

Trailing A Crime

by An English Ex-Detective

I have not a great story of the marvelous to relate, but what I have to say possesses the merit of being absolutely true.

About a dozen years ago complaints were continuously made to us of repeated robberies from a luggage train, which at that time was doing service between London and a certain provincial town which I will call Hubbleton.

Time after time, in spite of the traffic manager's strictest vigilance, valuable freight was stolen, and the thief or thieves remained undetected. The most mysterious part of the affair was that not unfrequently the missing goods consisted of very heavy and cumbersome articles, such, for instance, as bales of raw wool, heavy pieces of finished woollen cloths, and now and again bags of logwood, boxes of indigo, &c.

The guards of certain trains were keenly questioned, their every movement was observed,—in fact the company's own detectives placed the whole of the servants under the most watchful surveillance.

Still, consignors and consignees continued to complain, dispatched materials remained undelivered, and, as a consequence, the directors were made to smart pretty sharply in the shape of awarded compensation.

It was at this ruinous juncture that my services were called into requisition.

“Sleeky” (that is the nickname I was best known by then), said the inspector to me one morning, “I have got an intricate little matter I want you to undertake. The Grangewood Limited Liability Company have compromised that job you have been working, consequently you are the only member I have disengaged at the present moment.”

He gave me the details of the case, which I have just recited, suggested a few important hints, and concluded by advising me to take a day or two so as to deliberate my plans for attack.

“Of course you know the importance of the thing,” he said just before I took my leave of him, “and if you bring it to a satisfactory termination, I will take into consideration the question of advising your promotion.”

I thanked him for his encouraging remarks, and went away in high hopes of achieving my promised reward.

Early in the forenoon of the following day, while the inspector was running through his letters, the clerk apprised him of the visit of a railway porter, who wished to speak to him on a subject of deep importance.

“Show him in, by all means.”

The porter entered, cap in hand, and bowed to Inspector Brown.

He was a round shouldered, gray whiskered man of apparently fifty years of age..

“Well, what is it you want, my good man? Take a seat.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ve come to tell you that I think I know who it is that keeps stealing things from our company, and if you will send a man up with me, I will give him a wrinkle or two concerning it.”

“What do you know about the matter?” the inspector inquired.

“Well, I have spoken to our foreman, and he sent me down to say that I am ready to help the man you are going to send up, that’s all.”

“Oh, very well. The officer is not in now. Call again to-morrow at ten, and you shall see him. Good-day.”

“Good day,” I answered, for the pseudo porter was indeed myself. “Do you think, inspector, this getup is good enough?” I inquired with a smile.

For a moment he was thunderstruck and stood looking at me in mute astonishment. Then he burst out in an uproarious peal of laughter, during which I made my exit.

My disguise was perfect. I had undergone a thorough transformation; gesture, voice and form were changed. The consummate ability I always possessed in this respect has often been of incalculable service to me in my profession. Without it I should have had to chronicle a few failures in the long list of my stirring adventures. Coupled with that as well, I have in me the faculty of divining the hidden meanings of men’s hearts, from the fact that I have closely studied the unerring laws of physiognomy, and, because of these and my fearlessness, I was considered fairly fit to hold my own with any man.

It was growing late in the afternoon, as I intended it should, when I arrived at the luggage department of the railway whose name, for obvious reasons, I am not at liberty to disclose, and, after blundering for some time among long lines of trucks, and scrambling over mountains of miscellaneous goods, I came upon the dimly lit sanctum of Mr. Figgins, the general manager of the traffic. I knocked at the door, and responsive to the gruff voice of that individual, entered.

Barely had I closed the door behind me, before Mr. Figgins, buried at his desk among ledgers, letters, and way bills, turned bluntly upon me.

“What’s the matter now? Another squabble among you eh?”

“Not exactly, sir," I said. "I wish to have a little talk with you about the robberies that have been taking place for some time past “

“Oh, you do, eh? Well, what can you tell me about them?"

And Mr. Figgins, eyeing me most critically, suddenly assumed a very serious and injured air.

I saw from his manner that nothing could be gained by longer “beating about the bush,” so I revealed myself to Mr. Figgins by promptly handing him my card.

“Well, bless my soul!" exclaimed the manager, looking first at my name and then at me, his feelings alternating the while between surprise and suspicion.

“And are you really the man I sent for to root out these thefts?"

“The same," I said.

“You surprise me. I could have sworn you were one of my own workmen.”

“So much the better for my plans, Mr. Figgins. You are loading the trucks for Yorkshire to-night, I understand?"

“Yes.”

