

Too Clever by Half

by Thomas Waters

THE story has, I believe, been told—but not correctly—of a gentleman, habited in a long Spanish cloak, which reached below the tops of his Hessian boots, walking into an hotel, bespeaking and paying for a bed, retiring to rest, and in the morning raising a loud clamour through the house. His trousers had vanished during the night; in the pockets of which, he asserted, was money to over twenty pounds in amount. Certainly no trousers could be found. The gentleman had forgotten to lock the door; and someone must have entered the chamber during the night, and carried off the missing article, with its contents. The landlord was clearly liable, and paid for the unaccountable loss, though with reluctance. Something in the stranger's manner suggested suspicion; and the chambermaid significantly remarked, that, with that long cloak and those high Hessian boots, trousers (which no one had seen) were not much needed in such hot weather. It was afterwards known that the gentleman had no trousers on when he entered the hotel.

The story so told is, as I have said, incorrectly given. The exact circumstances, of which I had personal cognizance, were these:—The real name of the gentleman was Eldridge—Thomas Eldridge. He had served in the Burmese war, and was wounded at the capture of Rangoon. He was a man of considerable talent; and, though a very raffish scamp, looked the gentleman. Nor had his education been neglected. He had lately quitted the army—whether he had or had not purchased himself out, I cannot say. At all events, he was certainly in capital case when, on the evening in question—very early on a bitter December evening—he strode into the Hummums Hotel, ordered first an excellent dinner, and bespoke a bedroom for three nights. He threw off his cloak—a very handsome one, lined with silk, and trimmed with expensive fur. Unquestionably, he had trousers on when he sat down to dinner; he displayed also a splendid gold watch and appendages; and his purse, from which he took the money to pay for the dinner and bed, was seen by the waiter to be full of gold. Whilst drinking wine after dinner, he had also been seen to open a pocket-book, take from it a considerable number of bank-notes, count them, and replace the book in his trousers' -pocket. Several persons in the coffee-room saw him do so. He retired to bed late, and more than half intoxicated, having disposed of two bottles of port. The cloak, which was not of unusual length, he left in the hall. There was indeed a fierce clamour at ten the following morning, at which hour he had directed the waiter to have him called. The stranger's trousers had disappeared, and with them watch, appendages, purse, and pocket-book! There was a terrible consternation, Mr. Eldridge setting down his loss at four hundred pounds odd. I and another detective were sent for by the landlord; and, after a lengthened investigation, we could arrive at but one conclusion—that the stranger had really sustained the heavy loss, as alleged. He reasonably accounted for not having locked his door, and for having left purse and pocket-book in the pockets of his trousers, by the state of semi-intoxication in which he had retired to his bedchamber. Upon inquiry at Hoare's bank, we found that he really had, and only a day or two before, received there the bank-notes which were stolen with the pocket-book. There appeared to be no reason to suspect that any servant in the establishment was concerned in the robbery. Someone who had slept in the hotel and left in the morning—yet no one had left early—must have been the robber. That, however, which puzzled me was why the thief should have encumbered himself with a pair of trousers! instead of walking off with the easily-concealable contents. It was just unaccountable! The fact nevertheless was a stubborn one; and after

consulting with his solicitor, the landlord was fain to give Eldridge a cheque covering the amount of the loss. An exasperating necessity. True; but, exasperating as it might be, there seemed to be no flaw in the claim. But the abstraction of the trousers! That was a puzzle! I could not help fancying that Thomas Eldridge would some day or other cross my police-path! The notes, I should state, were all paid into the Bank of England in a short time; but so cleverly had the thing been managed, that no guilty trace could be discovered.

Two years, or about two years, had passed when my expectation or fancy was realized. And again my gentleman was claimant for a large sum of money—no less than twelve hundred pounds this time. The clever gentleman had invented a novel species of industry, or was about the most unlucky gentleman in the habit of frequenting first-rate hotels. Three or four times previously I fancied that I recognised, in newspaper descriptions of gentlemen who had mysteriously lost their property, when responsible landlords were in legal charge of it—upon one occasion at the Ship Hotel, Dover—the trousers-gentleman, varied as the name was in each instance. And I was right. This time the scene was the Trafalgar Hotel, Greenwich; the chief actor's name, the highly-respectable one of Bouverie. Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire,—his name was so painted in white letters on a large military-looking black leather trunk,—had been staying over a fortnight at the Trafalgar, where, from his lavish liberality, he was quite a favourite with waiters, chambermaids, boots, &c.

