

*The Disguised Robber*

From a Lawyer's Notebook

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

The following story, told to me by an old friend, gave me so much pleasure that I determined to share it with the million readers of the LEDGER. My friend told it in this wise:—

“Not long since I was stopping awhile at Lawrenceburg, Indiana. A former partner of mine had been doing business there, and as matters were pressing I consented to remain and assist him. He was away in Ohio, and I was in charge of his office—a very respectable affair, by the way, and delightfully located. Early one morning as I sat alone, with my feet on the desk, engaged in imaging the presence of all sorts of figures in the smoke that curled up from my cigar, the door opened and a man entered. He was young; not over thirty-five, and I was sure I had seen him before. He bowed and took a seat.

“Good morning, sir,” he said.

“Good morning, “ I returned.

“Ah—lawyer—is this you?” my visitor uttered, starting up.

“Yes, sir,” I told him.

“And don't you remember your old classmate, Harvey Gibson?”

It was Harvey, sure enough. Good, generous Harvey—only grown a little older, and with a slightly increased rotundity of frame. We shook hands, and were soon talking of old times. But he didn't seem inclined to converse with much spirit.

“How is brother Charley?” I asked him.

“Ah!” he answered, with a sudden clasping of the hands, while a shade of deep pain passed over his handsome face, “that's it. He's in jail!”

“In jail?”

“Yes. In jail. And it is on that account I have come here. Poor Charley! He's in a bad fix, sir!”

I had known Charley Gibson, well. He was five years younger than Harvey—a noble, generous, light-hearted fellow; full of wit and good sense; the centre of joy in any social assembly where he might be; beloved by all who truly knew him; and one of the best looking fellows I ever saw. I was anxious to know what had happened, and Harvey soon enlightened me.

“He has been apprehended for robbery, sir!” my visitor commenced. “Two weeks ago he stopped

at a hotel in Indianapolis, and during the night of his stay, a banker who was stopping there was robbed of over a hundred thousand dollars in gold and banknotes.”

“But how came a banker to have such an amount of money with him?” I asked.

“He was on his way to St. Louis with it; and as nearly the whole distance was to be traveled by rail he felt safe to have it with him.”

“But how came your brother to be suspected?”

“It’s curious, sir—the whole of it,” said Harvey. “Charley reached the city late in the afternoon, and went at once to the hotel and engaged a room. Then he went out and transacted some business, and returned about nine o’clock, having eaten his supper at a small cookshop in another part of the town. He went to the office and got the key to his room, and went up to bed. The apartment was a small one, and had three doors. One opened into a hall—the one by which he had entered. Another opened into a closet; and the third, which was fastened upon the opposite side, seemed to open into another room. He said he took particular notice of the doors, because the room was so much smaller than the ordinary bedrooms, and because he hence supposed that he had been put into a mere servant’s closet, which belonged to a larger and better room. The adjoining apartment was intended for a gentleman and this for his attendant.

“However, Charley concluded to put up with it, and say no more about it. He had at first been tempted to go down to the office and make complaint of the smallness of his room, and the questionable character of his bed; but it was only for one night, and he thought it best to let it go. And so he retired. He secured the door leading to the hall; but in his quandary he forgot the other. It was fastened upon the other side, but still he would have secured it in some way had he thought of it.

“He retired, and blew out his light, and went to sleep. He had slept some time, but not very soundly. He never could sleep well when away from home. When away from that fair and loving companion, who made his life bright and joyous, he could only slumber and dream, and lie awake and ponder. It was some time past midnight when he was startled by hearing someone in his room. He had been sleeping more soundly than usual under the circumstances, and there might have been considerable movement in his room before he awoke. He started up, and was just in time to see a dusky form move from the foot of his bed, where his clothes were, towards the door which led to the adjoining apartment. The moon was up, and there was light enough to see outlines quite plainly.

“Charley leaped from his bed and moved towards the door. He reached it, and opened it just in season to see the same dark form passing through the doorway of the next chamber into the hall. He darted forward; but when he reached the hall he found it dark as Erebus. The only windows were at the extreme ends, and they were curtained. If there had been a lamp burning in the hall, it had been put out. He entered the hall, and then stopped and listened, but he could hear nothing. His first impulse was to follow on. But what was the use? He had not even a sound to guide him, and amid the various entries, halls, and passages he would be sure to lose his way. His next thought was of giving an alarm, but what good would that do? He might raise the whole house

for nothing. Perhaps there had been no mischief done—perhaps none intended. He thought he would return, and if nothing had been lost, he would retire again.

“He went back and felt his clothing. Coat, vest, pants, cravat, shirt, and all the rest were there. He looked under his pillow, and there were his watch, his pocketbook, and his pistol. All was safe, and he resolved to seek his rest again. But before doing so, he thought he would see if there was anyone in the adjoining room—the one through which he had passed. He went and looked in. He saw a bed, and he was sure there was someone in it. That was enough. He closed the door as easily as possible, and having pulled two chairs and a washstand up against it, he once more sought his bed. He was disturbed no more for the night.

