

A Reminiscence of a Bow-Street Officer

I am an old man now, and though my life has been full of adventures, some of a rather odd, and some of a hazardous description, it is very little that has been said about them. It was not near so much the fashion in my time as it is now to let all the world know how the secret and silent machinery of justice did its business. We, whose function it was to work out the retribution due to crime, kept our own counsel, and made no more revelations than we were obliged to make. We could not afford to do so, in fact. We had not the means and facilities that later times have afforded to our successors. Railways existed only in the brains of projectors and speculators, whom the wise world looked upon as madmen; and the electric telegraph had not even got so far as to be laughed at, which I have observed is generally the first step forward of all great discoveries. So, as I said, we kept our own counsel, and made up, as far as we could, by secrecy, cunning, and stratagem for the want of better tools to work with. Fifty years ago thief-taking had not grown into a science, and there was then much more uncertainty in the practice even of sciences than there is at present. Still, we did not let all the rogues escape us; and I am given to understand they are not all caught even now. In deprecation of the present fashion of decrying us old fellows who are laid upon the shelf, perhaps I may be allowed to present the reader with a short sample of my own experience, which will show that we did something, at any rate, toward the capture and punishment of offenders.

It is now between thirty and forty years ago that a tradesman, in a large way of business in the city of Bath, inclosed in a very corpulent letter, directed to a wholesale house in London, a heavy sum of money, amounting, if I recollect right, to little short of £2000 in Bank of England notes. The letter, which was posted by the tradesman himself, never reached its destination. No trace of it could be discovered, upon inquiry at the post offices, either in Bath or London; but it was found that before any investigation had been set on foot, some days having unavoidably elapsed ere any suspicion of robbery occurred, the whole of the stolen notes had been passed in London, and most of them had found their way to the cashboxes of different bankers. To me was assigned the task of scenting out the trail of the thief; and I immediately set about the business, though I must confess with very indifferent hope of success. The notes had, as I soon became aware, all been changed by one person, so that there was probably no confederate in the crime, and consequently less chance of discovery. The descriptions given by the different persons who had changed the notes of the person who had paid them away, though they varied very much in many particulars, as descriptions of persons always do, yet tallied in one respect: they all described him as a merry, vivacious, gentlemanly man of about thirty-five years of age, and a little under the middle size. In one place, moreover, where he had changed a hundred-pound note to pay for a green-striped silk dress, he was accompanied by a lady, young, tall, sprightly, but not handsome. The young shopman at the draper's in Oxford Street, who gave me this clew, added further, that he thought the lady was no stranger to town, she having been to the shop since alone for ribbons to match the silk, and that perhaps she might be met with without much trouble. I thought so too, and, furnished with a pattern of silk from the same piece, I commenced a prowl, which I continued day and night in all likely and unlikely localities, endeavoring to match my pattern upon the dresses of young ladies "tall, sprightly, but not handsome." My exertions were not without their reward. I found the lady, habited as I expected, in the green-striped silk—but was no nearer to the thief than before. She was the daughter of a woman who kept a lodging house in Piccadilly. The person who had changed the notes was a lodger, who had staid in town for a few

days only—who had appeared to take a particular pleasure in her society—had induced her, with her parents' consent, to accompany him in a round of sightseeing—had treated her very handsomely, and purchased for her several trinkets and the dress in question. He had given out that he was on his way to France; but this I soon discovered, was nothing but a blind, since he had never applied for a passport in London, and I could meet with no trace of him at Calais or Boulogne, where he might have obtained one for the interior. I could do no more. The rogue had been too cunning to leave a trail behind him, and, unless accident should turn him up, had effectually given justice the slip. Meanwhile, other events occurred of more stirring interest, which drove him entirely out of my mind, and the affair soon vanished altogether from my recollection.

