

## *The Old Lady and the Detectives*

No one need envy my feelings in thus coming before the public. I always did say, and will ever say, that woman's mission begins and ends at home. And what I preach I practice. Rushing into print is not congenial to the spirit of the British matron, and I should much prefer confining my sorrows to the bosom of my family; but my son-in-law protests that I have a moral duty to perform—and from duty I will never shrink. This is the history of my wrongs.

I reside at a genteel village in the neighborhood of London. I do not think I should be justified, out of consideration for the society of the place, in divulging its exact name or situation. But it is on the Grand Junction Railway, and just far enough from the metropolis to avoid the odious epithet of a suburb.

Juniper Villa, semi-detached, is one of the most elegant dwellings on the green, and I live there, for the present, with my daughter Jane. Jane is married, of course, and her name is Tanfield—mine, if you please, being Mrs. Whittleby. Now, if I live with my married daughter, it is not, it must clearly be understood, because I cannot afford a home of my own. My name stands, I am thankful to say, in the books of the Three per Cent. Consols, with a comfortable sum opposite to it; and I derive from this source what I may safely call a snug income.

It is not, and it never has been, my habit personally to receive the dividends of this money. When Mr. Whittleby was alive *he* naturally took all business details into his own hands, and since his decease, Mortimer, my son-in-law, has always obliged me. Indeed, I hate form and fuss, and routine, and anything else that flusters, and worries, and tries the temper. So, when the day comes round, I always go to my desk and unlock it, and say, "Mortimer, my dear, here are the securities, if you can make it convenient to oblige me."

And Mortimer does always make it convenient to oblige me, and brings me down my money in gold and silver—for I don't much fancy notes—and I lock up my vouchers till next time. It was not Mortimer's fault, poor fellow! that he had so bad an attack of influenza this last day for the half-yearly payments, that he was unable to go up to town at all. It was not his fault, of course; and if I thought, and still think, that Jane might have accompanied me to London, instead of persisting in stopping at home, that is topic on which I shall not enlarge, as calculated to create unpleasantness.

So I had to go alone. My son-in-law, who could not speak very intelligibly on account of his indisposition, wished me to send up my vouchers and power of attorney to some city friend of his, who could, he said, "manage it for me in a jiffy." And Jane said, "Do, mamma, take Mortimer's advice." But I was quite resolute upon that subject. I never had trusted my securities out of my own hands except into those of Mortimer himself, and I never would. And as for giving any person in the city the power of an attorney over me, the very idea sent a cold chill through my veins, and gave me a creeping sensation from head to foot. No, that was *quite* out of the question, and I was determined that I would not be one of the victims of commercial dishonesty that we read so much of in the papers.

So I had no choice but to go myself. It was all very well for Mortimer, who thinks himself so wise on all points, to suggest that the business had better stand over a couple of days till he could see to it; and it was all very well for Jane, who stands by his opinion in all things, to beg me not to go for fear of pickpockets and sharpers, urging that the cash would be quite safe. How did I know that? Possibly, if I did not strike while the iron in Threadneedle street was hot, mine would be advertised as “unclaimed dividends,” and, perhaps, be acknowledged by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the light of conscience money.

It is always best to be in good time; and as the fast trains, and the mail trains, and the express trains, do not stop at our station, we have fewer opportunities of reaching town than might be inferred from our proximity to the great city. I, accordingly, took the quarter past nine train or 9.15, as Mortimer, in his new-fangled phraseology, insists upon calling it, and went up to London with my return ticket in my reticule.

Having plenty of time before me, and being averse to the impositions and insolence of cabdrivers (who are very nearly as ill-mannered as the hackney coachmen I remember in my youth), I traveled to the bank in an omnibus. I need hardly say that I was nervous, for it is a difficult thing to find one’s way to the proper offices, and I was a good deal elbowed and squeezed before I managed to get my due.

I am bound to say, however, that the young men at the bank were very civil and obliging, and I received my money in gold and silver more quickly than I could have expected when once I applied for it at the correct pay window. “How will you take this, ma’am?” asked the clerk, after showing me where I had to sign my name. This question puzzled me a little. Was he going to advise me to take a cab and not to go again in an omnibus for fear of thieves? or was it mere inquisitiveness on his part? I suppose I looked perplexed, for he laughed, and asked very politely whether I would have gold or notes. I said gold. I always prefer gold, and I keep it in my desk in pillboxes, with a little tooth-powder sprinkled over the sovereigns, to make housebreakers, if they should get in, believe them to be pills.

