

Caught by a Thread

An English Detective's Story

Some of our fellows who have been relating histories in your paper have informed you how they became detectives. All true, I believe; but there was no romance in my case. I took to the police force from liking. That being the case, and I being sober and industrious, I soon became a favorite, and rose rapidly, and at last was made a sergeant, receiving, besides my pay, what we call "intelligence money," which makes a very nice addition to our salary. So here I am Sergeant Fox of the detective force, and having introduced myself, I will go at once into my story.

One day I happened to have a holiday, and took my wife and children to a village beyond Hornsey, where a friend of mine kept an old-fashioned public-house – a low, rambling, comfortable place, as snug as you could wish.

My old friend gave me a hearty welcome, and we had a glorious day. The children ran in the fields at the back of the house, and my wife and Mrs. Balmer – my friend's wife sat in the bar parlor, while Balmer and myself smoked our pipes in the arbor at the bottom of the garden.

Balmer had given us a warm welcome, but for all that I saw there was something the matter with both him and his wife. For instance when we were at dinner and tea, I noticed that now and then they would pause in the conversation and listen as if they expected to hear something. Once during the latter meal Balmer jumped up and hurried out of the room; but he returned almost immediately, and saying quietly to his wife, "It's nothing, my dear," resumed the conversation as usual. This, of course, aroused my curiosity, and I determined to know what the matter was before I left.

"This is a fine old place, Harry," I said, as I puffed at my pipe.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I like it very much, so does my wife. Still not as much as I thought I should."

"What's up now, Harry?" I demanded. "Why after you had seen this old place you did nothing but talk about it, and never rested till you bought it. Yet you have only been here some six or eight months, and you seem tired of it. Is the trade not as good as you expected?"

"Oh, the trade is good enough. That's not it. Look here, Charlie, you might help me in the matter."

"If I can, I am at your service," I replied.

"Well, then, the one great fault in this place is the want of kitchen room. We have only a small kitchen proper, as I may call it, and a small back one – that over there, where you see the window," he said, as he pointed with his pipe to a kind of outhouse. "The consequence is that we have to stow away a lot of things in the back kitchen that ought to be in the front one – things of value, too. Well, almost every night something disappears, and hang me if I can make it out."

“Who have you in the house that you suspect?”

“Not a soul. I brought all my old servants with me, and they have been in my service for years. They are innocent.”

“Humph! As to that I don’t feel quite so certain,” said I. “Have any of your female servants sweethearts?”

“Not that I know. If they have they never come here.”

“Why do you not keep the door locked – you say that it always happened at night?”

“We can’t do that,” and here Harry Balmer went into a long statement as to the necessity that that door should be left on latch during the greater part of the evening. All of these reasons need not be mentioned here. Suffice it to say that he proved to me that for business purposes it had to be left on latch at certain times.

“I can’t understand it,” he continued. “We have done everything to discover how the thieves came in – taken every precaution, but all in vain. I do believe my old woman believes to think the house is haunted and really it is very mysterious – very!”

“Ghosts don’t steal,” said I. “Just come along with me and show me the place, and I will see what I can make of it.”

Well, he took me to the place, and I examined it carefully, and a queer one it was. Only a small kitchen with a copper sink, and the usual utensils of that sort. One door opened into the garden, and another door opened on to a dark passage, and not into the front kitchen, as is usually the case. The door of the front kitchen opened into the other, near the end of this passage, which was very narrow. There was a third door at the bottom of the passage, which opened into the bar. There was nothing to guide me there, so I walked into the garden and examined it.

It was a pleasant little place enough, perfectly country, having no wall round it, and only a low paling, over which any one could leap. Then I looked at the country, which consisted of beautiful fields, through which ran the New river, which indeed, came right under Harry’s house, just at the back. I saw at once that if a man came into the house to steal things, he would have to cross the river by a bridge some quarter of a mile up, which led into a by lane slanting down to the main road, close to the corner of the Jolly Farmer, as I will call Harry’s inn.

“Well, what do you make out of it?” demanded Harry, who had been watching me closely.

“I can’t make it out,” I said. “Just make a written statements of the facts and give it to me. I’ll lay it before my chief and ask him to send a man down to watch the case. But mind you, do not let anyone know that you have told me, even Mrs. Balmer. Women cannot keep secrets; it’s not in their nature to do so. Perhaps I may come down myself; if so, I will write and let you know

when I am coming, and in what disguise, so that you may help me and not betray me by a sudden recognition.

Well, to make a long matter short, he did as I directed him, and I returned with my wife and youngsters to town, and the next morning I placed the account before my chief, asking to go down on the case for a few days. But I was disappointed, for I was wanted somewhere else, and a young fellow was sent.

The case I was on caused me to be detained in Liverpool for a month, and when I had carried it out successfully I returned to town, and the first thing I inquired about was whether Harry Balmer's thief had been taken.

