

The Thousand Dollar Lesson

Charles Purvis: Taking Him in Charge at a Distance Hangers on at the St. Nicholas and Other Hotel Entrances—A Colloquy, Spiced With Reminiscences of “Old Sam Colt,” Of The “Revolver,” In His Gay Days; A Party At The “Old City Hotel,” Hartford, Conn., And Other Things —Trinity College Boys “George Ellsworth”—Purvis And He Start On A Walk—”Where Can They Be Going?”—Going To See Ellsworth’s “Friend”—An Exchange Of Coats—A Survey Taken—A First-Class Gambling Saloon A New Man In The Game—Purvis Drugged—His “Friends” Take Him “Home,” But Where? —Purvis Is Returned To His Hotel In A State Of Stupefaction; Is Aroused; Misses A Thousand Dollars—Plans Laid To Catch His Late Friends—Williams Found By Accident, And Quietly Caged—The Old Irish Woman’s Appeal—Williams “Explains,” After Proper Inducement—Most Of The Money Recovered—Supplements.

by George McWatters

I HAD just returned from a trip to Detroit, and failing to find my chief partner in town, strolled up to the St. Nicholas Hotel one night, in July, 1863, and while sauntering about there, came across a gentleman whom I had, a few days before, remarked in the cars, on the Shore Line Road. He got on board at Painesville, Ohio, and by sundry peculiarities of his dress, which was a particle “flashy,” but still neat and elegant, he attracted my attention. I was at a loss where to place, or how to classify him. Sometimes I took him for a merchant, then I thought he might be a lawyer, and again a young man of wealth and leisure. Suffice it, I allowed myself to study him—I know not why—so much that I was not likely to forget him.

Among the first persons I chanced to come across that day at the St. Nicholas, was this young man, and curiosity led me to learn from the bookkeeper his name, which I found to be Charles Purvis, of Louisville, Kentucky.

“Purvis?” I said to myself, “Purvis? The name is familiar, but where have I known anybody bearing it?” and so I cudgelled my brains to awaken memory, and at last called to mind a story told me by a brother detective, in my way, on a time, up the Mississippi River, in which the name of “Purvis” figured largely in a criminal transaction. “Perhaps,” thought I, “this is the chap in question,” and as I had nothing on hand to do for a day or two, I thought I would take the young gentleman in my charge—at a distance.

I left the hotel, determining to return early in the evening, and keep an eye to the young man. I did so, and I found that he was not a little “cheerful” in his ways about the bar, —treating, quite extensively, apparent strangers, but evidently, after all, not much given to making acquaintances. Finally, he left the bar-room, alone, and walked slowly through the hall, with the air of one who has nothing to do, and was reflecting how to amuse himself.

Near the front entrance of the hotel stood three men chatting, —men whose characters the experienced are never at a loss to know at once; a gentlemanly looking class, well dressed, of affable manners, and of the greatest shrewdness of address; men whose colloquial powers are

very great at times, but who know how to measure every word, and adapt it to the precise wants of the individual whom they may happen to address. These were of a class always infesting the hotels, especially the better ones, of the city, and whose business it is to “rope in” strangers into the various gambling saloons.

Upon the approach of Mr. Purvis, two of these worthies, bidding the other a cordial adieu for the evening, and addressing him in a style to indicate that he was a man of unusual importance, withdrew up Broadway. Still this courtliness was evidently intended to bear upon Mr. Purvis, who was in hearing; and as he drew nearer the distinguished gentleman, the latter addressed him, in a mild way, touching the weather, —

“A very pleasant evening, sir.”

“Decidedly. You seldom enjoy a finer one here in New York, I suppose?”

“O, I don’t know about that. The weather here is usually pretty fair. Are you a stranger, sir, in New York, allow me to ask?”

“Not a stranger exactly, but not a resident. I have been here considerably, off and on—enough to know the city pretty well, I reckon.”

