

The Button:

An Experience of a New York Detective, Related by Himself

I EXPECT you've no idea how scientifically burglars do their work sometimes. It's a regular trade; I don't know but you might call it one of the arts and sciences. Folks generally think a burglar is a rough-looking villain, with a horrid face and bushy eyebrows, who breaks into any house or store where he thinks there's anything worth taking, and kills everybody that makes any resistance. Just let me show you a burglar (turning to the Rogues' Gallery), one of the best of them. There, that fellow, number 203; you wouldn't think *he* was a rascal; he looks more like an Episcopal minister, doesn't he? Now that fellow had as nice a kit of tools as you'd care to see. His "skeletons," with movable wards, were made with a polish on 'em. Give him a chance and he'd open any lock in town. He never "weeded" a place till he knew just where he was to go and what he was to do. If it was a store, he'd have been through it carefully, under the pretext of buying goods, or finding some Mr. Jones or other among the clerks. He'd find just the right time for his job, if he waited weeks. I suppose he *might*, possibly, quiet anybody that disturbed him, if it was really necessary, and he had a large "swag," but he would avoid the risk of a murder from principle.

I was going to tell you of some smart work there was done some years ago by three men, down in Maiden Lane and thereabouts.

I think 'twas in the fall of the year, and for some weeks, every Monday morning regular, there came complaints to the Chief that some store had been entered and goods taken away without being charged. The Chief sent for the patrolmen of that ward, and was pretty sharp with them, telling them to keep extra lookout Saturday and Sunday nights, threatening to dismiss them if this sort of thing went on. But it did; and the merchants complained of the inefficiency of the police and all that; till, finally, the Chief declared he was ashamed of himself, and vowed something should be done.

One Monday morning three of us "specials" were sent for to "the Hall," and there we found a Maiden Lane merchant making a complaint. He kept a wholesale furnishing store, and had found that morning that some few thousands' worth of goods had gone off on free-trade principles.

The Chief says to us:

"Now men, I want this little matter attended to *sharp*. I don't want to see you again till this Sunday trade is stopped. Go with this gentleman and he'll show you what's been done."

We saw the Chief was in earnest, and as we'd heard about the charges of inefficiency, we had our own pride up, and were determined to do all we could.

When we came to the store we took a general survey. The windows and doors were all right, no locks broken, nothing to show how anybody could have got in or out, except in the regular way. We can often tell what "school" of thieves to suspect by the way the work has been done. In the "Hatters' Bank" case, for instance, as soon as we saw how neatly the job had been done, we had

our suspicions at once. But here, all that there was out of the way was the boxes broken open and the goods gone. We didn't suspect the clerks or porter, for it wasn't likely that all the clerks and porters of the various stores that had been robbed were dishonest.

Well, there seemed a poor show for making much in this case, and our plan seemed to be to watch round for the next attempt, and meanwhile to "turn up" (search) some of the "fences" (receivers of stolen goods) to see if we could find any of the property; though it's only by chance that you ever make anything that way, the "fences" are too "fly" (smart). But while examining the premises and discussing our plans we were all the while at work, learning the kind of goods taken, the store mark—that is, the cost and price marks fastened on the goods or written on them; we went over the whole store very carefully. The place had been swept out Saturday night, of course, and the rascals had done their work so quietly and thoroughly that there was no more litter about than if the goods had been taken down for some customer.

While overhauling some of the boxes we came upon a case of suspenders; the box had been roughly opened, and we found that out of the dozen three pairs only had been taken out. The rascals were *three*, then, we supposed. That was something learned, though it didn't amount to much. We looked about to see if we could find the old suspenders, for we thought they might have put the new ones on at once; but if they did they were "fly" enough not to leave any such mementoes behind them.

Just as we were coming away, Reed (one of us) picked up a rumpled newspaper that lay in a corner, and as he did so a button dropped out. He picked it up, and says he,

"Walling, see here; *this* may lead to it. It's all we've got, anyhow."

