

A Thief Sub Rosa

From the Diary of a Detective

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

I was not a professional at that time. In fact, I had never acted in an independent capacity, and was not sure that I should succeed in the particular calling. I was only two-and-twenty, and had been for nearly two years Capt. William Kipp's "confidential man." All who remember "Old Kipp,"—his chin ever hidden beneath a heavy silken bandana, and his upper lip brown with snuff,—will remember that when he got upon the track of a rogue, said rogue was sure to be caught. I completed my twenty-second year on the fifth of July, and on the first of the following month Kipp laid aside his heavy folded bandana; bought an extra-sized silver snuff-box; and retired from business, remarking to me,—

"Bob," (my name is Robert Rogers,)—"when you want a boost into the Force, come to me."

I thanked him, but did not know whether I should ever tax his kindness or not. Accident, however, very soon decided the matter for me.

Within a week after my old employer's retirement, as I came in to dinner one day, I found a letter on my plate. It was a city letter, superscribed in a hand entirely strange; but I did not open it then. Fellow boarders are apt to be inquisitive,—and there were nine of them with eyes upon my letter. When alone, I broke the seal of the missive, which I found to be very brief and comprehensive:

"NEW YORK, Aug. 7th, 18—.

"Mr. Robert Rogers—Will you have the kindness to call upon me, at my place of business, No.— Liberty street, this afternoon, at three o'clock? Business of importance to myself, and I trust I may make it of interest to you.

Respectfully yours,

ELIAS WHITTEMORE."

Elias Whittmore?—one of the most successful and wealthy merchants in the city! What could he want with me? At all events, you may be sure that I did not stop long to consider the request; and, furthermore, that I was not many seconds behind the time appointed. I heard a silvery *tink—tink—tink*—of the French clock upon the merchant's desk as I was ushered into his private office; and I was repaid for what little trouble my promptitude had cost me by the remark, in a pleased and emphatic tone—

"Good! Give me a man who knows the true time appointed, and can properly estimate it. Too early is nearly as bad as too late. Mr. Rogers, I am glad to see you." And as he took my hand he ran a glance over my person which I could feel to be searching. But I could glance as well and as sharply as he; and I was pleased to observe that his face wore a satisfied expression.

We shook hands; exchanged these glances; and then sat down to business, the merchant having first been careful to assure himself that no one was sitting within earshot upon the outside.

“Mr. Rogers, this business between you and me is to be strictly private and confidential.”

“I am used to that kind of business, sir; and shall govern myself in strict accordance with your wishes,” I replied, with a slight inclination of the head.

“Then, here it is,” continued Mr. Whittmore:— “I sent for Captain Kipp yesterday to wait upon me on professional business. He returned the very laconic reply that he was not in the profession at present. I then called upon him, and presented my case, and he at once recommended me to you; and he did it in such a manner that I come to you in perfect confidence. I beg that you will understand this from the start, because it may place you more at your ease.”

I thanked him and assured him that, so far as my will was concerned, he should not find his confidence misplaced.

There was a pause after this, during which the merchant sat with his head bowed upon his hands. At length he started up—looked anxiously over his shoulder towards the place where a massive iron door was let into the wall—then shot a quick glance out at the windows of the partition—and then turned to me.

“Mr. Rogers, you can imagine that something is wrong. In a word, I am being robbed!—gradually and systematically robbed! It has been going on now, to my certain knowledge, for about three months; and during that time I know that I have lost seventy-five thousand dollars. I made the first discovery by accident. One afternoon, about three months since, a young friend of mine came into my office and asked if I would let him place ten thousand dollars in my strong-box for safe-keeping while he went into the country a few days. I gave him permission with pleasure. We counted the money—in fifties, hundreds and, five hundreds—and I found just the ten thousand. I simply pinned a band around it, upon which was the depositor’s name, with the words,—‘*On deposit for a few days.*’

