

Kind Chance
A Detective Story

If you doubt there are any smart fellows among the New York detectives, just entrust them with some refreshingly mysterious case of robbery or other misdoing, and then follow the thread of their scheming to find the true parties concerned.

Much impressed by the able way, a young officer worked up a burglary at our place, and finding him intelligent and companionable, I kept up the acquaintance, and enjoyed many a bright chat when I happened to come across him.

I fell in with him one cool, pleasant evening, when the rush had died out of Broadway. As we sauntered up the great thoroughfare, a group of elderly, substantial men passed us and I saw a smile on my young friend Javert's face. Not having observed anything particular in the men, I inquired what amused him.

He made the inquiry:

“Are you acquainted with the heavy parent in the white tie?”

I assured him I had not observed him at all. Whereupon he continued:

“I had a visit from him, and the occasion of it makes quite a neat little story.”

“Let me hear it by all means; your stories, Mons. Javert, are never without point.”

“Oh, it isn't much, and yet it illustrates what all good detectives know—that stolen money found in one's pocket does not always prove one a thief. You must know the white necktie is a deacon of an uptown church. I may as well call him Deacon Choker, if you want the story. As becomes a deacon, he had never had any very close dealings with wicked folks, and therefore was in a considerably shocked and perturbed state when he came to the office and told me he had been the victim of a series of small robberies, amounting to over a hundred dollars, practiced upon him, he had every reason to believe, by a servant woman named Huldah Stearns.

“He lived, it appeared, in a sober, stylish uptown boarding house, his only relative, an orphan niece, being with him. There were about fifteen other boarders, and servants in proportion. This Huldah Stearns was a New England woman, and from his native place, he himself having recommended her to the landlady as a very proper person to take charge of boarders' rooms. She had admission to his room to put it in order during his absence, but the thefts could not be proved to have been committed then, for, being a sound sleeper, through dread of fire, he never locked his door at night.

“The money had been taken from his pockets and various other places, even from a locked bureau drawer, where he had placed it since discovering his losses.

“Finally, he marked two \$5 notes and placed them in the drawer, determined, should they disappear, to have the servants searched at once. He never thought of suspecting Huldah Stearns among them, having always considered her a person of sterling honesty, apart from the fact of her having shown a regard for himself and niece. The boarders were all people of standing that made suspicion impossible.

“Two or three mornings after, opening the drawer, as he had frequently done, to see if the notes were still there, he found them gone, and resolved that when the servants were assembled at their breakfast, to step out and invite in a policeman to discover the culprit.

“But before breakfast Huldah Stearns came into his sitting-room and asked him to take miscellaneous bills just paid her for wages and give her a Government bond, as she wished to lay the money by.

“Proceeding to oblige her, was as the good man’s horror at finding one of his \$5 bills among the notes she calmly handed him.

“Pointing to the mark on the bill, he explained how it came there, and taxed her with the theft.

“For a moment she seemed to be completely astonished and as if about to make an explanation, when, seeming to suddenly bethink herself, she said firmly:

“They who gave me the bill knows best how they got it; I don’t.”

“Who had given her the bill? That she resolutely refused to tell, completely exonerating the landlady, and persisting in denying her own guilt with firm dignity.

“One more versed in the ways of the world than Deacon Choker would have given her in charge at once, doubly indignant at her barefaced denial, or else have scented out the real truth; but he was bewildered and perplexed by the fact of her previous high character and sound common sense.

“So, loath to put her in custody, and equally reluctant to have her go in mischief, or be sent away under a cloud, he came to get our assistance in clearing the matter up.

“It seemed to me altogether improbable that Miss Huldah Stearns was her own sole accomplice, and with my experience with conversing on these delicate topics, I thought a personal interview might help to establish the face, and proposed it to Deacon Choker, who with alacrity conveyed me to his deeply-respectable abode, and ushering me into his sitting-room, sent for Huldah Stearns.

“She understood with Yankee sentences all my ‘leaders,’ and answered them straightway, denying having taken the money, and earnestly urging me to persuade the deacon to drop the matter, promising all the sums he had lost should be restored. I should still have believed her the thief, taking this ingenious method to get clear, had not one sentence begun and left unfinished

given me the impression that she had intended to say the deacon would regret it on his own account if he persisted in persecuting her.

“Her seeming to hesitate in this speech gave me a vague sort of clue, and recalling Deacon Choker, I told him that before expressing an opinion on the subject of her guilt, I should prefer seeing something of the other inmates of the house, and proposed his inviting me to dinner.

“Assenting politely, he went out, and presently came back with his niece, to whom he formally presented me, introducing her with an air of affectionate pride which suggested he thought her charming.

“She responded to my low bow with rather more frigid dignity than I thought needful, but at the same time blushed much more under my eye than a New York belle ought with nothing more weighty than a few flirtations on her mind and nobody of more importance before her than a poor detective.

“She took her uncle’s arm down to dinner, and as I had the privilege of walking behind her, I noticed how elaborately she was trimmed with that fashionable sort of bed-curtain trimming they put on everything and call Cluny lace.

“She condescended to take no notice of me at the table, but busied herself with her lady neighbor and my detective’s ear had the benefit of their innocent low prattle.

“So your dress is done,” said lady neighbor; “how sweet it is!—what a world of lace!”

“Yes; I sent for some more; we did not get enough the day we were out.”

“Oh dear! How dare you be so extravagant? Mr. Jones would never allow me.”

