

The Young Widow

A Leaf from a Detective's Portfolio

Sitting in the front office one morning, engaged in perusing the New York papers, I heard the chief's bell tinkle rather excitedly. The sergeant answered it.

"Send Brandon to me," next reached my ear through the half open door.

Before the sergeant could repeat the order, I passed him, and was by the side of the chief.

"Sit down, Mr. Brandon," he said, as he continued making some notes in the register.

I obeyed and anxiously awaited his commands.

"I have a singular case before me this morning," he began. "And I am about to try your ingenuity to unravel it."

My expectation was aroused.

"On the 19th of last month the Hon. Mr. F—— gave a ball at his mansion in Fifth Avenue, which was attended by nearly all the *elite* of the city."

"I remember it," I said.

"Do you remember what occurred there?"

"Almost every lady in the room lost some jewelry," I replied.

"Exactly, for which no one could account, as the party was most select, and it would have been an outrage to have suspected anyone present with stealing in such a wholesale manner."

I acknowledged the justice of his remarks. The chief continued:

"On the thirteenth of the month, a grand promenade concert was given at the Academy of Music, and the same thing occurred. This would not seem so singular as there was plenty of opportunity for the professional pickpockets, but the remarkable feature is, that no gentlemen were robbed, but all who suffered were ladies."

"This is indeed singular," I replied.

"Perhaps," responded the chief in a dubious tone. "Now for the last event: Yesterday morning, as you have probably heard, Mr. W—— was wedded to the daughter of Colonel H—— at Grace church. The assembly was large, and composed entirely of the *ton*. The bride received the congratulations of her numerous friends, and left the church, but had

not reached the carriage when she suddenly discovered that one of her bracelets was gone. A search was immediately made in the church, but it was nowhere to be seen. Then came another and another cry from various parties—all ladies who had lost one or another article of jewelry, with an occasional portmonnaie.[”]

I was getting excited.

“What are your conclusions?” I asked.

“I would first have heard yours,” said the chief looking at me closely, as though to test my penetration.

I reflected a moment, and could form but one opinion.

“There must be some person,” said I, “figuring at present in fashionable society, who is a second Babbington in the lifting profession.”

“A very proper conclusion,” said the chief, smiling at my simplicity. “But let us determine on something. For instance, is it a man or a woman?”

“Most likely a woman,” I remarked, “as none but women suffered from the thief’s adroit practice.”

“That would be the first conclusion,” said the chief; “but on the other hand, a man might perform the deed, confining his practice to females, only to throw the blame on one of them.”

I acknowledged the possibility of his suggestion, though it had but little effect upon me.

“You now have the particulars,” continued the chief. “I give you one week to solve the mystery, and to bring the adept to justice. —Here is a list of the principal losers. You can take your own course as to the plans you will follow. Good morning.”

I knew that this case had been placed in my hands as a test of my skill, and I resolved, if within the grasp of human ingenuity to compass it. It was a most singular case—occurring as it did, in the very heart and center of first society. It was impossible to accuse anyone on suspicion; there must be proof positive before a word could be uttered. How was it to [be] obtained?

I sat down and thought seriously, laying out my plans, as I grasped each point of the case. Then I arose to act.

Dressing myself in the very height of fashion, I hired a carriage and drove to the house of the Honorable Mr. F———. I found him at home, and stating my vocation and purpose, was invited into the library.

“I fear you have assumed a fruitless task, Mr. Brandon,” he said when we were seated.

I expressed my conviction of success.

“How do you intend to proceed?” he asked.

I remarked that I should be governed by circumstances, but desired a full list, or as near as possible, of all the guests on the evening of the ball. He went out a few moments, and handed me a complete list, which he had obtained from his lady. I ran my eyes down the column with eager interest; many of the persons I knew, either personally or by reputation; they were principally married men and their families. One name—a lady’s—seemed to make an impression on my mind. I had never heard of her, and—though it was a hazardous move—I ventured to ask who she was.

“Oh,” said Mr. F——, “Madame Delauney—she is an old friend. I knew her husband, M. Delauney, when I was Consul at Paris. He was Second Intendant of Police and died during my term. She is an American by birth, whom he fell in love with while on a visit to Paris with her father, a Boston merchant. She is very beautiful and amiable.”

This disarmed me, for I knew another question would give offence, and his report was perfectly satisfactory. I next asked the names of a few persons who had lost jewelry. He marked their names on the paper. I then took my leave, with many expressions of good will and hopes for success from the honorable gentleman.

My next visit was to the residence of one of the ladies who had been a victim of the mysterious pickpocket. Mrs. R——, with whom I was acquainted, received me kindly, and eagerly gave me all the information in her power. —Her loss was a large diamond breast pin, of which she gave me a concise description; also of a gold locket, taken from her eldest daughter containing the portrait of her deceased husband. By her kindness I was introduced to several others, who had lost various articles, in the way of broaches, earrings, necklaces, etc. —Some of these had been lost at the Academy, others at the wedding at Grace Church.