One day a gentleman from the establishment of Mr. Hancock, the eminent jeweller, arrived at the Trafalgar to deliver personally to Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, jewellery to the value of over twelve hundred pounds—jewellery purchased the previous day, and paid for. Mr. Bouverie was out—would not return till late; and had left orders that if the expected casket of gems arrived during his absence, it should be placed in a particular drawer in his bed-chamber, the key of which he left with the landlord for that purpose. The casket arrived; and was placed as directed, by the landlord himself, who, having locked it up, took away the key, and gave it for safe keeping to the bar-lady. The landlord had, of course, to give a written receipt for the casket.

Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, did not return to the Trafalgar that night. He had gone to the Queen's Theatre, to witness the performance of Grisi in Norma, and finally decided to sleep in London.

He returned to the Trafalgar the next day, at about five in the afternoon, bringing a friend to dine with him. The landlord did not happen to be in the way, and nothing was said about the jewel casket till after dinner, when Mr. Bouverie asked a waiter to inquire if it had arrived. This brought in the landlord, who had since come into the hotel. The casket *had* come safe to hand, and there was the key of the drawer in which it had been placed. Mr. Bouverie requested a waiter to fetch it, as he wished to show the jewels to his friend. The landlord was going upstairs and would bring the casket himself.

The clamour at the Hummums when the mystery of the trousers was first announced was as nothing, as I heard it described, to the confusion of tongues which arose in the Trafalgar when the loss of the jewel-box was discovered by the astounded landlord. The only person who did not appear to share in the general dismay was Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, himself. He remained perfectly calm. It would be found, he said—the landlord might not remember exactly where he

had put it; a suggestion which that dreadfully irritated gentleman would not listen to for a moment. The bar-lady, sternly questioned by the proprietor of the hotel, declared that she had not parted with the key entrusted to her for a single moment; vehemently insisted that her trunks—she herself—should be searched; went into violent hysterics, and was carried off to bed. The police were ultimately called in; boxes, trunks, drawers were ransacked; the hotel, in fact, turned inside out, amidst a general uproar, which did not wholly subside till past midnight, to be renewed again at cock-crow, though with gradually-abating violence. Nothing was discovered, except that the casket had vanished—that tremendous fact was ascertained beyond all possibility of doubt; and if a negative were logically proveable, it would have seemed equally clear that nobody had taken it.

Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, was the last to give up the hope that it wouldn't turn up somewhere in some out-of-the-way unexpected place—an iteration so frequently indulged in as to at last considerably increase the very natural savageness of the landlord, who had been privately informed by a respectable solicitor that he was unquestionably liable for every penny of the twelve hundred pounds odd, and liable in damages more for any delay or other serious inconvenience to which the loss might subject Mr. Adolphus Bouverie. It was like perpetually telling a furiously hungry man that he would be certain to get a dinner where a dinner could never by any chance be had.

At last, Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, himself despaired of finding the missing jewel-case; ordered his bill, discharged it, sent for the landlord, and politely inquired if it would be quite convenient just then to write a cheque for the twelve hundred odd pounds sterling.

“Cursedly inconvenient,” replied that gentleman, forgetting for a moment the respect due from a landlord to a guest who paid punctually; and “he only wished he had never set eyes upon Mr. Bouverie or his casket either. He would send for the London detective police, and see if they could get to the bottom of the dreadful business. Till they had made a report he would not pay one shilling.”

“You may send,” said Mr. Bouverie, “if it so pleases you, to all the detectives in London. But I cannot wait here any longer; neither do I choose to delay insistance upon payment. If the loss of twelve hundred pounds would seriously inconvenience you, I might perhaps consent to bear a portion of the loss, or at least afford time for the liquidation of the debt. As it is, if the money is not paid before I leave, which will be very shortly, I shall place the matter forthwith in my solicitor's hands, with instructions to proceed with vigour and dispatch.”