“In the course of a week my friend came for his money, and I happened to be alone in the office. I took the package from the safe; and, as is my custom, ran it over. I counted it once—twice—thrice;—then turned it and counted it upon the back,—and only nine thousand dollars! ‘Careless!’ I exclaimed. ‘I’ll venture to say Preston has never looked to see where his money came from, but has taken out a thousand dollars upon the stupid supposition that it was mine.’ I said this; and yet I knew, all the while, that Preston was one of the most careful and methodical men in the world. This Preston—Francis Preston—is my confidential clerk and private bookkeeper, sir. However, I put in the missing thousand, and sent my friend away feeling very grateful.

Of course we had an examination and an overhauling; but nothing came to light. The money had been stolen! And then, of his own accord, Preston told me he had reason to believe that other money had been stolen. He asked me, Did I ever take money from the safe without entering it

upon the books. I told his, Never,—unless it might be when I found myself with more money about my person than I chose to carry, and simply slipped it in there for safekeeping. There was mischief somewhere,—and rather dangerous, at that.

Mr. Whittemore now asked me to look at his safe, which I did. First was a triple iron door, the center plate of which was warranted to be utterly impervious to drilling, and the whole armed with a first-class powder-proof lock. Inside of this, set solidly in its bed of masonry, was a very large iron vault, or safe, the door of which was made secure against rascality as human ingenuity had been able to accomplish. This vault opened, and we came to yet another safe—one of the very best in the world—which, of itself, was warranted by its makers as capable of withstanding any amount of fire or of burglarious manipulation.

“What do you think of it?” said Whittemore, after I had examined the strong-box to my satisfaction.

“I think,” I replied, “that without the true keys, or faithful duplicates, no human power could reach the heart of this vault through its closed and carefully locked doors—not in one night, at least.”

“Just my opinion,” he rejoined; “and yet that very safe is robbed continually. We have two sets of keys. I used to let Preston keep one set; but lately I have kept both myself. I not only carry them home with me; but I sleep with them under my pillow. And yet, Mr. Rogers—by night—while I am away with the keys, after having locked the safe myself—money is stolen from that iron chamber.”

“And you wish me to find who does it?” said I.

“Yes, sir,” he answered.

I then asked him whom he suspected. He hesitated. I told him this was to be a work of mutual confidence. If he could not trust me with his suspicions—suspicions which had had three months for growth—I should prefer to stop where I was. He smiled, and said:

“It was only a passing pang at the thought of exposing one whom I have loved. I am forced to tell you all I suspect, for it is upon a particular track that I wish to set you. I have spoken of Preston. His salary is good; and I have lately raised it. He has a wife, who, I fear, is rather too fond of fashion; and he has also two daughters who have recently become old enough to appear in society,—and I understand that they have made quite a sensation. You know how such things draw upon one’s purse. And, moreover—it seems hard to speak of it, but I cannot get around it—for two years past Preston has had his wife’s invalid mother on his hands to entirely provide for. Taking all these things together, I am led to the conclusion that no bookkeeper’s salary could begin to meet such expenses. And there is one thing more: Since the discovery of the theft by myself Preston has been a different man from his former self. Before he was cheerful in his greetings; smiled when he met me; never hesitated to ask my advice upon a matter of business,—while now, he avoids me, hangs his head when we meet; and never speaks save when absolute necessity compels him. So, sir, you will not wonder that I suspect him. And him I wish you to

watch. Find out if he is the thief. But, for the love of friendship, do not let him suspect it; and, above all, if you find him guilty, do not breathe a word of it to any ear save mine own.”

I gathered the merchant’s wishes, and promised strict obedience. He arose and took two hundred dollars from the safe, and handed the money to me.

“Simply on account of expenses,” he said.

And I took it as promptly as he had offered it.

“Mr. Rogers, you are the son of one of my oldest and best friends. Do you understand?”

I told him, “Perfectly.”