“Good! I want you then to be kind enough to introduce me to your foreman. Is he to be relied upon?"

“I have every confidence in him," replied Mr. Figgins.

“Can he be safely trusted with my plans?"

“After a few words to him from me he may.”

“Very good. That will be of valuable service to me. And now you may send for him, if it is convenient for you to do so. One moment, though, Mr. Figgins, please. What time is the train to start to-night?"

“Ten thirty-two.”

“And is due at Hubbleton at—“

“Six fifty a.m.," responded the manager.

Furnished with these particulars and assisted by Mr. Figgins and his foreman, I went to work with a will.

The process of loading was a long and arduous one. The train was heavily freighted with wool, iron ore, sperm oil, &c, and it was close upon 10 o'clock before our labor was ended.

The wagon numbers had been entered, the goods registered on the way.

At that moment, I lifted my head forward, and perceived the first faint dawn of day peering from the eastern sky.

There was just enough light, indeed, to show me a low, wooden hut at the entrance of a tunnel, whose heights were crowned by very steep and jagged rock.

"Something in the way, surely," I muttered as I resumed my now cosy corner of the wagon. Barely was I settled there, however, before the door that was farthest from me was opened, and two men climbed on the piled up wool.

"Look alive, Harry!" said one of them, whom I recognized as the guard. "We are twenty minutes behind time. Had an accident on the road. There, have you got it all right?"

"Ay, ay; let go!"

And down went a bag of wool.

The door was closed again, when, with the agility of a panther I sprang out and, just as the train was set in motion, cleared the six foot way on the opposite side.

I flung myself flat in a ditch, from which I could dimly see the wooden hut before me.

The guard's van had just vanished in the dark bowels of the mountain, when I saw the form of a man disappearing in the hut, pushing the stolen wool before him.

About ten minutes elapsed. A gray light suffused the earth, and still I lay there watching.

My patience was soon rewarded. The same man came forth again bearing a great gray bag, pannierwise, across his shoulders, and I saw him enter a winding footpath from behind the hut, evidently with the intention of disposing of his spoil.

I dogged his footsteps as sleekly as an Indian trails his foe.

But the feat was by no means an easy one of achievement. All the care and ingenuity I could command was taxed to their fullest capacity, for there was I, in the uniform of a railway porter, with country surroundings strange to me as Abyssinian wilds, and to make things worse, the day dawn grew gradually more and more unfavorable to the carrying out of my designs.

Twice during our journey my victim laid his cumbrous burden down, and immediately this was done, I had to lie full length upon the ground to avoid the possibility of his detecting me. And in

this manner I pursued my man for a distance of at least two long, dreary miles.

Then, when we had emerged from a pathless meadow; he stood stone still for a moment, looked sharply around in every direction, and entered a dilapidated looking factory situated on the high road leading to the sleeping village of Brascombe.

I was satisfied he had another accomplice here because he used no key, but merely lifted the ponderous latch of the door and lugged his burden in.

No sooner had he disappeared from view than I ran with wild haste after him, and, placing my ear against the closed door, heard the sound of his footsteps vanishing upon the steep staircase, that led to the room above.

Fortunately for my plans, he had not turned the lock against me, so I noiselessly followed him in.

For a few moments I hesitated what to do. Then the thought struck me to take off my boots and mount the rickety stairs. It was a risky thing to do, but how else was I to prove the substantiality of the charge I intended to make against him if I did not pounce upon the culprit while the stolen goods were in his hands? I groped my way along the darkness of the lobby, and leaving my boots behind me, began the ascent.

The steps were worn and wooden, yet all went well with me until I reached the third one from the landing, when, to my chagrin, a loud creak followed the pressure of my foot.

Simultaneously with the sound came the startled whisper of a voice not far from me, which caused me to halt and stand motionless,

“Hush! What was that?”

“I don’t know,” was the gruff response. “But I’ll swear I heard some thing.”

The dim light that was struggling through a latticed window of the room shown full upon me thus making my discovery absolutely certain to anyone who chose to approach me.

At this critical juncture I rushed forward, and the next instant confronted the two men creeping on tiptoe toward the edge of the landing above me, and I saw the stolen wool lying at their feet.

Contrary to my expectation, they offered no resistance to me when I told them I was a detective, and charged them—one with stealing and the other with receiving stolen goods.

A few days afterward I had the satisfaction of bringing five men to the bar of justice. These were the guard, driver, and stoker of the train, with the actual thief and receiver.

They were condemned to various terms of imprisonment, the latter culprit receiving the heaviest sentence of them all. He was a small mill owner and had but recently escaped the jail for an act

of fraudulent bankruptcy.

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