

# *Catching a Burglar*

—————  
A Detective's Story  
—————

by Emerson Bennett  
—————

While employed in London, in my vocation of a police detective, the department to which I belonged received notice, from time to time, of very singular and extensive robberies having been perpetrated at the regular depots of different towns and villages within a few miles of the city, and though considerable efforts were made to ferret out the thieves, yet up to the time I am now speaking of no arrests had been made leading to any satisfactory results. As these robberies continued to increase in number, without any clue being found to the thieves, the matter began to assume a serious importance, and I was directed to give it my whole attention, and use any means I might think proper to detect and bring the villains to justice.

Accordingly I visited the different depots where the robberies had taken place, and ascertained the important facts that in no case had a single lock, bolt, door, or shutter been broken, and that the missing goods invariably consisted of the most valuable articles and a uniform bulk, which was proof conclusive to my mind that these burglaries were either the work of one hand, or committed under one general direction. It might have been supposed that the robber or robbers entered the premises with false keys, only for the further fact that, in three instances, a clerk slept in each warehouse, and each was willing to make oath that every door and shutter was secured by inside bolts on that special night. Had one place only been robbed several times, I should have suspected someone connected with the establishment; but a close sifting of facts convinced me it was the work of some outside thief or thieves, whose ingenuity I was disposed to compliment at the expense of their honesty.

Well, I set my wits to work, and gave the matter my most serious consideration for two weeks, without apparently being any nearer the truth at the end of that time than I was before, but with the mortification of hearing that two more of the same kind of robberies had been perpetrated meanwhile. The last one had occurred in the village of S— —, within fifteen miles of London; and it was while puzzling my brains over this, and wondering if ever I should be so fortunate as to unravel the mystery, that a faint glimmer of light seemed to break in upon my darkness, giving me corresponding hope and joy. While standing at a railway station a few days before, I now remember to have seen a large, curiously-shaped chest, directed to some person at S— —, to be kept till called for; but why I should now have connected this with the subsequent robbery, can only be explained on the principle that the mind sometimes, after dwelling long and seriously upon a perplexing subject, will, by an inherent law, instinctively reach out and grasp a solution that the ordinary course of reason might never arrive at. At all events, I did begin to connect that chest not only with the last burglary, but all which had precede it; and a few careful inquiries, which I now hastened to make, strengthened me in my suspicion of having gained the proper clue to the mystery.

Without making anyone my confidant, or giving anyone a hint of my suspicions, I dispatched private messages to all the depotmasters within a circuit of twenty miles, requesting them to be

on the watch for a chest of the description named, and, when discovered, not to detain it, nor speak about it to a living soul, but telegraph me immediately.

Three days after this, as I was sitting in the private room of a hotel where I had established my temporary headquarters, I received a dispatch, to the effect that such a box as I had described was then on its way from the town of L— — to C— — . Now it fortunately so happened that C— — , the destination of the suspicious chest, was only about five miles distant from where I was, and by setting off at once I might be the first to arrive at the depot. I lost no time in procuring a quick conveyance, and in exactly forty minutes from receiving the dispatch I was closeted with the stationmaster of C— — , making private arrangements for the disposition of the object of my suspicions, which I expected by the next train, then nearly due.

I had scarcely got everything settled to my desire, when the train came puffing up to the platform, and lo and behold, to my great delight, the identical chest was landed among several boxes, bales and parcels. It bore the marks:

“James Simpson, Esq. Railway Station at C— — . To be stored till called for.”

Nothing tending to excite suspicion was said to any of the men who had the handling of the goods, but the superintendent privately directed them to place the chest in a small room, where the most valuable articles were usually stored, and see that the apartment was carefully locked. Meantime, it being late in the day, I went to a neighboring hotel, got my supper, put my pistols in order, and prepared myself for watching through the night. Procuring a basket of provisions, a bottle of brandy, a dark lantern, and being previously supplied with handcuffs and some other necessary articles, I called on the stationmaster about dusk, and he and I repaired to the room where the chest was stored. As I had already let him into my secret, we understood each other perfectly, and our conversation of course was intended for any who might be listening, under cover of which I could fix upon my hiding place without being suspected.

“A small box, you say, marked Captain Edward Dilkins?” observed the depot master, as he unlocked and threw open the door of the smaller storeroom.

