

## EXPLOITS OF YANKEE BЛИGH

INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY WILLIAM C. MALLALIEU

Department of History, University of Louisville, Louisville, Ky.

Many stories are told about "Yankee Bligh," Louisville's most famous detective. Some writers make improbable statements or give facts that conflict with official records. But City documents and family papers establish the main facts of Captain Bligh's career.

The celebrated detective was actually named Delos Thurman Bligh. He was nicknamed "Yankee" because of his birth in the North, in Delaware County, New York, in 1823. He grew up in Meadeville, Pennsylvania, where he learned the craft of brick-laying.

At the age of nineteen, young Delos set out for the Far West, intending to become a fur-trapper. But he ran out of money in Louisville and took jobs as hod-carrier, bricklayer, and watchman. He was over six feet in height, weighed more than two hundred pounds, and was very muscular. In 1846, he was appointed supernumerary (substitute) city watchman.<sup>1</sup> Mayor Kaye assigned him to the wharf to watch for the arrival of suspicious characters.

Bligh was also a member of the Louisville Legion, a group of citizens organized in 1839 to help maintain order. On the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, the Legion was inducted into the United States Army and sent to reinforce the army of General Zachary Taylor. As a member of Company A, Bligh took part in two battles in Northern Mexico. The Legion then returned to Louisville and was discharged in May, 1847.<sup>2</sup> Bligh was again appointed a supernumerary watchman, but soon resigned. Later he was the guard of the Louisville Theater.

Between 1851 and 1856, city watchmen were elected by ward voters, with extra men appointed by the City Marshal. In 1856, when the City Council was again given control of the watchmen, Bligh was elected as the second of five supernumerary day watchmen.<sup>3</sup> When a Police Department was set up in 1861, Bligh was named as the first of four "day police for the City at large," and in 1865, as the first of four detectives.<sup>4</sup> After 1870 he was called "chief of detectives" with the rank of captain, a post he held until his death in 1890.<sup>5</sup> In 1873 Bligh started a "rogues' gallery" in the form of a large scrapbook containing descriptions and photographs of criminals wanted by police in every part of the nation and in some foreign countries.<sup>6</sup> In the same year he apprehended two Englishmen charged with attempting a forgery on the Bank of England.<sup>7</sup>

When John L. Whallen, a leading Louisville politician, became chief of police in 1885, he dismissed all the detectives except their chief. Bligh supervised the work of patrolmen assigned to investigate crimes committed in Louisville. But four years later a full-time force of four detectives was restored.<sup>8</sup>

Bligh was married twice and had four daughters. He died in 1890 at the age of sixty-seven.<sup>9</sup> The following stories about Bligh are taken from the *Louisville Post* of 1892.

#### SATCHELS FULL OF QUEER<sup>10</sup>

Jack Gallagher being a man after Bligh's own heart, their friendship was great. They made many arrests together, but the first one that extended their fame beyond the borders of their own city was that of a famous counterfeiter who flourished just before the breaking out of the Civil War. He had flooded the country with spurious money and all the detectives were on the lookout for him. At length these two sleuth hounds learned by chance that he was in Louisville. Finally they found him, but there was no proof against him, and consequently they could not arrest him. A hurried consultation was held and they decided to shadow him until he could be caught with some of the money in his possession. Three months passed by and every movement of the suspect was known to the trailers. But people were being victimized every day and matters had about reached a crisis. It was a cold, gloomy winter night and the counterfeiter whose name was LeTrenge (Latranza?)<sup>11</sup> was noticed on the street carrying a small black valise. Bligh and Gallagher followed him to an Italian boarding house at Second and Main streets. When he entered, the officers remained on the outside for a time, being afraid to go in and arrest the man, fearing he had no counterfeit money with him and they would thus frighten away the game. They knew he was guilty, though, and in a few minutes the risk was decided upon. Boldly opening the door they found they were in the kitchen and before them sat LeTrenge with another man and a woman. The former produced a murderous-looking stiletto and showed fight, but a blow from a club soon put all such notions to flight. In the meantime Bligh was searching for the valise. Closets, trunks, boxes, etc. were searched. But the valise was nowhere to be found. For once these detectives were at a loss what course to pursue; with no evidence they had made themselves liable to persecution for breaking into a house. Something must be done. At this moment, Bligh noticed a twinkle in the woman's eyes and saw her glance furtively at the bed. Here was the clue, and the keen-eyed detective seized it. Quick as a flash he tore up the bedding, and, sure enough, nestling against the slats was the valise. It was opened and in it was found

\$22,000 in bogus currency. On the way to the station the prisoner offered to give them \$10,000 if they would permit him to walk two squares by himself. But his captors indignantly refused the bribe, and at the trial he got a long term of imprisonment. This brought them into prominence.

