

A Piece of Paper

by a French Detective

A burglary was committed at night in the shop of a certain watchmaker in the Rue St. Dennis. The robbers seized a number of gold and silver watches hanging in the window, and they went off, leaving behind them a wooden handled chisel, which they employed in breaking the lock, and a candle end, wrapped in a piece of paper about half the size of a hand. M.S— did not discover the robbery till he came down to the shop in the morning, and I was not informed of the daring burglary till ten o'clock.— I at once proceeded with an agent to the shop, in order to collect any indications that might help me to discover the robbers; but there was not the slightest clue. No one had seen them, and excepting the two articles to which I have referred, no object of a nature to facilitate search was left in the shop. Under these circumstances, I resolved to call on the police commissioner of that quarter, who might perhaps possess more precise data; but this magistrate told me that nothing could be done at present, and that it would be wise to keep quiet for a while, as any steps would only lead to loss of time and useless labor. Then the conversation changed, and while talking of one thing and the other, I mechanically took up the piece of paper, which was about three inches long at the most, that surrounded the candle end. I had read beneath the dirty finger marks four words, "Two pounds of butter," written in an illegible manner, and with ink whose paleness rendered them even more impossible to decipher.— "By Jove," I exclaimed, "that is a prodigious accident. I must find out the person who wrote those words, and then, perhaps, I shall get a clue to the thieves."

The commissioner does not think much of this paper; he warns M. Cauler that he intends to close the report at four o'clock, and send all the articles to the prefecture. "Very good," replies our author; and off he starts, accompanied by an agent, and holding the little piece of paper.

I jumped into a cab and visited unsuccessfully all the markets in turn. Disappointed, I was returning to the commissioner's office, when I noticed, in the Rue Aubrey le Boucher, a butter dealer, to whom I handed my bit of paper while repeating the usual formula. After turning it over and over, the dealer said: "Why, I wrote those words; but I don't know to whom they were addressed. It is a ticket which I sold to some passer-by or customer." On hearing this, I fell back from the seventh heaven to earth, and went off.

As I walked along, I said to myself that the robbery was performed either at the beginning of the night—that is to say, at one in the morning—or the burglars waited till a late hour. But the latter theory was inadmissible, because at a late hour the Rue St. Dennis is filled with carts going to market and artisans proceeding to work. Hence the robbery was committed at about one o'clock in the morning. If this was the case, the robbers, in order not to arouse the suspicion of persons dwelling in the same house with themselves, did not go to bed; they probably spent the night in some mean wine-vault—the Coutelle, for instance—and that would explain how, in going down the Faubourh du Temple, they purchased the candle in that quarter.—Whilst discussing the circumstances which must have proceeded the robbery, I turned into the Rue de Faubourg du Temple, where I went from chandler's shop to chandler's shop, asking whether any one

recognized my bit of paper; it was the lantern with which Diogenes sought a man. At length I came to sixty-two, near the barracks, and to my great satisfaction the following answer was returned to my question:

“Yes, sir; at about half after eleven last night I sold a half-penny candle, wrapped in the paper you now show me, to two young men who live in the next house.”

“What is their trade?”

“Ah, sir, they are as quiet as lambs! They are two commercial travelers, and both out of work just at present. They smuggle lace from Belgium, but they are as well behaved as girls; they see nobody; they frequent no bad company; they not drink or quarrel.”

I thanked my chandler for the information, and said that it was not with these young men that I had anything to do; but as I feared he might warn the robbers, or give the alarm by his chattering, I sent my agent to fetch one of the comrades. During the interval I made the neighbors talk, and obtained a description of the malefactors. On the arrival of the inspectors, I sent them to watch, with orders to arrest the robbers if they went out, and at four o'clock the next morning, I went up and arrested them.— I could see nothing of a suspicious nature in their room, I sent for the commissioner, but a search led to no result, and I began to fear, not that I was mistaken, but I had arrived too late, and that the watches had fled. There was in the room a large window, looking out into the yard, which I opened to let in some fresh air, and as I leaned out I perceived a blacksmith's shop.

“By Jove,” I said to myself, “it would not be extraordinary if that smith made the chisel, without knowing to what use it might be turned.” So taking the instrument which I had brought, I went down to the forge, and asked the master if the tool was of his making.

“No sir!” he answered; “but I put it in a handle for one of the young men with whom you now are. He said he wanted to use it for opening cases.”

There was no further doubt that these were the burglars; hence I hurried up again, and the search began more strictly than before. The mattresses were ripped open, the palliasses gutted, the walls sounded, the boards taken up, and every hole and every corner inspected. We were in despair for we could find nothing, and after three quarters of an hour of useless searching, we resolved to go away. But the next morning I commenced a fresh search in their room, and on examining the ceiling I noticed an almost imperceptible difference of color over the bed. I jumped onto a chair, a vigorous blow of my fist on the spot produced a hole, from which tumbled pell mell on the bed, gold and silver watches, all stolen from M. S—. Our two rogues, in order to hide the stolen articles had made a hole in the ceiling, which they covered again with thick paper, and white-washed over, and it only appeared of a darker hue because it was not quite dry.

Some time after the two burglars were tried at the assizes, and sentenced to ten years' penal servitude. And yet, on what did the success of this affair depend? Upon a piece of paper, to which no one had paid any attention.

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