“In the morning he arose with the sun. He could sleep no more, and as the air was cool, bracing and fragrant, he concluded to walk out before breakfast. He dressed himself and went down. None of the household were up save one of the hostlers, who had gone out to the stables. So Charley passed out, and having looked around a few moments, he started off towards the river. The sun was just clear of the hilltops; and the scene was delightful. He reached the river and kept on down its bank. He fell into a train of interesting thought, and walked on. Castle after castle was built, high up in the air, and then demolished, until the sun had been up over an hour. He looked at his watch, and found it two hours. He had no idea he had been gone so long. He turned and hastened back, and when he reached the hotel he found the inmates in wild commotion. He asked what was the matter, and somebody said a great robbery had been committed. He saw the landlord at the door, and hastened forward.

“‘What is it?’ he asked.

“‘Aha!’ said the host, and as he spoke he clapped his hand upon my brother’s arm, and held him fast. Then he cried out— ‘*Here he is!*’ and upon that two officers came up and informed Charley that he was their prisoner!”

“Well,” said I, as my visitor stopped to gain his breath, “What were their grounds of suspicion?”

“Very plain, very conclusive, and very simple. Very simple to others, but very perplexing to poor Charley. The man who occupied the chamber adjoining my brother’s was the banker. His name was Jacob Bowers. He had been robbed of over a hundred thousand dollars! There were ten thousand dollars in gold; forty thousand in the notes of various eastern banks; and over fifty thousand in United States Treasury notes, which were as good as gold, and negotiable anywhere. The banker swore that he was awakened sometime during the night by a noise in his room, and on looking up he saw my brother just passing from his room into the hall. He stood in the hall a few moments, and then returned and entered his own room. Immediately afterwards he came back and looked towards the bed, as though to assure himself that the banker slept, and then retired and closed the door.

“Mr. Bowers said he was fearful of speaking, lest he might be murdered, so he made no noise to signify that he was awake. When asked why he did not give immediate alarm, he said that he did not dare to. He feared that the robber was watching his movements, and kill him if he moved. He is a nervous, timid man, and the very last person whom I should have trusted with money where

there was danger. But then, as all his traveling was to be by rail, and only that one night at a large hotel, his stern, uncompromising honesty was considered surety enough.

“Charley admitted all that had been sworn to by the banker, and then told his own story. But they must search him. He submitted to this readily. All his pockets were overhauled; his boots removed; his stockings pulled off; but without result against him. They were about to give up, when they noticed that a place had been torn in the lining of his coat, and pinned up. They opened this, and found therein a package of Treasury notes!—ten thousand dollars!

“You can imagine the result. Charley was away from home—among strangers, where no one knew his character, and all supposed him a villain—seen in the banker’s chamber in the middle of the night—passing to and fro, noiselessly, cat-like—peering at the banker’s bed, and seeming to listen to see if he slept—up and off in the morning, and gone nearly four hours—the banker robbed—and part of the money found so carefully concealed in his overcoat! All this, bursting in successive thunderclaps upon him, struck such terror to his soul, that for some moments he was utterly unable to speak. Oh! Tell about the guilty man’s showing fear, while the innocent can look his accusers boldly in the face! The guilty man is all prepared to meet accusation, and can turn it off with a bold front. The very hardness of heart which helped him do the deed will help him face the accuser. But not so with the innocent man when a heinous crime is laid to his charge. The bare thought of seeming evidence against him, with visions of chains and prison bolts, takes all power from him. I know there are instances where sudden trepidation signifies guilt. For instance: where the mention of a crime causes it; or where some slight hint pointing towards it causes tremor and alarm. But when it comes to direct accusation, with strong circumstantial evidence, immediately upon the commission of a crime—then the man who is terror-stricken and faint is surely not the villain.

“However, poor Charley’s fear was all set down against him, and he was marched off to prison at once. They asked him where he had concealed the rest of the money, but he could only declare his innocence. But they knew better. The evidence against him was positive. In fact, upon mature thought, the banker swore that he saw the prisoner at work upon his carpetbag! On the next day he was brought before a jury, and fully committed for trial. He sent for me, and I went to see him. I found him pale and thin, and suffering intensely. His wife does not yet know where he is, unless she has seen the newspaper account. I am afraid she will see that—perhaps she has already seen it. Alas! His case is a hard one!”

“Did you converse with the people there?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“And how did they feel?”

“They all look upon him as guilty. The evidence against him is too strong. You see how it stands.”