One day in 1868 Bligh and Gallagher received the photograph of a noted forger named Ingalls, for whom a reward of \$500 was offered in Chicago. Both mentally made a note of his appearance and they together strolled up to the Galt House. Loitering about in the lobby was an elegantly dressed man who was attracting considerable attention. The detectives joined the crowd that had gathered about him and simultaneously they recognized him as the Chicago forger. Without hesitation, they placed him under arrest and started for the First Street Station with him. On the way Ingalls stopped and said, "Business is business the world over. Now, if you will agree to let me go I will place five thousand in the hands of each of you." At the same time he pulled a roll of money from his pocket. But the detectives were not after money. They asked only the glory of making the arrest. They received the five hundred dollar reward, and Judge Hop Price took the prisoner to Chicago, where he turned him over to the Pinkertons.

After that time they broke up numerous groups of counterfeiters, sent hundreds of other criminals to the penitentiary and gained a national reputation.

Captain Bligh and Gallagher worked out the clues and traced down the famous counterfeiter Pete McCarty, the most renowned master of the queer that ever infested the Central United States. He was located and did his work at an old frame house at Twenty-ninth and Bank streets. There he was caught. Another gang of counterfeiting that had been flooding the country with basic coin was broken up by Captain Bligh about 1866. It was known as the Dago band and they had their headquarters on Second Street near Main. Their plan was to make the money here and "shove" it in all other parts of the country. Captain Bligh worked a long time tracing the counterfeiter to the seat of manufacture, and captured the whole band in one bold stroke. They were all sent to the penitentiary for long terms.

#### FORGERS, BURGLARS, AND CONFIDENCE MEN

Ponci McPhun, the Calcutta forger who had mulcted his victims in India for a quarter of a million, was also captured in this city by Captain Bligh and Detective Owens. The failure of the Calcutta officer to bring one paper allowed McPhun to go free on a technicality — *habeas corpus* being the means of his release.

When Stephen Douglas was stumping the country in his Presidential

Canvass in 1860, Captain Bligh captured a whole bus load of English pickpockets who were following the campaign speakers, fleecing the people. Again in 1876 when Victor Hugo was here he repeated the operation, only this time the pickpockets were of all nationalities.

In consequence of such achievements as continuously marked his public career was to make thieves shun Louisville as the one place in the country where their most dangerous foe was. "Don't go to Louisville" they would say to any "pal" who had never been here, "That Yankee Bligh will nab you sure. He is the toughest fly cop in the country and you can't 'square' him."

On one occasion after the City Council had re-elected the two partners, Bligh and Gallagher, they gave the members a supper. On the way home that night Bligh was somewhat in advance of the others. A respectable looking stranger was approaching; there was nothing suspicious about him and ordinarily he would have passed unnoticed. Just as he reached the broad-shouldered detective, he pulled his hat down slightly. Insignificant as the movement was, it attracted Bligh's attention and he at once seized the stranger by the arm. In his hand was found a pair of nippers used by burglars in turning keys left in the locks of residences. Other burglars' tools were found upon him and he went up for three years.

Not long after, a very smart Eastern burglar swooped down on the city. Every night for three or four weeks houses were broken into and robbed. But try as hard as they could, neither the police or detectives could affect his capture. Thus things went on until the police commissioners met and offered the man who would arrest him the finest hat that could be made in the city. One night Bligh and his partner came upon a man sitting in a doorway at Second and Green streets. At once they seized him. The man resisted and after a terrible struggle they finally laid him out insensible on the pavement. Searching his pockets they found four watches and a lot of jewelry he had stolen that night. In his room they recovered enough stolen property to have set up a good-sized store. He was the robber and both of the officers got new hats when they sent him to prison.

#### A MEMBER OF THE YOUNGER GANG

To attempt to enumerate all the famous cases in which Captain Bligh played a part would involve the criminal history of this section of the country. On many occasions he would probably have lost his life had he not been ever watchful in handling criminals. Only on one occasion did he ever find it necessary, however, to take human life. That was when in the purest self-defense he shot an infuriated Chinaman who was charging upon a crowd with an uplifted hatchet. Had Bligh not

fired, his life would beyond a doubt have been taken by the unrestrainable Celestial. Captain Bligh was very promptly acquitted of crime and fully exonerated by the courts and public opinion.

A notable arrest made in company with Detective Gallagher was that of George Shepherd, one of the Younger Gang. The case is so well known in this section that it needs no comment from the writer. The Youngers, Shepherd, and two other members of the band had robbed the bank at Russellville and killed the cashier in 1866. A few months later Bligh located Shepherd in Nelson County. Taking Gallagher with him, he went to arrest him. Shepherd was found in a store at Chaplin armed to the teeth. As Bligh and Gallagher walked into the store Shepherd saw them. He threw a hand back to each hip where a couple of revolvers adorned his cartridge belt. But before he could draw either pistol the two detectives were upon him. He struggled hard and it looked several times as if the only way to save their own lives was to kill him. Here was where Captain Bligh's physical strength served him well. Shepherd was subdued and disarmed. But for Captain Bligh's strength, human blood would almost certainly have paid the penalty of an attempt to arrest the outlaw, who seemed to rather court death than to submit to arrest.