As I walked out, I could not help clasping my bag more tightly than usual, and eying everybody I met with suspicious caution. For the first time I felt uneasy. I had a return ticket, naturally, and could not go back till what my son-in-law chooses to call 3.15. And though I knew my way about London well enough, having spent my own married life in Kensington, I felt the hundred and forty-nine pounds seven and ninepence a cruel weight upon my mind. To go about town with this valuable property was no laughing matter. However, I consoled myself that even the garroters, like tigers, were afraid of broad daylight, and if I never let the reticule with its precious freight out of my own hand or from under my own eye, I was pretty safe.

I visited several shops, spent an hour at the Pantheon Bazaar, and lunched at Simpson’s, in the Circus, on a frugal basin of clear ox-tail. Then I took a cab to convey myself and my parcels—for I had made several purchases—to the Grand Junction terminus. All went off well, and as my fare had been settled beforehand with the driver, there was no dispute to flurry my poor nerves. I took my parcels into the waiting room and made myself as comfortable as I could under the circumstances.

The clock showed me that I had still a good while to wait, and having no ticket to take and no luggage to plague me, I had nothing whatever to do but to look at the other passengers waiting like myself and to wonder who they were. One person, a female, particularly drew my attention— not that she was remarkable in herself, but that I made sure I had seen her before. She was a pale young person with thin lips and keen gray eyes, tidy in her dress, and carrying a leather bag something like mine, with a steel clasp and chain to it. Somehow, I felt sure that I had seen her before. Dear me!—yes, in the bank, when I was counting the money as the pay-clerk laid it before me, some one had pushed me and begged my pardon, and I had looked round and seen this person at my elbow. Most likely she had been there to draw dividends, too. But was that the only time I had seen her? Surely, as I was paying for my soup at Simpson's, this young person had chanced to come in for buns and take some away with her. Quite a coincidence! Cudgeling my memory again, I seemed to remember her, or somebody very like her, at that delightful repository for elegant knickknacks and stationery, Parkins and Gotto's, where I had been for some fancy articles, and where she, too, had been buying a packet of envelopes.

The hands of the clock crawled round very slowly, and the time hanging heavily on my hands made me fanciful perhaps; but it is a fact, that I began to imagine that the pale young woman was watching me. Yes, I was sure of it: quickly as she dropped her eyes or averted her head when I looked round, she had been watching me stealthily, patiently, as a cat watches a poor mouse. Why did she do this? Was there anything absurd or odd about me—such as my bonnet being askew on my head? I satisfied myself by one peep in the glass that I was perfectly neat from head to foot. Then why was I, not stared at, but steadily kept in view in an underhanded manner? The young person looked respectable—very much so— in her dark cloth mantle and plain bonnet with brown ribbons; but my mind misgave me that she had been following my movements all day, and I caught my bag up from the seat and laid it on my knee as I looked about to see if the people present were likely to be confederates of a she-pickpocket.

No. There was a middle-aged clergyman with his wife and daughters, going home, no doubt, with a load of purchases made in town. There were two young military gentlemen with long yellow mustaches lounging near the fire and talking of Aldershot. There was a sporting gentleman with a hunting whip and two horserugs beside his chair, and five or six other first-class passengers, all of very reassuring aspect. I saw nobody whom I could suspect to be a member of the swell-mob. If the pale young person meant ill, she was alone.

A porter happened to come in to tell the sporting gentleman that his horse was quite snug and tacked on the train, and the box chalked "to come off" at Snitchley. And when the porter had received his shilling for this news he came round and asked other passengers which train they were going by, and where to. The pale young person answered that she was going nowhere; she was only waiting for a friend. I gave a sigh of relief. I could get rid of her, then, by simply taking my place in one of the carriages. So off I went with my parcels and was soon settled in an empty compartment. As a porter going by closed the door at my request, I looked out and saw the pale young woman standing on the platform watching me with a sidelong glance out of her sly eyes. In a moment she had gone back into the waiting room and disappeared.

