

A Possible Case of Circumstantial Evidence

Here is a curious story, told by a London detective officer to a relation of mine. I vary no important fact, and merely alter names:

Henry Ranthorpe was a literary man; he had made some slight success as a provincial journalist and a political pamphleteer. He had a tragedy in his trunk, a plot of a comedy in his head, and one five-pound note in his pocket, and he must needs come up, in the naughtiness of his heart, stirred by

“That last infirmity of the noble mind,”

To win golden opinions and earn golden sovereigns in the great world of London. He had, moreover, made what is called an improvident marriage—that is, he had married a pretty girl without a farthing, who nevertheless was a very good wife. They were as happy as the *res angusta* would permit them to be. They took cheap lodgings in “the wilds of Pimlico”. The tragedy had not been accepted (tragedies never are)—at least, the manager had not vouchsafed a reply. Nevertheless, he worked at the comedy laboriously and hopefully. As he had, however, not been for years in a London theatre he thought, wisely enough, that it would considerably assist him if he saw a play acted at the house where he intended his five acts to be brought out. He had no especial interest with actors or critics by which to secure an “order,” and his wife agreed with him that the expenditure of half a crown, low as their finances were, would nevertheless be a wise outlay. Meanwhile, a pair of boots, the only shoe-leather he had brought with him from the country, had become so heelless, dilapidated, and shabby, that he made an investment in a pair of cheap shoes, and discarded the ruined bluchers. How to dispose of them was now his difficulty. He was ashamed to give them away at his lodgings; and they were not, after a grave consultation on the subject between his wife and himself, deemed worthy of repair. He proposed taking them out into the street at night and willfully making way with them when the other place descried a dusty-looking cupboard high up in the wall of the bedroom, into which he threw his once serviceable boots. The cupboard-door would not close; but the cupboard being high up, and in a corner, the bluchers did not show.

He started on his trip to the Temple of Thespis. Leaving his fond and self-denying wife to her tea, her needlework, and her anticipations of his report of the evening’s entertainment. He entered the pit-entrance of the — Theatre just after the first rush of half-past six punctual folk had gone on; deposited his solitary half crown, the only money which, with the exception of a few pence, he had about him; and received his check-ticket, and was about to pass on, full of disappointment at not having been earlier, and of excitement at the prospect of a little novel entertainment. To his intense astonishment, he had scarcely proceeded a yard when the money-taker called out to him and a policeman who was standing by simultaneously.

The man in the little box had twisted the half-crown, which was a bad one; was gesticulating wildly, and declaiming incoherently; and Henry Ranthorpe in a few moments was in the custody of the officer in blue. It was in vain that he protested his innocence, produced his card, gave his address, mentioned the names of two or three friends he knew in London. The money-taker winked knowingly to the officer, who smiled tranquilly; and to the station-house they went. The

inspector took the charge, heard the evidence, and he was placed in a wretched dark cell, where a riotous drunkard was singing and crying in turns. Afraid to alarm his wife by sending to her to state the misfortune that had befallen him, he secured, by the good officer of the inspector, who was struck with his respectable appearance and his manner, a messenger, whom he sent with a note to this landlord, and to a friend in Piccadilly who was a respectable householder. They arrived, and gave so satisfactory account of him, that the inspector, overstepping his duty I think, permitted him to go; and he reached home rather earlier than his wife expected him, with very little to say about the comedy which he was to have enjoyed. But with a full and impassioned narrative of the calamity that had befallen him. They sat together over their crust of bread-and-cheese and glass of beer, vowing vengeance against the manager of the theatre and his employees, and discussing the expediency of bringing an action for false imprisonment.

They little know how really narrow the escape had been. A few days afterward, Ranthorpe observed the ugly old boots protruding a little at the cupboard door. To get rid of this eyesore, he took a chair, placed his trunk upon it, and opened the dusty cupboard, in order to effectually secrete the boots. You may endeavor to imagine his astonishment when, in moving them, he descried two large bags. They were very heavy; and what do you suppose they contained? One hundred bad half-crowns each. There could be no doubt about their quality. He showed them to his wife, whose astonishment was as great as his own. They began to entertain strange suspicions about the landlord; and next began to reflect that, after what had happened at the theatre, he would probably suspect them. They, however, rang the bell, summoned the worthy householder, and showed him the useless and dangerous booty. They were relieved, however, by seeing his broad countenance, at first filled with amazement and distraction, suddenly illuminated with a glance of profound penetration, and a smile of self-satisfied sagacity.

“I quite understand it now, madam,” said their host, addressing Mrs. Ranthorpe. “Some months ago. Two young men came one day and took these rooms. They gave me no reference, but offered to pay in advance, which, as I always like to be on the safe side, I allowed them to do. Their hours were very strange; but they came in and went out very quiet, and gave but a very little trouble. Indeed, my missus said they were the best lodgers we had had for this many a day. The money was regular, and, what seems odd now, none of it was bed. One day they went out together, after they had been in this house eight weeks; and from that day to this I have never seen or heard of them. They certainly were very mysterious, and never told what their occupation was. A few clothes they left are up-stairs in a chest of drawers now, and a carpet-bag and a portmanteau. I did have my suspicions, which I mentioned to the old woman, when I saw that two young men somewhat answering to their description had been tried at the Old Bailey and sentenced to transportation.”

Here ends this curious case. But suppose upon arrival at the theatre officers had been sent to search his lodgings, and the two bags, as they would have certainly been, found. His wife could not have been a witness, the possession of a bad half-crown, and the finding of two bags of half-crowns in his bedroom, his poverty, his almost friendlessness in London—must not these facts inevitably caused his conviction. Of what avail, against all this, witnesses to character? Of what avail the ingenuity and eloquence of counsel? The landlord of the house, so wise after the event, would probably have directed his suspicions immediately at his new lodgers, and the fact of Ranthorpe sitting up alone at late hours of the night to write, and other facts having in them some

scintilla of suspicion, would have been marshaled against him in a compact array by the barrister prosecuting for the Mint. And this would have been a case of purely circumstantial evidence. The moral of the story is too obvious—the danger which a jury is always in of convicting an innocent man. This ambitious young litterateur might have been torn from his affectionate little wife, two hopeful and loving hearts broken, two respectable families disgraced, and a career of subsequent repute and usefulness nipped in the bud.

Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, April 6, 1867