About three years afterward the delightful city of Bath was honored with the presence of certain scions of royalty and the elite of the fashionable world, who all at once took it into their heads that the hot springs, once so refreshing to the pigs of King Bladud, might prove equally invigorating to the blood royal. A full season was expected, and a full season there was. Together with the nobility of the capital, down came the invariable attendants in those days upon wealth and fashion, a huge shoal, to wit, of gamblers, sharpers, and the swell-mob, who calculated, not without reason, upon reaping a good harvest among the unsophisticated citizens of “the west cuntry.” But the authorities at Bow Street, who were perfectly well aware of what was going on, not willing to let them have all the fun to themselves, resolved to have a hand in the game, and to seize the opportunity of thinning the ranks of the pickpockets especially, and of sending a batch of the old offenders upon their travels for the good of the country. It would have been easy to frighten them back to London, by allowing a few of my London colleagues to show their well-known faces in the streets of Bath. It was judged better to take the worst of the rascals, if it could be managed, *in flagrante delicto*, and rid the realm of them at once as a warning to the rest. For this purpose, I, as I knew the town and was known to many of the inhabitants in consequence of my investigations on the subject of the post office robbery, was sent down to take what measures I chose for the speedy capture of the light-fingered race. Having communicated my plan, and made some necessary arrangements with the corporation officers, I walked forth the day after my arrival, rigged out as the very model of a gentleman farmer, and with eyes, mouth, and pockets wide open, and a stout gold-headed cane in my hand, strolled leisurely through the fashionable thoroughfares, the pump room, and the assembly rooms, like a fat goose waiting to be plucked. I wore a pair of yellow gloves well wadded, to save me from falling, through a moment's inadvertency, into my own snare, which snare consisted of about fifty fishhooks, large black hackles, firmly sewn, barb downward, into each of the pockets of my bran new leather breeches. The most blundering “prig” alive might have easily got his hand to the bottom of my pockets, but to get it out again, without tearing every particle of flesh from the bones, was a sheer impossibility. As I lounged staring about, I took care never to see any of my old customers until the convulsive tug at one or other of the pockets announced the capture of a thief. I then coolly linked my arm in that of the prisoner, told him in a confidential whisper who I was, and professed to wonder that he did not know me; assured him I did not wish to hurt his feelings by exposure, as he was a bit of a gentleman; and, walking him off to a private receptacle in Orange Grove, where my coadjutors were in waiting, released him from hook to be consigned to the tender mercies of Crook, who was then a magistrate of the city. I should perhaps be accused of boasting, if I declared how many head of game I bagged the first day. One circumstance made me laugh in spite of myself: as I was walking off with the first victim, we came bolt upon his

“pal,” who, seeing me arm-in-arm with his fellow, naturally supposed I was a picked-up pigeon, and, eager for his share of the plucking, actually walked with us into the trap without being hooked. The second day’s sport was much less productive than the first; the ruse had somehow got wind, and the rogues had taken a panic. On the third day I showed myself in my true colors, and, in company with the town police, scoured out the dens of the evildoers, and warned all that yet remained of the London practitioners to quit the town within twelve hours. This, and the seizure of a couple of gambling gangs, with their apparatus, in a house in Milson Street, effectually dispersed the cloud of villainy that had settled upon the city, and I began before a week had elapsed to think of returning home. Accordingly, I took a place in the mail which left the York House at nine o’clock, and amused myself in the interim by walking about the town and gossiping occasionally with those of the inhabitants with whom I had formed a temporary acquaintance.

I was standing at the corner of Milson Street, near Loder’s music shop, and laughing with the Rev. Mr. — —, officiating curate of the — — Church, when we were joined by a gentlemanly man, who shook hands with the curate and inquired the subject of our mirth, bowing politely to me. Mr. — — introduced us to each other, when, upon looking in the stranger’s face, an undefinable something secretly told me that though I did not know him, and though I could not recollect having ever seen him before, yet that I ought to have known him, and *must* know him and all about him by some means or other. I took good notice of his countenance and figure, and my conviction of some as yet unaccountable connection between him and me grew momentarily stronger and stronger. He did not once look me in the face, and I thought changed color slightly when he heard my vocation mentioned; he very shortly took his leave. I inquired immediately who he was. “Oh,” said Mr. — —, “he is the landlord of the Fox, at Midford, a most welcome personage, I can assure you, to the eyes of an angler, after a warm day’s fishing in Coombe brook; a very worthy and respectable sort of man he is, and a most attentive host.” I could not make it out, nor for the life of me account for the strange ideas that ran in my head—the presentiment that already rose in my mind that it was my destiny to coil a halter round the neck of that “worthy and respectable sort of man.” Do what I would I could not get the notion out of my head all the evening. At length the time came for starting. I walked to the coach office, clapped my portmanteau in the front boot, and, as Fate would have it, found myself the sole inside passenger. Here, left to my own thoughts, as the mail rattled lightly along the dark road, I began calling myself to account why the commonplace physiognomy of the stranger I had met in the afternoon, and whom I had never, to my knowledge, seen before, should haunt me incessantly as it did. I ran over in my mind all my experience in the profession, from the very first pickpocket captured twenty years before down to the transactions of yesterday. That face was never among the number of my prisoners. No, it was altogether new to me; and yet, I thought again, is that the face of one whom I ought to have captured, though I never did? Let me see. I began again to revise all the fruitless chases I had made in the course of my life, and to compare the descriptions of every missing rogue with the face and figure of the stranger. Before the coach stopped for supper at Newbury I had come upon the right scent. “That’s the man,” said I, to myself, “who stole the two thousand pound letter from the post office, three years ago!” After supper, I had leisure to think the matter over, and to form my plans; and having settled what I would do, I went comfortably to sleep, and enjoyed a good night’s rest at my ease in the coach. I reported myself at the office the same morning, and requested a private conference with my superiors. It was immediately granted, when I stated that I had grounds for supposing myself at length in the way of clearing up the affair of the robbery, and asked for leave to pursue the

