

The Butcher's Story—Detective Police Party

by: Charles Dickens

“It's just about six years ago, now, since information was given at Scotland Yard of there being extensive robberies of lawns and silks going on, at some wholesale houses in this city. Directions were given for the business being looked into; and Straw, and Fendall, and me—we were all in it.”

“When you received your instructions,” said we, “you went away, and held a sort of Cabinet Council together!”

The smooth-faced officer coaxingly replied, “Ye-es. Just so. We turned it over among ourselves a good deal. It appeared, when we went into it, that the goods were sold by the receivers extraordinarily cheap—much cheaper than they could have been if they had been honestly come by. The receivers were in the trade, and kept capital shops—establishments of the first respectability—one of 'em at the West End, one down in Westminster. After a lot of watching and inquiry, and this and that among ourselves, we found that the job was managed, and the purchases of the stolen goods made, at a little public house near Smithfield, down by Saint Bartholomew's; where the Warehouse Porters, who were the thieves, took 'em for that purpose, don't you see? and made appointments to meet the people that went between themselves and the receivers. This public house was principally used by journeymen butchers from the country, out of place, and in want of situations; so, what did we do, but—ha, ha, ha!—we agreed that I should be dressed up like a butcher myself, and go and live there!”

Never, surely, was a faculty of observation better brought to bear upon a purpose, than that which picked out this officer for the part. Nothing in all creation could have suited him better. Even while he spoke, he became a greasy, sleepy, shy, good-natured, chuckle-headed, unsuspecting, and confiding young butcher. His very hair seemed to have suet in it, as he made it smooth upon his head, and his fresh complexion to be lubricated by large quantities of animal food.

“—So I—ha, ha, ha!” (always with the confiding snigger of the foolish young butcher) “so I dressed myself in the regular way, made up a little bundle of clothes, and went to the public house, and asked if I could have a lodging there? They says, ‘yes, you can have a lodging here,’ and I got a bedroom, and settled myself down in the tap. There was a number of people about the place, and coming backwards and forwards to the house; and first one says, and then another says, ‘Are you from the country, young man?’ ‘Yes,’ I says, ‘I am. I'm come out of Northamptonshire, and I'm quite lonely here, for I don't know London at all, and it's such a mighty big town.’ ‘It *is* a big town,’ they says. ‘Oh, it's a *very* big town!’ I says. ‘Really and truly I never was in such a town. It quite confuses of me!’ and all that, you know.”

“When some of the journeymen butchers that used the house, found that I wanted a place, they says, ‘Oh, we'll get you a place!’ And they actually took me to a sight of places, in Newgate Market, Newport Market, Clare, Carnaby—I don't know where all. But the wages was—ha, ha, ha!—was not sufficient, and I never could suit myself, don't you see? Some of the queer frequenters of the house were a little suspicious of me at first, and I was obliged to be very cautious indeed how I communicated with Straw or Fendall. Sometimes, when I went out,

pretending to stop and look into the shop windows, and just casting my eye round, I used to see some of 'em following me; but, being perhaps better accustomed than they thought for, to that sort of thing, I used to lead 'em on as far as I thought necessary or convenient—sometimes a long way—and then turn sharp round, and meet 'em, and say, 'Oh, dear, how glad I am to come upon you so fortunate! This London's such a place, I'm blowed if I ain't lost again!' And then we'd go back all together, to the public house, and, ha, ha, ha! and smoke our pipes, don't you see?

“ They were very attentive to me, I am sure. It was a common thing, while I was living there, for some of 'em to take me out, and show me London. They showed me the Prison—showed me Newgate—and when they showed me Newgate, I stops at the place where the Porters pitch their loads, and says, 'Oh dear, is this where they hang the men? Oh Lor!' 'That!' they says, 'what a simple cove he is! *That* ain't it!' And then, they pointed out which *was* it, and I says 'Lor!' and they says, 'Now you'll know it agen, won't you?' And I said I thought I should if I tried hard—and I assure you I kept a sharp look out for the City Police when we were out in this way, for if any of 'em had happened to know me, and had spoke to me, it would have been all up in a minute. However, by good luck such a thing never happened, and all went on quiet: though the difficulty I had in communicating with my brother officers were quite extraordinary.

