

Watched and Watching

A Detective Story

It was a bitter cold night in December. The snow was some inches thick in the fields, and in the streets of London all was slop and filth—in a word, everything was miserable. Even the professional thief was afraid to come out of his lair, and pickpockets could find no one in the streets whose pockets they might pick.

I sat by my fire late in the evening gazing intently on the blazing coals, and hoping some “job” would turn up in a day or two, for rent was high, and coals and brandy-and-water were absolutely necessary to keep out the cold. My rooms were rather luxuriously furnished for a detective; but I had been brought up well, and was used to, and liked a comfortable home. My profession too, sometimes, was highly remunerative.

I grew tired, but it was not bedtime; so I drew the sofa to the fire, and laid myself down and dozed.

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And now I was watching behind some corner to pounce on an unlucky defaulter as he passed, and, as I grasped at him, he seemed to vanish;— and then, again, I was going, armed to the teeth, to some den to seize a burglar or a robber, and although I knew the place well, could not find it;— and now I was going over again all my old journeys and adventures, my pursuits and my retreats;— and then I was aboard a steamer, ploughing the vast Atlantic in chase of a defaulter who had fled to another land, and I heard the winds howling, and the sea roaring, and the thump-thump of the waves against her side, and the harsh word of command to the sailors.

I shake off my dreams, and find the thumping of the waves to be a knocking at my door; and the hoarse command, a mild request from Superintendent Smith to let him in. A tall, dark form in plain clothes stalks stealthily in, as if there were thieves even in my room.

“A job, Sir?” I asked.

“Yes, Dacres;— quick, too,” he added.

“Ready, Sir, in a minute.”

“You must dress first,” he answered.

“How?” I asked.

“Low;” was the response.

I was soon dressed as a mechanic, and ready to accompany him.

“Take a good suit of clothes with you,” he added; “you will have to change.”

“Which way?” I said.

“London-bridge; there is a train at half-past twelve. You must be at your post in the morning. I have taken lodgings for you close to B—station. I will go down with you tonight, and come away early tomorrow morning; for I mustn’t be seen there. Do you know any one at B—? or do you think any one knows you?”

“Not a soul,” I confidently replied.

“And now, then,” he said, “you are ready. I have a cab at the door, and as we go, I can tell you what you have to do.”

I locked up my cupboards and drawers, called my landlady, and telling her that, perhaps, I should not come back for many days, I jumped in the cab, and in less than half-an-hour from the arrival of Superintendent Smith, we were on our way to the station. There was no time to lose; but, as we were not far from the station, in a few minutes we were in a first-class carriage, bowling off to B—.

“Now, Dacres,” began our Superintendent, “there are no pistols, no courage, no pluck, or anything of that kind required in this case; it is rather a nasty job – a spying business; it is not in your line, but there was no one else that I could trust as I can you. You will have to be at B—station on the arrival of every up-train; there is plenty of time for you to look into every carriage. When you see your man (he goes to town three or four times a week), follow him; stick to him, if you go to the world’s end; report every night to headquarters where he goes to, and what he does during the day. He may go to some queer places; probably he may not; but all you have to do is to follow him.”

“What shall I know him by? I never saw him.”

“You know him now,” he answered, as he drew a photograph from his pocket, and held it open before me.

“There is a scar, too,” he added, “over his right eye, if the likeness is not enough.”

“Why is he to be followed?”

“No one knows,” replied the Superintendent, “but myself and the person whom I am serving; and no one is to know.”

I guessed, however; and my guess proved correct afterwards.

The morning came, and the Superintendent departed and left me to my work.

I had, in the meantime, studied my likeness well, and thought I should know my man. By the twelve o’clock train came, as I thought, the original. He had driven down to B—instead of

getting in at the station below. He was going to town, and did not want the people at N—to know that he was going by train.

Such were some of the thoughts that came across me as I busied myself to help out his luggage from the dog-cart. There was no address, and that confirmed my suspicions. A cap was pulled down over his forehead, too. He got into a first-class carriage, and I, in my mechanic's dress, got into a third. The twelve train was the latest he ever went by, the Superintendent had informed me.

We were soon at London-bridge. I was out before the train had stopped, and after him.

“Did he want his luggage carried anywhere?” I asked.

“No.”

“Could I call a cab?”

“No.”

And he lifted the cap from his forehead, and there was no scar! I fancied he smiled, too.

“Will you tie this address on that bag,” he said.

E.L. JONES, Esq.,
15 Portland Place,

was the address on it. My man had a scar on his brow as surely as any man ever had, and so surely his name was not Jones.

“Mrs. Bentinck's carriage is waiting for you, Sir,” said a footman, touching his hat, and my man was gone.

It was no use to grumble; so I got into the next train for B—, and went again to my quarters.

There would be no mistake a second time; I could not mistake my man then.

Several days passed. No one seemed to notice me at the station; for I only came down just as the trains were going, and was seldom dressed the same.

One thing had annoyed me vastly; the day I went up with the wrong man, the right man had gone to town whilst I was away; but yet it could not be helped.

Several days passed, but yet he didn't come. On the fourth day he came up by the eleven train. He was in a first-class carriage, this time. I was got up “Swell.” So I got into the same compartment with him, and had quite an agreeable chat before I got to London-bridge.

I was certainly surprised when he got out of the train to see him call a cab, and get into [it] with a keeper. At once I concluded it was a false alarm; but my duty was to follow him; and seeing a cabby who knew me close by, I jumped into it, and telling him to keep the other in sight, we were soon whirling away up the Surrey side of the water. When he stopped to pay the gate at Waterloo, we were close on him.

On—on—as fast as the cab can take him. We are close at his heels. Now he stops in Bond-street; it is only his bootmaker's. In five minutes we are off again. Another stoppage, in Oxford-street; this time it is only his tailor's. A longer stop here, but in ten minutes we are again on the road.

Up Oxford-street, down the Edgeware-road, and swift as Hansoms can take us on towards Paddington—station, I thought. But no; through Bayswater, and down a narrow street, with no entrance at the other end. Now, my fine fellow, I thought, I have got you, after all this drive.

He and the keeper both got out, and preceded across a field to some nice-looking houses on the other side.

I, too, got out of my Hansom, went to the chased cab, and touched the cabman on the shoulder.

“You here, Mr. Dacres?”

“Where's your fare gone, Tom?” I knew the cabman (we detectives know nearly every one in London), and had more than once helped him out of a scrape. I knew he wouldn't say a word.

“Gone to Jem Nash, the dog-man, of course,” he said.

I was outwitted now; for, to tell the truth, I had never thought of that. Nothing was left, however, but to sit quietly in my cab till he came out; and long enough he kept me.

In about an hour he appeared, and again we were on our way.

Back to his tailor's; then to his bootmaker's; and on again to London-bridge.

I went to the station with him, and saw him safe inside his own house. But it is no use to write more. For three weeks I followed him in this way – nine days in all; and never once did he do anything more outrageous than on the first day. I do not, for one moment, think that there was the slightest reason for attributing to him that of which he was accused. This may, however, be a warning to married men not to keep away from home too much, and spend their wives' money in fancy dogs and sporting.

I did not like this kind of work, as Superintendent Smith had said. If I have to trace a fellow who has committed murder, or robbed any one, I do it with pleasure, because I know I am benefiting society at large; but to trace out a matter that may upset the peace of a whole family, I think is low, and beneath me. As Superintendent Smith said, “I didn't like that kind of work. It wasn't in my line.”

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