

Missed Him

A Detective's Story

Well, well! perhaps it was my fault – perhaps it was not. He was a clever fellow —ah! that he was. They asked me to catch him; I said I'd try. I wouldn't promise—no, I'd only say I'd try.

I tried. His offence was nothing —merely what is commonly called a “Railway Plant.” It succeeded though, and my gentleman was “wanted.”

I made a grand hit when I nabbed his companion. He told me his haunts and his habits, but he wouldn't aid me in catching him. I determined to do it myself. I was a green hand then. No matter, I had the will. I found the way. He was to be at a tea-party Thursday night. I was invited. Shall I take two policemen in disguise and arrest him? No; all his friends would rescue him. I will go alone. I went. I left my little house—a four-roomed dwelling—at six. I locked the front door, and went off to Mrs. Jones' tea-party.

It was the month of December. We had great fun at the tea-party. There was a gentleman there that I believed to be my man, despite the fact that, when I was introduced to him, I was informed he had just come from the continent. We fell into conversation. He began to pump me. This was what I wanted. I was determined to play simple, and tell him all he asked.

He stared hard at me. Perhaps he knew me—perhaps he did not. He was a peculiar man, with short black hair, a clean-shaved face dressed in a suit of very light gray. He looked smart. I might safely have shouted “All hands to pump ship!” for he pumped in a most barefaced manner.

He asked me where I lived. I told him. I saw no use in deceiving him; besides, I had a little plan in view—I might invite him to my house, and pin him.

Had I any company? None. Any one else in the house? No. I was a bachelor; I preferred to live alone. And then, in the most quiet and insinuating way he asked me did I shoot? He did; he had been shooting lately—last week he was shooting in Suffolk. He went down there for a day or two. Ah! and I remarked in a very innocent way, looking up benignly at him, that I thought—that was, I understood—he had just come from the continent.

He started. I pretended to be surprised, and he assured me, in fact, he had been to the continent since! But about the shooting? No, I didn't shoot; I was timid about firearms; the sight only, I assured him, of a loaded gun made me tremble (pass me here, reader; there is a loaded gun always hanging over my chimney-piece in the parlor). Had I no firearms? He had a beautiful gun. No, I had none. Then he returned to the house question. Did I sleep on the ground floor? No. Where then? At the top of the house – it was two stories high. Oh! back or front? Back. He was very inquisitive, I thought; but I seemed to enjoy telling him all I could. He thought he was duping me—poor devil! Then he asked me, as if casually, did I approve of keeping money at home, or did I send it to the bank? I started. I began to think this was too good. No matter, I would go through with it. I had told him lies enough, why not tell another—ay, why not? I kept

my money at home. Banks were unsafe; but I assured him that I felt uneasy “just then,” because I happened to have more than usual, and it wasn’t mine. Five hundred pounds, ready money, I think I told him. No; it was “five hundred pounds in notes” – ha! ha! ha! Five pence in coppers would have been nearer the mark. But no matter; poverty is no sin.

Yes, I kept it in the house; and he thought it strange I had no arms. Here I stopped him, and begged his pardon; I had arms. He turned pale; yes, I had so. What were they, might he ask? He might. My arm was a boiler-stick, with two ounces of lead let into the top of it. Oh! he seemed greatly relieved.

I told him the doors and windows had blots on them, and were all barred—all but one. He pricked up his ears, and a faintly murmured “which?” led him on, and gave me hope. I thought it best to encourage him—all but one. The front window on the ground floor, I said, had no bar on the shutter. They had all bells, I told him. I had a bell. It was very safe. Thieves never think of getting into a house by the front, you know. And there was no area or garden. The door opened on the pavement. Yes, it was very safe—wasn’t it? Yes, he thought it was. Then he talked about politics, etc.; and then he got up to go—so soon? And Mrs. Jones begged him to stay; and I begged him to give me a call some night, for—ah! really, he was very—that is, his company was very—ah! very agreeable, ha! ha! ha! He was going my way, would I go with him? Or would he wait for me? No; I would stay an hour longer at least, and then see Misses Browne to their home. Ha! ha! ha! what a notion I had of it!

He thought me very simple, no doubt—he thought all I said was true. I often wonder, now, whether he ever suspected that the quiet individual who did not shoot or put his money in the bank, and slept in the house alone, and put bells on the doors and windows, was a detective, who would do his best to see him safely “in quod” before twelve hours were over. Ha! ha! ha! we shall see what we shall see—so we shall.