“ The stolen goods that were brought to the public house by the warehouse porters, were always disposed of in a back parlor. For a long time, I never could get into this parlor, or see what was done there. As I sat smoking my pipe, like an innocent young chap, by the tap room fire, I'd hear some of the parties to the robbery, as they came in and out, say softly to the landlord, 'Who's that? What does *he* do here?' 'Bless your soul,' says the landlord, 'he's only a'—ha, ha, ha!—'he's only a green young fellow from the country, as is looking for a butcher's sitiuation. Don't mind *him*!' So, in course of time, they were so convinced of my being green, and got to be so accustomed to me, that I was as free of the parlor as any of 'em, and I have seen as much as seventy pounds' worth of fine lawn sold there, in one night, that was stolen from a warehouse in Friday Street. After the sale the buyers always stood treat—hot supper, or dinner, or what not—and they'd say on those occasions, 'Come on, butcher! Put your best leg foremost and walk into it!' Which I used to do—and hear, at table, all manner of particulars that it was very important for us detectives to know.

“ This went on for ten weeks. I lived in the public house all the time, and never was out of the Butcher's dress—except in bed. At last, when I had followed seven of the thieves, and set 'em to rights—that's an expression of ours, don't you see, by which I mean to say that I traced 'em, and found out where the robberies were done, and all about 'em—Straw, and Fendall, and I, gave one another the office, and at a time agreed upon, a descent was made upon the public house, and the apprehensions effected. One of the first things the officers did, was to collar me—for the parties to the robbery weren't to suppose yet, that I was anything but a butcher—on which the landlord cries out, 'Don't take *him*,' he says, 'whatever you do! He's only a poor young chap from the country, and butter wouldn't melt in his mouth!' However, they—ha, ha, ha!—they took me, and pretended to search my bedroom, where nothing was found but an old fiddle belonging to the landlord, that had got there somehow or another. But, it entirely changed the landlord's opinion, for when it was produced, he says, 'My fiddle! The butcher's a purloiner! I give him into custody for the robbery of a musical instrument!'”

“ The man that had stolen the goods in Friday Street was not taken yet. He had told me, in confidence, that he had his suspicions there was something wrong (on account of the City Police having captured one of the party), and that he was going to make himself scarce. I asked him,

‘Where do you mean to go, Mr. Shepherdson?’ ‘Why, Butcher,’ says he, ‘the Setting Moon, in the Commercial Road, is a snug house, and I shall call myself Simpson, which appears to me to be a modest sort of a name. Perhaps you’ll give us a look in, Butcher?’ ‘Well,’ says I, ‘I think I will give you a call’—which I fully intended, don’t you see, because, of course, he was to be taken! I went over to the Setting Moon next day, with a brother officer, and asked at the bar for Simpson. They pointed out his room, upstairs. As we were going up, he looks down over the banister, and calls out, ‘Halloa, Butcher! is that you?’ ‘Yes, it’s me. How do you find yourself?’ ‘Bobbish,’ he says; ‘but who’s that with you?’ ‘It’s only a young man, that’s a friend of mine,’ I says. ‘Come along, then,’ says he; ‘any friend of the butcher’s is as welcome as the butcher!’ So, I made my friend acquainted with him, and we took him into custody.

“ You have no idea, sir, what a sight it was, in Court, when they first knew that I wasn’t a Butcher, after all! I wasn’t produced at the first examination, when there was a remand; but I was at the second. And when I stepped into the box, in full police uniform, and the whole party saw how they had been done, actually a groan of horror and dismay proceeded from ’em in the dock!

“ At the Old Bailey, when their trials came on, Mr. Clarkson was engaged for the defence, and he *couldn’t* make out how it was, about the butcher. He thought, all along, it was a real butcher. When the counsel for the prosecution said, ‘I will now call before you, gentlemen, the police officer,’ meaning myself, Mr. Clarkson says, ‘Why police officer? Why more policers? I don’t want police. We have had a great deal too much of the police. I want the butcher!’ However, sir, he had the butcher and the police officer, both in one. Out of seven prisoners committed for trial, five were found guilty, and some of ’em were transported. The respectable firm at the West End got a term of imprisonment; and that’s the butcher’s story!”

The story done, the chuckle-headed butcher again resolved himself into the smooth-faced detective. But, he was so extremely tickled by their having taken him about, when he was that dragon in disguise, to show him London, that he could not help reverting to that point in his narrative; and gently repeating with the butcher snigger, ” Oh, dear,” I says, “ is that where they hang the men? Oh, Lor!” “ *That!*” says they. “ What a simple cove he is!”

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