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The Robbery of Plate

A Detective's Story

BY HARRY HAREWOOD LEECH

SOME years ago I was traveling from Amboy to New York—it was a cold, blustering November day. I had gone into the ladies' cabin on board the *John Potter*, and was settled near the stove among the pile of soft velvet cushions, before I discovered a figure directly opposite to me on the other side. His great coat was buttoned up to the neck, around which a heavy muffler was wound. Upon his head a heavy fur cap rested, from beneath the rim of which a pair of sharp, ferret-like eyes glowed on me, appearing to take in my whole character, history and business at a single glance. The man's features seemed familiar to me, and I soon recognized him as a noted detective officer, who lived in Philadelphia. He had succeeded some two years before in bringing some famous counterfeiters to justice, one of whom selected me as his counsel. They were tried at Trenton, New Jersey, and I recollected this man's puzzling, sharp answers to me as I cross-examined him, and through his instrumentality he was convicted. I addressed him by name, and after we had talked over this trial, some desultory conversation ensued, when I remarked to him:

“Benson, I suppose you have had many strange adventures in your life, which must be one of excitement, and where success is only obtained through the possession of such rare qualities as prudence, foresight, calmness and courage.”

“Yes, yes, many strange scenes do I pass through, but about the queerest case happened about a year ago in Philadelphia, and the principal actor is now serving out a term in the State's Prison.”

“Do narrate it, Mr. Benson.” And the little, strongly knit man undid the muffler from about his throat and said:

“I was sitting in the office of our chief about nine o'clock in the morning—let me see, it was much such a day as this—raw, and damp, and blustering. I was tucked up near the stove, thinking over an arrest I had made the night before, way out towards Doylstown. And an ugly ride I had of it too, over the hard roads with my man, in a wagon without springs, clear into town—but I thought no matter, there he is in the corner; I will get a snug reward, and perhaps be promoted to the ‘bank’ business—for in our corps that pays the best (I mean tracing bank robbers, defaulters, and such like big villains.) Well, I was thinking of all this medley, and I believe I was almost half asleep, too, for I hadn't got in till two o'clock that morning—when in comes to the office a fussy, bustling old gent, in a great flutter.

“‘I want to see the Chief of Police,’ said he, as soon as he could get his breath. I pointed to a back room, and he had a long conference with Captain B—, our chief. At last, the captain came to the door, and said he:

“‘Jerry, go along with this gentleman. He will tell you what is the matter as you accompany him—’

“‘But there ought to be a reward,’ blustered the old man.

“‘Not at all,’ said Captain B—, calmly. ‘You would only give them a better chance, and you will never recover your silver, for they would melt it up at once. Trust to Mr. Benson, he will do all that is necessary.’

“‘So I went along with the old gentleman, whose name I learned was James B. Castor. He lived in a fine house in Vine Street, and from what I learned afterwards was quite rich. The night before he had been robbed of nearly a thousand dollars’ worth of jewelry and silver plate.

“‘We soon arrived at his house, and we proceeded immediately to the room where the robbery had been committed. It was a large and sumptuously furnished chamber in the back building of the third story. It appears that Mr. Castor had retired to bed with his wife upon the previous night, after his usual custom of looking at all the fastenings, and examining if the silver plate—of which he possessed many massive old family pieces—was in its usual place in the strong mahogany, buckskin-lined box, beneath his bed. And when he arose in the morning, the doors and windows were all fastened as he had left them the night before, except the door which led out upon the ‘flats’ upon the roof behind, which was principally used for drying clothes, and no possible communication could have been had with that from the street. But the mahogany box was completely emptied of its contents. While I was conducting this examination, Mr. Castor’s wife came into the room, and I was surprised to see her a young, handsome-looking woman—yes, sir, I suppose thirty years younger than her husband—and she added to her husband’s information, ‘that within this box, and among the stolen valuables, were two splendid bracelets of hers.’

“‘But, dear,’ said she, speaking to her husband, ‘was it not fortunate I did not put my diamond armlets, necklace and earrings into the box? I carelessly had them locked in the bureau.’

“‘Do you usually keep them in the box?’ I asked her.

“‘Yes; but I had been to a wedding reception in the afternoon, and had returned home fatigued, placed them carelessly in the drawer, and had forgotten them,’ was the reply.

