent it, where Darby had it identified as Kennedy's.

Coukling was turned over to the sheriff from Hart about eleven o'clock, who, after binding him securely, left immediately with two guards.

Word had been wired that they were on their way, and when they arrived the streets of Hart were thronged with men, women and children eager to get a look at the most distinguished individual that had ever favored the place with a visit. Judging from appearances, and from what little he had heard Conklin say since he had been with him, the sheriff was satisfied that there was no place in Oceana County strong enough to hold him, so he proceeded by next train to Grand Rapids, a city which was famous for a burglar proof jail.

Conklin was examined on the following day before the U.S. Commissioner, who, of course, held him to await the action of the court then in session. The contents of the little bag found in Ludington were securely locked up in the great safe in the District Attorney's office, and Conkliu was returned to jail for safe keeping.

That afternoon a small, bright, well-dressed young gentleman walked into the District office and asked for the District Attorney, to whom he stated that he had

recently graduated from the law department at Ann Arbor, and being desirous of locating in the beautiful and flourishing city of Grand Rapids, he had been directed by a certain well-known lawyer in Detroit, to call on him, the District Attorney, who would likely consent to have him read law in his office.

The kind-hearted District Attorney said he was so badly pressed with government business just then that he would be unable that day to talk with him at length on the subject of admitting him to his office, but if he would come around the following day he might be able to spare him a few minutes.

The young gentleman did not mark the spot on the safe with his cane, where he would be best able to strike the combination, but as he gracefully withdrew, the attorney turned to one of his associates and remarked that he was very favorably impressed with the young man, and he prophesied a brilliant success for him in the legal world.

That night some burglar stole into the basement of the government building in Grand Rapids, worked his way unobserved up through the post-office to the floor above, opened the door of the District Attorney's office with a jimmy, and was at work on the door of the safe inside, which he had almost succeeded in opening, when he heard the footstep of the watchman in the hall outside, jumped to a window and slid away on a rope, without securing the articles he was after. The young lawyer from Detroit did not return on the following day, and the District Attorney saw nothing that resembled him except the picture of Kid Kennedy.

Conklin was indicted by the grand jury then sitting, and was at once arraigned for trial. He had engaged one of the shining lights of the Grand Rapids bar to defend him, and when his case was called the attorney asked to have it put over to the next term, stating that it would be manifestly unfair to his client to be tried now, without being allowed time to secure witnesses to prove his innocence and good character.

The District Attorney told how simple the case was, and plainly illustrated that it was one of the positive kind that did not even admit of any defense, yet it went over for three months, and Conklin was again taken back to jail for safe keeping.

About this time a strange woman appeared in Grand Rapids, who said she was Conklin's wife. She brought him new suits of clothes, and tried to fix him up so that the argus-eyed farmer living ten miles north of Hart would not be able to recognize him as one of the three men he entertained the morning of the robbery. The woman got the clothes and other things into Conklin's possession some way, but the farmer said he guessed it would bother anybody to get that peculiar spot out of Conklin's right eye.

Still, notwithstanding this unsurmountable obstacle, the woman secured apartments in Grand Rapids and was allowed to do missionary work in and out of jail, long after everybody had been informed that she was not Mrs. Conklin, but the notorious Mrs. Lowery.

It became necessary to know something more about Conklin, and with that end in view we undertook to get his picture. We took him to a gallery without his knowing where he was going, but the minute he realized what was intended he became frantic. Finally, with the aid of four policemen and two revolvers, a very good negative was secured.

The photographs I mailed to all the prisons in the country, with a letter of inquiry, and from, the penitentiary in Kingston, Canada, I received a reply stating that the picture was that of a man known there as Charles Morgan, who, owing to a peculiarity in his right eye was known as »Blinky« Morgan, and that a few months Morgan and a young man named Kennedy, both of whom were in the Kingston prison for murder, had escaped.

By following up the record closely I also learned that he once had a hand in a notorious robbery in New York; that he went from New York to Cleveland, where he and Charles Lowery were engaged in an express robbery where a messenger was killed. Lowery was arrested, and with the aid of Morgan and Mrs. Lowery broke jail and went to Canada. Morgan was shot in the performance, but not seriously enough to prevent him from going to Canada also. In Canada the record of the crimes of Lowery and Morgan would fill an entire book like this.

They were stealing, robbing and shooting constantly, and in every instance when they were caught, Mrs. Lowery would turn up to assist them to break jail, or, failing in this, to influence the court in their behalf, and her success had been fully as remarkable as that of the men.

They entered the residence of a wealthy Monsieur Belleville one night, and after they had stolen all that was valuable and were leaving they were surprised by several railroad men. The robbers held the entire crowd at bay and succeeded, as usual, in escaping, though Lowery was afterward caught and returned to Belleville.

Two days later Mrs. Lowery turned up and after a few days of her peculiar work Lowery escaped and returned to the states, where he was shortly afterward caught for some robbery in Pennsylvania, where he was sent up for ten years.