“Yes, sir! And a very valuable box, too!” I replied.

“Then it should be in here,” he rejoined, [“]for here is where we store all our most valuable articles, with the exception of packages of money and jewelry, which we always place in our iron safes. What value do you suppose we have in here, Captain Dilkins?”

“I have no idea.”

“Why, thousands and thousands of dollars’ worth, sir.”

“But are you not afraid of being robbed?”

“Oh, no, for we have two private watchmen outside, who constantly move around the building, from sun to sun, and scarcely a mouse could cross their beats without being seen.”

“And do you not keep a watch inside as well as outside?”

“What need of that, since no one can get in or out without being discovered.”

“Ah! Very true!”

While conversing in this strain, we busied ourselves in overhauling the different boxes and bales, as if searching for one in particular, but were really fixing them in such a manner as to give me a comfortable place of concealment, where, through one or two well-contrived crevices, I could keep watch of the mysterious chest. When all was arranged to my satisfaction, we pretended to have found the imaginary box; and then, as soon as I had secreted myself, the depot master put out his light as if by accident and exclaimed:

“There! I have blundered you into darkness.”

“No matter,” returned I, “since the box is found. I guess we can grope our way to the door.”

“Come on then!” he rejoined. “Here! Give me your hand. There—so—I can find the way.”

He then made a noise in walking which sounded like the steps of two persons, and in this manner went out and locked the door, leaving me in my place of concealment, where, in order to carry out my plan, I had to remain perfectly quiet and motionless, and guard even my breathing. This was no easy task for the first three hours that followed; and having heard nothing myself meantime, I began to fancy I had made a mistake, and to debate with myself whether I should continue thus much longer or not. Happily I decided to remain silent another hour; and in less than half that time, to my great delight, I heard a noise that convinced me my suspicions were well founded. The noise was light, as of someone unlocking and lifting the lid of a box, and drawing a long breath of relief, *and it was in the room*. Then followed the sounds of the rubbing of a match, and then the light itself, clearly revealing to me in my hiding place, a small, dapper fellow, sitting upright in the mysterious chest, the lid of which was now open.

Yes, here was the whole secret; just as I had conjectured. The chest, sent from place to place, to be stored till called for, always contained a thief, who came out in the night, in the storeroom where deposited, selected the most valuable goods at his leisure—silks, laces, shawls, and so forth—put them in the chest, and then got in there and remained till the box was called for and removed by an accomplice. It was a bold and ingenious plan, and had so far succeeded as well as the villains could wish.

Every man feels a pride and pleasure in accomplishing a difficult undertaking, and I confess I felt a great delight in watching this little fellow from my place of concealment—watching him as a cat does a mouse that she fairly has in her power and does not believe will ever again escape. Having lighted a kind of dark lantern, he now proceeded very deliberately to inspect the premises, and then the goods. He was evidently an adept in his business, and knew just where to go for what he wanted, and in a very short time his selections were made. I waited quietly and patiently till he had deposited a pretty large pile of articles beside his chest, preparatory to

packing them, when, noiselessly slipping off my boots, I stole softly round behind him, a pistol in one hand and a pair of handcuffs in the other. For perhaps a minute I stood silently within reach of him, watching him with a sort of grim delight, and then, bending my head forward, I shouted in his very ear:

“You are a dead man if you stir!”

These words, pronounced so suddenly, fairly paralyzed him, as I intended they should; and long before he had recovered from his astonishment and fright, I had him down, manacled, and every weapon removed from his person.

“There, my fine fellow,” said I, “we have both been playing a game, and you see you have lost and I have won.”

“Are you an officer?” he inquired, as he began to recover his self-possession.

“Alfred Pritchard, at your service!”

“I have heard of you before,” he replied, with recovered *sang froid*, “and am quite happy to be in the hands of so distinguished and honorable a gentleman.”

“I thank you for the compliment, and beg to assure you our happiness is mutual!” laughed I.

The next day, when his accomplice came for the chest, I arrested him also. The affair made quite a stir, not only in the town of C— —, but in London, and throughout the country generally; and while the cunning burglars got transportation for their part, I gained much credit and fame for mine.

*The New York Ledger*, August 16, 1862