The telegraphic message to Scotland-yard, requesting the services of a detective officer at the Trafalgar, Greenwich, reached the office when I happened to be present and not particularly engaged. I had read a report of the jewel robbery at the Trafalgar, Greenwich, in the papers, and had felt an inclination to run down upon my own account, without waiting for instructions, just to ascertain if it was Bouverie, *alias* Eldridge, who had lost the jewels. I, in consequence, volunteered—indeed, asked—to be sent on the Greenwich errand; the request was granted, and I was at the Trafalgar within an hour of the dispatch of the request by the landlord to Scotland-yard.

“Can I see this Mr. Adolphus Bouverie?” I asked the landlord, after listening to his lamentable story. “That is the first point.”

“I am afraid he is gone,” was the disappointing answer; “but I will inquire.”

“Step this way, Mr. Clarke. Mr. Bouverie has stayed to see the evening paper. He is in the coffee-room.”

“Mr. Eldridge”—it was that gentleman, sure enough—“I wish to speak with you in private.”

“Eldridge!” exclaimed that individual, springing up from his chair, and his face turning to the colour of new mahogany; “my name is Bouverie.”

“It may be now; but it was, two years ago, Eldridge—I mean when you were stopping at the Hummums Hotel, and lost your trousers and property to the value of four hundred pounds there! You must remember Clarke, the detective officer, who, with another, investigated that curious business. May I speak with you?”

“Oh, certainly.”

The man had recovered all his native audacity, and followed me to a private room with firm step and haughty bearing.

“Mr. Eldridge,” I began, “you cannot but admit that two robberies, for large amounts, both at hotels, coupled with your change of name, suggest queer thoughts—”

“Curse your queer thoughts! I suppose a gentleman is allowed to assume what name he pleases?”

“No question of that if the change be not made with fraudulent intent. Let me advise you to compromise this claim; the landlord is anxious to do so. He will pay six hundred pounds down for a discharge in full.”

“Do your detective duty, *Mister* Clarke, if you have any detective duty to do in connection with this affair of the casket of jewels. I shall answer none of your impertinent questions; nor do I quite understand how I consented to see you alone.” He then flung out of the room, slamming the door behind him. A few minutes afterwards I saw him walking swiftly towards the Railway Station—a porter following, with his black leather trunk. Too old a bird he to be caught with chaff.

I ran over the Hummums affair with the landlord of the Trafalgar, and advised him to resist, for a time, at all events, the action certain to be brought against him for the recovery of the twelve hundred pounds. It would be always soon enough to strike. He promised to do so. I then minutely inquired respecting every man and woman that had slept at the house and left between the time when the jewel-box was received and its loss was discovered—minutely noting down the answers I received. Only one person that had so left suggested a hint by the description given of his person. A tall, lathy gentleman, sun-freckled, with light hair, and a slight cast in his eyes, had

been staying at the Trafalgar for some time, and had left only on the morning of the day when the jewel-box must have been stolen.

“A tall, lathy, gentleman, sun-freckled, with light hair,” said I, after referring to my notes of the Hummums robbery—“about forty years of age, apparently?”

“Yes, that might be about his age.”

“Light grey eyes, and a slight cast in them?”

“Yes, yes! the very man.”

“That man,” said I, “left the Hummums early on the morning of the trousers robbery. He did not appear to know Mr. Bouverie, alias Eldridge? But of course not. That is the man, depend upon it, who, in conjunction with his fellow conspirator, Bouverie, robbed the landlord [of] the Hummums of four hundred, and fully intends to swindle you out of thrice that sum. They are playing a bold game; but one in which a slight slip, very easily made, will be fatal. Meantime I can but repeat my earnest advice—that the landlord of the Trafalgar shall defend the action that will certainly be brought against him.”

