

## *Life on the Turn of a Card*

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One of the small streets that turn from Aldersgate Street, though occupied by highly respectable people, was more than a month under the strict surveillance of the police force of London on account of some peculiarities its neighborhood bore. Suspicious persons had been noticed many times in that quarter, although not a single offense had been complained of, no householder having lost even the smallest articles.

The more impenetrable the mystery, the darker must be the object it veils, has always been a maxim of our profession; and, as I have said, close watching was kept up until every hope of discovery was found futile.

I was returning from Whitecross Street prison, where I had lodged a prisoner, and took the above mentioned street as a means of shortening my road. When within a block of Aldersgate Street, a noise and the shouts of "stop thief!" broke in upon the daydream I was indulging, and I fell back into the shadow of a high stoop, to spring out upon the thief if he came my way. I had not taken notice of the street, and would not have remembered it as the one I had a share in watching so long and faithfully, if it had not been for the events of the next few moments.

Cautiously protruding my head outside my hiding place, I attentively watched the fugitive. He indeed was coming down the street towards me, panting and breathing hard, yet with a pace increasing, instead of decreasing in swiftness, as if he received new hope from his nearness to some mode of escape well known to him.

My hand was already itching to seize the man, who was about twenty feet from my concealment and six or seven from a gas lamp which had been turned carefully down to the regulation height, and was therefore only capable of shedding a light for a yard or so around. To my surprise, the fugitive coolly stopped and turned his head to look behind him, where a confused mass of shouting beings, easily mistaken for Indians by those who do not know the savages of cities, the Mohicans of London, who take as much delight in hunting human beings as do their red-skinned prototypes. Then, with a cursory glance down the street, which was deserted on that side, he took off his cap, which was evidently loaded with a metal interior, and flung it with great dexterity and unqualified success at the jet of gas. The singular missile hit its mark, and the crash of the broken metal and glass preceded a moment only by the total extinction of the light, plunging this part of the street into a cloud of darkness.

The fugitive was nowhere to be seen.

With wild shouts twenty men and boys rushed past my hiding place, then stopped and began talking together, until the main crowd thronged into the street and peered into the area on both sides of the way.

I had no desire to be confronted by a crowd and bothered by a host of questions, so I retreated slowly backward till I came against an alley gate, in the deep sill of which I stopped. The searchers had not more than looked into my retreat, and that without seeing me, for they had looked from partial into complete obscurity. A suppressed but audible breathing made me still

mine, and a harsh, low grating sound directed my eyes downward, where, inside the gate, which had an opening with iron bars up and down it, I saw a flat stone, one of the pavement, moving. I crouched down, leaving my eyes alone above the aperture—I had already thrown off my hat. A man arose quickly from what I saw was a trap, and noiselessly approached the grating.

My plan was made up in an instant.

Drawing a pistol from my breast pocket, cocking it to prevent its clicking, and grasping it in my right hand, I waited, still crouching down.

The moment came.

On the very instant the man pressed his face against the bars, looking over me into the street, I dashed my left hand between two of the irons and caught him by the hair, while my right hand, armed with the pistol, held the cold muzzle of the weapon against the hollow of his cheek.

At the same time, I said in a low whisper: “If you don’t undo this gate without hesitation, I’ll blow your brains out on the spot.”

Too much surprised to resist, my captive shot back the bolt and the gate was open. I pulled his face tightly against the bars, while I moved to the other side and changed my hold. After a slight scuffle, I got a pair of handcuffs on him, and was for a moment in a puzzle what to do with him.

“Who are you? and how came you here?” were questions he put, to which I only answered with half the truth.

“My name is Rees, of the detective force; and by this time, the rest of you are served like yourself, I hope.”

“Who let out on us? Was it Jerry?”

“You can’t get anything from me, my man, you know”; but I said this much in a way which made him think he was correct in his conjectures.

“The captain was all along suspicious of Jerry, and I’m deuced mad at not having served him out before.”

“That will do,” said I, pushing my captive before me into the street, where I gave him in charge of a sergeant who, on seeing my badge, did as I told him; that is, took the prisoner off quietly and had the thinning crowd dispersed.

I immediately returned to the alley gate, and stepping cautiously, made my way up the dark, stone-paved passage. I had walked nearly six yards, the house on one side of me, and a brick wall on the other, when I felt something touch my arm. I half turned, or rather was pulled into a door even with the ground, as a rough voice demanded:

“Is all safe, Jim?”

