

[Written for The Flag of our Union.]

The Detective's Story
by Caleb Russet

One sultry evening, in 1856, I was pacing the deck of one of our floating palaces on Lake Erie, arm-in-arm with John Smith, who was accounted one of the smartest detectives in his corps. Business relations, to which I may take occasion to refer at some future time, had brought us in contact, and a casual acquaintance had ripened into intimacy. He seemed specially adapted to his calling. Being liberally educated, with a polished address, endowed with extraordinary conversational powers, and the art of pleasing, together with a thorough knowledge of human nature, he was eminently qualified to fill almost any sphere in society; but, stimulated by a love of adventure, and a tolerably fair income, he was well content to remain in his present position.

A robbery had occurred some time previous, attracting considerable notice at the time, under the following circumstances: On one of the leading railroad routes of the country, an express company occupied a portion of a baggage-car of the express train. One day, while the messenger was traversing the road as usual, he was called, on some pretense or other, to go into one of the rear passenger cars. The baggage-master also left his post at the same time. While these worthies were absent, the iron safe, which usually stood very near the side door, was tumbled out by unknown hands, and when the messenger returned, which was but a few minutes before the train reached the next station, he saw at once it was gone. On going back to recover it, it was found broken open by some rude instrument, probably an axe or sledge, and the contents—some \$20,000, drafts, and other valuable matter, was missing. It was the prevailing supposition that one or more of the rogues were on board the train, with a confederate or confederates on the road outside; and while the messenger and baggage-master were out of the way, the deed was done. Knowing that Smith was principally instrumental in ferreting out and bringing the villains to justice, I entertained some curiosity to learn the *modus operandi*, and asked him if he felt at liberty to relate his “experience.” He expressed no hesitation whatever, and as considerable time had elapsed since the transaction, which has died out in the public mind long ago, I deem it no violation of confidence to relate it now, which shall be given in Smith’s own words:

“When the case was put into my hands to work out, several leading points were prominent in my mind. The rogues were not old offenders, because the game was too desperate, too much wanting in science and system, for old professionals to play; secondly, the baggage-master, Wiggins, had some complicity in the transaction. It would weary you to state by what process of induction I arrived at this conclusion, but from the date of this conviction I determined to cultivate Wiggins’s friendship.

“At this time, I became a vendor of patent medicines—a very useful character, by the way, when worn by a detective, but an extremely pernicious one, when the real Simon Pure his license to sell his poisonous decoctions, and hurry the poor victim into an untimely grave. I went to my wife’s medicine chest—laboratory, I had almost said—and took from thence sundry phials and pill-boxes, duly labeled. She had been an invalid during the first year of our marriage life, and I never visit that chest without a shudder, for the conviction unpleasantly forces itself on my mind, she has swallowed it all—not the chest, but the contents. You would hardly think it now, I know, for her weight avoirdupois is two hundred and fifty pounds; in fact, she once weighed three

hundred, but that was when my foot, weighing just fifty pounds, accidentally stepped on the scales. Luckily, before she came to death's door, I found means to divert her mind from nostrums by travel, and thus saved her. As I was rolling up bread pills, to put into the sample pill-boxes, and pouring colored water into sample phials, my wife inquired:

“What are you doing, my dear?”

“Putting these things to a better use than formerly,” I growled. “Handling these rascally phials always makes me cross.”

“They saved my life.”

“Saved a fiddlestick! Nature and a good constitution triumphed. A voyage across the Atlantic, together with travel over our own country, as a change of scene, did much; sleeping with a healthy husband did more; and—”

“I had just time to escape, before one of the empty wooden pill-boxes struck the door. Better that, than the concussion of two empty globes; better than either, the contents had never been crammed down my throat.

“I traveled several days on the train with Wiggins. Having often occasion to smoke, * the baggage-car was a place of constant resort. As it was the common practice to regale the baggage-master with the weed, by the frequenters of that place, it seemed a matter of course that I should offer him prime Havanas by the half dozen. If other loungers were in, the virtues of my patent medicines would be persistently set forth. In three days I had established my self on an intimate footing.

“In the evening, we agreed to go to a place of entertainment. He insisted on paying the bill. To do so, however, he found it necessary to have a hundred dollar note changed. From that moment, I conceived a sudden disgust for ‘patents.’ They had suddenly lost all their virtues.

“Shortly after, Mr. Wiggins received a pressing invitation to attend a meeting where certain judicial gentlemen were gathered, to explain by what means this note came into his possession. Not being able to give a satisfactory explanation, he was committed. In a short time he broke completely down, and was ready to communicate freely—the more especially as the hope was held out, if his information proved to be important, that efforts would be made to extricate him from the meshes of the law.

“It appeared that there were three men engaged in the transaction, besides himself. He gave their names as he knew them, but which proved to be *aliases*. He was paid a certain sum, not only to absent himself from the car at a given signal, but to devise a well-wrought plan to procure the absence of the messenger. This was nearly the extent of his information. Where the rascals were, what they were, and who they were, he could not give the least clue, save that he suspected one of them had a mistress boarding in a hotel in Boston. Upon this hint, action was taken. I was instructed to trace out the sinuous windings at this point, which I commenced by taking up

* Smoking-cars were then unknown.

quarters at the above-mentioned hotel. As my samples had not cooled, I was once more an agent of Doctor Pillgarlic's nostrums. It is not a difficult matter to detect an adventuress, or to become acquainted, especially when modesty embarrasses neither party. The fact soon became patent to my mind that *the* lady was there—the particular *one* sought. In a short time we became friends—on my part, something more. I took care to impress on her mind that I was desperately smitten. Walks and rides were the order of the day. She received my advances warily, however, because she was not satisfied of my real position; not only that, but the old connection was not yet severed.