I told him I did. I saw very plainly how direct it all was. And yet I knew that Charles Gibson was innocent. I knew that a guilty man would not have come back with those notes in his coat; and I knew that a guilty man would not have been so excessively frightened at the relation of evidence which he before knew existed; and, above all, I knew that Charles [Gibson] could not commit I

such a crime under any circumstances. But how was he to be cleared?

“What circumstance is there that Charley can bring forward to help himself?” I asked.

“Well,” returned Harry, with considerable thoughtfulness, “he hasn’t much of anything. There are two little circumstances, however, upon which I have been trying to build some sort of a hope; but I can make nothing of them. First: that notorious robber, cutthroat and blackleg, Porter Drake, was seen in the neighborhood of the banker’s house, at Cincinnati, on the day before he left. Drake was recognized by several people on that occasion, but made his exit before he could be apprehended. From the manner in which he lurked about Mr. Bowers’s premises, it was supposed that he meant to rob him if possible. The second circumstance is this: On the night of the robbery there was a stranger at the hotel who occupied a room near Charley’s, and of course near the banker’s. On the following morning this stranger disappeared.—He was a tall, muscular man; very stout and corpulent; with an immense black beard all over his face; wearing blue spectacles and a white cravat. His clothes were black, and he had a sort of ministerial air. His room was on the opposite side of the corridor from my brother’s, and one or two doors further down. Charley is very positive that the individual he followed from his own apartment on that night must have entered that very room where this stranger stopped. That’s all.”

“And that is much, if it could be substantiated,” I said.

But there was the trouble. No use had yet been made of it, and there was little hope of bringing these things forward in any palpable shape. The case certainly looked dubious; but yet I promised my friend that I would go up and defend his brother to the best of my ability. The trial was to come off in four days, and I promised to set out on the second morning, thus giving myself a day and a half at Indianapolis to look into the case.

Harry Gibson went over the evidence once more, and I saw that it was very strong, and formed a perfect chain between Charley and the crime. But we mutually hoped that “something might turn up,” and thus we left for the time. Harry started on his return, and I went about some business I had in hand.

On the morning set for my start there was quite a commotion at one of the heavy mercantile houses. Porter Drake had robbed the store of some ten thousand dollars in money and valuable goods. It must have been he, as he was seen in the place on the evening before; but no trace of him could be found. I could not stop to inquire into particulars, as the cars would start in half an hour.

As soon as I had arranged my business so as to leave it with my clerk, I ran to the station, and was just in season to jump into a car and be taken off. I had blundered into the Ladies’ Car, but as there was plenty of room I concluded to remain. We reached Greensburg at half past nine, and while stopping there two passengers came into the car where I sat, and took their places three seats ahead of me upon the opposite side of the passageway. They were a man and woman. The former was a powerful looking fellow, with a huge rotundity of belly; wearing his jet-black beard unshorn; with blue spectacles upon his nose; and dressed in all black save his linen and cravat, which were white.

I was interested in a moment, for I at once recognized the individual whom Harry Gibson had described to me. I knew it must be the man, for he not only answered Harry's description in every particular, but I also knew that just another such man could not be found in that section. I watched him narrowly, and soon convinced myself that he was sailing under false colors. I took out a paper and opened it, and then regarded the man from behind the screen thus formed. Every once in a while he would cast his eyes around to see if he was particularly noticed; but he did not find me looking at him.

Presently he put his hand to his face and moved his beard. I saw the movement distinctly. It had got a little out of shape, and he had replaced it! That was something. It was something gained for my client. If this was the man who had occupied a room near him on the night of the robbery—and that he was the man I had not the remotest doubt—then the fact of his being disguised was something. But this was not all. I soon discovered that the black hair which curled so daintily about his neck and temples was false.

But my next discovery was more important still. The man put his hand over and rested it on the arm of the next seat, and as he did so, I noticed that the hand was a very nervous and muscular one, and that there was no useless flesh upon it. The veins and cords were sharply defined, and the knuckles were prominent and angular. Such a hand as that could not belong to such a belly as he appeared to have. I knew enough of physiology to know that. Any healthy man with a natural obesity, such as this man seemed to possess, would have had a fat, plump hand, with the knuckles dimpled instead of prominent.

I began to feel nervous, I knew—knew very well—knew as well as I could need to know for my own satisfaction,— that the man before me was utterly, radically, and entirely a different person from what he appeared. If he was a tall, muscular, bony man, with sandy hair, and a deep scar upon the left cheek, then he would answer to the description of the notorious robber, Porter Drake. But how could I have him apprehended?

As soon as I could afford to turn my attention to the man's female companion I gave her a careful scrutiny, and read her character at once. She was an abandoned, profligate woman whom I had seen in the prisoner's box at Cincinnati. I knew her well, her fine clothes, and the lily-powder and rouge upon her face could not hide her from me. I had seen her when on trial for a heinous crime.

That was enough for her!

