

The Robbery at Osborne's Hotel

Inspector F.

“DETECTIVE” literature, if it may be so called, appears to have acquired a wide popularity, chiefly, I suppose, because the stories are believed to be, in the main, faithfully-told, truthful narratives. I have read them all, and need hardly say have discovered mistakes which proved to me that the best and most popular of them were the handiwork of a literary man, not the result of an actual experience. I have frequently made remarks in this sense to my friends, several of whom thereupon suggested that I should publish my own real experiences. I do not know that I should have yielded to the suggestion, had I not a few months since made acquaintance with a gentleman who writes for the best of the London periodicals. He warmly urged me to pitch together the incidents retained in my memory with the memoranda thickly scribbled in my note-book, promising on his part to see the product carefully through the press. I agreed to do so and this series of tales is the result. Tales, certainly, but tales of truth. It is I who have furnished the pen which jots down these recollections; my literary friend having done nothing more than point and nib it.

The only indication I shall give of my individuality is contained in the following few lines. Several months previous to the organization, in 1829, by Sir Robert, then Mr. Peel, Secretary for the Home Department I had made myself conspicuous to a certain degree in the neighborhood of Covent-garden as an amateur, supplementary sort of constable, and in several instances wherein the Charleys were completely nonplussed, succeeded in bringing criminals to justice. This seemed to be my natural vocation; and when the new police force was in process of definitive formation, I received a communication from Colonel Rowan, proposing to appoint me inspector, if such a post were worth my acceptance. I instantly closed with the offer, disposed of my business—not a very profitable one (I had attended more to the affairs of the public than to my own, and entered with alacrity upon the duties of my new profession.

The detective brigade, strictly so called, was not organized till about ten years after the establishment of the new force, but we all acted in that capacity when occasion required us to do so. My first noticeable essay in that particular line occurred a few months after the opening of the London and Birmingham Railway, now the North-Western.

I was in waiting at Bow-street to watch a case in which two officers in the division I belonged to were implicated, when a young and singularly-interesting woman was placed at the bar to answer a charge of robbery committed at Osborne's Hotel, in the Adelphi, then kept by the late Mr. W. Chaplin, afterwards a great railway proprietor, and member of Parliament for Salisbury.

I cannot more succinctly render what occurred in the justice-room than did the next day's *Times*:—

“BOW-STREET.—A singularly-interesting young woman, who gave the name of Saunders, Mrs. Lucy Saunders, was charged with having stolen a large quantity of jewellery at Osborne’s Hotel, in the Adelphi, under somewhat remarkable circumstances.

“Mrs. Saunders, though not a native of Birmingham, has—if her own statement is to be credited—resided there many years, in creditable, if humble circumstances. She is a widow, with two young children to support. If we may believe her, she had occasion to leave Birmingham for London the day before yesterday to confer with a relative, who unfortunately happens to be just now in Paris, or somewhere else. At —, still following her story, she met with Mrs. Jefferson, a dashing, fashionably-attired lady, with whom many years previously she had been acquainted; and in order to travel in the same carriage with the dashing, fashionably-attired lady, Mrs. Lucy Saunders, though confessedly straitened in means, purchased a first-class ticket. Mrs. Jefferson, it appeared, ostentatiously discoursed during the journey upon her high position in the social scale, compared with what it was in former days. Amongst other proofs of affluence, she instanced the jewellery on her person, and the splendid gems in a casket which she never for a moment parted with when travelling, amounting in value, she said, to more than a thousand pounds. Arrived in London, Mrs. Jefferson insisted that her old acquaintance should accompany her to Osborne’s Hotel, in the Adelphi, and sleep there. Mrs. Lucy Saunders consented with seeming reluctance, and both ladies occupied one bed. Mrs. Jefferson, greatly fatigued by her journey, did not awake till about ten o’clock the next morning. Her companion, an earlier riser, had quietly got up and left the hotel, she was informed, at least two hours previously, and was not returned. This was rather odd behaviour, but consternation succeeded to surprise when it was almost immediately discovered that the lady’s jewellery, casket and all, had disappeared. Tremendous hubbub thereupon in the hotel—wildest commotion, from garret to cellar—soon settling down into solemn conviction that the woman who slept with the lady and left the hotel before eight on a winter’s morning was the thief. The police (immediately sent for) concurred in that conviction; and, finally, Mrs. Lucy Saunders was caught, late in the afternoon of the same day, at the Euston station. A few moments before she was arrested, a gentlemanly-looking man, with whom she was conversing, had hurriedly left her. The woman vehemently asserted her perfect innocence, and not the less earnestly, or passionately, when her person being searched, the duplicate of a diamond ring afterwards identified by Mrs. Jefferson, as part of the stolen property, pledged for twenty pounds, was found in her purse, which purse, moreover, contained eight sovereigns and some silver. The bewildered astonishment affected by the prisoner at the sight of the purse and contents was, the police said, a capital piece of acting; but when, in another part of her dress, eleven duplicates of watches pawned in London at various places during the last two months, were found by the searcher, Mrs. Lucy Saunders’ assurance completely forsook her, and she fainted. The magistrate remanded the prisoner for a week; the authorities of Birmingham will in the meantime be communicated with, and every effort made by the police to trace the missing property.”