“Mr. Preston is away this afternoon, but you will see him here tomorrow.”

We then walked out into the store, where Mr. Whittemore showed me the various arrangements for receiving and dispatching goods, and also exhibited to me some of the best of his enormous stock.

“You will drop in whenever you can, Robert,—Mind,—we shall look for you a little before the hour for tea. Take good care of yourself, my boy.”

Just as he spoke these last words I observed a young man drawing a glass of water at the ice-fount. I had seen the individual before; and as I turned and shook hands with my employer, and said, “By, by,” I whispered, “Who is that drawing ice-water?”

“O,—one of my porters,—and one of the best men in the store. Why?—is there—”

“Pshaw!—Nothing of suspicion about him, sir. I only asked because I thought I had seen him before,—a friendly recognition,—that’s all.”

And with this I went out, carrying with me the form and features of the young porter,—and I carried them as distinctly as though I had had his very face before me. I had no other thought than to locate him; and at length I did it. I had seen him on the stage of a crack Vaudeville Lyceum and Concert Saloon, where he played sprightly Irish characters, and sang songs. His name had been down on the bills as Owen McDermott, and I rather thought that might be his cognomen. However, that I had located the scene of his first introduction to my notice I was simply certain; and the source of puzzle was, why a young man (not over twenty-four) of such temperament; bound by no social ties to sedate life; possessing such a fund of wit and humor; so capitally adapted to light vaudeville and comedy; and evidently able to find engagement upon respectable boards, if he chose, should let himself to a merchant down in Liberty street to perform the duties of a porter. And I think any man, of reflection, in my place at the time, would have marveled as I did.

On the next day I went down and saw Francis Preston. I found him to be a man of about forty years; slightly built; light brown, wavy hair; mild, passive blue eyes; a face of calm, tranquil beauty—every feature stamped with truth and honor. He was bowed down—was under a cloud—a grievous burden was upon him—and his agony was such that I could lay hold upon it and feel it. Mr. Whittemore introduced me to him as the son of one of his old friends, and then went out on the pretext of business, offering me his seat; and thus I had an opportunity for conversation with the suspected bookkeeper.

Never mind what we talked about,—only suffice it for me to say that I could not draw him out until I spoke of my orphanage and my utter loneliness in the world, at which his eye moistened, and his tongue loosened.

As I left the store on that day I said to myself,—“I shall take another tack. Francis Preston is not a thief. He could not rob his employer.” And then I prayed God, if such a moral anomaly were possible, that I might never know it!

There were two places now to which I resolved to turn my attention for a season, leaving Preston alone: The store, and the boarding place of Owen McDermott,—for I had found that to be his true name. I procured a sufficient disguise, and on the very first evening of my watch I was rewarded by a discovery. McDermott boarded on Mulberry street, near Chatham; and the location of the house was such—with two oyster and drinking saloons directly opposite—that I had no difficulty in keeping a safe watch.

On the evening in question, at about eight o'clock, McDermott came out dressed in the very height of style and fashion, and sauntered off towards Broadway. He stopped in at the Tammany bar-room and drank something, and then crossed the Park to the Astor House, where he stopped upon the upper corner under the variegated light of the druggist's brilliant window. But he was not to remain there a great while. Ere long a female came up Barclay street; stopped at the window; was recognized; took the young man's arm; and together they walked off up Broadway. I followed them to a fashionable saloon; but gained no glance at the female's face there. At Niblo's, however, I was more successful. She was a girl of nineteen or twenty; fair and plump; of medium height; and though quite pretty, yet there was an air and expression of simplicity about her which detracted much from her comeliness. There was a sort of vacant look, even when others were excited, which betrayed a lack of sensibility; and it was moreover plain to be seen that she was not brilliant. And yet she was really pretty and interesting; and that she loved Owen McDermott was as clear as the deep flush upon her full cheeks. Luckily for her she had dimples in those cheeks, and one in her chin; and when she laughed—which was very often—the playful lines leaped and shot about the eyes in a manner which added immeasurably to the beauty of her smile. Her dress was not showy—no aim at furbelows,—but it was costly; and her jewelry was of the pure water.