#### A NIGHT CLERK'S STORY

Mr. C. G. Calloway, the veteran clerk at Sunning Hotel, was in an unnaturally communicative mood, telling about his experiences: — Yes, I have had lots of funny things happen, but I don't know they are worth telling — I remember one, though, that occurred sometime ago, when I was placed in a pretty ticklish position. Along toward morning a large fine-looking man came in and said he wanted a room. He registered from New Orleans, but I don't remember his name now. He pulled out a large roll of greenbacks and gave them to me to put in the safe. He had been in bed an hour or two when Detective "Yankee Bligh" came in and looked over the register. As soon as he caught sight of the name of my last guest he livened up and was all business in a minute. He asked for a description of the man which I gave as best I could. Bligh then drew a photograph from his pocket and asked me if that was the man. After looking at it, I said I thought it was.

"Well, I want him," said Bligh. I protested against waking up a gent at this hour of the night, but it did no good. Bligh had struck the trail and he could not be stopped until he had run his game to the earth. Well, he stood there for a while and planned how he would capture him and—would you believe it?—he wanted me to go into the

room first, and finally persuaded me to do it. Arriving at the door, I knocked.

"What do you want," came from inside.

"Open the door, I want to talk to you," I replied.

"But I don't want to talk to you," was the answer.

"I've got important business," I said.

After some more persuasion he got up, muttering and grumbling, and finally he opened the door and I stepped into the room.

"Now what do you want" he asked in a surly tone.

"I had not thought what I would say to him, as I expected Captain Bligh would follow me into the room, but he didn't immediately. There I stood before the man unable to explain my unreasonable intrusion. He was a big muscular fellow, and I saw in his eyes that he was a dangerous man to fool with when he was aroused. Noticing my hesitation and confusion, he evidently became suspicious and began making his way toward his valise, which I was satisfied contained a revolver. I was getting very nervous, for I did not know what the man might do, and I thought Bligh would never come to my relief. Just at this time, however, the big detective came into the room. But not a feature in the man's face changed at the sight of him. He was dead game I could see, and I anticipated a desperate struggle, for this happened in Captain Bligh's younger days when he was a match for any man." "Is your name So-and-So?" asked Captain Bligh. "No, it is not" stoutly asserted the man, "My name is on the register below, and if you want to know what it is go down and read it."

"Did you ever see this man" asked Bligh, presenting the picture he had shown me. The man looked carefully at it without the least appearance of astonishment. "No, I never did," he replied. "Oh, yes you have," said Bligh, "and—you are my prisoner." Before I knew what was going on, Bligh had clapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. He was taken so by surprise by the quickness of the action that he did not have time to resist. Well, that man turned out to be one of the greatest confidence men and embezzlers in the whole country, and he had just swindled a man in New Orleans out of a large sum of money. He was the coolest one I ever came across.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> An article entitled "Crooks and Crime," *Louisville Post*, January 13, August 13, 1892, is the main source of an article on Bligh by David Walsh, Jr., in the *Louisville Courier-Journal* (Feature Section, March 12, 1916). See also interview with Bligh (*ibid.*, April 20, 1884). Elmer T. Smith wrote two articles on Bligh in *On-guard*,

the Kentucky Peace Officers' Magazine, December, 1940; March, 1949. Bligh's 1846 appointment is not recorded in the City Journal, probably because it was a recess appointment.

<sup>2</sup> An undated clipping from the *Louisville Commercial* in the scrapbook of a granddaughter, Mrs. Emma E. Green, gives Bligh's reminiscences of his Mexican War experiences and a roster of Company A of the Louisville Legion. See also "Interesting Reminiscences" by a member of the Louisville Legion, *Louisville Times*, July 24, 1916 (Huber Scrapbook, The Filson Club).

<sup>3</sup> *Louisville City Journal* No. 2, p. 487; Journal of the Common Council, No. 5, pp. 453-454, 166-167; Journal, Board of Aldermen, No. 5, pp. 165, 510.

<sup>4</sup> *Charter of the City of Louisville with Amendments and Ordinances*, 1858-1859.

<sup>5</sup> *Louisville City Directory for 1870, 1872, etc.*

<sup>6</sup> The scrapbook containing clippings and pictures dated 1873-1894 is in the possession of Major Elmer T. Smith, Louisville.

<sup>7</sup> Assistant Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, London, to D. T. Bligh, March 20, 1873. A letter from the cashier of the Bank of England, dated June 4, 1873, says Bligh's inquiry about a reward for apprehending these two fugitives was being referred to the Bank's solicitors. These letters are held by Mrs. J. E. Merchant, Bagdad, Kentucky.

<sup>8</sup> "Report of Chief of Police" in *Municipal Reports of the City of Louisville, 1885-1890*.

<sup>9</sup> This and other information about Captain Bligh was furnished by Mrs. Edgar E. Ruppard, Jeffersontown, Kentucky, a great-granddaughter of Captain Bligh. She has the scrapbook of her mother, Mrs. E. E. Green.

<sup>10</sup> "Crooks and Crime," *Louisville Post*, January 13, August 13, 1892.

<sup>11</sup> A clipping from the 1850's in the private scrapbook of Captain Bligh, tells of "lynx-eyed sleuths" capturing a counterfeiter named Latranza (collection of Mrs. J. E. Merchant). The *Courier-Journal* said a whole gang of Italian counterfeiteres were captured by Bligh and Gallagher about 1860 (Feb. 2, 1890).