And this really was the only rational advice that could be offered in such a case. “Patience! Patience! and shuffle the cards,” is a good axiom to be remembered in a long game, if there are cards to shuffle; but here there was only one doubtful trump,—the coincidence of the tall, lank, sun-freckled, squinting man being at the Hummums and also at the Trafalgar when the two swindles were consummated. At the Hummums that peculiar gentleman went by the name of Smith; at the Trafalgar he was Richards; and I had no more doubt when I left Greenwich that evening, that Smith and Richards, Eldridge and Bouverie, were exulting over the success of their little game *à quatre*, played by two only, than I had of my own existence. The question was, where to drop upon them,—and even then—

The action was brought against mine host of the Trafalgar; and by advice of counsel, after notice of trial had been given, an application, supported by affidavits, mine amongst the number, was made to a Judge at Chambers to postpone it till the following term, upon the ground that an important witness, who had passed by two names, as had the plaintiff in the case, could not be found. After a good deal of wrangling, the order was made; the costs of the application to be costs in the cause. A motion was made before the full Court to quash or vary the Judge’s order. It was refused; a pretty significant intimation of their Lordships’ opinion upon the merits, as disclosed by the affidavits.

All very well as far as it went, but which was by no means very far. There could be no further postponement; and unless the tall, squinting gentleman could be found, and some trace consequently be discovered that he had passed the stolen notes,—sold or pawned the jewellery,—and did so *in collusion with Bouverie*—there would be literally no legal case whatever for the defendant. All that I could do was to obtain an accurate list and description of the jewellery from Mr. Hancock, have it printed, distribute the bills amongst pawnbrokers in town and country. I also always kept one in my pocket book. I was really anxious to unravel the

“trousers” puzzle. It was very absurd that I should allow myself to be worried by such a ridiculous incident. It was so nevertheless.

At last I ran, literally ran, against Smith alias Richards by the merest accident. It was on the day the Emperor and Empress of the French were entertained in the Guildhall by the city dignitaries. I was not on duty; and feeling some curiosity to see her Majesty, of whose beauty people who had and who had not seen her talked in such enthusiastic terms, I mingled with the crowd in Cheapside; and being much hustled and jostled on the pavement opposite King Street, was endeavouring to thread my way out, when a sway of the multitude drove me, with a great many others, against a jeweller’s shop—a Mr. Trench’s, I think.

The large centre glass plate was smashed in; and one tall, lanky gentleman’s head was so damaged by contact with the glass, or the window-frame, or sill—all three possibly—that when something like quiet and order had been restored, it was found necessary to convey him to the nearest tavern. I was one of those who assisted in doing so, though my left wrist had been severely cut by the broken glass, and was in great pain. The man’s face interested me. Where had I seen it before? Never—after a time I was quite sure of that. Stop! Let me see. Tall, sun-freckled, sandy-haired, a slight squint. By heaven! this fellow may be Smith *alias* Richards! May be! Was! I will not impose upon the reader. In the hurry and hustling of carrying the man through the crowd, a note fell from his pocket; I picked it up, and read the address, “Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, Star and Garter, Richmond!” There was a stamp upon the envelope; and no doubt the letter would have been presently posted. No question that the address prompted the close examination of the insensible man’s features, which resulted in the conviction that he was Smith *alias* Richards. I restored the letter to Mr. Smith’s pocket, and went away before he was sufficiently recovered to notice my person. I should meet with him at the Star and Garter, to some purpose I hoped. The pain too of my wounded wrist was increasing. I would get home as quickly as possible, contenting myself with a sight of Her Majesty the Empress of the French in the print-shop windows.

It was necessary to be cautious. My reputation for success, as a rule, had become so well-established, that I did not choose to risk a break-down of the case by mentioning the chance discovery I had made to even mine host of the Trafalgar. Nor, *à fortiori*, would I myself go to Richmond to meet with Richard Eldridge, otherwise Bouverie. That is to say, I would not go in such guise that he would recognise me as Clarke, the detective officer. There would need to be two of us; so I, after consulting with Webbe (a smoothfaced young fellow), resolved to go down as aged uncle and youthful niece. First, however, before going into the matter regardless of expense, as managers get up pantomimes, a trusty messenger was despatched to ascertain if Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, was really at the Star and Garter. Yes, he was there; and so, very soon after that was known, were Mr. Josiah Romney and his showy niece, Miss Edwards. We both made up uncommonly well. Mine host—he might not perhaps like to have his real name printed—mine host, I say, whom the prospect of being done out of twelve hundred pounds, and laughed at in the bargain, had worked up to a state of intense white-heat passion, had, I may remark, given me *carte blanche* as to expenses. There was no danger of my being recognised by Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, if I sat next to him in the coffee-room, and politely intimated that when he had quite finished with the *Times* I should be glad to look at it. Now I had not the slightest idea that my gentleman and his co-conspirator were going to repeat the Trafalgar trick