“‘I was busy noting everything—the exit and entrances; the windows, doors, etc., while the old gentleman was speculating how the robbery might have been accomplished. But the strangest thing of all, he had slept with the key of the box under his pillow, and it was found there in the morning. Every possible way for the escape of the robber or robbers was suggested. At last, I said:

“‘They may have got on this roof in some way,’—and I pointed to the ‘flats,’—‘this is the only unfastened door—and made their escape in the same manner.’

“‘O no, that is not possible,’ said Mrs. Castor, coming forward to where we stood.

“‘Why not, madam?’ I asked, abruptly. I thought she was frightened at my manner, but she replied:

“‘O I don’t know, but I should think so.’

“I soon after left the house, to make out my plan of operations, and you will see, sir, that the reason why detectives are often wonderfully successful in the detection of crime is, *that they take notice of the smallest things*, which in many cases give a faint clue, which judiciously followed up leads to success. My clue in this instance was the wife of Mr. Castor changing color so quickly, and her embarrassment when I spoke of the roof as a means of escape. And that instant I made up my mind that she was somehow connected with the robbery, and I determined to develop it further.

“I commenced by making quiet inquiries in regard to the antecedents of Mrs. Castor. I found she had been a seamstress in the family, in the employ of Mr. Castor’s late wife, who had died some five years before, and that she became Mr. Castor’s wife about two years after that event. Her character was unimpeached previously, and although many rude people said she ‘married old Castor for his money,’ none ever traduced her character, and she moved in very good circles of society, and although the knowledge of these facts would satisfy the world, a detective policeman is a good deal more inquiring and incredulous. However, I proceeded as usual, allowing no hints to be dropped of my plans or suspicions, and I pretty soon after made up my mind that the two old servants were perfectly innocent in the whole matter. So I was perplexed, I assure you, to know how to go to work, but I and my ‘shadows’ soon commenced earnestly working up the case, the game began to move, and we awaited the moment the birds should rise from cover, with our fingers already placed upon the triggers of our weapons.

“On the evening of the third day after the robbery, I was about relieving my partner from his watch, which had been kept from a restaurant a few doors below their house, on the opposite side of the way, when we saw a female figure emerge from Castor’s house, shut the door softly, look up and down the street quickly, then start out on a brisk walk toward Thirteenth Street. She was wrapped up very warmly, and had a double veil over her face. It did not need me to look twice at the figure to recognize it as Mrs. Castor, and soon saw that she was afraid of being followed, for she looked around nervously right and left several times. She passed down Thirteenth to Chestnut, down Chestnut to Eighth, always selecting the crowded thoroughfares, going into stores every once in a while, and then dodging out again. When I see these actions, I was certain I was on the right scent, for it is an old dodge with females when they fear they are followed, to practice going into a great many stores, merely prying an article, then coming quickly out again and mingling with the moving crowd.

“Well, after a while she retraced her steps again, going into Chestnut, up Thirteenth to Race, then out into Broad, then we followed her past Vine Street, till she came to a little street above the latter, and running parallel with it, which was noted for its dens of wretchedness, and of being the abode of many pickpockets and thieves. She continued down this street—I believe they call it Wood Street now—and proceeding a short distance, knocked at the door of a house. We now bustled by her, as it was getting quite dark, and heard the knocking reverberate through the house

as though it was empty of furniture, and we had not proceeded many paces before the figure vanished from the doorway, and entered the house.

“George Corson (the partner of mine) and I retraced our steps to the building and looked for some way of entrance. There was a narrow alleyway which we entered, and found the gate unfastened, and a back window looking into the patch of yard was open. All was still, and we saw the room was empty. We leaped quietly into the house and groped our way upstairs. We had reached the second story, when we heard for the first time voices upstairs, and softly as cats we pushed on. The quiet was so profound we could hear each other’s breathing, and almost the beating of our hearts. We grasped our revolvers, for we did not know how soon we would burst upon perhaps a gang of desperate scoundrels.

“Now the voices were plainly heard, they were only those of a man and woman, and every word they uttered was distinctly audible. We were now in rather a wide entry, and we crouched down near what appeared to be a pile of rubbish. We could listen to what was said, and if necessary to our plans, would allow the twain to pass us in going downstairs, but if discovered, we would spring up and arrest them both. The woman was talking in a troubled voice:

“‘Indeed, I cannot do so,’ she said. ‘You promised if I got the silver to you, that you would leave the country, and never come near me again.’