It was a black pruned button, coat size, and had evidently been worn, for the threads in it showed that it had come off somebody's coat. I thought that it might have come off the coat of one of the clerks, and as the pattern was rather peculiar—it had what they call a "dome centre," a new pattern then—we concluded to overhaul the coats of the establishment. No one had been with us when we found the button but one of the partners—the clerks were all below—and he took me down with him to make comparisons. We went through the closet where the clerks hung their coats—they usually wear linen coats or something cheap to work in—but we found no buttons to match. The partner said he was quite sure no such buttons had been worn by anyone connected with the store; he should have observed it if there had been, the button was so peculiar. Indeed, as I said before, we hadn't suspected the clerks from the first.

Well, we came away, and says Reed to me and Shadbolt (the other officer), "That button's the only clue we've got to 'em, and it's my opinion we can get 'em by that."

He seemed to have so much faith, that I rather yielded to him, though I thought less of the chance than he seemed to. We reported progress, such as it was, at headquarters, and Shadbolt and me were ordered to go into the button trade; Reed was wanted for something else, I forget what. The robberies that had been committed were important, in number and the amount taken, and we two officers were directed to give our whole attention to the matter, on whatever clue or in whatever way we thought best. We had nothing but the button, for the suspenders didn't promise much

help in finding them, though they might serve to identify them when they were found; and after a consultation together, we concluded to try to find the rest of that set of buttons.

Well, we went to all the rendezvous of “cross-men” (thieves) all over the city, the drinking - saloons they frequent, the corners where they “loaf,” the oyster cellars, dance houses, lodging houses, the private “cribs,” the low theatres, the pits and third tiers of more respectable places *everywhere*; I should like to know where we *didn't* go! There was a race out to the Fashion Course, and we went there; and a regatta up the river, and we went there; and a launch over to Brooklyn, and we were there. And so it went on. By day we were everywhere where there was a crowd:’ —and “cross-men” love a crowd where there’s “thimbles,” “props,” and “dummies,” to “prig” (watches, breastpins, and pocketbooks); your regular burglar doesn’t go into that business much—that’s interfering in another trade—but he likes to be along on such occasions; and at night we were at all such places as I’ve mentioned. We were at work three weeks. It seems a good while to think of, but it wasn’t so long while we were at work, because it seemed all the time as if we were just agoing to succeed. We did think we’d got our man several times, but on working up alongside and taking out our button we’d find that it wouldn’t match.

One night we were at the Chatham Street Theatre; I was up in the third tier, and Shadbolt was below, at the door. While I was looking quietly round, Shad comes up, all out of breath, and says he,

“There’s three fellows just stopped at the tickethole, and one of ’em’s got on the buttons, I think. I’m afraid they know me, so I’ll keep shady.”

“Well,” says I, “you stay out in front till I call you or send for you.”

“All right,” says he, and he slips away, just as the three fellows come up. I was afraid they’d see him, but as they stopped at the bar a minute, he had a chance to get downstairs very prettily.

The light wasn’t very clear up there, and I couldn’t make out the shapes of their buttons; but as only one wore a black coat, I knew which one to steer for. I got up as if to change my seat, loafed out to the bar, and came in again and sat down right next to my man with the black coat. I looked over my playbill very carefully, and at the same time took a side glance at his buttons. They were the same pattern as the one I carried in my pocket; and to make it a sure thing, one of the row of buttons was newer than the rest, and of a slightly different pattern, showing that one of the original set had come off and been replaced.

It wouldn’t do to try to arrest them there, for there were more birds of that feather in the place, and they would have turned to and made a row, and in the confusion my birds would fly away; I couldn’t be sure of more than one at any rate. So my plan was to “pipe” them (follow), and either nab them in the street, with Shadbolt’s aid, or track them to their lodgings. It was rather late, and I hadn’t long to wait. I knew that Shadbolt was on the lookout below, and at the “break up” I followed my men downstairs. At the entrance the crowd was too great to try a nab and be sure of getting them all, so I “piped” along. I felt sure, from their looks, that they belonged to that ward, and I thought they’d run in somewhere close by; so, as I passed Shadbolt, I gave him the sign to stay where he was “till called for,” and I followed the game. They went into two or three

“lushing kens” (drinking places), and I waited for them, humbly, outside; and at last they started straight for “the Points.”

In those days the Five Points was a much worse place than it is now—whether it’s owing to the Mission Houses or to Captain Dowling I don’t know—and as I walked along at a little distance behind my parties, I got my club out of my pocket and run it up my sleeve, so as to be ready for anything. I knew the country I was going over pretty well, and had my eyes open, so I felt comfortable.

