

Retired from the Force.

by Theo. Op.

I read a little while back—and in all probability you, reader, read—of the celebrated Russian police, which the author called “bogyey tribe”; read how officers of the force are not “passing rich on forty pounds a year,” but very rich indeed; how they rob, and rob, and rob again, so that their name is a blood-chiller and their existence a national curse: and when I had so read—let me say when we had so read (meaning you and I), we turned round to Scotland Yard, and our own blue and, comparatively, innocent police, and smiled. Oh! (to set aside the Russian bogyey), after the continental police impertinence, I love the mild-looking, queerly-dressed, swordless, cocked-hatless police of this tight little, nice little island. I declare, I do think the blue policemen of England the civilest body on earth—far more civil than a Quaker, the core of peace and placidity. I don’t think there is a blue uniformed man in the force who would return even a dry answer to a civil inquiry; and if he is not in the way when he may happen to be particularly wanted, please to recollect his trans-channel brother is very often present when he is not wanted at all.

But “to return to our muttuns” (as the French client said to the discursive barrister)—I mean the Russian police—I wonder what bogyey does when he is past his dirty work? I wonder whether he retires on a fortune? or whether, having defrauded all his life, he is himself defrauded, and, being made poor, takes up his lodging on the bed of the Neva? I wonder whether he is degraded, and works for small pay—yes, I should like to know what the superannuated Russian police—a beggar, or a semi-millionaire—the inhabitant of a big house, or a cellar?

But if I don’t know what becomes of the Russian police officer, when he retires from the force, at least I know something of the English peeler when he has resigned his staff for ever; when he will no longer tell rowdies to “get out of that there” and “go along, do”; when stipendiary justices shall upbraid him no more; (I have seen stipendiary justices particularly brisk in reproachfully correcting a round-about-speaking peeler) when he has turned bull’s-eyes for the last time on the shivering houseless; and when he has run his last chance of being kicked to death, his last chance of bronchitical-flooring, per night air. (Indulging in my bane, I revel in a parenthesis on purpose to point out the great proof that policemen give of the villainous danger of night air in this country. There is barely a man in the force who does not suffer from some pulmonary complaint—bronchitis generally. O you mothers, who have read the last sentence, show it to your daughters: its effect may be that they will not insist, so smilingly and pertinaciously, upon “only another quadrille, mamma.”)

But to return, &c., &c.—when he, the policeman, has forever retired from the force—a very gentle force indeed, speaking comparatively! Yes, I know somewhat of the retired peelers; let me here disport myself in tangled sentences, touching one, once of the force, but who has now retired beyond the pale of uniforms.

High up above the house where I am writing, on a hill, and surrounded by swooping fir and pine trees, is a castle weeping itself to decay. The castle and the ground it stands on are (let all good men pity them) in Chancery. They have been there for years: they will be there for more, I am pretty well certain—and dreadfully dull are both castle and park. Past the castle, and so buried in

trees that, as I look up, I have not the slightest chance of seeing an inch of it, there is the castle lodge; and in it lives the one who has retired from the force, and about whom I am going to scribble.

He is nothing much to look at. Having cast from him the blue casings, he has fallen upon moleskin and corduroy; and with his trousers tucked up, his hands in his rough jacket pockets, and a smile on his red, round, whisker fringed face, he looks queerly good-humoured. Some unknown, mixed up with the Chancery suit, has given him the appointment of general-looker-after-the-property; and he lives in the lodge, and does keep a look out—a policeman's look out—upon the park and castle. A glorious look out; for since he has taken the premises into custody the chanceryed castle has lost no more lead off its roof (it went consumedly before); and at Christmas time, that Reign of Terror for gardeners who have shrubberies on their minds, the holly-trees remain untouched, and the other evergreens fully bear out their name.