From Niblo's, at half-past ten, I followed them to a public-house—an orderly, small hotel—where I left them.

Three days after this I sat in the store, towards the latter part of the afternoon, engaged in conversation with Preston; and we were talking of Owen McDermott. I had asked how he came to the store.

“He came about four months ago,” said the confidential clerk. “He asked first for a clerk’s, or bookkeeper’s berth; then for a salesman’s; and when I had informed him that there was no opening of the kind he remarked that his wish was, to get into a good, well-conducted wholesale establishment of this kind and work his way up. He had a fair education, and understood all of bookkeeping that could be learned at school; but he knew nothing of business. He had a little money, and if we could hire him, he would serve as porter for six months or a year; after which he should rise or go out, as he had evinced merit. I presented his case to Mr. Whittemore, and he was hired; and a most punctual and attentive man has he proved himself.

Preston went on with quite an addition to his encomium, after which I think he used a “*but*,” and spoke of something in the young porter’s manner that had puzzled him; but I did not hear,—or, I did not mark his words,—for, while he spoke a female entered the store who at once engrossed my attention. It was the female whom I had seen with McDermott at Niblo’s. There was no mistake—not a particle. That face was not to be confounded with any other face that ever was. She entered the store, and stopped at the station of the first disengaged salesman, with whom she shook hands, and very smilingly passed social salutations. And so on with half a dozen more. Near the counting room, and within two yards of where I sat, she met Owen McDermott, but did not recognize him—did not even notice that a man was near her. And so on his part,—not so much as a glance of interest, or the least betrayal of a token of recognition.

In the name of all that was wonderful! Could my eyes play me such a trick? Were there twins, and this one of them?

“Mr. Preston, who is that young lady?”

“Which?”

“I see but one.”

He looked at me with a comical expression, and I saw in an instant that he thought I was quizzing him.

“My eyesight is defective at short distanced,” I explained. “She looks familiar; but her face is all a blur to me.”

“O,—ah,—Why,—that’s MISS ELLEN.”

“Nellie?” said I.

“I never heard her father call her so.”

“Never did?”

“No. But then he may be very different at home from what he is here in his store.”

What a bolt was that to let fall upon a man’s head! Mr. Whittemore’s daughter! A very large “*mice*” appeared to my perception. I arose from my chair, and went out into the store just in season to see Miss Ellen going down into the basement. There was another way of descent, and I went down by it, and succeeded in finding a secure hiding-place without being observed by the young lady. By and by Owen McDermott down whistling “The Bould Soldier Boy.” He discovered the lady and was silent. There was a careful survey by McDermott, and a careful survey by Miss Whittemore; after which they came together in a dark corner, where they conversed for two or three minutes—not longer than that; and the only words of all they said that I heard, were spoken as they were about to separate, by the lady:

“*At the old place—half-past eight.*” And they separated with a kiss, McDermott hurrying up by the way he had come down, while, shortly after, Miss Ellen went up by the other way.

In due time I went up, and found Miss Ellen *non est*.

“*The old place!*” Where could it be, except at the corner of Broadway and Barclay, in the rosy light of the druggist’s window? At all events, so I interpreted it; and, in disguise, was on hand to solve the problem—on hand in Mulberry street, for thus I should be sure.

It was the old place—at the corner—and there they met at the appointed time, I followed them to Fulton street, and into an oyster-saloon. They examined five or six of the closely curtained side stalls, and finally seated themselves in one which had empty apartments adjoining, after which McDermott rang his bell, and gave his order. Without noise, and watching my opportunity, I slipped into the stall at Miss Ellen’s back, as I was anxious that the other pair of lips should be directed towards me. However, I had no difficulty in hearing. They felt sure that no one was near them, and were consequently unguarded.