The foregoing summary of the investigation, so far as it had gone, was quite accurate. Not the slightest colouring adverse to the accused had been imported into the evidence; and when being questioned as to the eleven watch duplicates, Mrs. Lucy Saunders

refused, with distressing hysterical sobs, of course, to say how or of whom she obtained them, admitting at the same time that her chief errand in London was to redeem those very watches, who could for one moment doubt her guilt? The magistrate said he was as certain she had stolen Mrs. Jefferson's jewels as if he had seen her purloin them with his bodily eyes. He advised her to give the police a clue to the whereabouts of her confederate—her paramour, probably—who had slunk off at the Euston station a few minutes before her apprehension. Should the jewellery be recovered by her help, that circumstance would no doubt weigh in her favour with the judge by whom she would be sentenced, in mitigation of punishment, as of her conviction no possible doubt could be entertained.

Much wiser men than the presiding magistrate would unquestionably have arrived at the same conclusion, and yet poor Mrs. Lucy Saunders was as innocent of the crime imputed to her as the magistrate himself, and in the matter of the watch-duplicates had been engaged in an act of self-sacrificing, compassionate beneficence!

My reason could not dissent from the judicial decision of the magistrate, and why did my feelings war with that decision? I knew not. Surely it could not be that I was influenced by the woman's sweet fair face, a face which I had certainly seen before—in a dream, perhaps; yet when sentence of remand was pronounced, accompanied by those baleful, pitiless remarks, she burst into an agony of grief—not rageful grief, of beseeching terror rather—and wildly wringing her hands, exclaimed in a voice broken by hysterical sobs—“O my children! my poor, lost brother! God! God! what will become of them?” I was not only deeply affected, but doubt of her guilt, spite of the damning evidence adduced, arose in and fastened itself upon my mind.

Where have I before seen that pale, sweet, starlit face? This was the question, to the exclusion of all others, which, as I took my way homewards from the court, exercised my brain. Where and when? Somewhere—somewhere—I could readily have sworn.

I had supped, and was smoking my pipe, when a dark, dusty nook of memory suddenly lit up. “Lucy Dawson, as I'm alive!” I hotly blurted out. My wife stared. “Lucy Dawson! And pray who may Lucy Dawson be?”

I parried this very natural query by saying that I suddenly remembered that a woman accused of robbery, and calling herself Mrs. Saunders, was a person whom I had once known by the name of Dawson.

Lucy Dawson, of Bridgewater, my earliest boy-flame—whose image, though I had never spoken to her in my life, played for years like sunlight about my heart—a thief! I could not believe it—at least, I would not; and resolved to see and speak with her at the earliest possible moment on the morrow.

“You do not recognise me,” I gently said, having obtained a private interview with the weeping, wailing woman; “you do not recognise, know me. I am not surprised at that, but

I well remember you. Your maiden name was Lucy Dawson; you were born and passed your early youth at Bridgewater, Somersetshire.”

“Quite true,” she answered; “but what then?”