investigation in my own way, with such assistance only as I should see fit to apply for. No objection was made to my demand, and, supplied with the necessary funds, I immediately set off in search of the young shopman who had guided me in the matter of the sprightly young lady. Though he had left his situation in Oxford Street, he had fortunately left his present address behind him, and we were soon in conference. To my inquiry whether he would be still able to identify the man we sought, "Yes," said he, "at any time, among a thousand others." "Then," said I, "you will come with me and notice every man into whose company I bring you; and if you should see him, you will pull out your watch and say to him, 'Oblige me with the time by you, sir, my watch is stopped.'" I took a couple of places in the Bath coach for the same night, and having first placed a watch upon the motions of the sprightly young lady, who was still at the maternal home in Piccadilly, I again started off with my companion early in the evening for the city of the hot springs.

In the afternoon of the next day, having refreshed ourselves after our journey with a nap of a couple of hours and a good dinner, I made a call, in company with the young draper, upon the Rev. Mr. — — "What! not gone yet?" said he, "I thought you were in London long before this." I did not think it necessary to undeceive him. "Why," said I, "I have met with a young friend; and as I think I have a right to a day's holiday, I mean to take a turn at trout fishing along with him. I am come to ask if you will condescend to join us. You were saying the other day that you knew of some place where we might catch fish, and get a decent dinner afterward; if you will make one of our party and bring any friend with you, we may, perhaps, spend a pleasant day together." The reverend gentleman was nothing loath, and we agreed to set forth directly after breakfast on the following morning. I now went to the town hall in search of a couple of the city officers in whom I knew I might confide, and engaging them to be at the brook near Midford bridge, fishing rods in hand, on the morrow, informed them that they were to keep an eye on the landlord of the "Fox," and in case of any symptoms of a meditated escape, to take him into custody. This precaution I thought necessary, as it was possible, were he the man I sought, he might recollect the face of the shopman who had sold him the striped silk, and slope off without waiting to cook our dinner for us. As we emerged from the town hall, and were descending the steps, my eye lighted upon a couple of young fellows, who with rods in their hands and creels at their hips, were evidently just returned from a day's fishing. I asked them what sport, got into conversation, and following them into the upper parlor of an inn in the Boroughwalls, sat down with them to taste the publican's Burton ale. The discourse was of trout and of trout fishing, and I made many inquiries as to the different brooks in the neighborhood. At last Midford was mentioned, and the "Fox Inn" followed as a matter of course. I pretended to be struck with the name of the landlord of the "Fox," and asked who he was, where he came from—could it be my old friend? "Oh!" said one of the young fellows, "H— — can tell you all about him; well have him up. Here, waiter, call Mr. H— —." The waiter disappeared, and the publican came upstairs. "Here's a gentleman who wants to know about — —, as keeps the 'Fox' at Midford; you can tell'n all about him." "Yes," said I, "I want to know whether he is a friend of mine—that's all. How long has this gentleman kept the 'Fox'? and what was he before he kept that house?" "Oh!" said the publican, "he hasn't kept that house many years; he were in the post office here, long enough afore he took to that. He've got a goodish business in summertime out there, but he doan't do much in the winter. 'Tis but a little place, you know." "Ah, he is not my friend," said I; "I beg pardon for troubling you." "No trouble at all, sir," and the publican disappeared.

