

The Hotel Thief

A Curious Incident

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

A few evenings since, a small party of us were assembled in a snug parlor, discussing the various topics of the day. We had run the “Hard Times” till nothing more was to be said upon the subject, and then we turned our attention to the criminal cases detailed in the various newspapers. There were thefts, robberies, murders, arsons, and all sorts of misdeeds brought before us, and we gave them such consideration as we could afford.

“Speaking of thefts,” remarked one of the party, “puts me in mind of a curious circumstance that once happened in my own house. I will relate it if you choose to hear it.”

The speaker’s name was Barton—“Uncle Sim” we always called him—his Christian name being Simeon. He was well advanced in years, and had been engaged in hotel-keeping during most of his life. We were anxious to hear his story, and he related it as follows:—

“Something over twenty years ago, I kept a hotel in the western part of this State. The location was a good one, for there was considerable travel, but I had many good boarders.

It was somewhere near the first of July, along towards evening, that a splendid carriage drew up at my door, and as the driver leaped from his seat, he asked one of my men to come and help him. The carriage was opened, and a young girl a bright—pretty thing, not over fifteen—was the first to alight. After this, the driver reached in, and, with the assistance of my porter, handed out the sickliest looking man for a traveller, I had ever seen. He was tall and bent, and seemed more like a living skeleton than a thing of flesh and blood. The bones were all clearly defined, through the parchment-like skin, and I almost fancied I could hear his frame rattle, as he was helped along. A dry, short cough shook his system, and an occasional groan seemed to indicate that he suffered much. I had him conducted at once to the parlor, where I waited upon him as soon as the carriage had gone.

I found him upon one of the sofas, breathing with difficulty, and quite exhausted. He informed me that he was a merchant of New York, and nearly gone with consumption. His physician had advised him to come to my place and spend the Summer, and he had followed the counsel. I knew he had come, but with regard to spending the Summer I was not so sure. He seemed nearer to the church-yard than anything else. He told me I should have no trouble with him, for his physician would visit him nearly every day, and his daughter had come to wait upon him. He gave his name as Oscar Luton, and the bright eyed girl he called Clara.

I could not refuse him. He offered to pay me any price I might demand, and as I had rooms to spare, I determined to take him. So I had the apartments put in order, and as soon as all was

ready, we helped him up stairs. He went to bed at once, being faint and weary.

On the following morning a gentleman came who introduced himself as Dr. John Adams. He was a fine, intelligent looking man, about fifty years of age, and possessed a peculiar faculty of winning confidence at once. I learned from him that he was stopping with a sister only a few miles off, and should remain there while his patient, Luton, lived. While we were conversing, Clara came in and informed the doctor that her father wished to see him as soon as possible.

In half an hour the doctor came down shaking his head.

‘Poor fellow!’ he said, taking a seat by my side. ‘He can’t live long. He is very low and weak this morning.’

I didn’t much like the idea of having, a man die in my house thus, but ‘twas too late to help it now.

A week passed, and Mr. Luton seemed to be failing every day. He had grown so feeble that he could not sit up at all, and the physician came every morning, and sometimes in the evening. Clara was unceasing in her attentions, and I knew that sometimes she must have watched by her father’s bedside all night.

One morning I received a letter from New York, from a lawyer who had stopped at my house, with his wife and daughter, five days before, in which the writer stated that his wife had lost jewelry to the value of three thousand dollars somewhere on her journey. She was sure she had it when she stopped at my house, and her only other stopping place between there and the city was with her own father. The lawyer closed his letter by asking me to look around carefully, and see if I could gain any clue to the property.

That very evening Clara Luton came to me, and told me her father wished to see me. I went up at once, and found the invalid raised to a sitting position in the bed, with a pile of bolsters and pillow behind him. He looked far more like a dead man than a living one. He asked me to sit down, and then made some remarks, upon the state of his health. He said he thought he should get well—he knew he was very weak—much weaker than when he came—he could not even stand alone now—but, still he hoped to recover. I saw Clara turn her head away, and I thought tears came to her eyes. Poor girl! She knew well enough that there was no recovery for her father.

‘But,’ said Luton, at the end of a long pause, speaking in a hoarse, gurgling whisper, and with an expression of pain, ‘I sent for you on strange business. Have you many boarders in your house?’

I told him that the house was nearly full.

‘And are any of them strangers to you?’

‘Yes—nearly all of them,’ I returned, puzzled at the question.

