

A Butterfly

When Mrs. Walsingham lost the diamond butterfly which her husband had given her on the first anniversary of their wedding day, she was naturally much perturbed by the loss.

For two seasons Mrs. Walsingham's butterfly had been an absorbing topic of conversation whenever pretty Mrs. Walsingham herself happened to be present, and on more than one occasion it attracted the admiring attention of royalty.

And now the butterfly was lost. The world—or rather such portion of it as was crowded into the Court theatre on that disastrous night—had seen the jeweled insect flashing and scintillating in Mrs. Walsingham's pretty brown hair all the time of the performance. But when husband and wife stood in the light of their own hall lamp, the former had uttered an exclamation of dismay.

The butterfly was gone!

Everything had been done that was usual in such cases. The colonel had looked carefully in the carriage, and had made a thorough examination of each separate fold in his wife's dress. Next morning he had gone off to the theatre, and had himself searched the box in which they had been sitting. Then, with commendable prudence, he had cautioned his wife against speaking about her loss, even to the servants, and in the advertisement in which he offered a considerable reward for the recovery of the missing trinket, he had described it as "a jeweled insect (paste), valuable to the owner because specially designed for the Polish wife of Prince Boris Ivanvitch, when she secretly sold the Ivanvitch diamonds to supply her compatriots with funds for a revolutionary uprising."

The colonel was very pleased with the wording of this advertisement, and read it aloud with a great deal of complacency to his wife.

Mrs. Walsingham was not quite so pleased as her husband. She objected to the slight put upon her cherished possession by describing it as paste, and the aristocratic flavor of its mythical history did not console her.

"Even if I do get it back," she murmured plaintively, "I shan't care to wear it, if everybody imagines it is paste."

When, however, the colonel pointed out that he had referred the public in the first instance to a neighboring stationer's, and that there was nothing whatever in the advertisement to suggest to a captious world that Mrs. Walsingham's famous butterfly was in question, she was greatly impressed with her husband's cleverness.

That evening the Walsinghams did not dine out, but had a cozy tête-à-tête dinner at home, so as to be on the spot if any one came with news of the stolen jewel.

"Not that I am at all sanguine," said the colonel, as he thoughtfully peeled a banana. "If the thief had happened to be a stray pickpocket, we might hope to see the 'fly' again. It's more likely,

though, that the vagabond who has the thing now has had his eye on it for some time past.” But even as he spoke the solemn butler came softly in.

“A person to see you, sir,” he announced, deferentially; “he won’t give his name, but he says Foster, the stationer, has sent him, and that you will know all about it.”

Mrs. Walsingham gave a little start of delight, and the colonel could scarcely conceal his excitement. “Show him in here, Bailey,” he said quickly. “It is some one we are expecting.”

The butler withdrew, and in a few seconds ushered in a slight, gentlemanly looking man with sharp gray eyes and smooth face.

“Col. Walsingham, I believe?” began the stranger, taking with easy self-possession the chair which the colonel indicated at the far end of the table.

The colonel assented. “You have come, I presume—”

“To give information about some lost property of yours. Precisely.”

“Have you found it?” queried Mrs. Walsingham, eagerly.

“Well, that’s what I wish to ascertain,” said the stranger, suavely. “My name is Sawder, Fred Sawder, late of Scotland Yard,” he continued, turning to the colonel. “I’m a detective, and a few hours back I came across a piece of jewelry answering to your description.”

“You don’t mean to say so?” cried the colonel excitedly. “Where did you find it?”

“Well, that’s a long story,” said Mr. Sawder, deliberately, “and brings in matters which are, so to speak, professional secrets at present. But there—the whole account will be in the papers tomorrow, so there’s no harm in my telling you.”

Both the colonel and Mrs. Walsingham waited anxiously for him to go on, and, after a few seconds’ pause, he was graciously pleased to do so, pointedly addressing himself to Mrs. Walsingham.

“Of course, madam, you have heard of the great Fenton Court robbery?”

Mrs. Walsingham made a motion of assent.

“Er—well—the fact is, today I had the good fortune to recover nearly all that stolen jewelry. I have just telegraphed to Mr. Fenton to come up and identify the things tomorrow.”

“You have got back the diamonds?”

“Everything, madam, as far as we can tell.”

“Tell us all about it,” commanded Mrs. Walsingham, in her pretty, imperious manner, while her husband’s face seconded her request.

“Oh, well, there’s not much to tell, ma’am. From information received we made this morning a raid on the house of a party called Sleepy Jim—sleepy because he isn’t just sleepy, don’t you see, madam? Well, Jim was very easy and careless and we searched and searched, and not a thing could we find, and at last we gave it up. I was the last to go, and as I went I heard—for my ears are quick—I heard Jim give the least little bit of a sigh.

“‘Come back, men!’ I shouted; ‘the things are here, and we won’t be such numbskulls as to go away without them. Let’s have one more look around.’ Then it occurred to me that Sleepy Jim had not been sitting on the table for nothing all the time we were turning his place upside down. So I just pushed him and it to one side, kicked over the square of carpet on which the table had been standing, and lo and behold, there were plain signs that the boards had been raised pretty recently.

“We had those boards up again in a jiffy, and there in a deep hole underneath was all the Fenton Court jewelry.”

The detective paused impressively and looked at his two eager listeners, as though challenging their admiration.

“Well, and my wife’s butterfly?” asked the colonel inquiringly.

“I am coming to that, sir. Among the things there were several pins and brooches not included in the list supplied to us by Scotland Yard. I had seen your advertisement, and I thought one of the miscellaneous articles looked very much like your insect. So I just asked Sleepy Jim about it, and he told me that it had been brought to him by a man who had picked it up in Sloane street and had been afraid to pawn it. Jim gave him thirty shillings for it, for he saw the diamonds were uncommon good paste, and”—

“But they are nothing of the sort,” put in Mrs. Walsingham, indignantly; “that was only my husband’s idea to call them paste.”