“That’s my case exactly, for the last few years, though I formerly resided here for a while. A pretty stirring place to get into, if one knows all the avenues of business or pleasure, sir.”

“Surely, but I have never had occasion to learn much of these.”

“Well, I too have only a limited acquaintance here, yet I always find my way around without much difficulty—generally going about with some friends, of whom I have a few here, formerly from my native State, Connecticut.”

“Ah, Connecticut? Do you know anything about Hartford? Perhaps you are from there?”

“Yes, sir, that is my native place, and a pleasant little city ‘tis. Great deal of wealth and refinement there, sir.”

“Yes, I know it. I had a cousin from Arkansas there, at Trinity College, some years ago, and a gay boy, too, was Bill Sebastian” (if I rightly remember the name he gave). “I visited him there during his collegiate course, and spent a delightful week. Old Sam Colt was a trifle gay—wasn’t he? Well, we had a jolly time with him one night, and several more of the jolly men of Hartford, in rooms at the old City Hotel. You know where that is?”

“Of course; and it has witnessed many a festive meeting. The Trinity boys always go there for their fun.”

“I am glad to learn that you are from Hartford. I’ve thought I should visit that town before I return. Do you intend to return there soon?”

“Yes, I may go up to-morrow, but I may remain here a day or two more. Should you be going up when I go, I should be pleased to have your company.”

“Well, stranger, I hope it will happen that we go up together, if I go at all. And now let us exchange cards. My name is Purvis, as you see, of Louisville, Kentucky.”

The lounge fumbled in his pockets for a card to give to Mr. Purvis, but finding none, half-blushingly announced that his cards were out, but that his name was George Ellsworth.”

“Ellsworth? Well, sir, you rejoice in a right honorable name. I’ve heard my Uncle Throckmorton talk a great deal about one of the Ellsworths of Connecticut.”

It was evident to me that “Ellsworth” was making fast inroads into the good graces of Purvis, and of the latter’s character I was beginning to be at a loss; for though I had from his name connected him at first with a criminal transaction, yet his manner, in conversation with “Ellsworth,” did not seem to sustain my early suspicions.

Their conversation now assumed a lower tone, as Purvis had drawn nearer up to Ellsworth, the two acting very like old acquaintances by this time; so I managed to draw nearer them, fumbling over the envelopes of some old letters I had taken from my pocket, and assuming to be in a “brown study” over something.

“Well, isn’t this a little dull, Mr. Purvis? I’ve been waiting here an hour or so, expecting a particular friend along, with whom I was going out for a while to look about. But he has been obliged to disappoint me, I suppose,” said Ellsworth.

“Yes, it is a little dull, as you say; a stranger, especially, is apt to be very lonesome in a big city. Do you ever take wine, Mr. Ellsworth?”

“Seldom, sir, especially when away from home: but I don’t mind a glass now and then.”

“Come, sir, accompany me, if you will. I would invite you to my room to take wine, but unfortunately they’re so crowded here they’ve been obliged to put me far up. Suppose we go to the bar?”

“Well, if you please; but you’ll pardon me when I say that I must not indulge but once now. The night is long yet, and we shall have other occasion, perhaps, to drink. I know how generous and impulsive you Southern gentlemen are.”

“O, surely, I know we are apt to ‘go ahead,’ like Davy Crockett, when we are right, and when we are not, too; but come along, please,” and the trusting Purvis carelessly locked his arm in that of Ellsworth, and they moved towards the bar-room.

My first intention was to follow them, but I hesitated, and waited their return. They were gone a longer time than necessary to take one glass, and when they came along down the hall, rested but a moment at the door, and stepped out down Broadway together.

“Ellsworth has his victim in sure training,” thought I to myself. “Where can they be going?”

Feeling confident that some mischief would be wrought ere the night was passed, I followed on at proper distance, and saw the two lingering for a moment before No. 477 Broadway. Ellsworth seemed more in doubt what to do than Purvis, or less decided. By this time I had, by mingling with sundry pedestrians, managed to approach near enough to Ellsworth and Purvis to hear the latter say, —

“Well, if you think we won’t obtrude, let us go up to see your friend for a while.”