‘I do not wish to trouble you,’ Luton resumed, ‘for you have been very kind to me, and I know there is no fault with you. But last night I lost between ten and twelve hundred dollars. I don’t know exactly how much there was, but it was over a thousand. I had it in that little dressing-case (pointing to a rose-wood box upon the table). About midnight I sent Clara to bed and then, under the influence of an opiate, I fell asleep myself. I slept until daylight, as did my child, and this morning I found my money gone. My door was not locked, and some one must have come in during the night, and robbed me. But,’ he added, as I began to express my alarm and sorrow, ‘don’t let my loss trouble you, for I shall not feel it, nor will it affect at all the good opinion of your house. I only mention it that you may be on the watch, for others, who cannot afford it, may meet with a similar loss if the thief is not detected.’

As the invalid seemed exhausted by his efforts thus far, I asked him no more questions. He said the money he had was mostly in gold, only about two hundred dollars of it being in bank-notes. He described the bills as nearly as he could, and I then took my leave.

I was in trouble now, sure enough. That there was a regular hotel-thief in the house was evident; but how should I find him? I had a hundred and fifty people stopping with me, and of the whole lot I was not acquainted with over five-and-twenty of them. However, I did the best I could. I put the clerk and chambermaids on the watch, and resolved to keep an eye open myself.

Just before supper was ready, a party of boarders returned from a day’s jaunt among the hills. They had taken teams and left immediately after breakfast. I was in the bar-room when they entered, and two of them, who occupied the same room, came and whispered to me that they had been robbed during the previous night. One had lost two hundred and ten dollars, and the other, over a hundred. It had been taken from their pockets.

But this was not the worst. When the stage came in from the West, it brought a New Orleans merchant, with his wife and two servants, who were on their way to New York. I gave them the only suit of rooms I had to spare, and then left my clerk to receive their orders. In the morning the merchant came to me with a look of deep trouble and anxiety. He had been robbed of fourteen thousand dollars during the night!

I was frightened now in earnest. At this rate I should soon be utterly ruined. I told the man to wait until after breakfast, and I would see what we could do. He did not blame me, nor did he seem anxious to resort to extreme measures, though he would leave nothing undone which could possibly lead to the detection of the thief.

When the guests had all taken their seats at the table for breakfast, I ran my eye carefully over the company, and found every person who had been there on the night before. I could detect no guilty looks, nor could I find a villainous-looking face. At length I asked them to give me their attention for a few moments, and when they were still, I told them all that had happened. I told of the letter I had received from New York; of the loss of over ten hundred dollars by Mr. Luton; of the robbery of the two young men; and, finally, of the heavy loss of the New Orleans merchant. I told them that I suspected no one. I looked upon each and every one as honest. Yet, under the circumstances, I hoped they would all be willing to allow their baggage to be examined. At this a

young man jumped up and said:

‘Aye—I for one, demand to be examined, and I hope all will do the same.’

And then he put it to a vote, requesting all who were in favor of the examination to arise. Every soul stood up in a moment. After the meal was done a committee was chosen from among the guests, and I went with them over the house. We first examined the persons themselves, and then overhauled the trunks and boxes, but nothing of the stolen property was to be found. My own men had been stationed at the doors, so that no one could leave, and thus we knew that all had been searched.

I could do no more then upon the premises. The New Orleans merchant, whose name was Lafont, concluded to keep on to New York, but obtained from me a promise that I would leave no stone unturned to find his money.

Two days after this, a planter from Kentucky stopped with me, and on the very first night of his stay his trunk was robbed of eight thousand dollars, while another man, on the same, night, lost nearly four thousand! On the next day, when this became known, forty-seven of my best boarders left me. They would stay no longer where they were liable to lose everything, and where, moreover, they were in constant danger of being suspected of crime,

I began to grow desperate. There was a thief quartered upon me—an expert and mysterious thief—and I determined to find him if it lay within the bounds of human possibility. If I did not, my patrons would all leave me, and my growing business would be ruined. That very afternoon the stage from Oswego, brought a wealthy family who were on their way to the Mississippi. I gave them the same rooms Mr. Lafont had occupied, and then determined to keep a watch upon them through the night. I said nothing to any one of my purpose, but when the guests had all retired I took up my position where no one would be likely to see me, but yet where I could see the door of the apartment in question. There was no light burning in this upper hall, but the starlight from the two large windows would enable me to detect the presence of any one within my range of vision.

It was very near midnight when I took my post. The clock struck one—then two—and yet no sound had I heard. Perhaps the thief had gone; or, maybe, he was afraid to venture again so soon. Half an hour more passed, and I was becoming tired of my watch, when I heard a movement as of a door being opened very softly, and in a few moments more I saw a dark figure glide across the hall. It was a slight, short person, and in female attire. I looked more sharply, and finally satisfied myself that it was Clara Luton. I supposed that she must be after something for her father. But no. She moved directly to the door of the traveler’s chamber, and placed her ear to the key-hole, and at the end of a minute she glided back as she had come.