“I wish to gain your confidence. Yourself and family used to frequent the Independent chapel in Bridgewater; so did my family and myself. You and yours occupied the front row in the cross gallery; we the communion pew on the floor, immediately beneath the pulpit. Now, don’t you remember that a rude lad, about seventeen or eighteen years of age, seating himself with his back to the pulpit, used to gaze so persistently during the whole service at your face, that you were at length obliged to screen it by placing your brother’s hat upon the ledge before you?”

“Certainly I remember that,” she replied, smiling and blushing through her tears; “certainly I remember that. Were you that boy—that youth?”

“I was. Now, do you feel sure I shall not abuse your confidence?”

“I do—I do! I will tell you all, without reserve.”

She did so, and this was the story of her life:—

Lucy Dawson was born in Bristol; her father, a lieutenant in the 44th Regiment of the line, had been wounded in the attack upon General Jackson’s cotton bales in New Orleans. He retired on his half pay and a pension for his wound, settling first at Bristol. There he married, and the sole issue of his union was a son, baptized James, who was ultimately apprenticed to a watchmaker. The first wife died. Lieutenant Dawson married again. The second wife gave birth to a daughter—the Lucy of this narrative. The lieutenant did not long survive his second nuptials. The widow had a sore struggle with the world, in consequence, and removed to Bridgewater, where her own relations were established, and with their help she bravely fought the battle of life till Lucy had passed her eighteenth year, when she suddenly expired of disease of the heart. On the day previous to that sad occurrence, Lucy had been engaged to Archibald Saunders—a travelling agent for a Birmingham house. He left that employ, commenced business in Birmingham as a book and music-seller, married Lucy Dawson, *and*—failed in business. His health, never very robust, not long afterwards gave way, and Mrs. Saunders was left alone to do battle with the world, and with two children to support. Yet not altogether unaided: Mr. Barham, her mother’s brother, a fairly well-to-do bachelor uncle—an eccentric, restless person, residing now in London, now in Paris—next no one knew where—furnished her with sufficient funds to set up a small shop in the Berlin wool and fancy stationery line, by which industry she had maintained herself in humble respectability till the very day when she met with Mrs. Jefferson at the railway station.

Why she was there, and the purpose of her journey to London, admitted of easy explanation. Her brother James had been established by Mr. Barham as a watch-maker in Orange street, Bloomsbury—in a small way, it was true, but being a capital workman, he

had a fair chance of gaining a comfortable position in the world. It was not to be. Late one evening he presented himself unexpectedly before Mrs. Saunders, haggard, wild in aspect, and partially tipsy. He was ruined, lost, in peril of prison, and in fear of the hulks! Excesses of various kinds having involved him in difficulties, he, in the hope of retrieving himself by play and betting, pawned eleven watches entrusted to him to repair. Of course he was fleeced of the money he obtained; the owners of the watches had become clamorous for the restoration of their property, and he had fled from London to consult his sister, in whom alone he had hope, bringing the duplicates with him. Mr. Barham, whom he believed to be in London, might, at her solicitation—though he had declared he would not give another sixpence to save him, her brother, from the gallows—supply the forty pounds odd required to redeem the watches; and if rescued from the disgrace and ruin he had madly incurred, James Dawson solemnly vowed to lead a new life, and abandon, at once and for ever, the vicious courses to which he had given way, and become a sober, frugal, industrious man.

The tender-hearted sister could not refuse his appeal, and at once consented to set off early the next morning, taking the terrible duplicates with her, and invoke the aid of her uncle Barham, with whom she was deservedly a great favourite.

At the station she met with Mrs. Jefferson, whom she had known as a girl at Bridgewater. That lady expressed great delight at meeting with her, and amongst other civilities, took the railway ticket for her. Mrs. Saunders received no change of her sovereign,—she had but two,—and the train being on the point of starting, she was hurried into the same first-class carriage with her officious friend, and away, en route for London.

“My liking—respect, I should say—for my companion,” said Mrs. Saunders, with heightened colour, “increased as the day—the evening—wore on, and she became excited by the good cheer at Osborne’s Hotel, in which she, I thought, over freely indulged. I was, however, compelled to put as good a face upon the matter as possible. Mr. Barham *might* not, I tremblingly reflected, be in London, and I had but one sovereign in my purse.