But fortune had another favor in store for me. We had just stopped at a little station, and were moving on around a curve, when my stout friend pulled a letter from his pocket. It was in a common brown envelope, and as he took out the letter he laid the envelope in his lap. He opened the missive and showed it to his companion, and while thus engaged a puff of wind from an open window took the envelope from his lap and whirled it into the passage close to my seat. I cast my eyes down, and quickly glanced at the fugitive paper. The superscription was up, but I could not decipher it at that distance. I picked it up, and read the name, in a scrawly, vulgar hand, "PORTER DRAKE. *By the hands of Moll Slasher.*" I threw the envelope down and busied

myself with my paper as expeditiously as possible. And I was none too soon, for hardly had I gained the other end of my seat, and hidden my face behind the newsprint when the man started up, and came and got the envelope.

I remembered Mistress “Moll Slasher” very well. She was the one I had seen on trial in Cincinnati—the one now before me. And I knew Master *Porter Drake* very well, too. I could see through his disguise now, and read him like a book.

Shortly after this the cars stopped at Shelbyville, and I ran out and spoke to the conductor. I told him what I had found, and asked him to wait until I could find an officer. He told me an officer had just entered the cars to search for Drake, and that another was on the platform to watch the passengers who might get out. I asked him to keep quiet and leave the matter to me. I then went to the rear car, and ere long the officer came out. He was a sheriff, and I knew him well.

“Have you found anything?” I asked him, after we had shaken hands.

“No,” he replied. “Drake won’t trust himself within my limits.”

“But suppose I should tell you that he was in one of these cars now!”

The sheriff thought I was joking.

“Did you see a large, fat man, with a huge, black beard, blue glasses, and a white cravat?” I asked.

“Yes.”

“Did you ever see him before?”

“Yes. He came down on this road over a week ago.”

“Wasn’t it on Friday?”

The officer thought a moment, and then said it was.

Then, in as few words as possible, I told of my discovery; and promised to explain my business as soon as the cars were in motion. The sheriff called his deputy, and as soon as we were aboard, the conductor gave the signal for starting.

We sat down in the rear car, and I then told the whole story of Charley Gibson’s trouble, together with the circumstances of the presence of Drake upon the banker’s premises, and the presence of this fat man at the hotel where the robbery had taken place. The sheriff understood it all.

After this we went into the Ladies’ Car, and took our seats directly behind the blue-glassed man. My official companion began to “smell the rat” for himself, and ere long he could see the deception.

The train did not stop again until we reached Indianapolis, and there the large man was arrested. He was at first astonished, then indignant, and finally savage. But the presence of a revolver calmed him down, and the handcuffs were slipped upon his wrists, and both he and his fair companion were marched off. When we reached the jail his disguise was stripped off, and we found it as I had supposed. His hair, his beard, and his huge belly, were all false, and when they were removed, we had the notorious robber before us, *in propria persona*. His pockets were then overhauled, and not only were some thirty thousand dollars of the banker's money found upon him, but the letter which I had seen was found and read; and it proved to be from one of his accomplices, announcing that the ten thousand dollars in gold was safe, and that the United States Treasury notes should be disposed of carefully and safely.

I found Harry Gibson at the hotel, and Charley's wife was with him. She was a lovely woman, and well worthy of any man's best faith and devotion. As soon as she knew who I was she sprang forward and caught me by the arm, and asked me if I could save her husband. I told her I could. But was I sure? Oh! I must not give her groundless hopes! I assured her that I had found the true robber, and that he was then in the same prison with Charley. All was safe and sure.

Poor wife! She struggled a few seconds, and then fainted wholly away. But we managed to revive her, and before night she was very happy.

On the following morning I called upon the prosecuting attorney, and he went with me to the jail. We saw the sheriff, and found that Drake had confessed the robbery. He saw that there was no hope of escape by trial, and to make the matter easier for himself he confessed all. He said he went into the little bedroom which led out from the banker's apartment, and put some of the notes into a coat which hung there, in order to turn suspicion that way.

But there is no need of dwelling much longer upon the affair. At nine o'clock, Charley was brought into the courtroom with his hands free, and the complaint against him was withdrawn, on the grounds already set forth.

Half an hour afterwards we were at the hotel—Charley and his wife, and Harvey and myself—and we passed a joyous, happy season. The relieved wife was for some time almost tottering upon the verge of insanity; but by degrees the paroxysms wore off, and her joy shone forth undimmed and unclouded. I saw her depart with her husband and Harvey, and I think I never saw more of pure, out bursting gratitude than she manifested towards me. And she had reason for it, though the result made me as happy, comparatively, as it had made her.

Master Porter Drake was shortly afterwards tried, and is now engaged in laboring for the State; in consideration of which labor he receives his food and clothing, and a very snug, cozy little apartment, into which thieves and robbers cannot break to filch away his effects.

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