I began to be interested. What could that young girl be doing out there at such a time? But I had not long for reflection. Very soon the sound of a very carefully opened door came again, and in a few seconds another object presented itself. It was tall and dark, and moved with a cat-like, noiseless tread, and from a single ray of light which shot out before it, I knew that it must bear a dark lantern. Who could it be? Surely not Dr. Adams, for he went away before noon. But I had

enough to do to watch the person's movements. He—I knew it was a man—stooped down to the lock of the door, and ere long he had it opened. He entered the room beyond—the room where my new guest slept—without having as yet made a sound which I could hear, since passing his own door. I determined to wait until he came out, and then confront him.

The minutes passed on—twenty of them, at least—and finally the man reappeared. He closed the door carefully behind him, and then started across the hall. When he was half way over, I leaped forward and grasped him by the collar. He uttered a grating curse, and, with a power which I was not prepared to overcome, he cast me from him and rushed toward his own room. But I was mad now, and with a single bound I grasped him again, this time bringing him to the floor. At this moment the door of his room was opened, and as the light of the lamp from within fell upon his face. I recognized the cadaverous features of Oscar Luton! It was my invalid—my dying man! At first I could hardly believe the evidence of my own senses. Whence came the strength he had manifested? But he gave me little time for thought then, and would probably have given me some trouble had not the noise of our scuffle brought some of the other boarders from their rooms. It was Clara who had opened the door and let the light out, but she turned back as soon as she saw me.

With the assistance of some of the newcomers I soon had my prisoner secured, and then I stood back and looked at him. He was as thin and pale, and deathly as ever, only there was a fire in his eye which I had not seen there before. It was the same skeleton, but with a new life in it. I asked him several questions, but he would make no reply. We searched his person, and found the small dark lantern, half-a-dozen curiously constructed implements for picking locks, together with some thousands of dollars which he had taken but a few minutes before. When we had overhauled him thoroughly, we lashed his hands and feet, and having put him in a small unoccupied bed-room. I called a stout hostler to come and keep watch over him till morning.

After this, we went to his room, where was found the young girl on the bed sobbing and crying bitterly. She was so pretty, so mild, and seemed so distressed, that my sympathies were at once excited, and I promised her, if she would tell me the truth, that no harm should come to her.

‘He’ll kill me!’ she cried in terror.’

‘Who’ll kill you?’ I asked her.

‘Both of them.’

‘You mean Luton and Adams?’

‘Yes.’

I finally led her to my own room, where my wife was, and succeeded in quieting her fears; and when I had given my solemn assurance that she should not be arrested for anything more than a witness, she told me the whole story.

She said her mother died when she was very young—of her father, she knew nothing. When she was ten years old, she was taken by a bad woman who professed to be her aunt. There she became acquainted with Luton, whose real name she did not know, as he had gone by different names at different times. At length this Luton paid the professed aunt some money, and the poor girl was given to him. As soon as she was able she was forced to assist her master in his villainies, he threatening her with death in case of refusal. She said he had always been very thin and pale, ever since she knew him, but the intensely cadaverous hue of his face was produced by a preparation of his own, which he applied when necessary. No amount of food could put any flesh upon his bones, though his general health seemed to be good.

She said the professed doctor was an accomplice and they had already operated in several hotels, just as they had been operating in mine. When I asked her how they contrived their plans, she told me that she had to watch the coming of the guests, and report such as appeared to have money. Then she had to see what room they took, and also make a careful survey of the doors, and so on. This she could do easily, as her wandering over the house would excite no suspicion. During the day she would manage to obtain the keys of those rooms in which wealthy guest, lodged, and by them Luton would shape his implements for picking the locks. At night, when her master thought it safe to work, she had to glide out and survey the premises to see that all was safe; and if she chanced to meet any one she had only to keep on down stairs; as though she were after something in the kitchen, and thus prevent suspicion. When she reported all quiet, Luton would issue forth to his work.

In the morning I had an officer called, and when Doctor Adams made his appearance he was arrested. At first he was greatly surprised; then he grew angry, and swore, and finally became calm and sullen; I had learned from Clara that Adams carried the money off when Luton had obtained it. The doctor would not tell us where he stopped, but the place was easily hunted up, and there we found all the property which had been stolen from my guests. It was in a small trunk which we found locked up in a larger one.

Thus I was enabled to return to my customers, every dollar they had lost, and as soon as the facts became known, my boarders all came back. Masters Luton and Adam, were found to be old offenders, and upon trial they were convicted and sentenced to a term of imprisonment which seemed likely to outlive them. Clara lived with me several years, and then became the clerk; and she is now the honored and respected hostess of the very hotel where her last labor of evil for a wicked master was performed.”

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