at a place so near London as Richmond; and especially before the trial (which could not be again postponed) had come off. I had no such stuff in my thoughts. But I was quite sure that there must be, at such an important crisis in their affairs, constant and frequent communication between the two worthies, by letters chiefly, but now and then by personal interviews—the whereabouts of which would be arranged by such correspondence. The deuce was in it, therefore, if Mr. Romney and Miss Edwards could not make two—one, at all events—in observation of such conferences; and afterwards, by some pretence or other, acquire the right of officially, or officiously, ascertaining whether any illuminating MS. existed at Smith's lodging, as to how and where the plunder had been so cleverly disposed of. Failing that, the very fact that Smith *alias* Richards and Eldridge *alias* Bouverie were upon terms of confidential intimacy—an intimacy furtively, clandestinely, so to speak, carried on—would, weighted with other circumstances, tell strongly at the trial of the case upon the minds of the jury. There could be no doubt of that.

We were but just in time. A letter arrived for Adolphus Bouverie, Esquire, marked "Immediate and important." My niece, who expected to have found letters waiting for her at the Star and Garter, and who, seeing the postman approach the hotel, was waiting to ascertain if he had brought one or more for her, ascertained that fact. She had scarcely done so, when Mr. Bouverie (who had been out for a stroll, and who also must have noticed the arrival of the postman) hurried into the hall, seized the letter, tore it open, glanced over its contents, and immediately gave orders to have a cab brought to the entrance, without delay.

Mr. Romney was seated in another cab some moments before Mr. Bouverie stepped into his, giving only aloud as he did so—supercautious gentleman (my niece was standing close by)—the vague direction of Waterloo Bridge, Strand end.

At the end of Wellington-street accordingly Mr. Bouverie alighted, so did Mr. Romney. Mr. Bouverie pushed on eastward on foot, the individual just then taking so much interest in him close at his heels. At last we reach Farringdon-street, where Mr. Bouverie enters a stationer's shop; Mr. Romney does the same.

"How is Mr. Thompson after the accident he met with yesterday?" asks Mr. Bouverie of the gentleman behind the counter.

"Mr. Jones, I believe?"

"Yes; Mr. Jones, a friend of Thompson's."

"Just so. Mr. Thompson expects you. Your friend is better," added the gentleman, touching a bell. "But the doctor says his nerves are much shaken. You can pass through into the passage, sir. The servant will show you to Mr. Thompson's room."

I purchased a few quires of notepaper; left; called a cab; was quickly set down at my lodging; was Clarke himself again in a few minutes; and, armed with a Crown subpoena for Smith *alias* Richards *alias* Thompson, was soon upon my return to Farringdon-street.

I alighted at the opposite side of the street, and watched for the exit of Mr. Bouverie from the stationer's. I had not long to wait; and after about a quarter of an hour had elapsed, entered the shop.

“Mr. Jones, who left Mr. Thompson a short time since, has commissioned me to deliver an important message to that gentleman.”

“Certainly, sir. This way.”

The many *aliased* gentleman certainly looked ill; and, perhaps because his nervous system had sustained so severe a shock, or that he knew me by sight to be Clarke, the detective, regarded me with a wild, alarmed expression.

“I was present when you met with the accident in Cheapside yesterday, and helped to carry you into the tavern, Mr. Smith, otherwise Richards, now Thompson, and Heaven knows how many other pretty names! The confounded glass cut my wrist, as you see. Well, I am glad to find you look so well, considering; and will avail myself of the present opportunity of serving you with this subpoena, in the case of your friend Bouverie *versus* —, of the Trafalgar Hotel, Greenwich. I have also, it is only right to say, sent for the landlord of the Hummums, and expect him shortly. I must take the liberty, indeed, to wait till he *does* come. He is coming about a pair of trousers which a gentleman lost at his hotel; and is possessed of a strong fancy that you might be able to give some valuable information concerning that indispensable article.”