“‘Yes, confound you!’ a gruff, thick voice answered—and I supposed from the utterance the fellow had been drinking—‘and now that such a cursed fuss has been kicked up about it, the beaks are almost about my heels, I can’t use the stuff, and I tell you once for all, that I must have the money-box that you say is hidden in the stone shelf.’

“‘O spare me, Jack—spare me!’ was returned in the other’s sobbing voice. ‘I will give you all my diamonds, but we shall surely be discovered if I attempt to take the box—’

“‘Stop your sniveling! I say I *must* have the box, or I will blow you so that you will have to acknowledge your real husband, anyhow—but aid me in this, and I will leave you and this infernal country forever,’ said the man, in a blustering, threatening voice.

“There was a great deal more bullying and coaxing, interrupted by sobs and prayers, and then the woman yielded, and we heard the plan formed for a more extensive robbery than before. At last the conference ended, and they both came out of the room—the woman sobbing and trembling, and her companion telling her in rude terms to make less noise. We heard the front door close, and then the man came upstairs again, seemed to fumble around in the dark in the next room—afraid, we supposed, to strike a light, because the house was supposed to be vacant. Then he went down again, and we heard him go out, relieving us thus from our unpleasant positions.

“We went into the next room, struck a match and lit a small bull’s-eye which Corson always carries with him, and hunted around for some of the evidences of the late robbery. But all of no avail till I thought of the chimney. Upon removing the board and examining, we found a sack suspended some four feet up the chimney, and after we had pulled it down, it was found to contain almost the entire stolen property—thrown in carelessly with a ‘jimmy,’ a bunch of false

keys, and other burglarious implements. We replaced it where we found it, afterwards setting a watch on the premises. But we had made a discovery which was valuable, and when we looked out from the window of the room where we were, we found that this back part of the house was directly opposite to the rear of Castor's house on Vine Street, and as we peered out in the darkness, the 'flats' of the latter house could be distinctly seen, and was not more than twelve or fourteen feet distant, and it was more than likely that the burglar had climbed the intervening fence, and propping up the old boards which were lying in the yard against the house, had thus got to the porch at the second story, then, by the aid of the columns had reached the roof above, upon which the door of the Castors' chamber, already described, opened—and by the expressions of the ruffian, which we had heard, we judged that the woman who was now Mrs. Castor, had been the wife of that villain who was now playing upon her fears, and threatening exposure, thus exacting 'black mail,' the payment of which the unhappy victim could not deny. We were now enabled to form our plans, so as to fix the traps for the detection of this rogue.

“The next day I had an interview with Mr. Castor, and although not betraying to him in the least our plans and suspicions, lest he should thwart them by his precipitancy, we gave him to understand that there was a traitor in his house, and received from him a *carte blanche* to act as we pleased.

“About a week after the meeting of Mrs. Castor with the man, at the house in Wood Street, at nine o'clock in the evening, George Corson and I were admitted into the house in Vine Street, quietly, at the front door, by James B. Castor himself. We immediately slipped upstairs and took our positions in a sort of lumber room situated behind the old gentleman's chamber, and looking out upon the flats. This position was one of double value to us, for, by leaving a chink in the door open, we could glance sideways in Castor's sleeping-room, and see all that was going on there.

“After the clock on the old State House struck eleven, Mr. Castor and his wife came up to their chamber to retire. We could see the old gentleman was nervous and excited, and his wife was fearfully pale, seeming to start at every sound, and I thought to myself what cowards guilt makes of people. The old man was continually looking around, as if to hear a noise at any moment, and as though he had not full confidence in the vigilance of those who should be watching. And when he put his watch away, instead of putting it beneath his pillow, he thrust it quickly and slyly between the mattress and sacking. A few moments afterwards the twain were in bed, and Mrs. Castor had lit the little night-lamp and laid it upon the floor. In a short time we heard the heavy snore of the old man—we knew it was affected, but his companion by his side did not. It was hard work for us, keeping in one position for over two hours, and in silence we were almost afraid of our breathing being heard. Twelve o'clock was pealed forth by the iron tongue of the State House bell, and rang sharply upon the still night, but old Castor slept undisturbed, and the moment its tones had ceased, Mrs. Castor slipped quietly out of bed, making no noise, and approaching the door which led out upon the flats, waved a little night lamp once, twice, three times—the last time a gust of wind nearly extinguishing its flame. She closed the door softly, glancing quickly around where her husband lay. His breathing had become hard and labored. She took it as an index of sounder sleep, but we, the excited watchers, knew it was his fearful state of mind, as the truth gradually came to him that his wife was about to be proved a shameful deceiver.