“We retired late to bed,” continued the fair widow, “and I told Mrs. Jefferson I should leave the hotel early in the morning—probably, as she appeared to be much fatigued, before she herself awoke. She made no objection; perhaps, did not distinctly comprehend what I said, as she seemed confused as well as sleepy.

“I myself being so anxious, so troubled in mind, did not sleep very soundly, and once it seemed that stealthy steps were creeping about the carpeted room. I called out; no answer was returned; the silence remained unbroken, and I again dozed off. With the first glimmer of daylight I rose, quietly dressed, so as not to disturb Mrs. Jefferson, and left the chamber and the hotel. Mr. Barham, to my great dismay, I found was not in London, and the woman in charge of his apartments did not know where a letter could be directed to him. So circumstanced, my only course was to get back to Birmingham as quickly as possible. You know the rest. And now tell me faithfully, truly,” she added, with tears in

her eyes, tears in her voice, “whether you see a chance, entertain a hope, of rebutting this frightful accusation—of rescuing me from shame, perdition—me, and my little ones?”

“I do see a chance, do entertain a lively hope of saving you and your little ones from shame, perdition. But I have some questions to ask. Do not, I beg of you, suppose that I, in putting these questions, doubt for a moment that you have told me the exact truth. I am as positive you have as I am of my own life. To begin, then. You heard, or fancied you heard, footfalls, stealthy footfalls in the chamber where you slept with Mrs. Jefferson?”

“I did. I believe it was those sounds, as I had a confused impression of something heavy falling upon the floor, which awoke me.”

“You called out, then all was silent, and you dozed off again. Was the chamber door locked?”

“Yes; that is to say, I turned the key myself, and left it in the lock. To my surprise, however, I found, on going out, that the door had *not* been locked.”

“If you had locked it, it could only have been *un*-locked from the inside.”

“Of course not.”

“Ah! Now tell me, who was the fashionably dressed gentleman who was seen speaking with you at the Euston station, and who went off so quickly upon catching sight of the police-officer?”

“I know nothing of him, except that he travelled in the same carriage as Mrs. Jefferson did from Rugby to London. When I met him again at the Euston station, he bowed and addressed to me a few civil, commonplace expressions—that is all.”

“Are you sure? Did he approach you nearly?”

“Yes. A porter’s truck, with luggage in it, was passing along the platform; and, though it would not have touched me, he, apologizing for so doing, drew me back beyond the possibility of contact with the truck.”

“And not long afterwards the purse with eight sovereigns, some silver, and a duplicate of a diamond ring was found in your pocket? I begin to see a chink in this millstone. Will you describe this polite gentleman to me as minutely as you can?”

Mrs. Saunders did so; and I had no doubt the gentleman was a dashing scoundrel whom I had long had my eye upon.

“That gentleman did not accompany you and Mrs. Jefferson to Osborne’s Hotel? But, of course he did not; the question is absurd. Do you know if there was any new arrival at Osborne’s Hotel after you were set down there?”

Mrs. Saunders could not say—did not know. I would soon know; and after a few more less important questions, took leave of her, with a confident promise that when next taken before the magistrate she would be discharged with honour.

I was very anxious, very eager in the business, and I had at once directed my steps to the Osborne Hotel, where I had a long conference with Mrs. Chaplin, an admirable lady, well fitted to grace the high position to which her husband's intelligent enterprise soon afterwards raised her. There had arrived at the hotel, about an hour after Mrs. Jefferson and Mrs. Saunders, a lady and her servant, which lady's name was Tomlinson. She was still there—had not gone out since she arrived, but purposed leaving the next day.

“Her maid-servant has gone out more than once, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes; she frequently goes out.”

Next I had a long interview with Mrs. Jefferson, a good, kind-hearted, if not the most immaculate woman in London, with respect to which this deponent sayeth not. She was a wonderfully clever woman, in my modest judgment, and would, I was of opinion, have made an excellent actress. We soon understood each other, and she entered into the pleasant plot I had contrived with charming spirit and good-will.