There I sat, amusing myself by watching the bustle of the station, as fresh passengers, fresh barrowloads of luggage, fresh mountains of parcels, baskets, and rolls of newspapers, came

pouring in. Guards and porters were slamming or unlocking doors, people were putting in rugs and cloaks to establish a claim to the best seat, and the boys from the bookstall were bawling out the names of the papers, and what sounded: “Thin sweet punch,” but was, I believe, “This week’s *Punch*,” all along the line.

In the midst of this hurry and stir I noticed a stout middle-aged man, respectably dressed—something like the foreman of some works in his Sunday clothes—come on the platform with a quick, firm step, and look sharply around him. He stood quite still for a moment, and then sauntered along the rows of carriages, glancing up at them as if looking for a face he knew. His own face was bluff and broad, with a very stern expression about the firm mouth; dark, restless eyes, and crisp, iron-gray hair, curling strongly about his temples. He had a coarse, mottled complexion, as if he drank a good deal; but he was perfectly sober, well shaved, and as neat as a soldier on parade. He gave me a long, searching look; and then passed on as the carriage door was opened and two ladies, a gentleman, and two little boys got in.

Five minutes more. The engine was squealing and the buffers thumping together as fresh carriages were put on, and the bustle increased, but the stout man was gone. I looked after him out of mere curiosity, though, very oddly, when I turned toward the waiting room, there stood the pale young woman, who was expecting a friend gazing eagerly and openly at me. In a moment she shrank back and I never saw her again. The carriage was locked, the hand bell rung for last time, and the word “All right!” was given to the engine driver.

Suddenly a group of excited persons came swiftly from the interior of the station and hastened across the platform—a railway policeman, a porter, the stout man with the restless eyes, and a portly figure wearing a Crimean medal and whom I guessed to be the stationmaster.

“Hold hard!” bawled the stationmaster— “hold hard there, Gubbins; stop a bit!”

The engine was already in motion, and the steam whistle sounding, but the machinery was reversed, and the heavy train came to a stop, jolting and banging. Fifty heads were thrust out of the windows, and several voices called out inquiries as to what was the matter. Was there any accident?

“No; no; no such thing. You’ll go on directly,” cried the stationmaster. “Here, Hallar, open this carriage—C. 3.”

Up came a distracted guard, running, key in hand, and tore open the door of my carriage. I had a conviction that the axles must have taken fire or the floor be breaking down.

“This your customer, eh?” asked the stationmaster, pointing to me.

“Yes. All right. Step out, ma’am, if you please. Take my arm,” said the stout man with the coarse red face. “Hand out those parcels, please,” to the guard.

“But how—why should I—why must I—what is it?” asked I, trembling very much, for my nerves are not strong in spite of the camphor I take for them.

“Quick, ma’am, if *you* please. Train’s just about to start. Only waiting till you are out,” said the stationmaster, impatiently, as I was half helped, half compelled to leave my seat.

“But isn’t it the right train? I’m going to—”

But I was interrupted with—“All the parcels out? Shut the door. Gubbins, go on!”

As the engine gave its warning shriek, one of the young military gentlemen put his head out of the window of the next compartment to ascertain what was amiss.

“Nothing much, sir,” said a grinning porter, pointing most impertinently at me with his blackened thumb; “only a case for the police.”

The police!—what on earth could they have to do with me, Jemima Whittleby? Of course there was some mistake, and so I said, looking with despair at the moving train and thinking of the dinner hour at Juniper Villa.

“No mistake at all, ma’am,” glibly replied the stout man, winking at the bystanders. “I am obliged to do my duty in taking you along with me, painful as it is when a lady is concerned.”

There was a general laugh from those who heard the remark, and as the train glided off, and I saw the passengers sniggering and pointing me out to each other, I felt ready to sink into the earth to hide myself.

“I have done nothing wrong,” said I gasping. “What do you mean by interfering with a lady who—”

“Gammon!” said the railway policeman, very rudely, while the stout man civilly assured me that it was useless to “try it on.” He knew me quite well, and I knew him if I would but own to it.

“But in case you are troubled with a short memory, ma’am, I’ll just mention that my name is Inspector Marsh of the detective police, and that I want you on suspicion of shoplifting. Come this way.”