No, no one would believe, in looking on my friend—I am proud to call him so—that he has been a detective—a wondrous detective. That he has been in cases of the most cunning, daring and intricate kind. Look at his face, and you would say he could not say “Bo!” to a goose. Ah! you would be a goose to say so. Why, the man, when in the force, was so cunning and successful that he acquired the name of “Nobbly Bob.” A proud adjective is Nobbly to place before Bob—it may not be found in “Johnson,” but the force know its meaning full well. He was ever in the heart of all the best “jobs”; he was part and parcel of most of the celebrated trials of late; and now, now that he has retired from the force, now that he has done with detection (of criminals), uniforms, disguises, and adventure, he lives a life Arcadian.

He has about twelve or fifteen shillings a week from the “force” as a pension: to that he has ten shillings a week added for keeping watch and guard over the castle; and he has his little cottage, with its little garden, without being called upon for rent, or made to frown at tax demands—which latter enjoyment must be delicious indeed! Moreover, he has all the smaller wood of all the trees that fall; and the trees being in Chancery with the grounds and castle, I need not say they are continually falling and rending the chanceryed earth about them.

Yes, it is pleasant to see him, done with staffs and arrests forever, sawing away at a giant tree which has gone down before a north wind. He is not much of a hand at a saw or wedge, and if it were not for good will and a purpose, I think the trees would remain as they fell; but as the gentlemen of the force never forget its attributes when even they have left it, this good-tempered friend of mine wages perseverance incessant against the stubborn wood; and consequently the trees are chopped and split, and sawn before they are quite sure that they have ceased to stand erect. I have learnt a good deal about the power of wood to resist the power of the wedge: Nobbly Bob can overcome oak and pine, because they consent to split; but as for elm, it is, in Bob's own energetic words, “the very old Harry.”

I have said that Bob only gets the small wood of the fallen trees—Bob doesn't get *all* the wood. *I* don't know for certain where the big branches and the trunks go to, *but I think I can guess*. And when I speak to the castellain about the matter, he shows all his teeth, and grins. Of course the big wood isn't used in the Chancery courts, because there they use coal—I'm sure they do,

because I have ocularly assured myself of that assertion. I do hope that the Lord Chancellor will see into it, after he has read this, as *of course he will*.

Nobbly Bob has a good many red geraniums: he says he means to be a florist now; and in summer time his little cottage-front and veranda shine again with bright leaves and brighter blossoms. Also he keeps a goat, which butts at everybody; and furthermore, he keeps a dog, which barks at every soul. And what is better than all, he shows the castle to strangers, and makes a good bit per week by that.

Think first of Russian police people, and then think of this honest fellow who has retired from the force, and then contrast the former with the latter. Think of Bob going about the dismal old place, opening shutters, pointing out views, and telling the queerest of histories. He is not very learned, but he is very sharp; so he has got up a verbal history of every room and hall in the old place; and such an astonishing history it is!

I was in the dismal old building one day, and discovered a marble mantelpiece on which were depicted the labours of Hercules—such labours!

“Dear me!” said I to Bob, and merely added that I thought they were the labours. I saw his detective eyes go from my face to the marbles; then he washed his hands in imaginary water; then he put his head on one side. And, by Jupiter, in a week he’d got up a history of those labours, beginning, “Yere, yer see a lion.” He had heard they were labours, so he set to work to detect them—he might have detected them more badly.

On the same day that I discovered the labours, I noticed in the cornice of one of the rooms the ciphers M. and W. interlaced. “Dear me!” said I, marking the top-heavy decorations of the room, “William and Mary.” He detected them likewise; and I hear now “Wilyum and Mary, sir; they slep in this ere very room, sir.”

One day Bob discovered a narrow cupboard where there should have been nothing but wainscot. He discovered it by the keyhole—about the size of a small pea. Bob was in the force again directly. There was no handle; the keyhole was in the shade; the door was cunningly hid. The nobbly one suspected something. Would I wait there while he went and got a chisel? I suppose he wanted to have an eye kept upon the cupboard—which could give no good account of itself. “Bob,” said I, “there used to be Catholics in this house. I know there must have been, because you know you have shown me where they kept the holy water.”