Mrs. Tomlinson and Mrs. Jefferson, at the invitation of the latter, dined together that evening—my noble self in full waiter costume, black coat-and white choker, in attendance upon them. I was curious to mark the countenance of Mrs. Tomlinson, when certain agreed-upon intimations fell carelessly from the lips of Mrs. Jefferson. The experiment was highly successful, and I had no longer a lingering doubt of being able to save from moral destruction the woman who, when a young girl, had been obliged to conceal her face from my impertinent unswerving gaze behind her brother's hat.

I was placing the dessert, when Mrs. Jefferson, in the most natural manner possible, said—

“Well, I do pity that wretched creature Saunders, against whom I don't think I will appear again. I am very glad, too, that she wont sleep with me tonight.”

“Indeed, my dear Mrs. Jefferson;—why? I mean especially—why?”

“Simply that my cash-box will to-night contain in gold and Bank of England notes—ah, yes, and I must not forget to take the numbers to-morrow—will contain, in gold and Bank of England notes, more than a thousand pounds; and you may be sure I don't want to be robbed of that.”

Mrs. Tomlinson could not, had she tried, have repressed the lightning flash of her dark eyes. The game was as good as won.

“I should think not, indeed! Have the goodness to remind the porter,” added Mrs. Tomlinson, speaking to me, “that a cab must be at the door for me at half-past seven tomorrow morning. I must be at Portsmouth before nightfall.” She added, “I do not love to be on the road after dark; and an aunt who is very ill—dying, I fear—impatiently expects me.”

Mrs. Jefferson was sorry; and, as she was going to the Opera, they would not probably see each other again for some time. Mrs. Tomlinson said that would be so, and they must bid each other farewell at once. “I lead a very rackety life,” said that delicious Mrs. Jefferson, as the two ladies shook hands; “shan’t be in bed again tonight, I dare say, till one o’clock. There is one comfort, however, I sleep sound as a top when I do once get to bed. Good-bye, love, good-bye.”

The Opera was over; Mrs. Jefferson gone to rest, when the Tomlinson’s maid-servant came down stairs in a terrible flurry. Her mistress was seized with colic pains, and required hot brandy-and-water. This was supplied; and again reminding the porter that well or ill her mistress would leave at half-past seven in the morning, the maid-servant tripped away with the brandy-and-water,—not a bad blind, though scarcely worth the trouble, especially as I knew that her mistress had been for three or four hours concealed in an alcove at the head of Mrs. Jefferson’s bedstead.

Two o’clock chimed clearly. Mrs. Jefferson was snoring tremendously, overdoing it, I feared; but for that the house was silent as the grave, when *click*—the faintest click of the bolt of the chamber lock, as a cautious hand within turned the key—caught my greedy ear. The door gently, very gently opened, was as gently closed, and the softly-stealing steps of Mrs. Tomlinson, carrying a cash-box in her hand, came towards where I stood concealed, anxiously expectant, on the way to her own bed-room.

A scream to waken the dead! Then a frantic attempt at escape—flight!

“My dear Mrs. Tomlinson,” said I, “it’s of no manner of use to twist and wriggle about in that way, not the least use. There’s all the establishment on foot coming on purpose to enjoy the play. Now, do you go quietly along with me, and if you have the good sense to enable me to nab and convict that infamous pal of yours who incited you to commit the jewelery robbery the other night, and who slipped the purse into Mrs Saunders’ pocket on the Euston station platform—it wont go so very hard with yourself, I’ll warrant.”

Ten minutes had not passed before Mrs. Tomlinson recognised the reasonableness of my proposal, and before half-past seven, the hour at which she was to have left to visit a dying relative at Portsmouth, Augustus Beauclerk, *alias* Marmaduke Ravensworth, *alias* Reginald Mauleverer, was seized in his bed; and soon afterwards convicted at the Old Bailey in his real name, Thomas Ruggles, and transported for life.

Mrs. Jefferson’s jewellery was nearly all recovered, and that lady, at my suggestion, made it all right with respect to the eleven watches pawned by James Dawson; and besides that, made Mrs. Saunders a pretty present, as some compensation for the

unmerited suffering she had undergone. I thought the Bow-street magistrate did not quite like to be so flagrantly convicted of having pronounced a rash judgment. He was, however, obliged, being challenged by the solicitor who appeared for Mrs. Lucy Saunders, to say that she left the court “without the slightest stain upon her character.”

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