The same day that Mrs. Lowery assisted Lowery to get away from Belleville, Morgan shot and killed Jas. Marooney, omnibus driver at the Walker House, Toronto, having also fired at and shot a policeman named Cuddy, slightly wounding him. Morgan was tried and convicted of murder in the first degree, but the presiding judge would not accept the verdict and ordered the jury back. They afterwards found a verdict of manslaughter, and Morgan was sentenced to five years in Kingston penitentiary, where he remained less than one.

Having learned all this it was now quite clear why Morgan wanted time to prove his innocence and good character, and it was equally as clear what Mrs. Lowery's particular business was in Grand Rapids. The sheriff in Grand Rapids, who was now the sole custodian of Morgan, was fully advised of these startling revelations from time to time, and finally, when it was known positively that arrangements had been completed for Morgan to break jail this fact was also telegraphed by me to Grand Rapids.

Still with all these precautions Morgan did actually break out of that burglar-proof jail, the night before the court was to convene, and great was the excitement in consequence thereof.

It may be interesting to know how he did it, and as the story is quickly told, I will repeat it verbatim from the *Leader* of the following evening:

„Turnkey John Platte of the county jail awoke and arose at the usual hour this morning and came down from his room in the second story of the

residence portion of the jail. As usual, he rapped on Sheriff Kinney's door, and then opened the front door and let in Phillip Boos, the watchman, who for a month past has been keeping guard of the jail premises and patrolling the yard outside.

„His next move was to open the wooden door leading from the office entrance hallway into the prison department. The two heavy padlocks which were put on the iron door to make it more secure were lying on the floor on the threshold. The iron grating door was ajar.

„Continuing his investigations Platte, leaving Boos at the door, proceeded into the jail, found the iron door open leading up stairs and which at night is always fastened with a Yale padlock. More surprised and mystified than ever, Mr. Platte wended his way up the stairs and to the door of the east corridor, where the prisoners held on the most serious charges are confined. This doorway was open. Passing into the corridor the door of the cell which Conklin, the post-office burglar, was confined in, was found ajar and the cell vacant.

„Pale, breathless, and terribly excited by his discoveries, Platte conveyed the startling news to Sheriff Kinney, who was then making his toilet. Without formality and without boots, collar or vest, his face blanched with astonishment and surprise, the sheriff hastened to make an examination of the premises. The doors, from the lower outside to the inner cell door, were all unlocked and open.

„Not a scratch or mark was visible on the locks or bars to show that violence had been used. His own keys, the official keys of the jail, and the only ones known to be in existence, were in his safe in his office where they were left the night before. In Conklin's cell was a dummy made of quilts and bedding, and a letter was found pinned to its breast. No trace or shadow of the missing prisoner could be found, nor were any clues left behind.

„How did Conklin get out? demanded Sheriff Kinney of Boyd, the murderer, who occupied the adjoining cell and who was aroused from his sleep by the officers.

„I Didn't know he got away! Is he out? replied the still half-asleep Boyd, who was startled into wakefulness by the news. He very apparently had not the slightest inkling of how the thing was done, nor when.

„Did you hear Conklin get away? asked the sheriff of young Terrill, who occupied the next cell to Conklin on the other side. Terrill was as much surprised as Boyd and could hardly believe such a thing possible. None of the others in the corridors could shed any light on the affair. They were all asleep and none of them were aroused from their slumbers.

„Philip Boos, who has been keeping guard at the jail premises for several weeks past, who last night patrolled a beat in front and on the south side of the jail portion of the yard, had seen no suspicious circumstances or persons about the building during the night. It was seemingly a mystery to everybody.“

The only amusing feature of Morgan's escape, and the only one that contains very much mystery, is found in the valedictory which was pinned to the dummy in the cell. It reads as follows:

„MR. SMART SHERIFF: your Watchfulness has, Broken My heart, look at the wreck you have maid of Me. I hope you will Burry me in the ventalate whare you Prevented me from getting out by your Watchfulness, you are very Wachfull But thare ar Others that are mor watchfull than you. I am Sorry for Big John he was so very Kind to me and My whife. he Ot to have ben Nommed for Sheriff. Such a Nobile looking man. Geate god, the Cockroaches will miss him when he his gon. Th 'only frend I had in your hotell was littell Graice. When she reads this letter she will Laugh untill She will be unabill to talk. I will miss the Mush and Milk and Roust Beefe, that is it, I think I Eate to much Beeff, that is wot Kild your two Blood Hounds. Well, Mr. Wachfull, my Spirit will be in Europ befor you get the crape of of your old Hat. I am much obliged to my many friends for sending you so many letters about Me. No wonder your Hair is gray.

„Very Respectfully,
„CHARLES CONKLIN.

„P. S.: If you offer a Reward ofer a Big one So that the Snakes will git well paid for finding me.