“We knew the moment had nearly arrived for action; we felt to see if our arms were all right, and that the iron wristbands were convenient and then watched on. You may well say, sir, ours is an exciting life, full of peril and adventure. And you can well imagine this—if you had been placed in our positions, watching that woman steal slyly up to the bedside of old Castor, and take a small bunch of keys from beneath his head, and then softly approach a closet with a heavy door, which seemed set in the wall, opening this carefully, then unlocking an inner door of thin sheet iron, which creaked slightly on its rusty hinges. Then to see her start back and gaze towards the bed, and observing the old man still motionless, resume her task of unlocking what appeared to be a sort of fire and theft safe, and taking therefrom a heavy box which she set down upon the floor—yes, sir, if you had been watching all this, as we were from our concealment, you would have been no less excited.

“Then we observed a slight noise in the direction of the roof, and we could just observe by staring into the darkness, a head appear above the edge. Then higher and higher it came, seeming to be forcing itself up by sheer strength—then a pair of arms, then the body, and at last all these stood upon the legs belonging to them, and the said legs upon old Castor’s roof. One watched the tiptoeing roof-walker, advancing softly as a panther to the chamber door, and the other, the woman within the chamber, trembling, tottering towards the door with the stolen box; and a glance at the bed convinced us that it was only by a superhuman effort of the will, that Castor remained quiet, as he saw the full guilt of her he had called wife.

“In another moment the door was pushed partly open by the robber outside, so that he could meet the woman and receive the box—when Corson and I rushed forth upon the man. Corson caught him by the throat with an iron grip, but the fellow with a curse threw him off, as a startled bull dog would a snarling puppy. And no sooner was the act performed, than quick as lightning he pulled from his waist a heavy pistol, and crying, ‘You fiend, you have betrayed me!’ he pointed it at the woman and fired, and would certainly have murdered her, but she had, the instant before he pulled the trigger, fallen to the floor in a deadly swoon, and the ball went crashing into the headboard of the bed, cracking it through and through, and in another instant we had thrown ourselves upon him, and bore him to the floor, while I quickly fastened the ‘darbies’ upon his wrists, and while he lay floundering and cursing, we stepped to the side of the woman. She was lying apparently dead, her flowing black hair falling around her shoulders and lying in a heavy mass down her pure white nightdress. Old Castor immediately upon the opening of the door, had jumped out of bed, seized a strong cudgel by his bedside, and after we had the villain handcuffed, and before we could prevent him, dealt the scoundrel a stunning blow over the head. He capered around in a perfect fury, and prayed that ‘God would not let that woman live.’

“Well, we soon had the robber, who was recognized as the notorious villain, Jack Masters, conveyed him to the stationhouse, and his whole history came out. He had been the husband of Mrs. Castor, and had left her many years before in poverty, when he wandered off to California. She had obtained the situation in Castor’s family, finally marrying him, when her former worthless husband returned, and commenced his persecutions and threats of exposure, which led her to become his accomplice to save herself from his wrath. But, poor thing, she died before her husband was tried, awaking from that swoon, only to be attacked with brain fever, from which she never recovered. Masters is now, sir, in the Eastern Penitentiary, in Philadelphia, serving out a sentence of nine years and—”

Jerk—bump goes the boat. Bump—creak again—then she labors hard—creak—and she’s fast. A thousand voices are heard, myriad faces are upturned—nothing is noticeable but whole lines of arms, with waving whips, and no sounds salute our ears except—“Astor?” “American?” “Ride up!” “Ride up?” “Here’s for the Howard, right off!” “St. Nicholas?” “Have a cab, sir?”

“Why, we are at the Battery already. I am much obliged to you, Mr. Benson, for your very entertaining adventure.”

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