“Yes, yes,” said Bob.

“Well, perhaps when the Catholics had to run, they put the plate in that cupboard!”

“O, you jest wait there,” said Bob; and away he shot for a chisel. When he brought his chisel, and arrested the cupboard with it, he showed a joyous face indeed. But when the door, which hadn’t been opened for I can’t say how many score years, gave way with a rusty shriek, and showed that the cupboard contained nothing but dust and shelves, Bob’s round face was as long as he could draw it.

There are in the old castle a suite of vilely painted rooms—I take it servants’ bedrooms. He flings them open one after the other, and he says, “This is the red room; this is the green room; this is the blue room. You can’t get colours to stand like this ’ere now.”

Having arrived at the conclusion—I can’t say how—that the house once belonged to Catholics, he has discovered Catholicism in a very cupboard, where, I am assured, the priest “slep bolt upright” amongst a lot of pegs, when full on penance bent. Bob has also some dim ideas about confession, and points out a glass door as nearly connected with that ceremony. He has also discovered some holy water basins, as he says, which I take to be wooden soap bowls.

I have asked myself the questions, “Does the detective thoroughly believe in the pegs and priest, the confession and the glass door? or does he believe in them as a means of creating a wondrous history for the castle over which he means to die guardian?” I can’t find an answer. My detective has such a wisely simple face that I cannot read it.

He is yet young—perhaps not more than thirty-five; therefore his retirement from the force was premature, for, to tell the truth, having gone too hazardous a length in his detective powers, he was knocked down and suffered concussion of the brain. And that was his last suffering in the force.

But he has other employments than those I have named, being a detective. He can discover a rabbit run with the best and sharpest gamekeeper on the nearest estate of any one Scotch lord, and therefore he has something to do in the way of rabbit catching. Moreover, arguing back from effect to cause, he discovers the traces of polecats, &c., and sets to work to detect *them*. When I say polecats, &c., I am wrong: I should say he has set to work to discover a polecat; and that polecat he has discovered and shot down. He came running down to my garden end, one morning, with the nauseous animal on a pronged hazel branch; and then his eyes were piercing indeed. Moreover, he shoots birds, and he can fish a little; and altogether this gentleman retired from the force, having a park, shooting, fishing, a garden, and capital health to boot, lives luxuriously and comfortably, and what is more—honestly.

And now go and read the police chapters of the “Journey due North”; and having done so, don’t grumble about the British police, O gentleman reader, though you are an Englishman! for think—here is a man who has been part and parcel of an important class of British officials (I dare to say important, in the very teeth of a certain harsh judge; who crests his hair in anger sometimes)—who has worked hard—who has been a talented member of his class—who has without doubt been very, very often tempted to bribery—who has been very, very often near to other temptations: here he is, I say, after years of dangerous and brain-wearying labour, retired from the force, on but twelve shillings a week, and having to make out a living by the state of castellain.

Having written the above, I looked up, to take a draught of park in at my eyes, when there he was, coming down the hill—as he is always coming (for a purpose)—and in a minute or so he was rattling his heel against the lapped palings which separate my garden from the park whose overlooker he is. It was the beginning of March, and he had brought me half-a-dozen snowdrops, for my mother.

“And I tell you what,” he said, as he gave me the flowers, “I’ll take a mug of your good beer; and you needn’t be particular in the size of it.”

Let me hasten to say that, bringing the snowdrops, I wonder he asked for the beer; for he looks generally for beer when his hands are empty only. But then, perhaps, he was very thirsty.

I never give him a mug of beer (I am not particular as to the size of the vessel) unless he asks for it; because when he does, he opens his eyes wide, and I like to see the contrast between those sharp perceivers and the simple rest of the face. So he gave me the snowdrops, and I gave him the beer; whereupon, he drank it up, heaved satisfactorily, and then went back up the hill, like a detective refreshed indeed; while I came in with the empty pot, and sat down to flourish with a pen.

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