„Ratts.“

At the time of Morgan's escape, I was engaged in the east on an important case, and so of course, could not give him any attention. The District Attorney and the Marshal in Grand Rapids, however, wrote pleadingly to the Post-office Department to assist them in finding him, which I think could have been easily done, but for some reason a deaf ear was turned to their appeals, and not the slightest effort was ever made outside of Grand Rapids to recapture him. But it may be of interest to many to know if we ever heard of him again, so I will briefly relate.

Scarcely three months afterward there occurred, in the winter of 1887, in Cleveland, one of the greatest robberies on record. On this occasion the largest fur store in that city was entered through the roof of the building, and thousands of dollars worth of furs were stolen in a single night. The work of the robbers was done so cleverly that there was positively no clues to aid detection, and the best detective skill in this country was employed on the case.

After several weeks of hard work it was settled that some of the stolen goods had found their way into Pittsburg, and, as a result of careful watching, Kid Kennedy—the same young man who wanted to read law in Grand Rapids—was arrested in Pittsburg, and charged with having been connected with the robbery. He was examined and held, and two Cleveland city detectives, Capt. Henry Hoehn and Mr. W. H. Hulligan, left Pittsburg one night with Kennedy to take him back to Cleveland. Everything on the trip passed without interruption till just after the train had left Ravenna, when, without warning, Blinky Morgan, James Robinson, and John Coughlin entered the car and commenced shooting at the officers and others.

The train was stopped, when the terror-stricken passengers jumped for their lives. Kennedy was released, when he quickly disappeared in the darkness with Morgan, Robinson, and Coughlin, while the two detectives were left for dead. Soon afterward Hulligan died, but Captain Hoehn, after much suffering, recovered. As soon as possible, after such an encounter, the train proceeded, when everybody in Ravenna turned out to run down the murderers. But they didn't run them down.

When the news of this sad affair reached Cleveland in the morning, the excitement was very great. There was nothing that the public-spirited citizens were not willing to do to bring Morgan and his crowd to justice. Large rewards were offered for them and everything was done that human hands could do.

Men were sent to all parts of the country to watch for them and to see if certain prisoners, who were suspected, could not be identified as being some one of the number wanted. Photographs and descriptions were sent to every sheriff and chief of police in this and every other country, and, at last, after several months of anxious waiting, the effects bore fruit.

Charles L. Lynch, the sheriff of Alpena, Michigan, quite unexpectedly one day, discovered that there were three strangers stopping at the house of Mrs. Frank Williams. They did not go out much and their peculiar actions somewhat excited the curiosity of the neighbors.

Mr. Lynch compared their descriptions with those sent out by the Cleveland people, and found a very striking resemblance. So striking in fact, that he decided to arrest them and send to Cleveland for some one to come and identify them. He summoned a sufficient number of men to assist him and on the following morning they were to watch their opportunity. Quite early, Robinson and Coughlin came from the Williams residence and started toward the wharf, where was lying a steamer going to Detroit. The two went aboard the steamer, and were quickly followed by half a dozen of the sheriff's party, who soon surrounded them, and instantly pointed three revolvers at each person and commanded them to „hold up.“ They were securely bound, and before the news could reach their rendezvous, the sheriff and three others started back to arrest the third man.

Arriving at Mrs. Williams' establishment, they quietly entered, and, an instant later, sprang upon Morgan, who was visiting with Mrs. Williams and making a bouquet. Quick as was the sheriff he was not quick enough, for before he got the irons on his prisoner, Morgan had fired and hit him.

The wound was not considered dangerous, so Morgan and party were transferred to Cleveland, and soon afterward Mr. Lynch died from the effects of Morgan's shot. I should, perhaps, add here that Mrs. Williams is a sister of Mrs. Lowery.

From Cleveland, the three robbers and murderers were taken to Ravenna for trial. Morgan was tried first and was found guilty of murder in the first-degree and was sentenced to be hanged in the penitentiary at Columbus, on March 16, 1888, and it was hoped by everybody that nothing would happen to interfere with the highly appropriate proceeding.

In this fond hope, the people were somewhat disappointed. Mrs. Lowery went to work again, and a stay of two months was granted in February to enable the Court of Appeals to decide whether or not he should have a new trial. Strange, isn't it,

that such a man should receive any consideration, especially after it had been once decided to hang him!

Fortunately the anxiety felt on the announcement of the two months' stay was dispelled early in April, by an announcement from the court that there was not good ground for a new trial, and that Morgan must hang on June 1st, 1888.

Robinson was also convicted, and was sentenced to be hanged in Columbus, April 27, 1888.

Coughlan likewise was convicted of murder in the first degree, but before he received his sentence a new trial was agreed upon, the result of which is not known at this writing.

Kennedy, the Kid, I regret to say, has not been recaptured, and his whereabouts are unknown. Of course he is practicing law somewhere, and if any of my readers will write and tell me where, I will arrange matters so that they will not be obliged to do any more real hard work for several years.