He is gone. He shuts the hall door. He looks wildly about him, and then sets off in the direction of my lodgings. I am watching him from my window. Oh! I forgot to tell him. Ah! really I must go. Good evening Mrs. Jones; ta, ta! I will clap on my hat and follow him. I shall shut the hall door quietly and start in the same direction. Ha! I thought so.

There he is in the dark, round the corner. He does not think any one sees him. Here is a low wall—how handy! I’ll just get behind it and watch him. His position is well chosen—no one can see him unless just where I am.

Look what he is at. Well, I’m blow’d! he pulls out a coat from goodness knows where. It is quite black. He puts it on over his other coats, and even pulls off his trousers. Ah! he has others on under them—they are black, too. And then he takes off his tall hat, and stows all his traps where the coat came from. His hat is replaced by a Glengarry. Then out comes a great black beard and moustache, which are carefully adjusted. My yah! I wouldn’t know him again.

Look again; he is examining something in his hand; it shines as he turns it over – it gives a faint click, click, as he holds it up. Ha! I thought so; it is a pistol. He puts it into his breast, and then looks about him. I creep closer to the wall. He does not see me, although he is coming this way.

He passes me and walks on. I whistle a tune, and step after him round the corner. I am coming up to him. He asks me the time. I tell him, and ask, did a gentleman in a light suit pass this way? Yes; he went up yon street smoking a cigar—good night, sir! Ha! Ha! good-night! But surely he is following me! There can be no mistake about it. No matter, I will outwit him. I reach the corner—he is ten yards behind me, or more. I set off on a run down the street till I reach the next corner. Round it I fly. A glance backward—he has not entered the street yet. I enter a half-open door. The next minute I hear his steps; he is running for death and life, one would think. He reaches the corner, too, and stops. He is not a yard from me, and I am grinning at him through the door, which is about six inches open. He looks about him. He is at fault. “B—t him,” he mutters, “I’ll have him yet!” He sets off at a headlong speed along the street, and I saunter out quietly and follow him at an easy walk. I arrive at the corner. Heavens! He is coming down the street toward me. Yes, it must be he, although his beard and moustache are replaced by carrotty whiskers, and he has a pea-jacket and a jerry hat! By what trick of slight-of-hand is this done? I cannot imagine. It must be he. He is filling his pipe. My house is just in advance; still he follows me.

I enter the house. Casually he glances up at the windows. I bolt the door. I hear him turn into the lane that goes up alongside the next house. I steal quietly into the front parlor, and leave the shutters open, and put back the window fastening. Then I go up-stairs to the back room. I light the candle. I don’t draw down the blind, for reasons of my own. One glance at the lane, I thought so; there he, is staring at the house. I can see him: the lamp is not far off. I draw back out of sight, and taking my revolver out of the drawer I put fresh cartridges therein, and slip it into my pocket. Then I go to the window again, with my night-cap in my hand. I stare into the glass while I adjust it. I am full in the glare of the candle-light; I am sure he sees me. Then, quietly drawing down the blind, I extinguish the light, and put it (the blind) a little on one side to look out. See! He is running round to the front again.

I steal down-stairs; I creep into the parlor. I thought so; someone at the window. Slowly and silently the sash is lifted and the blind pushed back; the next moment a man enters the room. It is he!

He pulls out a pistol, cocks it, and lays it on the table. Then he pokes his head out under the blind, and glances up and down the street. Apparently satisfied, he withdrew his head, and then feels his way to the fireplace; he is going to strike a match.

I quietly put out my hand and grip his pistol. I stealthily draw myself up and face him. He strikes the silent match; gradually it brightens up. His back is toward me. He lights a candle and turns round.

He does not start, but turns white as a sheet. I am facing him, covering him with my own revolver and his own pistol. For a moment we glare at each other. He mutters, “No firearms, eh?” and I hiss, “Surrender!” A moment, and the candle-stick is dashed in my face. There is a flash, a report—another! He dashes at the window. Now I see why he left it open. I rush madly forward. A heavy blow descends on my face. I stagger back, only for a moment. I start up and take down the gun; in an instant I am standing in the street. He is fifty yards away. I fire one barrel, then the next—of course I miss—and there I stand crestfallen at my window, while the

neighbors gather round. “Thieves!” says one; “The ruffians!” cries another; while a third eyes me calmly, saying, “You’ve missed him, master.”

A pistol for my trouble. “I have missed him!” I never saw him again.

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