

A Private Detective

Hiram Hazlett had for months been much interested in newspaper accounts of cases in which private personages attained fame by acting as amateur detectives in cases where professionals had failed. He was constantly revolving in his mind the possibility of sometime acquiring fame in such line himself, and was fond of picturing his course of conduct under circumstances which he would imagine himself in. With this proemial clause, we will proceed to follow Mr. Hazlett on his way to catch the early morning train for the city, where he was engaged in the hardware business.

The train was nearly filled when he entered, and it was with some difficulty that he secured a seat just in the rear of two neatly-dressed ladies. At first he was so intent upon his own thoughts that he paid no attention to the conversation of his fair neighbors, but finally a remark arrested his wandering ideas. What he heard was: "What do you intend doing with your husband?" from one of the fair ladies to the other.

"Oh, I have that all fixed. I shall bind him securely with the ropes secreted in a closet in the room, and then, while he is still asleep, I shall steal out and call Burgess Winburne to come and assist me to rifle the iron safe of all valuables in the form of money, bonds and jewels."

"What will you do then?" said the other lady.

"We will leave my husband bound and gagged while we pack our spoils into a portable shape and get away to New York, whence we will sail for Europe to enjoy our ill-gotten gains. I am not right sure but what I shall have Burgess Winburne kill my husband, and leave his cold corpse to electrify the servants at Eglantine Villa," laughingly said the lady of the gray veil.

This rather singular conversation roused all the dormant detective in Hiram's nature. Here was his great opportunity! What should he do to work up this apparently rich case to an adequately famous climax? He pondered a few moments, and decided to step out at the next station and telegraph to New York for officers to arrest a criminal now on board the train.

Accordingly when the train stopped for passengers at the station Hiram was out in a trice and sent the telegram. He then returned to the car and sat closely watching his prey. They did not indulge in any more conversation of a criminal nature, but Hiram did not relax his espionage on that account. He felt that he now had his future in the hollow of his hand, and vision's of special promotion in the detective force flitted before his eyes.

As the train steamed into the New York depot Hiram was all eagerness. He rose, but remained standing, with his hand on the back of his seat, prepared to stay the passage of the two ladies when they should start to leave the car.

He was delighted to see two officers enter the train before it had fully come to a stop, and, as they advanced, Hiram signaled to them. As they came near, he pointed to the ladies and exclaimed:

“Here they are! I’ve had a time watching to keep them from leaving the train at some wayside station!”

One of the officers laid his hand on the shoulder of the foremost lady, saying: “You are my prisoner,” and motioned to his companion to arrest the other lady.

At this unlooked-for manifestation both prisoners shrieked in alarm, and their discomfited looks might well have been taken for detected guilt.

“By what authority, sir, do you dare treat me thus?” said one of them.

“By the sovereign one of the law.” replied the officer. “You have been pointed out to us as criminals by this gent here,” indicating Hiram, “and it is our duty to arrest you and carry you before a magistrate to answer whatsoever charge may be preferred you by your accuser.”

“This man!” said the lady, “Why, we never beheld him in our lives till just now on the train! What can he have to say of us?”

“Don’t know, mam,” replied the officer, “but he telegraphed for us at any rate; so you had best come along easy, and make no stir until we get to the magistrate’s office.”

Several persons had gathered around the party as they stepped out on the depot platform, but, as they were all strangers to the prisoners, they had no chance to appeal successfully for aid in their distress. They were loud in their protests against such ignominious treatment, but were forced to accompany the officers to a magistrate’s office near.

Matters were soon in progress for the opening of the case. The prisoners were brought forward and their accuser summoned to present himself. Hiram Hazlett advanced (greatly inflated with his consequential position) and proceeded to state that the prisoners had been overheard by him plotting against the life and property of the unfortunate husband of the prisoner with the gray veil. He repeated at length all he had overheard, and, perhaps unconsciously, elaborated to a great degree what he had inferred, rather than heard. He said that he did not doubt the intended guilt of the woman, and that he considered it to be his solemn duty to arrest her in her career of crime. The lady accused at first looked quite overwhelmed, but as Hiram progressed with his narration she exchanged glances with her companion, and both quietly awaited the conclusion of the serious charge. At its conclusion the magistrate required the prisoners to answer as best they could to the accusations made. Then the lady of the gray veil requested that she might be permitted to send a note to a friend in the city. The magistrate, after slight hesitation, complied with the request, and an errand boy was called and dispatched with the note to a certain address. In a short time two or three gentlemen arrived, and in great astonishment one of them hastened to inquire of the ladies the cause of their singular predicament. To the intense surprise of the magistrate and the wondrous chagrin of the doughty Hiram they were told that the lady of the gray veil was Mrs. Allworth, wife of Judge Henry Allworth, a prominent lawyer in New York. Her companion on the cars was Mrs. Spencer, who was returning with Mrs. Allworth from a visit to a friend in the country. Their conversation on the train was found to have related to a novelette

which Mrs. Allworth was writing, in which she had a wife plot to rob and possibly murder her husband in complicity with her clandestine lover, Burgess Winburne, with whom she was to elope to Europe. The fine-looking gentleman who had come to the rescue of the prisoners was Judge Allworth, and with him were two other gentlemen, well known in New York.

Our friend Hiram's discomfiture may better be imagined than described. All his bright hopes of distinction as an amateur detective were dashed at one fell swoop, and moreover he found himself in no enviable plight, when Judge Allworth turning to him demanded in a ferocious manner:

“See here, my fine fellow! What do you mean by meddling with what does not concern you, and insulting ladies on board public conveyances?”

Poor Hiram was so downcast that he could easily have accomplished his exit through the most diminutive key-hole just at this particular period of his mundane experience; but stern necessity compelled him to make an effort to extricate himself in a different mode from the awkward situation. He stammered and murmured a few words of humble apology for his flagrant breach of etiquette to the ladies. He said he was really under the conviction that Mrs. Allworth was confiding a most nefarious scheme to her friend, which it appeared to be his duty to frustrate as speedily as he could; hence, his prompt action in telegraphing for officers to meet the train and arrest the arch conspirator. He ventured to express an earnest hope, however, that he should not be hardly dealt with on that score, since his motive was a good one.

Mrs. Allworth and Mrs. Spencer were at first not disposed to treat the officious little would-be detective with much leniency; but after some deliberation, they allowed him to depart with a friendly injunction that he should, in the future, be more careful not to jump so readily to conclusions which might involve him in even more embarrassing straits than these of the present instance. Hiram gratefully acquiesced, and, bowing, made his way through a laughing crowd out into the open air, where he at last breathed freely. He meditated soberly on the mutability of human prospects. It was but a little while since he had firmly believed himself to be at headlong speed on the road to fame and fortune— when presto—all is altered, and he is on the thorny bed of combined mortification and danger. It did seem hard that he could not have sprung a bona-fide “case,” instead of, as it proved, a regular “hornet nest,” around his unlucky ears.

But, since we are all liable to errors in our walk through life, let us be gentle with Hiram, and not condemn him too harshly for being at the most only too eager to grasp fame at one clutch. We may rest assured that when he returned to his home that night he lay down upon his couch a wiser, if a much sadder man than he had been when he started on his momentous trip to the city in the morning.

Sumner Gazette [Sumner, IA], October 19, 1882