“No, we shall not obtrude,” replied Ellsworth, “but I was thinking if we might not find some more agreeable place,”—but he turned and went up the stairs, followed by Purvis.

In 477, at that time, was a half gambling hell, kept as the private rooms of a worthless sporting son of a distinguished surgeon. I had never been in the place, but had heard that many fast young men gathered there to play cards for fun, and that sometimes a faro-bank was run there for “amusement.” Fearing that by some possibility Ellsworth might notice me as the individual having stood near him in the St. Nicholas so long, and suspect something if I went in alone, and undisguised, I was resolving what course to pursue, when my friend, Henry W—, a detective, came along. He was just my size, and wore a blue “swallow-tailed” coat, while I had on a black frock. I took Henry into the small hall-way, and said, “Business up; swap coats with me in a minute; and if you’ve a pair of false mustaches with you, let me have ‘em, Henry.”

“I haven’t mustaches,” said Henry; “but here’s something as good,” said he, pulling from the skirt of his coat a paper containing a fine long-haired wig. (My hair was cut extremely short for the then prevailing fashion.) The changing of coats, and assuming of the wig, was but a moment’s work, and with my promise to Henry “to report in the morning,” we parted, and I mounted to the sporting-room in a trice. Walking in coolly, I proceeded quietly to the “bureau,” and helped myself, as is the custom in such places, to a small glass of wine, and while drinking, took a survey.

There were my friends Ellsworth and Purvis, the former evidently instructing the other about the ways and habits of such places. This night the faro-bank was in operation in one room, and in another several parties were playing at cards.

After a while I overheard Ellsworth say, “I never play for money, but some one here, I dare say, will take a hand with you if you wish a little amusement,” and they sauntered into the card-room, where, without trouble, parties were found to “make up a hand “at an unoccupied table— Ellsworth declining to play, but taking a seat near Purvis, to watch the game. The stakes were small, but during the play Purvis lost a little more than the loose change which he had about him, and was forced to draw a well-filled wallet from his side coat pocket. I noticed a peculiar smile on Ellsworth’s face as his eye rested on that wallet; and from that moment I felt that I had work to do. I took an apparently listless interest in the game, and kept my eye as much on Ellsworth as I could. He seemed to be restless. Persons were coming in and going out of the other room especially, and Ellsworth’s face always reverted to the door when he heard new footsteps or a new voice. Presently his face brightened, and he got up, went into the other room, took a glass of

wine, and on returning, affecting to just then discover a friend, exclaimed, "Ah, Williams! how do you do? How did you get here? I was waiting at St. Nicholas for you for over an hour."

"Well, I was delayed—did not know where to look for you when I got there, and dropped in here, I hardly know how; but, old fellow, it's all as well now—isn't it?" giving Ellsworth a gentle pat on the shoulder. All this was said in such a manner that Purvis might have heard it if not too much engaged in his play; and he probably did hear it; and the two worthies went arm in arm into the card-room.

"Let me interrupt the play for a second, gentlemen, if you please," said Ellsworth, taking Williams directly up to Purvis. "Mr. Purvis, allow me to introduce to you my friend, Mr. Williams, the gentleman we were waiting so long for to-night. Lucky—isn't it, he dropped in here?"

The usual courtesies of introduction were passed, Purvis assuring Mr. Williams that he was very glad to make his acquaintance, and that the game would soon be over, when he would be glad to learn more of his "friend Ellsworth's" friend.

But who was this "Williams?" you are apt to inquire, right here. I did not know Ellsworth, but I had seen Williams before. He was elegantly attired, more so than Ellsworth, indeed, and nearly as mannerly; though, to the practised eye, there was discernible in his face a lower range of character than in Ellsworth's. He had more low cunning, and was fitter to do deeds of positive criminality. He belonged to the higher class of pickpockets, and I had known him under the name of "Billy Seaver." I saw that the two were well met to work together.

