

The Pretty Thief
James Darney

“Have I had much experience with thieves? If you mean professional thieves, I have, sir. I don’t see much of the petty cases that come up before the police magistrates, as they are out of my line.”

So spoke my friend, Officer If--, who had been for many years one of the detectives of the great city in which I resided. He had frequently told me of his adventures in the discharge of the duties of his profession, some of which I have already told before the readers of this journal.

“Yes,” he continued, “I’ve seen a great deal of thieves in my day, and I give it all as my candid opinion, sir, that the worst characters of this class are women. They’re the hardest to deal with, from the fact that they can lie with a better grace than a man, and are so quick to remind you of the fact that you are a man and more powerful than they. That you find yourself almost ashamed to proceed against them as harshly as they deserve. Then again, they are far more ingenious than man, and are much harder to entrap, for they can baffle by their arts and tricks the most complete detective of the whole force. I remember one case of female dexterity which came under my notice. I mean that I arrested the woman after the robbery was committed.

“You know the firm of Grindem and Squeeze, of this city, sir. They are extensive retail dry goods dealers, and their trade is principally with the wealthy, fashionable class of citizens. They have the reputation of being the keenest business men in the place, and their clerks are regarded as among the smartest and hardest to deceive of any in the whole trade. Indeed, it is said they will not keep a clerk who is not pretty well up to their standard of shrewdness. Well, it is to show you how one of these very smart clerks was taken in, that I am about to relate this story.

“One morning Messrs. Grindem and Squeeze received a note from a lady, asking them to send up for her examination a lot of costly silks, as she wished to purchase some. The address she gave was that of a very fashionable boarding-house, where several of their customers resided. She said she was an invalid, and unable to go out, and requested that he silks might be sent up by a clerk who was authorized to give her a receipt for her purchase.

“As such a request as this was not uncommon, Messrs. Grindem and Squeeze readily complied with it, but in order to guard against accidents, sent the silks in charge of one of their most expert salesmen. The young man proceeded to the house, and was shown up to the sitting-room of the lady who had sent for the goods. Communicating with this room was a chamber, and the door between the two was half open. He was met in the sitting-room by a young and handsome woman who informed him that she was the companion of the lady who had written the note. The lady herself was confined to her bed in the adjoining chamber, and if the young man would be good enough to sit down, and wait a few moments, she, the companion, would carry he silks in for the lady’s inspection.

“The frank and charming manner of the woman, who was very handsome, disarmed the clerk of any suspicion, and he at once gave her the package of silks, the value of which was several hundred dollars. She carried them into the chamber, leaving the door partially open. The young

man heard a sharp, querulous voice bid the companion open the package, and then there ensued a conversation upon the quality and beauty of the goods. Frequently the clerk's cheeks would flush with indignation at the crass, ill-natured manner in which the invalid spoke to the young woman, and he could but admire the calm and gentle replies with which these bits of ill-temper were met. At last he heard the sick woman tell her companion that she would take two of the silks, and order her to bid the clerk make out and receipt his bill for them. The young woman at once came into the sitting-room with pen and ink, and the clerk, who had provided himself with a blank bill-head prepared to fill it up. The young woman then returned to the chamber, saying to the clerk that she would be back in a few minutes with the money, and the silks that the lady did not want.

“The bill was duly made out and receipted, and the clerk sat awaiting the return of the young woman. The sound of voices in the next room had died away, and a total stillness reigned through the apartments. Fifteen minutes passed away, and the young man began to feel uneasy. Going to the door of the chamber he knocked, but received no answer. He pushed it open, and entered the room. To his astonishment and dismay he found it empty. The bed was untouched, and there had been evidently no person in it that day. There was a door leading into the hall, which was partially open, but the silks and the young woman were nowhere to be seen.

“The whole trick was now clear to the young man, and he perceived that he had been thoroughly swindled. He at once gave the alarm, and summoned the proprietor of the house, who told him that the room had been engaged that morning for a single day by the young woman, and that no sick person had been there at all. The fact was the young woman had carried on the conversation in the chamber alone, disguising her voice to imitate the invalid, and had thus deceived the clerk. The young fellow was thoroughly mortified, apart from his trouble at the loss of the silks.

“The case was placed in my hands, and I had a long hunt after the thief. I found her at last, and, as I expected, discovered that she was an old hand at the business, who had served her apprenticeship at it in London and New York, and that in cunning and dexterity she was more than a match for Gindem and Squeeze or any of their clerks.”

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