Why the White Coat?

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Why the White Coat?

Millions of people have seen this image. How many have noticed that I am the only person wearing a white coat, or wondered why?

My story is a short one. I was a Pinkerton detective in the 1850s, and volunteered for the Michigan cavalry during the Civil War. I had been assigned to assist with contract oversight of the building of the railroad across the Nevada territory. The government had wanted quick access to the California gold fields to get the gold to pay for the war, but also to make sure that the Secesh did not get ahold of it. There had been some question about the invoicing of the Union Pacific railroad, and they ordered me West to investigate.
After managing to bribe a member of the Union Pacific Railroad to give me some time with the financial books, I found that a large amount of money was going to a small firm, the Credit Mobilier company. The UP was losing money because they were paying an exorbitant amount to Credit Mobilier for constructing a small part of the tracks through relatively unimpressive plains east of the small town of Lovelock. I sent a telegram back to my superiors in Washington, who promised to investigate. I was then recalled to my active duty with the Cavalry, and didn’t pay it much more attention.

After the War ended, the government had chosen to pursue this issue with Union Pacific. I was sent to San Francisco, along with an accountant and investigator, to look into it deeper. This was a long, arduous journey by rail to Nebraska, until the rail line ended. Then it got worse—stagecoach the rest of the way across the desert and mountains to California.

Arriving in San Francisco, I was amazed by the respect given to the vice president of the Union Pacific, Thomas Durant. He was almost a deity in that town! At first he welcomed us into his house, and set out a fabulous dinner for me and my colleagues. He assured me that everything was on the table and he would cooperate in any way he could with our investigation.

His house was amazingly beautiful. A three-story mansion, with a carriage house and servants quarters in back. As we entered the house, a lushly carpeted stairway led alluringly to the upper floors, from which he descended like an English Lord. The foyer of the house was larger than my living room, adorned by some kind of Arabian
tapestries with desert scenes. In the dining room, a dumbwaiter was used to bring us food, which came from the downstairs kitchen. The opulence was something I had heard about but never seen, even in the richer areas of Washington. It was very impressive but something seemed amiss.

After a couple of days reviewing the books, my earlier suspicions were confirmed. Other companies had been laying track for less money than Credit Mobilier, even through rougher terrain. UP itself had been laying tracks across the Sierra Nevada mountains, some of the most difficult roadway ever attempted, at about a third the cost of the Credit Mobilier company!

I confronted Durant with this, and he claimed that CM had had substantial issues with both labor and suppliers. He had no proof of this, but would try to provide corroborating evidence the next week. He invited us back for dinner the following Friday.

At that dinner, it was only the four of us. Durant started off amiably, and was the picture of gentile behavior. He poured us some delicious French wine, followed by a scrumptious lamb dinner with all the fixings. After the meal was over, we retired to the smoking room, where he provided cigars and the finest brandy I’ve ever tasted. A fire was burning in the oversized, center room fireplace, displacing the cold, clammy chill of San Francisco in January, 1869.

He then completely surprised me. He started out by describing how difficult and expensive it is to build a railroad across the wilderness. Labor relations were atrocious,
and his company couldn’t afford to hire local miners to excavate the mountains and
tunnels, as they were making much more working in the gold mines. He had decided to
bring Chinese laborers who would work for much less money. They also didn’t complain
about long hours and working conditions. It also turned out that, according to him, they
didn’t “last” as long as the American workers, so he had to keep bringing in more. And
now Washington was interfering with his operations by these silly, pointless
investigations. He had just cleared one by the State of California and didn’t want to
have to repeat the effort for no purpose.

He looked at us and asked, “What do I have to do to make this futile investigation stop?
You won’t be able to prove anything is wrong, and it will just delay the completion of
the railroad. Plus, I’m in competition with the Central Pacific and stand to lose if
resources have to be diverted from the construction effort for bookkeeping.”

We gave no response. Inside I was wondering if he was trying to bribe us somehow.

Then he got to the point. He offered to make us officers of Credit Mobilier if we would
file a good report to the government. “How much do you make in your government
jobs? You can do much better working for me.”

I was floored. Never before had I been offered so much for nothing more than the price
of my integrity. John, the investigator, said we would have to discuss it that night. The
accountant replied that it was obvious the expenses for Credit Mobilier were out of line,
and adjustments would have to be made to correct it.
Durant offered to make him the Lead Accountant for the Company, with a stake in UP as well. None of us knew what to say.

We finished our cigars and brandy and took our leave, promising to be back for lunch the next day and let him know what we decided.

To make a long story short, the accountant resigned his position and joined up with UP. The investigator and I stuck to our principles, but were afraid to return to Durant’s house, with his number of servants and bodyguards. So instead of going to lunch at his house that noon, we departed hastily to the East. Afraid to ride the UP train, we took the stagecoach to Sacramento, where we bought horses and went on our own.

There was no trouble until we reached Elko, Nevada territory, a small but growing cow town. We rented a hotel room but John was playing Faro at the bar that night. I was having a whiskey over at the bar when someone accused him of cheating, and a gunshot rang out. John was dying on the floor, blood running out of his nose as he gasped for air. I could tell by the look of the cowboy that shot him that he was no stranger to gunplay, and was probably hired by Durant or others to remove us from the investigation one way or another. I managed to sneak out the back door of the hotel, grabbed my horse, and fled east through the night.

After a few days I managed to arrive in Salt Lake City. The Mormons are good people but can be suspicious of strangers, so I used my Pinkerton experience to develop a disguise. I shaved my beard, colored my normally red hair dark brown, and changed my
clothes into dusty, trail-ridden stuff. I went the street and bought a white suit, which I had never even imagined having before.

I then picked up a copy of the Salt Lake Tribune to see if there were any news of my adventure in Elko. There was not, but I did find an article stating that the Transcontinental railroad was about to be completed at Promontory summit, a three day ride from Salt Lake. I decided I had to attend, even if just to see if Durant had the courage to show up. I wrote up my findings and took them to the telegraph office, where I wired back to Washington the details and scale of the fraud that had been perpetrated by Mr. Durant and his friends, along with the betrayal of my accountant and the killing of my investigator.

I also had my Colt revolver with me, and felt I could handle any incident that might arise. Plus, there would likely be so many people participating that I didn’t think anything would happen in the crowd. I set off for the north, along the shores of the Salt Lake.

Along the road, I became angrier and angrier as I thought about what Mr. Durant had done, bribing my accountant and probably killing my investigator. I imagined myself shooting him and taking over his beautiful palace in San Francisco, although I knew that couldn’t happen.

Arriving at the site of the railroad construction, it was obvious that the two lines were coming together that day. I managed to get close enough to Mr. Durant to be in the picture as he tried to drive the Golden Spike.
Well guess what! He missed with his first attempt, and the crowd howled with laughter.

He was quite embarrassed, to be the VP of one of the two companies meeting that fateful day and not being able to hit the nail on the head, so to speak.

The crowd got so excited at that point that they rushed into the scene, pushing me aside and I was forcibly carried away. I never saw Mr. Durant again, although my wire had provided enough evidence for him to be prosecuted. I returned to Washington that summer and continued my job as a government employee, never to enjoy the lifestyle of the man I had helped to convict.