I need not go into details. I had a certain work to do, and I will simply tell what bears thereupon. These were detached sentences which I plainly heard.

ELLEN—“Oh, yes. I put the drops in the wine when I turned it out. He lets me do anything for him I want to. How they do make him sleep, to be sure!”

MCDERMOTT—“And yet, Nellie, they can’t hurt him any more than so much pure water. These drops you will give him tonight. You can put them in his glass before the wine is poured out.”

ELLEN—“I’ll do it,—never fear.”

MCDERMOTT—“And if we are successful tonight, tomorrow we will be off.”

ELLEN—“O, my own dear Owen, you’ll never, never cease to love me!”

MCDERMOTT—"How can I? Are you not all in all to me?"

ELLEN—"Aye,—and think what I've done: With my own hands robbed my father of almost a hundred thousand dollars!"

MCDERMOTT—"And tonight, darling, we'll make it enough to be happy on while we live. Your father will be sound asleep before midnight. You can then take the keys from beneath his pillow; put on your disguise, and join me at the store. I shall be in the old arch."

The rest of their conversation consisted mostly of questions by Ellen touching their future course, and answers from McDermott which I could very plainly and with absolute certainty, see were the empty promises and alluring devices of the easy-going, utterly selfish, and morally oblivious votary of gilded vice.

From this saloon the pair passed out into Broadway, and near the Astor House took a coach for "up town."

I went down to the store, to a side entrance of which I had duplicate keys, for the purpose of taking post of observation. I had just applied the key to the outer door, when a finger was laid upon my shoulder, and I looked around.

"Ah—Simmons!"

"Eh?—Bob—Is that you?"

"Yes,—and I'm glad you're here. Is this your beat?"

"Yes."

"Then, on the hush. 'I've got a job here, and the birds are in hand. Don't interfere with any one who may enter the store after me."

"D'ye want help?"

"No. They are the last pair in the world Whittmore has thought of suspecting, and will fall into my hands in the morning easily enough."

"All right. Good luck to you."

"Thank you." And with this I entered the store, locking the doors behind me.

My first work, after gaining the store, was to fix a safe hiding-place, from which I could watch all that transpired in the counting-room, which I did by a simple arrangement of goods upon a counter near at hand.

About half-past twelve they came—McDermott and Miss Ellen—entering by the front door. At first I was a little staggered; for the porter seemingly had a boy with him; but I quickly discovered that a boy's garb was the "disguise" of which I had heard them speak. They wasted no time. First they closed the outer door behind them; then lighted a lamp; then entered the counting-room; and then, with the true keys thereto, opened the triple safe. While I was on the watch the merchant left all the money that came in after banking-hours in his vault,—and on the present occasion it chanced to be considerable, as McDermott had been aware.

"We shall be off before any search can be made," I heard the porter say, "so there can be no danger in making a big lift this time. And then, if there is search, it will be at Preston's. There's over fifty thousand here—let's take thirty of it. It's yours, and you'll be my wife before this time in another day."

"Well," said Ellen, "take what you please."

"No," persisted Owen, "it is your money,—do you take it."

And the poor, simple-minded, infatuated girl took out thirty thousand dollars, in gold and bank-notes, and passed it over to her companion. Then the safe was relocked; the light extinguished; and the twain departed by the way they had found entrance.

I followed them to Broadway, and saw them take a stage, and then I went home.

Early in the morning I called upon a professional friend to bear me company. You know what a rat can do at bay,—and I know not what a high-spirited Hibernian, of McDermott's temperament, might offer to do upon finding himself in such a trap as I was ready to spring upon him. Together we went to the boarding place in Mulberry street, where I left Watkins (so my friend was named) under the front window, with an understanding of my signal for his presence. I found part of the boarders up, but not all; and among the latter was McDermott. I sent word up to him that the *Palmetto Queen*, for Charleston, was steaming up, and that he must come down to the store and help us get the goods on board which were packed yesterday. The landlady asked me who she should say had called with the message; and I gave her the name of Mark Trull, the Southern Export clerk.