I was taken into the ladies’ waiting room, which was empty, and a respectable woman, wife of one of the porters, was called in to act as searcher. She began, awkwardly and reluctantly, to fumble in my pocket, while the inspector more deftly took on himself the task of examining my parcels, muff, and bag.

To my horror and profound surprise he extracted, or seemed to extract, two lace veils from the one, a packet of gloves and a pair of silk stockings from the other, and from one of the parcels a long piece of Valenciennes.

“Thought as much!” laconically remarked the inspector, wiping his forehead with a red handkerchief. “Very clear case,” said the stationmaster; and all the bystanders thought so too,

especially when the detective curtly assured them that I was an “old hand,” and “the most audacious lady shoplifter on the lay.”

I did not submit silently to this infringement on my liberty. In a voice choked with sobs I told my name and address, and protested my innocence; but in vain. Not one of them would believe me. The articles found hidden in my muff and bag, and for which I could not in the least account, were terrible evidence against me, and I am sure I looked more like guilt than innocence as I stood weeping and protesting against this arrest.

“Indeed, indeed,” said I, “you mistake me for somebody else!”

“Yah! Give it up. Keep all that for the sessions,” said the stationmaster, turning away in disgust. “Inspector, haven’t you a cab waiting?”

“Certainly,” said the pitiless officer of justice; “No. 4,000, with one of our constables on the box in case of any attempt at rescue. This *lady*’s pals are not far off, I dare say. Now, ma’am, will you come quietly or not? Sorry to vex a female; but—” And the inspector jingled a pair of neat steel handcuffs as he whipped them out of his pocket, meanwhile offering me his arm in the most cordial manner. Stunned, miserable, I could not resist. I walked to the cab trembling and weeping, but meek as a lamb. There was quite a crowd of men in corduroy and bright buttons to see me off, and from the murmurs I overheard I gathered that I was regarded as a very hardened but hypocritical offender.

On the box beside the cabman sat the policeman alluded to by Inspector Marsh. He was not a bit like a policeman to look at, having a rough white coat such as drovers wear, and what with his busky whiskers, the comforter round his neck, and the way in which his hat was pulled over his eyes, very little of his face could be seen.

“A rum style of bobby that anyhow,” remarked one of the porters as I was hustled into the cab, the detective getting in too, while the subordinate officer closed the door and remounted the box. Probably the cabman had his orders, for I heard none given, only as we drove away a saucy street boy called out:

“Millbank Hotel, cabby; and don’t upset the lady;” at which there was an unfeeling roar of mirth.

For some moments, as the cab rolled rapidly along, I could not trust myself to speak. At last I found breath to ask the detective whither he was taking me, as I wanted to go at once before a magistrate.

“Your examination, ma’am, will be tomorrow, most likely,” said the inspector very urbanely; “but you are going now to a place where you’ll be taken every care of. In the meantime it is my irksome duty to take charge of all valuables found about you.”

And with these words he gently but firmly proceeded to take away my reticule which I had hitherto held fast.

“No, no, you mustn’t do that. Leave the bag alone. There is money in it, and papers, and— and I never let it out of my own hand—never!” exclaimed I with the courage of despair.

“As you please, ma’am, I must do my duty. It rests with you whether it’s done pleasant and quiet or by force. Better give it up—you won’t? Constable, your assistance is wanted. Prisoner’s refractory!”

He shouted these last words through the window, and the cabman pulled up, and the roughcoated policeman began to get down. I surrendered at once. What else could I do? I gave up my bag and leant back sobbing in the corner.

“We shan’t require your assistance, constable, just now; we are going on agreeable again,” said the inspector smoothly, and off went the horse again at a round trot. Inspector Marsh very deftly transferred the contents of the bag, the gold and silver, to his own pockets. He then drew forth the vouchers, but my misery at seeing my capital in jeopardy as it were overcame my fear of him.

“Please leave me my securities,” I whimpered, in a wretched voice. “Please do, Mr. Officer. They’re no good to any one but me, but I shall be ruined if I lose them.”

And, indeed, so earnestly did I plead that the detective, after carefully looking the vouchers over, returned them to the bag.

“If I humor you in this you must comply with the rules, ma’am,” said he in his calm stern way; “all valuables will be put away in the police office and returned on acquittal or discharge. You’ve a watch and ring, eh?—purse, too? Hand ’em over!”