Purvis and his party's game ending, Williams proposed to take a hand; and a party being made up, Purvis continued to play, not neglecting to take wine occasionally. On one occasion Williams, accompanying him to the sideboard, I noticed the former turn suddenly about, as he said, "Mr. Purvis, join me in claret this tune, —an unfashionable drink, to be sure" (with a most graceful smile). "I see that you take sherry generally," and having suited the action to the word, had poured out a glass, which he handed to Purvis, who took and drank it. I had no doubt that Williams had skillfully "drugged" that dram; and my interest began to deepen now that my observations would have to continue for several hours. At length I united in a game with several new in-comers, and posted myself at the table where I could easily watch Purvis and his friends. He played on well for a while, but by and by I saw he began to grow a little stupid. At this time Williams, who was a good talker, entered upon the recital of many curious tales ("good stories," as they are called among his class, but which were not so "good" as to bear repeating here), and tried to keep up Purvis's waning spirits with laughter and jokes. And so Purvis was kept at the board, while the drug was constantly doing its sure and secret work. Purvis lost considerably, and occasionally reverted to his wallet for supplies.

An hour or so went on, when Ellsworth, who took no practical interest in the game, said to Williams, "Isn't it about time for honest people to be a-bed? Hadn't we better go?"

"Just as you like; and I presume Mr. Purvis would like to go to his hotel. I declare," said he, turning to the clock on the mantel, "it *is* later than I thought."

Presently the three sallied out. With some difficulty was it that Purvis moved. They reached the sidewalk and Ellsworth said, "Mr. Williams, let's go up to the St. Nicholas with Mr. Purvis," taking Purvis by the arm in a quiet way; and they started. The distance was so short, that on reaching the walk from the stairs, where I overheard the proposition, I thought I would not follow too speedily. They had not gone on their way over a minute at most, when an alarm of fire on the corner of Howard and Broadway arrested my attention, as I thought but for a minute or so, —but time flies on such occasions, and it might have been five minutes, —when, turning to look after my men, I could not see them, but rushed on to the hotel. Not finding them there, I sought the clerk, to learn if Purvis had taken his key and gone to his room. He had seen nothing of Purvis at all, "since early in the evening," he said.

Where could the scoundrels have taken him? O, they must have dropped into one of the coaches standing at all hours of night near the hotel; that was my solution of the matter, and I knew it would be folly to attempt to follow them farther; and I had nothing to do but to withdraw to my rooms and go to bed, and await the issue—clue to which I felt sure to get next day.

I took the night clerk into my confidence sufficiently to tell him that I suspected Purvis would be victimized, lose his money, and perhaps his life; but conjured him to keep still, if he should chance to return before morning; watch those who might come with him, and be sure to get the number of the coach and name of the driver, if he should be brought back in a carriage, and then find out if and how he had been "played with," and to send me word; all of which he promised to do, entering with spirit into the enterprise. I went home, feeling sure that the clerk would give me an intelligent report if anything wrong happened.

Next morning, about seven o'clock, I was awakened at my rooms by the clerk, who told me that, an hour before, Purvis had been pitched into the entrance way of the hotel, in a state of stupidity so great that, after a half hour's attempt to arouse him, they had sent for a doctor; that instantly on hearing the noise of his advent, he had rushed to the door, only to see a tall man running down street, while a coach, at some distance off, was driving rapidly up; but whether the coach had any connection with the matter he thought was doubtful. But he had examined Purvis's clothes, which were much stained and soiled, and found a cut in the right side, over his wallet pocket, but "not large enough to let out much of a purse," he said. As the wallet was large, I fancied that this cut had been made, possibly, as they left the gaming-rooms, and not succeeding with that, had taken Purvis away to "finish" him, —which was doubtless the case.