“To remove all doubts as regarded myself, I took occasion, while walking the street with her, to make a call on a business acquaintance, a wholesale druggist, to whom I had made (over the left) large consignments. We were ushered into the pleasant office of my friend, who greeted me warmly, and politely gave the lady a chair.

“‘Time's about up on that bill?’ he asked, inquiringly.

“It was drawn from the file by the book-keeper, and the items critically scanned. It amounted to five thousand dollars. A check was drawn for that sum on one of the banks, which, it is needless to say, is a good now as it was ever.

“‘I have no especial need of the money,’ I replied, with an indifferent air; ‘but still it will serve to replenish the exchequer,’ at the same time drawing forth a pocket-book, stuffed and crammed with worthless bank-notes.

“‘I shouldn't think there was much room for more. Why, I suppose our house alone has paid you a hundred thousand dollars, first and last. Don't you think it is careless to carry so much money about your person?’ he asked, with a bland smile.

“‘Haven't had time to deposit today,’ I replied, coolly. We then took our leave.

“From that time her reserve vanished. From certain inductions, I drew these inferences: her protector's name was Jackson, or rather it was the assumed one; secondly, he was *my* man; thirdly, he was making advances to a young lady in high life, residing in Brooklyn, N.Y., wealthy, and most respectably connected. His suit was favorably received, for he was also respectably connected, being the son of a bank president in B—, Maine; was attractive in person and manners; had graduated at one of our universities; but, on account of his vicious courses, although not fully known, was barely tolerated by his relatives. The young lady and her relatives were entirely ignorant of this latter fact. His great anxiety was now to shake off the old connection, without being betrayed, for he was well aware that his mistress knew too much, as concerned his safety and peace of mind. She, on the other hand, was as jealous as women of such a class only can be—at one moment ready to compass a complete revenge, and at another fearful that the golden egg would cease to be laid, by premature disclosures. As it was, her exactions were severe, to which he undoubtedly submitted with the best grace he could, and was driven to the commission of crime, to sustain the tax of these expenditures.

“At length the sponge was squeezed dry. By this time the lady was ready to throw herself into my arms, cut all former connections, and form a new one off-hand. But ‘a change had come over the spirit of my dream.’ I had become tired again of nostrums, or walks and rides, and lastly of the lady herself. In the evening, at a late hour, I paid my bills, and in the morning, bright and early, took leave of the ‘city of notions,’ without saying ‘good-by.’

“A large party had gathered at the princely mansion of Mr. —, in Brooklyn, N.Y. Beauty and fashion, like twin graces, were arrayed side by side. The richly-ornamented chandeliers, with pendant hangings, diffusing a mellow light, brilliantly illuminated the gay and festive scene. Gay laughter and merry jest rang through the halls. The heart of an anchorite, forsworn to earthly pleasures, could not fail to throb tumultuously in an hour like this. The band discoursed its sweetest music. Tripping feet kept time in tuneful measure to its dulcet strains. ‘On with the dance! Let joy be unconfined!’ But lo! a sudden change, as if by magic, passed over the spirit of this festive hour. As when the gay revelers had assembled in Belgium’s fair capital, they were startled by the cannon’s opening roar, from the beleaguering hosts gathered beneath its walls, so the rich harmonies of music ceased to fall on the raptured ear, with its voluptuous swell; many a fair cheek blanched with a nameless fear; they gathered in groups, with hushed voices and breath, to whisper hints they dare not utter aloud.

“Two unbidden guests have entered the reception hall. They wished to see Mr. Jackson on business that would brook no delay. He reluctantly appeared, and inquired if their business would not wait till a more fitting season. No; they are minions of the law, whose behests must be obeyed. His [*fiancée*], attracted by curiosity and nameless fears, peeps through the nearly closed door. The visitors assured Mr. Jackson that he must accompany them, *nolens volens*. He peremptorily refused. They then, dropping all disguise, told him that he was under arrest for the commission of a grave crime. The lady heard, and to her ears it was the knell of departed joys—of hopes brief and transient, never again to hold dwelling in her heart. She fell fainting to the floor—‘there was a hurrying to and fro in hot haste.’ But why linger on the painful scene? Before a year had passed, her fair form had found a resting place in the family vault at Greenwood.

“Having arrived at the station, he was plied with questions relative to his accomplices. Being induced to believe that all was known, with the prospect held out that he might appear as state’s evidence, he gave a succinct account of the whole transaction. The hopes held out that a complete and candid confession would save him from doom, were not realized. Subsequently, on the trial, we received a sharp rebuke from Judge B—, for pressing such inducements at all. The court saw in Wiggins, the baggage-master, the only case for judicial clemency; deeming, in their wisdom, that the magnitude of the crime demanded an expiatory punishment from the most interested parties in the commission of the offense. However, we outlived the frowns of the court, but still we could not help thinking the rebuke unmerited, in this case, as we could not have traced Jackson’s confederates so readily as we were enabled to do by needful information being given. Acting on Jackson’s statement, we found Wilson in St. Louis, and Drake in Chicago. These two were respectably connected, and hailed from Maine. All were young, and realized my first impressions in not being old professionals in crime. They were simply fast

young men—criminal, it is true, but were impelled to the perpetration of the robbery, rather to satisfy temporal necessities, than engaging in it in the way of business. They were tried, convicted, and sentenced for a term of years, with the exception of Wiggins, who was discharged. A great portion of the money, nearly or quite all the drafts, and other valuable matter, was eventually recovered. I learn that an appeal has been made to executive clemency in behalf of Jackson by his friends, but with what success, I am unable to say.

“Now that I have spun my yard, and finished my cigar at the same time, let us adjourn to the saloon, and renew our game at draughts.”

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