I concluded to have Watkins with me, so I called him, and let him in myself. In a short time Owen McDermott came down, and entered the parlor.

"Now, then, my—Eh? What the—!"

"It's all right, Mr. McDermott. You are wanted at the house of Mr. Whittemore."

"Oho! That's yer game, is it?" and he made a spring for the door; but the hands of Watkins were upon him like a pair of double-threaded vices.

"Easy, my friend," said I, with a smile. "I haven't taken all this trouble to be thwarted at this stage of the game. No, no." I arose, and snapped a pair of very bright, clean steel ruffles upon his wrists, and then informed him that he could go with us quietly, or he could cut up as much as he

pleased. He broke down, and came near crying; but presently he rallied; and with an oath, exclaimed:

“Go ahead. The game’s up, and I’ve lost. And the game is all I’ve lost. By —! I’ve done nothing for which the law can touch me! So go ahead,—the sooner the better.”

And beyond this I spoke not a dozen words with Owen McDermott. He gave himself up to my guidance, but kept his tongue still.

On Chatham street I took a coach for the three of us, and proceeded directly to the dwelling of Mr. Whittemore, where we alighted—Watkins and I—and then assisted our prisoner out, and conducted him into the house. The servant knew me, and asked no questions. I found that Mrs. Whittemore was up, so I ventured to go to the merchant’s chamber myself, and arouse him, which I did with difficulty. But finally I got him up; helped him to dress; telling him the while the important points of my discovery; so that when we reached the parlor he was prepared to hear the rest calmly and understandingly.

And, sitting by McDermott’s side, I told to Whittemore everything I had seen, heard, and done while looking up the despoiler of his treasure; and in the end I turned to my prisoner:

“Owen McDermott, have I told the truth?”

And he answered, without a moment’s hesitation, “Yes.”

And then Mr. Whittemore arose, and asked me if I would leave the prisoner with him, and give him the key of the handcuffs; and when I told him, Yes, he said:

“Call upon me at my office at half-past four, this afternoon. Till then, excuse me.”

At the appointed time I was at the merchant’s office; and I found him looking ten years older than he had looked that morning. He was broken beneath a heavy weight, and his words were few.

“Mr. Rogers,” he said, “may I depend upon the good faith of the officer who was with you this morning?”

I assured him upon that point, and he proceeded:

“It is all settled. I made McDermott confess to my child that he should have ere long deserted her if she had gone away with him, and it was the money, and not her, that he sought. He met her first at a charity Fair. He learned who she was, and having discovered her lack of mental strength, he applied himself to the work of bending her to his own purposes—with what result we have seen. He has left the city, and I have his word that he will not return for three years, and that he will never speak with my daughter again. However, I do not think that Ellen would listen to him more. As for my poor child—I can only hope. And now, sir, I can only add, that I am deeply grateful for what you have done, as well as for the very quiet manner in which you have

done, as well as for the very quiet manner in which you have done it; and I trust this will sufficiently recompense you. If not, come to me, and I will make it more. Mr. Preston can never sufficiently thank you, because I shall never let him know what a load of suspicion against him you removed from my mind. But I may inform you that I have almost doubled his salary, and he has gone home, I think, the happiest and most grateful man I ever saw.”

I did not open the envelope which Mr. Whittemore had given me until I reached home. I found one thousand dollars in it. At first I feared he had made a mistake. A thousand dollars for catching a thief?—aye—and almost two hundred more of unexpended expense money, which he bade me keep! But I thought of his daughter saved, and concluded that all was right.

I did not go back for more pay; but from that time my fate was sealed as a detective; and I have had no reason to complain of the result.

The New York Ledger, August 12, 1869