I dressed myself rapidly as possible, and hurried to the hotel. Purvis had been carried to his room, and a doctor and his student, a tall, good-looking, sympathetic fellow, were attending him. The doctor administered some medicines as well as he could, and then performed some quite vigorous manipulations of Purvis's body. The student said that he was a native of Louisville, and knew Purvis's family very well, and that he'd give five hundred dollars himself for the detection of the scamps who had ill treated Purvis. He warmed up to great height on the occasion, in true Southern style, generous and ardent. I took a great fancy to him, and when the doctor left urged the student to remain, which he gladly did. We watched by Purvis's side for an hour and a half before he sufficiently recovered to recognize his Louisville friend, and to answer me as to how much he had lost, —which was what I most desired to know. Where he had been he had no memory of. All was a blank to him; but he knew that the evening before he had a thousand and

sixty dollars with him—a thousand in his wallet, in the side coat pocket, and the sixty in various pockets. He had paid a bill a day before for parties in Louisville, and had so much left, only about half of which belonged to him, the remainder belonged to the Louisville parties; “which makes the matter a heap worse,” as he said.

When I had learned so much, I set about laying my plans, within myself, for catching Ellsworth and Williams. I had no doubt that they were still in the city, so secret had been their operations, as they probably supposed; and thinking I might need help, took into my counsels, as far as I thought best, my young friend, the stalwart student. He was all on fire for the work, if we should chance to come across the enemy; and we started forth, he to arm himself at his rooms, I to prepare myself, and we to “rendezvous” at the St. Nicholas in an hour.

Coming together, I bethought me that perhaps Purvis’s wallet might have some private mark by which it might be identified; and we went up to his room to inquire, and learned that the wallet was the gift of his brother, and bore, under the principal clasp, in faded gilding, the letters, “C. H. P., L’ville.” The letters were quite obscure now, he said. And we started on our search. I fancied I could readily find Williams’s lodgings, and that he would likely be there, in a state of more or less sleepiness, and his compeer Ellsworth with him. But I had counted without my host that day; and though we were constantly going from point to point, in our investigations, nothing had we learned when nightfall came, and we were very weary. Passing up Roosevelt Street, having had occasion to go down to the Williamsburg Ferry, a tall man brushed rapidly by us, whom I at once discovered to be Williams, who suddenly dropped into a little filthy cellar oyster saloon, and we followed. Williams had taken a seat at the remote corner of the dirty room, and called for a stew. He looked haggard, as if he had, not long ago, been on a tremendous spree. We called for oysters roasted in shell, as likely to be the most cleanly in that dirty crib.

Williams was quite “nervous,” and spilled the broth over himself considerably, and I half conjectured that he, too had been drugged. I knew he must have taken the wallet, and that perhaps he had it about him then; but I had no warrant to arrest him on the spot, but must follow him farther. He arose, having finished his meal, and started straight for the door, and opening it, was going out, when the dirty Irish woman who kept the shop exclaimed, “Look here, mistur, is that the way gintlemens trates ladies? Don’t yer pay for yer vittals when yer takes ‘em?”

Williams, who hardly knew what he was about, had not, I presume, intended to “beat” the woman (to use the slang phrase for cheat), but he was maddened by the woman’s gross manner, and turned upon her with an oath.

“Be jabbers.” screamed the woman! “Gintlemen,” turning to us, “will yees see a poor honest woman, so there! “(the tears coming into her eyes) “ chated by the likes o’ that dirty blaggard? Ketch him, and hould him!” (flourishing a big spoon like a sword, in air).

My impulsive student friend needed no more encouragement, and quickly catching Williams in his brawny arms, exclaimed, “Here, you scamp! pay this woman before you go, or you’ll stay here all night,” pulling him at the same time up to the little dirty counter, behind which the woman stood. Half drunk, Williams, finding himself in a strong man’s grasp, was instantly quiet,

and began fumbling for his money. In his search he pulled out a silk sash—as it proved, a stolen one at that—from his inner side coat pocket, when out tumbled a plethoric wallet with it.