"No," said the inspector; "that is a queer case. I sent Saunders down about it, but he did no good. He watched the case carefully for a week, but could not discover anything, for while he was there nothing went; but the night after he left a basket full of washing was stolen – something the next night, and so on. I sent him down again, and the thieves stopped directly. I can't make it out."

"The thief knew Saunders," replied I, "and while he was there he would not run the risk. I have nothing to do now. I think I will have a turn at it."

"You can, if you like, Fox," said the inspector; "but I do not think you will make much of it. Saunders took all sorts of disguises and failed, although he is not half so well known by the thieves of London, or of England, I might say, as you are."

"Well, I'll have my try and if I do not catch the fellow in four days I'll give the matter up."

This being agreed upon I wrote off at once to Harry to tell him to prepare for me and then set about for a disguise.

For that purpose I selected a navvy's costume – namely, a sealskin cap with the ear flaps pulled well down, a coarse cotton shirt with no collar, a red wool comforter, a fusion coat of the Newmarket cut, with large bone buttons, a long waistcoat with flapped pockets – of the same material as the coat – but left unbuttoned; trousers of corduroy, fastened around the waist with a strap, and two little straps fastening them up below the knee, high enough to show about two inches of blue worsted stockings and a large, heavy pair of thick, high-low boots.

Of course my hair was dyed, and my hands and face made up to suit the character. Thus equipped I was ready, and, mounting the top of an omnibus, lit up my dirty stump of a black clay pipe and drove quietly down to Tottenham.

There I entered one or two public houses where "navvies most do congregate," and, as I drank half a pint of beer, asked the landlord, or any navvies who happened to be present, if they knew a place round about where a poor fellow could get work.

Everywhere but at one place I had the same answer – “Hard times,” “place too crowded already,” etc. But the single exception was nearly a poser for me. He was a stout, jolly fellow – seemed to take pity on me, and having asked me if I could dig well, was about to engage me to dig up his garden. Luckily for me his wife happened to come into the bar, and bullied him for a fool who encouraged all the idle, lazy fellows in the world, and declared I should not have a penny of her money, and complimented me by saying, loud enough for me to hear, that I looked more like a thief than a laborer. So the honest landlord gave up engaging me.

I made these visits so that I might enter Hornsby at the end furthest from London; secondly, in case I was watched, to throw off suspicion; and thirdly, I wished to see if I could come across any one I knew, for I was certain that the robberies of the Jolly Farmers were the work of no novice. How far I succeeded in my second object, of course, I cannot tell, but I failed to recognize one face.

It was dusk when I reached the Jolly Farmers and luckily Harry was in the bar alone, and so I gave him the “office” and he knew at once what to do, for I had told him in my letter.

I nodded to some navvies and laborers who were in the bar, and then put my usual question, and got the general answer.

“You seem to have come a long way, mate?” said Harry.

“You’re right, master, I have come a long way. I’m going to London to look for work. I s’pose you ain’t got an off job I can do for you, just to earn a shilling, or some supper, and a shake-down in a barn?”

Harry pretended to be considering, for he put his elbow on the pewter counter, and rubbed the palms of his hands over his face as he said:

“Well, I don’t know. I might find you something to do. Here, May, just come and mind the bar for a moment.”

The girl came, and Harry, coming from behind the bar counter, opened the door leading into the passage and bade me follow him.

“Why, Charlie, how the deuce did you learn to make up so capitally? ‘Pon my word, I should never have known you if it had not been for your letter. Indeed, then I don’t think I should have done so had you not tipped me a wink.”

“So much the better; but take care you do not betray me. Take me into the ‘haunted kitchen’ – for so we used to call the place – and I will set to work directly. Have you a new coat – a valuable one?”

“Yes. But what on earth do you want it for?”

“To bait the trap. Go and get it for me at once, and bring me a reel of black cotton. Go, and don’t ask questions.”

Harry went off full of wonder and speedily returned with the required articles.

Taking the coat I spread it over the copper, which, having been recently whitewashed, showed it up nicely. I then fastened the end of the reel of black thread to the back buttons of the coat, spreading the latter out as if it had been put there to dry.

“Now, Harry,” I said, “you must keep the women away from the passage as much as possible. I must have it; so if anyone is there using it make some excuse to get them out. Now, I will unwind some of this cotton and place it on the floor, as you shall see. If you carry out my orders to the letter I warrant we shall land our fish [tonight]. If not, I shall be deeply disappointed.”

I laid out the line, taking care not to leave too much slack, passed it under both of the doors, and, holding the reel in my hand, sank into the appointed seat, which luckily was vacant, with all the air of a tired man.

“I’ll do the job for you, master,” I said, as if still conversing about the business, “and be grateful. Let me rest a little while.”

“Do it when you get up tomorrow,” said Harry.

Well, there I sat and smoked, appearing every now and then to fall off fast asleep and to wake up with a start. This went on for three hours when suddenly I felt a slight tug at the thread.

The fish was nibbling, but I dared not be in a hurry. Presently I felt a different movement of the cotton and knew that the thief was putting the coat on.

