

*A Hunt on the Highway*  
*From the Journal of an English Police Officer*

THERE WAS A SHREWD ROBBER SOMEWHERE. The farmhouses were robbed; shops were robbed; the tills of the bars at the wayside inns were robbed; and the people had their pockets picked.—All this happened in the region of the country between Sidney and Lowstone—not a field of vast extent—and yet the robber or robbers could not be found. Officers had searched in every direction, and several suspicious looking individuals were apprehended; but the real culprit still remained at large. One day the mail was robbed, and on the next a man had his pocket picked of five hundred pounds, while riding in the stagecoach—for my narrative dates back to the old coaching days. The money had been carried in his breast pocket, and he knew that it was stolen from him while he was enjoying a bit of a doze on the road.

I had been confined to the house by a severe cold for several days, and was not fit to go out now; but as this matter was becoming so serious, I felt it my duty to be on the move, and accordingly I fortified my throat and breast with warm flannel, and set forth. I had no settled plan in my mind, for I had not yet been upon the road, and was not thoroughly “posted up.” A ride of five miles brought me to Sidney, and thence I meant to take coach to Lowstone, where Sam Stickney, one of the shrewdest of men, lived. Stickney had already been on the search, and I wished to consult him before making any decided movement. I reached Sidney at half past five in the morn, and the coach left at six. Lowstone was sixty miles distant, so I had a good ride before me. During the early part of the day I rode upon the box with the driver and from him I gained considerable information touching the various robberies that had been committed. He was forced to admit that several people had been robbed in his stage, though he declared he couldn’t see into it, for he had not the most remote idea even of who the robber could be.

We reached Bonnaville at noon where we stopped to dine, and when we left this place I was the only passenger. At the distance of twelve mile, at a little village called Cawthorne, we stopped to change horses, and here another passenger got up. I had been occupying the forward seat, as that happened to be wider than the others, and gave me a better opportunity for lying down; and when the newcomer entered he took the back seat. He was a young man, I judged, and not very tall in stature, but so completely bundled up was he in shawls and mufflers, that his size was not so easily determined. He was very pale and coughed badly; and I at once made up my mind that he was far less fit to travel than I was. After we got fairly on our way, I remarked to him that I had been suffering from a severe cold, and that this was the first time I had ventured out for quite a number of days. He looked at me out of a pair of dark, bright eyes, and when he seemed to have determined what manner of man I was, he said:

“I have something worse than a cold, sir.” He broke into a fit of coughing which lasted a minute or so, and then added—“It won’t be a great while before I shall take my last ride.”

Again he was seized with a spasm of coughing, and when he had recovered from it, he continued—“The disease is eating me up and shaking me to pieces at the same time.”

He further informed me that he had started on a tour for his health, but that he had given it up, and was now on his way home, which place he was anxious to reach as soon as possible. Another

paroxysm seized him at this point and he intimated that he was unable to converse, as the effort brought on his cough. I had noticed this, and had made up my mind to trouble him no more, even before he had given me the hint.

After this he drew his outer shawl more closely about his neck and face, and having secured an easy posture, he closed his eyes, and I was not long in following his example. Toward the middle of the afternoon the coach stopped at a small village, where we changed horses again, and where four passengers got up. This broke up the arrangements of my friend and self for rest, as he had to take one of the strangers on his seat, while I took another upon mine, the other two occupying the middle seat. The newcomers soon broached the subject of the robberies which had been committed in that region, and I listened, to gain information, if possible; but they knew no more than anyone else knew. They had heard about it, and were inflated with wonder.