“Yes,” I answered.

But my voice, it appeared, bore [no] resemblance to Master James; and I thank the stars it didn't, if Jim was the man I surprised at the gate.

“No!” thundered the man; “tell me who you are, or I'll cut away at your gullet till my knife blade reaches the bone! Are you a spy, a policeman? If so, there'll be a vacancy down on the books tomorrow.”

A man's mind is quick at anytime, but in such an emergency as this, my part was written out, so to say, learned by heart, and ready to be enacted, in the space it takes one to draw breath,

I could see nothing in the way of escape, for firearms would only arouse the friends of the man who held me, and if I missed, all would be over with one of her majesty's liege subjects. How deeply I regretted my foolishness in refusing the aid of half a dozen knights of the baton, whom the sergeant would assuredly have given me if I had so requested.

“My name is Larry Limber, generally called ‘the nibsome pal,’” returned I quickly.

“A nice name, do for the 'sizes,” grumbled the ruffian. “I never heard any good of it.”

“What do you mean by that?” I exclaimed, affecting indignation.

“Why, I never heard of it afore at all,” chuckled he. Then, his suspicions recurring, he added threateningly: “What brought you here—how came you to find us out, say?”

“Out of Saffron Hill, in Polly Park's crib, I was told of the game; grab, belt the street lamp with your hat, dodge into the airy, up the trap, and come here to lay over till the ‘crushers’ go.”

“But there ain't a club inside of a mile, let alone Aldergate corner; and why didn't you go off? We saw the peelers go away long ago, out of the window. Here, some of you, bring out the light, till I have a look at this fellow's mug—his talk don't suit me.”

In answer to this call, delivered in a louder tone of voice, there was a scuffling of feet, and a door opening on my right let in a flood of light; brilliant by comparison with the absence of it previously.

My countenance was exposed to the stare of the man, whose features and form I also scanned scrutinizingly. He was a tall, thick-set man, with plain countenance, not remarkably villainous, and I saw that his hand had in it a formidable knife, with blade opened as if to make good his threat. I instantly perceived that he was no London thief, both from his country look and my acquaintance with him, for I enjoyed the same privilege as my brother professionals, that is, having the “rogue's gallery” in my mind.

The bearer of the light, a common candle, was a young man, whose face was already disfigured with intemperance and vice. He paid scarcely any attention to me and my companion, who, still holding me fast, moved in the direction of the open door.

I must avow that the time seemed to me a suitable one for me to offer up a prayer for my wife, whom I was at that moment far from thinking to see again. I was pulled in by the thick-set man, whose burly form temporarily hid me from the occupants of the room.

He stepped aside, saying:

“Friends of the company, as you all know, I am new to London, and hence do not know all the men on our lay. This man comes up the alley, chased by the grabs, and he says he was told of our crib at Park’s, over on Saffron Hill. I must say he has made no attempt at running away, although he has had a staving chance at the door. Do you know him?”

A long table, with its edges crowded with a dozen or more men and women, strewn with eatables and bottles of all sizes, filled up the greater part of the room, which had been built as an extension of the house. It had no windows, but on all side walls, which were fully a foot thick, to deaden sound. Candles were stuck in brackets along the walls, and some stood on the table, giving a light, though yellower, much resembling bright moonshine, which revealed in all reasonable distinctness the hangdog countenances, not improved by black-patched and unhealed wounds.

A brief silence ensued after my introduction, broken only by some facetious remarks by the females on my personal appearance, and the roar of laughter at the wit of a young rascal who, holding up two porter bottles to his eyes, in imitation of an opera glass, eyed me with a ludicrous affectation of a swell.

Then came a medley of ayes and noes with cries of “Hold him!” “Don’t let him go, Yorkshire!” “Rees, the policeman! The spy!”

I shook off the grasp of “Yorkshire,” stepped back to the door, and drew out my pistols. But I had forgotten the young man with the candle, who dropped the light and caught my arms in a way to pinion them. I was thrown down, and my pockets, both the secret ones and others, emptied with practical dexterity.

I was permitted to rise, and was lifted along to a place at the table right opposite to where sat the man who was apparently the leader of the gang.

“Now,” said the latter, “don’t all speak at once, for the street may not be empty, but one of you—you, Jerry—begin and tell of this fellow.”