The doctor was quite right. The patient's nervous system had received a severe shock. How he stared—shook—his teeth rattling like a pair of ill-played castanets.

“Wha-at is—the—the—meaning of—of—this—eh—Mr. Clarke?”

“Well, I thought you knew me. The meaning, my dear sir, I take, briefly expressed, to be, *multum in parvo* you know, NEWGATE. That I think will be about the size of it. There is an infirmary, as you are no doubt aware, attached to that venerable institution, the doctors attached to which have great experience I am told in nervous cases. Your case evidently comes under that category. By-the-bye, Mr. Smith, or Mr. Richards, or—which is your favourite name? Never mind. That which we call a rose, by any other name would—the saying is a little stale, and the concluding word not critically appropriate. Never mind. At least, I don't. I was about asking you if you had a glimpse of the Empress yesterday?”

I had often found that this sort of slang badinage had a very depressing effect upon rogues of Smith's calibre. They think you would not be so *chaffy* if not quite sure of having by some unaccountable means snared your game.

My friend remained silent with his tongue, but there was a world of eloquent expression in his quivering, dilated eyes. Words could not have more plainly said—I am in a state of horrible fright. What had I best do? Turn round upon Eldridge, or be led like a fool to the slaughter myself?

“That Hummums gentleman,” said I, looking at my watch, “must be here soon. Swiftly the unreturning moments fly, my friend. You have at the most but ten minutes. Not long, but quite long enough, if sensibly used.”

“What—what do you wish me to do?”

“Nothing, my dear sir. I have no *wish* you should do anything, make the slightest exertion for yourself, or—but I don’t know if there’s a family. Ah! there is a wife and babies, eh? No, indeed! No exertion is demanded of you. Being in such a nervous state, we shall support you carefully downstairs, and a cab will convey you at a gentle pace to the half-way house to Newgate, *alias*—how those *aliases* run in my head—*alias* the Mansion House; thence by a natural and easy transition to—”

“Mr. Clarke,” interrupted the patient, “let us have no more chaff. Tell me what I had best do.”

“No, thank you; I would rather not. Opinions differ. But it would be a comfort to me, personally if you would tell me why you walked off with those trousers from the Hummums.”

“That was a foolish fancy of Eldridge’s. I wore them out over my own.”

“Ah! That was it! About the jewel casket at the Trafalgar? But, mind, I don’t say it will do you good to tell me where that is.”

“It is safe enough, with a friend. But come, Mr. Clarke: since I do find myself talking plain to you, it can’t be robbery. The things were Eldridge’s, and honestly come by; and I took them away by his direction. Newgate, indeed!—Why that’s arrant nonsense.”

“A long way off from being nonsense. Did you never come across, in your studies of the Newgate Calendar, such a phrase as ‘Felonious Conspiracy to extort money?’ However, now you have said your say, I will say mine; which is, that under the circumstances you have taken the best course possible for yourself. Meanwhile, distinctly understand that you are in custody. What ulterior measures may be taken will not depend upon me. And now I must telegraph to a niece of mine at the Star and Garter, Richmond.[”]

“What! Why, you know everything!”

“To be sure I do. For example, I know that that trunk of yours—which you haven’t been able to keep your eyes off for a minute together since I have been here—contains pretty things which Mr. Hancock would know again with half an eye.”

“The devil take it. You are right. We are done for, that is quite clear. But Eldridge’s friends—they are rich as Jews—will make it all square. His mother will; he knows that.”

“Square here, square there. He will be presently, as you are, in custody.”

I rang the bell and requested to see the master of the house. To him I briefly explained matters, and requested him to call in the first police-officer he could see. That was done. Safe bind, safe find. There was no danger of Mr. Smith giving me the slip whilst I was gone to Richmond; thence, Mr. Bouverie first placed in hand-fast, to the Trafalgar.

Richard Eldridge's friends did make it square. At least, I have a right to suppose so. There was no prosecution of the culprits. Mine Host suddenly recovered his equanimity and good spirits; and him of the Hummums winked pleasantly when, chancing to meet him in the street, I asked if he had yet fathomed the mystery of those trousers.

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *Autobiography of a London Detective*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864