Cautiously I put my pipe in my pocket and then snapped the cotton off close by the reel. You will wonder why I did that? Well, how could I tell that a number of the low fellows in the bar might not have been his pals, and if I had not been quick enough to open the door dash down the passage, open the second door and arrest him, they would have made a rescue and most likely smashed the whole bar. Again, I should not have been quick enough to have arrested him. He would have bolted, and thieves are generally good runners; he would have had a good start of me, and I made little doubt that he knew the country thoroughly, which I did not, and so would have been sure to escape. That would not have done for me – I meant to make sure of my man.

So, staggering from the chair, I slyly showed Harry the reel, and growling out, “I’ll be back directly, guvnor,” rolled out of the house in the manner of a drunken man.

Once clear of the door I turned down the lane which I have described as running to the river, for I knew that the thief having got clear of the house, would make for the bridge, come quickly down the lane, cut through the main road, and make his way down some lanes into the middle of the Seven Sisters road, where in a crowd it would be difficult to catch a trace of him. I was not mistaken. There was my man coming surging along at a good pace. A perfect giant. I knew

him directly. There was no mistaking the immensely broad shoulders, long legs and bullet head, or the huge strides he took. It was Arthur Blendel, a well-known thief, as bad a vagabond as ever walked. He was celebrated for boxing and wrestling, and was known for carrying a dagger-knife with him, which he swore he would use on any policeman who attempted to arrest him. The fellow could run like a stag, so if I raised an alarm he would be off like a shot. If I attempted to arrest him he would kill me for a certainty, for I was no match for him – no, nor three such as me. How he managed to get Balmer’s coat on, was a mystery to me – It must have been because Balmer is very fat.

I scarcely knew what to do, but I was not going to lose my man, so going up to him, I said:

“Hullo Arthur, what are you doing up here?”

He started for he knew my voice in an instant, and then he said in the regular thieves’ whine:

“Hello, Mr. Fox! I think I should ask you what you are doing up here, and in that disguise, too.”

“There has been a burglary at the Ferns down there – Major Crawford’s house – and I am on about it.”

“You don’t suspect me?” he growled, as he stepped back a pace or two. “S’help me, I have been miles away –“

“Yes, yes; I know that. This has been done by country hands in collusion with one of the maids. I fancy I have a clue to the matter. But do you know that you are wanted, Arthur?”

“Me! What precious put up have you policemen made now? S’help me, a poor fellow can’t work honestly for the perlice. But I won’t be taken for nothing, so I tell you, Charlie Fox. I’d sooner be hanged for murder than quodded. So look out, Charlie!”

As he spoke I saw the gleam of the knife in his hand and I did not feel comfortable.

“Don’t be a fool Arthur,” I said; “I am not in the case. The put up, as you call it, this time is for bigamy.”

“Bigamy!” he shouted, with a roar of laughter, as he shut his knife, much to my relief. “Why, I never was married in my life. You know that Mr. Fox?”

“Well, so I said when I heard the charge; but the women swore it and each have certificates.”

“Women! Ha, ha, ha, ha! And who are these blessed beauties?”

“Sal Boyd – the Irish girl – and Mary Crew. I happened to call at the police-station as I was coming out, and there they were at it, hammer and tongs. I bet they are both there now. If you take my advice you will go at once and face the matter. I’ll go with you and bear witness that to

the best of my knowledge and belief you are not married and also as to the characters of the girls.”

“Characters of the girls?” he muttered in virtuous indignation. “They ain’t got none. But I’m on, sergeant. I’ll give it to em. Married! Ha, ha, ha! Well, that is cheek. Come on, sergeant; I shan’t rest till I’ve faced those impudent hussies. And two such wives! Ho, ho, ho, ho!”

Thus laughing and enjoying the joke he strode on, I having almost to run to keep pace with him. We reached the station where I was glad to see a number of constables, to whom I gave the office; and then I placed him in the dock, and there he stood smiling impudently at the inspector.

“What is the charge?” demanded the inspector, for he did not like too much familiarity.

“Stealing a coat from the back kitchen of the Jolly Farmers, sir.”

Scarcely had I finished my speech than Arthur, uttering a yell of rage, attempted to leap the rail and get at me; but the police were on to him and he was soon handcuffed and his boots taken off. Then such a torrent of abuse followed as I never heard in my life before. Of course the evidence convicted him. Harry swore to the coat, which was rather damaged in the tussle, and there was the piece of cotton on the button. So, through my means, the first thief I had ever known was caught by a thread.

The Delta Herald [PA], August 3, 1883

The Freeborn County Standard [MN], September, 20, 1883

The version printed in *The Freeborn County Standard* was prefaced by this introductory paragraph:

"I am a detective. I am not ashamed to own it; indeed, I am proud of my profession, as every good detective ought to be. I know some people look down on a policeman. I should like to know what they should do for aid against the rogues and swindlers who always abound in wealthy cities if it were not for us. The very people who make the most fun of us are the first to seek our aid if they are robbed and swindled."