Jerry forthwith rose from his seat, and, clearing his throat with a glass of liquor, began in this wise:

“Last year in the fall, I was *lambered* [taken into custody] by this cove, whose name is Rees, and he is a ‘tective, down at Shadwell, and I kicked him in the shins pretty hard when he nabbed me; and when I was up before the beak for shoving the *sinkers* [base money] and got three months, this cove, who is a right up and down gent, didn’t let on about my kicking, which he said was one of the troubles of the trade, and which would have made me get three or six months more, if he’d a told.”

“One in favor of the prisoner,” said the man, who amused the company with a mock magistrate-like air. “Someone else speak out.”

Up got three or four more, saying almost the same thing as Jerry, proving my always having been good-hearted to them after their arrest, which was a principle I had taken to myself. I saw that I could count on these half dozen of men to prevent any criminal action against me, and I felt as if a weight had been taken off my breast.

“Now” said the president, or judge, “against him—who speaks?”

There was a tumult of oaths, of yells, of shouts of “Hang him! Death to the spy! Down with him!” which made my former impression falter, and I made up my mind for the worst.

“Let us vote,” shouted one or two.

“No,” said the president, as I shall call him, “we have no paper for ballots. Shall we throw dice, or stake his life on cards?”

“Cards!” said one party.

“Dice!” was the other’s cry.

“All in favor of cards, hold up their right hand,” said the president, and cards were decided upon.

During this show of hands, the hero of the opera glass, inspired by that success, as a matter of course, lugged in a gray-headed joke of putting his foot on the table. I rejoice to say that he was soon after on the point of choking from the meeting of a laugh coming up, and the liquor going down his throat.

A new pack was selected from quite a number at one end of the room; one of my partisans was selected “to pit” against one of my opponents, and the game for life commenced.

The game they played was a little peculiar one, having no name, a hybrid between “forty-fives” and “everlasting,” as far as I could make out, and it was nearly half an hour, during which time I was allowed to sit down, before the finale of the game drew near. My partisan had thirty-seven points; my opponent had thirty-nine. The next deal would decide—life and death hung on the faintest thread, which a thin piece of pasteboard was to sunder or protect.

What I felt I cannot describe; it was allied to the feeling of the shipwrecked sailor who, swaying at the mercy of the winds and waves on a fragile plank, sees in the boundless horizon a faint speck, which he fears is going away from him, when all his heart is in the hope of its approaching.—Or like the hunter aiming at some monster bear, which if his cap fails to serve him at the nick of time, will crush him with a single sweep of his gigantic paw.

Few should scorn little things—they have decided the fate of empires.

Notwithstanding the thoughts agitating within me, I contrived to keep an impassive face, even at the moment when I was allowed to make the first cut. I did as in a dream, and heard distinctly the exclamation of the bystanders who saw, with anger some, with pleasure others, that I had turned up some cards which gave me five points in my favor. I was saved!—I breathed more freely and the air I drank in seemed to be pure, although it was close and unendurable from its mixture with cheap tobacco smoke.

Suffice it to say that my side had won, and I had no reason to fear death being portioned out to me, for there can be and is honor among thieves.

I was then made to give my word that I would not try to escape for three days, which I gave, exacting only one condition, that my wife should be informed of my absence.

The three days I passed in a room which was behind the one where the above scene had taken place. I was furnished with papers and books, my property was restored to me—all but my money—no considerable sum; and food was given me on the second day in quantity to suffice for the third day, by which time the gang had removed all their portable goods and secreted themselves.

As twelve o'clock boomed from St. Paul's, and was echoed in different tones from as many different portions of the metropolis, I emerged from my retreat, and, hastening to the nearest station, obtained a posse, with which I searched the house and its extensions.

A few heavy, valueless articles of furniture, a couple of large presses for stamping the counterfeit money, beds and bedding, were all that we found in the house. The underground passage was explored; it was found to run to a grating on the sidewalk which was in front of a house, the second from the place it conducted to, and hence had not given birth to suspicion.

No person claimed the house, and it was confiscated to the crown, the subterranean mode of entry filled up, the extension converted into a kitchen, and the street resumed its customary respectability.

Once in a while, on meeting with the members of the gang who had opposed my death, I interested myself in their future, and persuaded four of the six or seven to emigrate to Australia, which country, I have reason to believe, has exerted a reforming influence upon them.

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