Well, I tracked the three young gentlemen into one of the shilling lodging-houses; and as you’ve been through these, you say, you know that one of those houses is a nice place to catch a rogue in. Dark, dirty, rickety stairs, winding round from story to story; back entrances and side entrances, underground passages, alleyways leading to other streets; all sorts of ways to get in and out of these dirty ratholes. I wasn’t going in alone, not because I was afraid, but because I knew it would take at least two of us to catch them when we found them. I was pretty sure that the parties didn’t think themselves watched by their manner; and as they’d been drinking a good deal, I thought they’d be sure to go right to bed. But though I wanted Shadbolt, it wouldn’t do for me to leave; they might have gone in only on some business, and be coming out, and then, if I was away, they’d get off. I didn’t know just what to do then, but a man happened to come hurrying along as I was standing in the door, who looked “square” (honest) —there was a gaslight close by—and says I to him,

“Friend, will you do me a favor?”

He looked scared to be spoken to by anyone just there and then, but he stopped, and said he would if he could. So I asked him to go to the theatre, as it was in the way he was going, and tell a man he’d find near the door—I described Shadbolt—that someone wanted him at that corner where I was. He said he would, and went on, and presently Shadbolt came along. Well, we talked over our plans a little, and then we went and got the landlord of the house—he was a sub landlord, and dealt directly with the tenants—and got him to take a lantern and go through the house with us. If we’d have gone alone, rapping at the doors, and asking the people to open, the thieves would have smelt rat, and got away somehow; but we knew they would recognize the landlord’s voice, and so open and let us in. Well, we went from room to room, turning up a bed here and a bed there, and, finally, we came to a room where the landlord knocked several times, and at last there was a “Who’s there? What’s wanted?” I recognized the voice in a minute; it was the young fellow I’d sat next to in the theatre; and I whispered to Shadbolt that we’d got to the right place. The landlord made them get up and open the door, and as soon as there was a crack I put my foot inside, so they couldn’t slam it to and lock it when they saw us. As they opened the door very slowly and cautiously, I seized the lantern, gave the door a shove, and stepped in. There he was.

“Dress yourself, young man,” says I.

“Get up, boys,” says he, without replying to me.

“What’s up?” says one of them.

“Why, d—n it, we’re ‘copped!’” says he, for he knew Shadbolt right off.

They didn’t make any trouble, dressed themselves quietly, and we took them off. As they were dressing we recognized the suspenders. All three of them had on suspenders alike, and of a pattern the same as those in the store. So in about ten minutes from that time we had them “in hock” (the cells). It was a good long chase, night and day for three weeks, and there was some satisfaction in having at last done our work, especially as we had so small a clue to begin on.

Wait a minute: the best part’s to come yet. We’d caught the thieves, but we hadn’t recovered all the “swag” they’d been collecting so long. Of course it was a good thing that we’d got them, so that they couldn’t trade for some time; but there had been some thousands of dollars’ worth of goods stolen, and we wanted to get some, if not all, of that.

We managed this very neatly, but I can’t tell you just how it was done. There are some tricks in our trade that it wouldn’t do to have the “cracksmen” of the city know, as they would, of course, if they were printed

It was somehow in this way: Say that next morning an old man comes to see the three fellows we’ve caught; say that some one of our officers, loafing round, suspects him to be a friend of one of the “fences” he’d “turned up” a little while before; say that we think the old man has come to see the boys, and promise to help them all he can on condition that they won’t “squeak” on their “fence” (expose him); say that we offer every facility for conversation between the parties through the grated doors of the cells, and that an officer is so situated as to hear all that is said. This being the arrangement, it is not difficult for someone to “pipe” that old man home, overhaul his premises, and find lots of “swag.” Never mind just how it was done; anyhow, we got about seven thousand dollars’ worth from that “fence,” and had him “sent up” for two years and four months, and the three young gentlemen went along to keep him company. The goods we found were claimed not only by parties in Maiden Lane, but by Brooklyn merchants, and one lot by a lace merchant on Broadway.

We got a good deal of credit for the way we worked the case, and I think myself there wasn’t anything to be ashamed of about it.

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