One—an old farmer—asked me if I knew anything of the robber. I told him that I knew but little of the affair in any way, having been sick, and unable to be out among folks. Then he asked my consumptive friend if he knew anything about it. The latter raised his head from its reclined position, and was on the point of answering, when we heard our driver, in quick, abrupt tones, ordering someone to get out of the road. I instinctively put my head out at the window to see what the trouble was, and my eye was just quick enough to detect a load of faggots in time to dodge back and avoid them.—The road was quite narrow at this point and as the faggots were loaded very widely, it was impossible for the driver to wholly avoid them, and the side of the coach was swept by them quite smartly. I escaped without being touched, but not so my friend. I heard an exclamation—I thought rather a profane one—from his lips, and on looking towards him, I found that one of the faggots had struck him over the left eye, making quite a mark upon the pale skin. This incident turned the conversation from the subject of the robberies, and it was not again alluded to during the day.

We reached Lowstone shortly after dark, and I went at once to the residence of Mr. Stickney, whom I found at home. He had been out all day and had made all sorts of efforts to obtain some clue to the perpetrators of the robberies that were being committed, but without effect.

He said he could learn nothing on which to hang suspicion. Two shops had been robbed in his town, but he could gain no clue to the perpetrators. We consulted together, and finally proposed to go in the morning and see another detective officer, named Gamblit, who resided about two miles distant in the town of Orton.

This met the views of my host, and so we left the matter for the evening. On the following morning we were up early, and as the coach would take us directly to Gamblit's house, we chose that mode of conveyance, and repaired at a seasonable hour to the tavern for that purpose. When we reached the inn, we found the old farmer, who had been one of my fellow passengers the night before, stepping about the door in a high state of excitement. He had been robbed of three hundred pounds, and he was sure it must have been done in the stage, for he had slept with his pocketbook under his pillow. He had not thought to look into it when he retired, but he had found it empty that morning when he got up. He said the wallet had been taken from his pocket and put back again—he knew it. As soon as he saw me he was anxious I should be searched. Of course I allowed the operation to be performed, willingly. After the excitement was allayed, I asked

where the pale young man was that came in the coach, and was told by the landlord that he went away soon after the coach arrived.

My first aim was to satisfy myself that the old man had been robbed in the stagecoach, and of this he succeeded in convincing me. After this my suspicions rested upon the consumptive man, and I believed, if I could find him, I should find him the rogue. So I bade the landlord to keep a sharp lookout; and also spoke to the driver who had brought me from Sidney, and who was now on the point of returning; requesting him if he saw anything of the pale man, to see that he was secured. The suspicious individual had only remained at the inn a few minutes on the previous evening, and had then gone away in a gig, which had come for him; but no one could tell what direction he had taken.

The coach for Orton soon came to the door, and Stickney and myself took our seats inside, the farmer having determined to remain where he was until he heard something about the money.—There were two other passengers inside and two or three outside, but they were strangers to me. We had gone two or three miles, when the driver pulled up before a small farmhouse, where a woman and a trunk were waiting by the garden gate. The lady was handed into the coach, and took a seat facing me, and as she turned to give the driver some direction concerning the baggage, she threw her veil over her bonnet. She was pretty, very pretty, with rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes. Her hair hung in glossy brown ringlets over her neck and shoulders, and was a type of beauty in itself. I looked at the rosy cheeks again, and into her dark lustrous eyes. My gaze was fixed upon this latter point when she caught my glance, and quickly dropped her veil. At first I felt a little ashamed at having been caught staring at her so boldly, but as her face was hidden from sight, and I had opportunity for reflection, it struck me that I had seen those features before.

Here was a study for me, and I was buried in it at once. Where had I seen that face? I whispered to Stickney, and asked him if he had ever seen her before. He said he had not, and joked me for being so curious about a pretty face.

We stopped at a place called “Turner’s Mills,” in the edge of Orton, to exchange mails, and here I jumped out to see the postmaster who was an old friend of mine—and as I was returning to the coach the thought struck me to go and look at the trunk which had been last put on, and see if any name was on it. It was marked with the simple initials—“A.M.” So that was all I gained from that source. As I came to the coach door I approached it from behind, and as I cast my eyes up I found that the beauty had her veil raised, and was looking at the post office as though she was anxious for the mail to come, that we might be off.—The expression of anxiety detracted somewhat from her beauty, and as I looked upon her now, seeing her face in a different light, I was struck with a sort of snake like cast which was perceptible in the whole character of her features. I was on the point of withdrawing my gaze, lest she should catch me a second time, when a light motion of her head rolled her curls over her temple, and I saw a faint line, something like a vein over her left eye. It was a mark—a livid scratch—where something had struck her. It might have been the stroke of a whip. But no; I quickly glided back behind the coach, and there reflected. Such a mark as that could be made by a faggot!

