

[Written for The Flag of our Union.]

The Stolen Silks

by James Dabney

“YES sir,” said the policeman, “I am an old hand at the business. I was a watchman long before the present force was organized, and I’ve been in the city police ever since they were first put on duty. I take a pride in it, sir, and I try honestly to win the respect and confidence of my superiors. I think I’ve done this, and that I may say without vanity that there is no member of the force so well thought of as myself. I’ve worked hard for the honor, sir, and I think I’ve won it fairly. There are some in the force that are jealous of me, and would gladly throw me out if they could, but I’ve no fear of their succeeding, as I’ve made myself too necessary to the authorities.

“As you say, sir, I’ve had some strange adventures in my day. Some have been trifling enough, while others have been such as I wouldn’t care to seek for amusement. When I have my duty before me, I’m willing to run any risk, but I don’t care to jeopardize my life for the mere fun of it, I can tell you.

“Well, one of these adventures I don’t mind telling you, if you care to listen. It may interest you, or it may not. However, if you find it dull, you must blame yourself for having drawn it out.

“During the second year of the Rebellion an extensive robbery was committed in the city of Boston. The chief sent me down to examine the premises, and see if I could make anything out of it. I found the proprietors of the warehouse in great excitement. The robbery had been managed so adroitly that no trace of it had been left. A large quantity of costly silks, worth fifty thousand dollars at the lowest figure, had been taken from the store, but no trace of the thieves had been left behind. The proprietors were in close consultation in their private office, and were completely bewildered by the audacity as well as the neatness of the affair. In a short time I found that they suspected one of their clerks, and I asked them to summon him to the office, without giving him any cause to suspect the reason of the summons. In a few minutes he came in, and I almost broke out into a laugh as I saw him. The fellow was as innocent of the crime as I was, and I told the merchants so. In the first place he did not have the capacity either to plan or execute so daring and scientific a burglary, and I was firmly convinced that he was also lacking in the courage necessary for such an undertaking.

“I agreed to undertake the case, upon the conditions that I was to manage it entirely in my own way, and have six weeks to try it in. I made the merchants furnish me with sample pieces of the silks they had lost, and told them to announce in a few days that they had abandoned all hope of recovering the goods. These preliminaries being arranged, I took my departure. I had not much hope of recovering the goods, for the work had been done so wisely that I had nothing to begin upon. I went home, and began to run over in my mind all the various cases in which I had ever been engaged. I could not remember any of the professional thieves who had been engaged in such matters, who could boast skill

enough to cover up their traces so perfectly. The whole affair seemed involved in a hopeless mystery, and for the first time in my life, I was completely baffled.

“While in this frame of mind, I was called on by the chief to examine into a case connected with a theft in a disreputable house in the lower part of the city. While there I went into the room of one of the boarders, and there found a young woman sewing on a handsome silk dress. The appearance of the silk seemed familiar to me, and I very quietly drew out the samples I had been given by the merchants, and compared them with the dress. To my astonishment and delight I found that the dress was of the same material. I made up my mind quietly as to my course, and rising from my seat walked to the door, locked it, and put the key in my pocket. The young woman looked up in astonishment and alarm.

“‘What do you mean by that?’ she asked, excitedly.

“‘I mean,’ I replied, coolly, ‘that I arrest you upon the charge of stealing that dress.’

“Her face grew as white as death, sir, and she sprang to her feet in alarm. She protested her innocence, and then told me how she came to possess the silk. She opened her wardrobe and showed me three other dresses she had made up, each of which corresponded with the samples I had with me. The story she told me made me open my eyes, sir, much as I had seen of the rascality of the world, but it also convinced me that the woman was perfectly innocent of any dishonest intentions or act. She had been victimized. I explained her position to her, and told her that to save herself she must identify the thief. This she consented to do, and we bundled up the silk dresses, and set off for the store. I was in high glee, for I had succeeded far beyond my wildest expectations.

“When we reached the store we were shown into the private office of the senior partner. I made him call in two of his associates, and then lock the door[.] Then I laid out the dresses on a chair before them, amid their exclamations of wonder.

“‘By the way,’ I exclaimed, ‘where’s the junior partner? I haven’t seen him?’

“He was called, and as he came in, I motioned to the woman to lower her veil. This she did. I then called the junior’s attention to the silks, and I never saw a man struggle so hard to maintain his composure. He said he didn’t think I had found the right goods, that he didn’t recognize them.

“‘Then,’ said I, ‘perhaps you will recognize your friend here,’ and I raised the woman’s veil. The man never said a word. He tottered and fell fainting to the floor.

“‘What is the meaning of all this?’ the head of the house asked, anxiously.

“‘It means,’ I replied, ‘that I must arrest your junior partner upon the charge of stealing the silks.’

“It was true. The junior had stolen the goods, and that was why the work had been done so neatly. The young woman with whom I had found them was his mistress, and he had given her a part of them without saying how he got them. She had received them, believing that he had come by them fairly. He confessed the whole thing, and the greater part of the goods was recovered, and I received a very handsome reward for my services.

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