I did so. With trembling fingers I offered the contents of my pockets, purse, bunch of keys, silver-mounted housewife, gold pencil-case (Jane’s gift), and silver thimble. He swept the whole except the keys into his own pocket, to which he also consigned my watch and rings, and even the Cairngorm brooch in my shawl.

“You’ll have ’em all back, ma’am, when you come out of the Penitentiary safe and sound. Ah! here we are!”

And as he spoke the cab stopped in front of an enormous and dingy building with a high brick wall before it. A prison! My heart gave one great leap and then stood still, and I could not see plainly for the tears that welled up to my eyes. Meanwhile, the inspector had got out and the constable had got down, and they were both loading themselves with the parcels that lay on the front seat, and which were to be produced—so the inspector said—before the magistrate next day.

Now that I saw the dreadful Bastille, all the horrors of a jail flashed upon me, and I begged and prayed that they would send for Mortimer, for Jane, that they would take me to some place where I was known—as I was, of course, at many shops and private houses—anything but lock me up in a horrid prison. I could prove my innocence. It was all a mistake.

The inspector whistled incredulously, but my grief seemed to touch him, and he said at last that if I would sit quite still and not make a disturbance he would see if he could get me a hearing at once. So saying, he walked jauntily away, and to my surprise the constable soon followed him.

No one was left but myself in the cab, and the driver stamping to and fro on the pavement clapping his hands for warmth. I sat and sat, wondering every moment why Inspector Marsh did not return, still the idea of escape never crossed my mind, and I was quite surprised when, after three-quarters of an hour's waiting, the cabman, who had been pacing up and down, stopped and touched his hat, asking if "my friends were likely to be much longer, as it was mortal cold, and he wanted to go home and change horses?"

Friends! was he mocking my misfortunes?

"Is—is the police court far off?" asked I timidly.

"You must speak louder, please; I am a little hard o' hearing," bawled the man, who, indeed, turned out to be stone deaf.

I repeated my question, asking if the inspector would soon be back. After I had thrice shouted this query the cabman understood it, and answered that he knew nothing about inspectors or magistrates. The party who hired him said he was going to the Grand Junction station to meet his aunt from the country.

A light—a welcome, yet a painful light, broke in upon me. I managed to bawl the inquiry, "Is not this—is not this a—prison?"

"Prison, ma'am? Not a bit of it. It's a blacking manufactory."

A blacking manufactory! There was a singing in my ears, and my brain seemed to buzz like a hive of bees. "Struck all of a heap" is a vulgar expression, and such as I have always set my face against, yet I cannot describe my feelings on this occasion half so accurately as by using it. I was struck all of a heap, and hardly know what I should have done, when I caught sight of a friendly face—a face I knew, coming down the street, the face of our medical man, Dr. Tupper. In one moment I was out on the pavement with a suppressed scream clutching Dr. Tupper's arm.

The real police at Scotland Yard, when Dr. Tupper, after hearing my story, took me there, shook their heads when they heard the details of my arrest and the loss of my property. They pronounced the whole business a "plant," and one of the most artful "plants" ever chronicled, while they had little difficulty in fixing on its author and prime mover.

"That sham inspector—what did he call himself?—Marsh, can be no other than Nobby Sam by the lady's description and the whole account of the trick," said the superintendent; and all the detectives agreed that the man in question could be no other than Nobby Sam.

"A clever burglar, an expert garroter, and the most dangerous rogue in London," said the superintendent. "We shall lay hands on him one day, for many warrants are out; but I fear there

is no chance of recovering the stolen cash. The mock policeman was, probably, Hairy Bill, who acts as jackal to the shrewder rascal, and the pale young woman a spy.”

Dr. Tupper took me home. I have been in low health and spirits ever since. A week ago Nobby Sam *was* taken—but, alas! I am sorry to say that no portion of my property was found in his possession. The only articles upon him, as Mortimer learned by inquiry of the police, were a fourpenny piece, an end of a wax candle, three bad halfcrowns, and a skeleton key. That he put the lace rails and other things into my muff and bag, after slipping them out of his own coat sleeve, was what he confessed freely, though the detectives had guessed it before, and what he persisted in treating as an uncommonly good joke.

Frank Leslie's Pleasant Hours, 1867

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