In the post office, thought I; were on the right track, as tomorrow will show. The morrow came,

and a glorious day for fishing they said it was. The curate and a friend he brought with him, and I and the young draper, stepped into a hired chaise at half-past nine in the morning, and drove off to Midford. We surmounted slowly the huge hill, and drew up at the door of the "Fox" in less than an hour. I seized my rod, and, pushing my companion before me, made for the brook-side beyond the mill, pretending eagerness for the sport, and begging our friends to order dinner, and then rejoin us. I was afraid lest the landlord should catch a glimpse of us, and, disliking our appearance, make himself scarce; and I was unwilling, too, to spoil the sport of the party. The day was warm and close, but cloudy at times; and the two gentlemen, who understood the craft of angling, had good success. The draper and I, on the other hand, made a sorry affair of it. A dozen times, at least, the fish broke away our hooks, and, when at last the draper caught one, he broke the rod in lugging it out. As for me, I caught none. I was all the while thinking of a bigger fish, which I was afraid was lying shy in the public house, and might not be induced to come out of his hole. But these were groundless fears. The stableboy came running across the meadow about five o'clock, to tell us dinner was waiting; and we saw the landlord himself, without his coat, standing on the little plank bridge by the mill, and signing with his hands for us to make haste, at the distance of half a mile. We found the ducks and green peas smoking on the table, and a tidy lass in waiting. I bade her tell her master to bring a bottle of his best sherry. She withdrew, and, in a few minutes, the landlord came in all smiles and good humor, bottle and corkscrew in hand, and began drawing the cork.

As the wine glugged forth into the decanter, the draper, who just then, was thinking of nothing but satisfying his appetite, started, turned pale, and, recovering himself as he met my glance, pulled out his watch, and, turning to the unconscious victim of the law, said, "Landlord, oblige me with the exact time by you; my watch is stopped."

"The exact time," said the other, obsequiously, "is sixteen minutes past five to a second."

The die was cast.

The gentlemen all enjoyed their dinner, and, for the matter of that, so did I mine. The landlord waited upon us with the utmost glee and alacrity, laughed at the passing jokes till the tears ran out of his eyes, took wine with the curate, with whom he was on terms of respectful familiarity, and seemed altogether as happy as man could be in the enjoyment of the comforts and delights of existence. It went against my heart to think how soon all this would be dashed away from him; but I knew that feeling was a weakness I ought not to entertain. When we had done dinner and finished a bottle of port, I ordered the chaise to the door, requested, as the evening was getting cool, to have it closed up, and bade the landlord make out his bill. While our party were packing up their tackle and fish, and loading the chaise, I whispered to the draper that he should ride outside with the driver. I got first into the chaise, and taking out my purse, called to the landlord, as the two gentlemen were getting in, to come and receive his money. We were all seated when he came, bill in hand, and, bowing presented it to me. I took hold of his hand instead of the bill: "Come!" said I, "here's room enough for you," and I pulled him, before he was aware of my intent, down on the seat at my side. I shut the door while he yet thought I was joking, and grasping him firmly by the arm, apprised him that he was my prisoner for a robbery committed on the post office three years ago. All this had taken place so rapidly, that my two companions in the chaise were only convinced that the whole was not a practical jest on my part after I had ordered the driver to proceed as fast as possible to the town hall in Bath, and they had time to

notice the horror-stricken condition of the miserable man in custody, as I fastened the handcuffs on his wrists. At their request I stopped the chaise at the foot of the hill, and suffered them to alight, taking up in their stead the two town officers, who had been lurking all day in the neighborhood, and had seen how the affair had been managed. One of them ran back to the inn for the hat and coat of the prisoner, who groaned bitterly, and writhed in agony of spirit, but spoke not a word during the short journey. He was safely lodged in jail in Grove Street the same evening, after the hearing of the charge I had to prefer against him. I then went to the post office to see what chance of evidence inquiry in that quarter might afford. There I learned that the prisoner had been in the constant habit of calling once or twice a week to see his old companions, and had as constantly assisted them in sorting the letters and making up the mailbags whenever, from pressure of business, his experienced assistance was desirable. The master remembered distinctly that he had assisted to make up the London mailbag which ought to have contained the missing letter three years before. Upon my demanding why I was not informed of that during the investigation I made at the time, he said it had escaped his memory, and that, further, Mr. — — was the last man upon earth whom he should have suspected; and that, indeed, notwithstanding appearances, nothing should convince him of the prisoner's guilt.

When the trial came on about six weeks after, the Old Bailey jury were of a very different opinion. The evidence was, in fact, overpowering. He was identified not only by the sprightly young lady and her mother, but by half a score of the tradesmen and shopkeepers who had changed large notes for small purchases. He was sentenced to be hanged—and hanged he was in less than a month after the trial, in spite of all the efforts made by his friends (in support of which efforts no expense was spared) to procure a commutation of the sentence. The day before his execution he made a full confession of his guilt. All the excuse he could allege was the force of the temptation which took him by surprise, and he had not the power to resist it. He forgave me, as the instrument of his punishment, on the ground that I had only done my duty; and, in compliance with his last request, I saw his body packed up and forwarded to Bath for interment by his family.

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