“Be jabbers, that’s a fat one, indade!” said the woman; “the gintlernan has money enough to buy out old Astor and all his kin.”

Williams, more intoxicated than I thought at first, seemed to take no heed of this, and after he had managed to fish out of his pocket money enough to pay the old woman, I took up the wallet, and said, “Here, don’t leave this; you’ll want it.”

He looked in amazement, as he started towards me, as he saw me deliberately opening the clasp. There were the self-same initials Purvis had told us of. “I will keep this, Mr. Williams,” said I; “this is what I am after.—Old woman, this man is a pickpocket.—Bolt the door!” I exclaimed to my student friend, which he did instantly. “Take charge of Williams while I examine the wallet; and you, old woman, keep quiet; and, Williams, don’t *you* dare to make the least noise, or we’ll finish you here.”

I made rapid search, and found in the wallet nine hundred and thirty dollars (some of it Kentucky money), a lady’s elegant gold enameled watch, and a chain which could not have cost less than two hundred dollars, but which had been cut in some of the links—evidently a recent prize of Williams. He would never tell where that watch came from; and I advertised “A lady’s watch, taken from a pickpocket. The owner can have the same by identifying it. Call at No.—Broadway” for several days, in the papers. But no one ever came to claim it, and I gave it to a lady, who still wears it, subject to the owner’s reclamation at any time.

Williams saw that it was all over with him, but he protested that he did not abstract the wallet; that the whole “job” was Ellsworth’s; and I was willing to believe this in part, for Ellsworth was the prime roper-in. More anxious to catch Ellsworth than to punish Williams, I agreed that if he would tell me the whole story truly, and where Ellsworth could be found, I would, on finding the latter, let him, Williams, off.

He told me the story in detail. They had taken Purvis, that night, over to a place in Williamsburg, occupied by Ellsworth, and his “family,” as he pretended. Purvis was so stupid when they arrived there that the coachman had to assist them to bear him into the house. Of course the process of robbery was easy after that. But not having a good place to keep Purvis, and that matter being dangerous, too, they had hired another coach near morning, and brought him over to New York, Williams coming alone with him. He would not tell me the coachman’s name, —the one of the night before, —but said he had “bled” them to the tune of fifty dollars for his services.

He had been over to Williamsburg, and was on his way back, taking with him the money, which he was to divide the next day, at a certain hour, in a place he named in the Bowery, with Ellsworth, who would be there.

I did not credit his story, to be sure; but still I was there duly, and found Williams, who pretended surprise as he came in with an officer (into whose keeping I had given him, —having called him before we left the shop, —on a charge of forgery, not telling him I knew the real state

of the case), at not finding Ellsworth up to his appointment. But my story is running into too much detail. Suffice it that we got back to the hotel as speedily as we could, and a more delighted man than was Mr. Purvis, on the recovery of so much of his money, can hardly be imagined. He gave the watch, of course, into my keeping, and in spite of all my protestations, compelled me to receive a much larger sum than would have amply satisfied me.

I pursued Ellsworth somewhat afterwards, visiting his “family “ in Williamsburg, but I could not get track of him for a long while, when he turned up in another city, and I chanced to make him available in the detection of sundry other rogues. But that story is *sui generis*, and I must not mar it by a recital of a part here.

As for the brave medical student (whose name I have purposely withheld), he became a fast friend of mine, and afterwards we had several adventures together, some of which I purpose to relate, should I at some other time feel more in the spirit to do so.

Enough to know now, that he is, for his years, an eminent physician, with a large practice, in a district in the South, and married to a most beautiful woman, whose acquaintance he made while once playing the amateur detective. In some of these papers, perhaps, his name, if he permits, will be disclosed. Had he given himself to the business, I conceive that he could not have had a successful rival, as a detective, in the world. The same knowledge of human nature which the detective needs, cannot but serve the physician to great advantage.

Mr. Purvis said that if he had wholly lost the thousand dollars, the lesson he had learned would have been cheaply bought.

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