When I returned to my seat in the coach the fair passenger's veil was down again. Could it be possible that my suspicions were correct, and that chance had thrown in my way a solution of the problem which had vexed my deputies so much? Yes I was sure of it; and the more I compared the two faces in my mind, the more I saw the resemblance. Either these cheeks had been painted red today or they had been painted white yesterday. The eyes were the same, the contour the same, and that brow, with its telltale mark, was not to be mistaken.

We soon stopped at the door of the inn at Orton. The driver announced that they would stop there for fifteen or twenty minutes, to exchange horses and wait for the mail, and also informed the passengers that they would find plenty of accommodation in the house if they chose to go in.

The lady at first did not get out, but at length she did so and went into the hotel. I determined now to find out who she was. I left my deputy at the door of the room she entered, having ordered him to rush in, in case he should hear anything that warranted his intrusion. On going into the apartment I found the beauty sitting by a window, gazing out between the blinds.—She started up as I entered, and let her veil fall.

“I thought this was a private room, sir,” she said. Her voice trembled and sounded unnatural.

“It may be,” I returned; “but that does not exclude those who have business. I came on purpose to see you.”

There was a momentary pause, and then she appeared as calm as could be.

“What are you?” she asked.

“I am an officer from Bow Street,” I replied. “I want to know who you are.”

“Stop—one moment,” she said; and as she spoke she carried her hand beneath her cloak. It was quickly withdrawn, and in it was a pistol, but she grasped a portion of her dress with it, and before she could clear it, I had sprung upon her and seized her by the arms. But it was a her no longer.—There was more muscle in that slight body than I had bargained for. However, my man “popped” in the moment he heard the scuffle, and the beauty was soon secured. The glossy brown tresses fell off during the scuffle, and some of the paint was removed from the cheeks.

As soon as the prisoner was secured, I had his trunk taken off and brought in, and upon overhauling its contents we found disguises of all sorts, and quite a sum of money, besides watches and jewelry of much value. I made him assume a proper male attire, and when he stood forth in propria persona, I found that he had not only used red paint for the blushing beauty of today, but that he had applied a more cadaverous coloring matter for the consumptive individual of yesterday. As he stood now, he was a lithe-built, intelligent looking youth of not more than twenty; but with a cold-blooded expression on his marble face, and an evil look in his dark eyes.

We carried him back to Lowstone, where we found the money of the old farmer upon him besides other money which had been lost by different individuals. At first he told strange stories of himself, but finally when he knew the worst must come, he confessed the whole. He was from

London, and had come into the country on purpose to rob. He had two confederates with him, who had helped him from place to place. One of them had taken him away from the inn the night before, and the other had brought him and set him down at the farmer's gate that morning. We made search for these confederates, but they had got wind of their principal's arrest, and were not found.

However, we had got the chief sinner, and had broken up the game. After he had been found guilty and sentenced, he seemed to enjoy himself hugely in telling how he deceived the good people of our county. Now he would turn himself again into the old woman who had given the driver so much trouble about her bandbox. Then he would be again the meek-browed minister, who had distributed tracts to the passengers, and picked their pockets while they read. Then he would do himself up into the little hump-backed old man, who had been lifted into, and out of the coach, and robbed his helpers while they fixed his crutches for him. It was funny—very—and perhaps we might never have caught him but for the accident of the faggot. That was not so funny for him; and I doubt if he found much fun working at our hard stone—hammering early and late—with an inexorable master over him to spur him on when he lagged.

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