“I saw the young lady glance at her uncle at this remark, to which she replied:

“Oh, I’m very saving, I assure you; this is the only thing I have bought this month.”

“Where did she buy it, and when? I took a fancy to find out, but how to institute inquiries into the splendors of a lady’s costume?”

“I ventured on the way up stairs, saying:

“You have, I perceive, the pleasure of wearing a pattern of lace to which is attached an interesting history. Can it be the same piece?”

“I bought this at Carirngton’s.” replied she, with cold civility.

“The very place, and doubtless from the very piece, if you bought it previous to the 21st.”

“I got it on the 18th. Pray, what is the history?”

“I will give myself the pleasure of relating it when I call again. My engagement just now makes it needful for me to wish you good afternoon.”

“And I bowed myself out, leaving Deacon Choker as much in the dark about the robbery as ever.

“My immediate engagement was a visit to Carrington’s in search of the other five-dollar bill. I was by no means sure it was not one of the fool’s errands upon which a detective is usually going. But Huldah Stearns had no superfluous words, and what did she mean by that half hint of the propriety of the deacon letting the matter alone for his own sake? Who was there in that house whose complicity would cause him unpleasantness save his niece? Why not she? If, as Huldah averred, the money had been put into her hands by another, what other would have had equal facilities for getting hold of it?”

“Observe, the lace had been bought on the 18th, and the loss discovered on the morning of the 19th.”

“Proceeding to Carrington’s, I inquired if the money taken on the 18th had been examined. Naturally but part of it was still in the safe, which I was at liberty to see.”

No great hope, I proceeded to the investigation of the V’s to be found in the safe, assisted by a dapper clerk, who, excited by the mystery of my proceedings, pumped me vigorously.”

“True enough, however, there, among a great bundle of other notes, lay the deacon’s five dollars.”

“Curious to see if additional proof were possible, I went to the lace counter, and selecting the piece inquired of the youth if he remembered a lady (whom I described) having bought a piece from it.”

“Yes,” said he presently, “I do, from the fact that she came in when the rush was all over, just as we were shutting up. She is a full-rigged little craft, bought five yards, and next morning sent it back by a woman to have it matched with three yards more.”

“What money did she pay you?”

“The lace is a dollar, so it was a V; it must have been just the change, for the cashier had gone out and I could not have taken a large bill.”

“I went back to Deacon Choker’s brown-stone boarding-house, and he being, as I knew he would be, down town, I sent up my name to Miss Niece.”

“She came down rather in a tremor, but trying to keep up all due dignity.”

“I have come,” said I, ‘to tell you the story of the Cluny lace. It was purchased by a young lady with marked money, abstracted from her uncle’s drawer; and she keeps silence while an honest

woman is waiting for her to speak, suffering disgraceful suspicion in her reluctance to betray the crime of another.”

“The stateliness underwent a complete collapse, and the young lady began to wring her hands and implore me not to tell her uncle on whose money she lived, and who would certainly turn her off to the dreadful fate of earning her own living, should he, with his ideas, know the truth.”

“She was not so very much to blame, after all; he was the stingiest old thing that ever drew breath, and would never of his own accord give her enough to dress like other people.”

“As to Huldah, she had assured him she could not be guilty, and begged him to let her off, and if she had been sent to the Tombs would have certainly told all.”

“Upon my telling her that it would probably be impossible to induce her uncle to give up the matter without having his money refunded, she reflected long, and finally solemnly promised that if I could succeed in clearing Huldah without exposing her, she would save up money as fast as her uncle gave it to her, and not buy a single new thing until she had collected enough to cover the sums pilfered.”

“Meanwhile would I not advance it to uncle? She made the proposition so pleadingly, with such tears in her blue eyes, that I—well, I consented, knowing, mind you, that I had the security of the power to blow Deacon Choker should she fail of her agreement.”

“How to manage the Deacon? After a little reflection, I sent for him to the office, and assured him with an air of mysterious solemnity that Huldah Stearns was perfectly innocent; that the theft had been committed by a fellow-boarder, who had entrusted Huldah the bill to make a purchase. Furthermore, that the detected boarder was in agonies of shame and remorse—already so punished that exposure might well be spared, since it would do no good and bring scandal on the church. That was a telling argument, and I clinched it by counting out a hundred and odd as per account with the pilfering boarder.”

“Mr. Deacon, glad to have Huldah cleared, consented to press the matter no further, and departed full of wonderment at the abilities of the detective force.”

“Doubtless to this day he glances furtively at the staid visages about that deeply respectable table, and wonders which of them may belong to the sinner—always overlooking the little pink one at his side.”

“Yesterday, however, that face graced my office long enough for its owner to toss down an envelope containing a hundred, and then the young lady sailed away with the air of an injured princess.”

As the embryo Javert ended we neared an uptown church, and the people were coming out from some mid-day meeting. A bright gleam of fun came into the detective’s eye. He pressed my arm.

“Mum’s the word always. I know I can trust you. There she is—taking the arm of the rabbit-faced divinity student. That’s the very Cluny lace on her bonnet. She’s been economizing and fixing over, you know.”

Mum the word was, and continued to be. I did not even mention to Javert my previous acquaintance with Deacon Choker’s niece. Concluding, too, not to mention to herself that; previously under the conviction—from her blue eyes principally—of her entire suitability for an honest man’s wife, I had begun to meditate offering her that position.

But I have said to myself many times since that fortunate walk:

“Now I know just what is meant by ‘kind chance.’”

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