“Ah! that was smart, sir, very smart. You ought to be one of us.”

The colonel looked gratified. “Won’t you take a glass of wine, Mr. Sawder?” he said, pushing the decanter over to him.

“Thank you, sir, I don’t mind if I do,” replied Mr. Sawder, helping himself, and he required little pressing to be induced to repeat the action several times in the course of the next hour.

As a consequence he soon grew exceedingly communicative, and entertained the colonel with the most thrilling Scotland Yard narratives, all illustrative of the cleverness of rogues and the superior astuteness of detectives.

“It’s not that the criminal classes are so especially clever,” he remarked, judiciously, as he wound up one of his tales, “but the public is so uncommonly soft!”

The colonel acquiesced. There were a great many fools in the world, he opined; but for his part he had no pity for them. He himself had never been taken in in his life.

“I can quite believe that,” said Mr. Sawder, politely; “and if I may make so free, I repeat again you ought to be one of us.”

The colonel did not resent at all Mr. Sawder’s freedom. He was particularly pleased with him and his stories, and in the fullness of his heart he told him he was going down to his club for half an hour and would be charmed to give him a life.

Mr. Sawder was quite sensible of the colonel’s condescension, and accepted the offer with effusion. Having arranged with Mrs. Walsingham that she was to come down to Scotland Yard the following morning, he went off with the colonel into the adjoining room, waiting there while this gentleman got ready to go out. The room was a sort of sanctum of Col. Walsingham, and while he drew on his gloves he passed in review his collection of firearms and other objects of warlike predilection.

The detective seemed a bit of a connoisseur, and his enthusiasm was sufficiently dashed with discriminating knowledge to be particularly pleasing to the colonel, who actually deigned to bring out from a cavernous cupboard his latest extravagance, to wit, a handsome fur lined coat he had recently imported from Russia.

“What do you think of that?” he asked.

“Think?” said the detective, “why that’s not a thing to be left in the hall.”

“Rather not,” laughed the colonel; “we keep it in a cupboard in this room. Why, that cost me eighty guineas!”

“It looks as if it did,” said the detective, warmly; and the colonel being now ready the two gentlemen got into their hansom and drove off.

It was scarcely half an hour afterward that there was a hasty pull at the door bell. Mrs. Walsingham was tired, and had gone to bed, and the household had followed her example. The butler alone was still up, and busy with the silver in his pantry.

“Why, the master’s forgotten his latch key!” he cried, hurrying to the door; “It’s lucky for me he’s come back so early!”

But it was not Col. Walsingham who stood in the doorway—it was Mr. Sawder.

“Sorry to trouble you, my man,” he said, speaking very fast, and slipping a shilling into Bailey’s hand; “but I left some important papers behind me, which I was showing to Colonel and Mrs. Walsingham. Will you give them to me?”

“Papers, sir? I haven’t seen any.”

“But they must be here,” cried Mr. Sawder, looking very worried. “The fact is — I daresay Mrs. Walsingham told you—those papers have to do with the Fenton Court robbery. We nabbed the man and his swag this afternoon, and the owner’s coming up tomorrow. So you see the papers are awfully important.”

“Of course, they must be,” said the butler, unbending from his solemn dignity on the instant. “Well, I’ll just light a taper and see if they are anywhere in the dining room. I may have overlooked them, but I don’t think I have.”

The detective followed him into the dining room and helped in the search, but no papers were found, and he grew more and more anxious.

“I tell you what it is,” he began, in a vexed tone, “Mrs. Walsingham must have noticed them directly we had gone, and knowing their importance, must have locked them up somewhere. Now if you can get them for me tonight I’ll not forget you.”

Bailey’s kindness, or his affection for the prospective coin, made him consent, after a little demur, to do what he could.

“I’ll go upstairs and call up one of the women servants,” he said, “and then send her to ask Mrs. Walsingham. I’ll shout up to the under housemaid,” he added; “she’ll come like winking when she hears my voice.”

It took longer to get the housemaid to come down, however, than the butler had anticipated, but at last she had gone off on her embassy, and had brought her mistress’ answer to Bailey, patiently waiting on the upper landing.

“I am sorry, sir,” he began, as he descended the last flight of stairs, “but Mrs. Walsingham hasn’t seen your papers.”

Then he stopped short. The rosy tints fled from his well-nourished face, and a bilious hue took possession of that broad expanse.

The street door was open and Mr. Sawder had disappeared.

“A ‘do,’” murmured Bailey, faintly; “a real old ‘do.’”

He thought of his plate, and almost breathed again as he remembered that he had deposited it in the plate chest and turned the key before he had let the insidious stranger in.

“Depend upon it, he’s only gone off with master’s umbrella,” he said, trying to reassure himself.

The next moment he struck his hands wildly together and rushed into the colonel’s study. When he came back he was perfectly green. The colonel’s fur coat, for which he had paid eighty guineas only a few weeks back, was nowhere to be found.

The officials of Scotland Yard next morning listened with polite attention to Col. Walsingham’s account of what had happened.

“A clean-shaven man with gray eyes, you say?”

“Yes,” was the answer. “He gave me the name Sawder—Fred Sawder.”

“Fred Sawder! The man was James Croft, alias Sleepy Jim, the cleverest rogue in the United Kingdom, and as slippery as an eel. I am afraid you will never see your coat again, sir.”

And he was right, for the colonel never did. But one result of his little experience was that he completely changed his views of criminals.

“It is not that the public is so stupid,” he was often heard to say; “it is those scamps who are so horribly clever.”—Argosy

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