Having obtained all this information, I sat down to consider, and found myself about as wise as when I commenced. One of the ladies had lost a bracelet, at the first mentioned ball, and had loaned me the fellow to it. This being almost my only clue, I resolved to work on it.

Taking a list of all the pawnbrokers in the city, I visited each one and made a thorough inventory of their recent jewelry receipts, but could find nothing to match my bracelet, nor accord with my descriptions of the other articles lost. What was to be done next?

I asked myself this question as I was seated in the office, after my long and fruitless search. In a moment I was in the carriage again and off to Mrs. R——’s.

“What, have you gained a clue already?” she exclaimed, as I entered hastily.

“Not yet,” I replied. “But all is not lost that’s missing. Tell me,” I added, “who gives the next grand *conversationare* in your circle?”

“Mrs. Johnson.”

“When?”

“Tomorrow evening.”

“Can you get me a *billet d’entrée*?”

“Certainly.”

“Then procure it immediately for Mr. Le Clair, a Louisiana planter of your acquaintance. If Miss Belle, your daughter, would play my *chaperone*, it would be better for our scheme.”

Miss Belle was a gay, rollicking girl of eighteen, with black eyes, and a merry, laughing mouth, was especially fond of adventure, and being let into the secret, gave her ready assent to accept my protection—for that evening only—as the playbills say.

The next morning I received a special card of invitation to attend Mrs. Johnson’s *soiree* in 13th street.

At the proper hour I handed Miss Belle R—— from the carriage in front of the house, and led her into the grand reception-room.

I had got myself up in tremendous style. I was supposed to be determined to make a *hit*—whether I did it or not will appear in time. I am afraid that, if asked, I could not have told the use of the jewelry I wore. Certain it was that I had plenty of it—rings in abundance—not exactly in taste—but like my watch chain, belted across my vest, and a large seal dangling from my fob—all spurious—they were my bates [sic] which I had thrown out as an angler throws out a single line, with a dozen hooks at the end of it. That was my cash capital, upon which I would win my fortune of success. If there was a pickpocket there, I was determined he should have a fair chance at it, though like the angler referred to, if he bit at a bate [sic], he would find a hook in it, for every article was fastened with a secret steel chain.

The pleasures of the evening proceeded. I was introduced to several interesting ladies and gentlemen of congenial temperament, and, as I conversed, apparently unconscious of any purpose, I scanned carefully each individual of the company.

“Belle?” in a whisper.

“What, Mr. Le Clair.”

“Who is that singular looking lady in the centre of the group by the window?”

“Why do you think her singular looking?” asked Belle R——, in a tone of curious surprise.

“Because it is so,” I replied. “Her face is pale almost to ghastliness, except the one little spot where she paints, while her black eyes dance about like meteors, and her raven hair seems like an ebony coffin revealing a dead face. She is dressed in mourning, and yet she is the most gay and fascinating person in the room.”

Belle almost held her breath as I gave this description, and with her hand on my arm, and a blank expression on her face, she said—

“You don’t think—”

“Who is she?” I repeated quickly.

“Madame Delauney, of Paris.”

“Madame Dulaney!” I murmured to myself. “The friend of the Hon. Mr. F——; the widow of the Assistant Intendant of French Police. Umph!”

“Don’t you think her very handsome?” asked Belle.

“Yes, as a vulcanized *d. Medici*. Introduce me.”

Something in my manner must have impressed my fair *chaperone* with the idea of an adventure, for the introduction was made with evident embarrassment on her part, and she lingered close by, gazing in the faces of Madame Delauney and myself with an air of puzzled curiosity.

As my inquiring glance met that of Madame Delauney, I thought I detected something like a start—it was not perceptible—a mere shrinking of the pupil of the eye, a double palpation of the heart—as she seemed to read my vocation at a glance, and felt a flash of fear. This may, however, have been the result of my own conviction. She was dressed in what was termed second mourning, consisting of a black satin skirt with flounces fringed and embroidered with green leaders, a pink bodice, cut low in the neck, and bordered with dark velvet. The sleeves were exceedingly wide, with loose white undersleeves. A blue scarf encircled her waist. She wore no ornaments, save a plain breast pin, and a solitary diamond ring upon her middle finger.

Having made this scrutiny at a glance—during which she seemed to have done the same with me, I summoned all my resources, and at once began an attack in French. She seemed pleased at my addressing her in that language and, whether the rest were ignorant of the tongue or from what cause I know not, we soon found ourselves alone. The fair

widow seemed quite lively, and had it not been for her white, ghastly, expressionless face, she would have been handsome indeed. But added to this, there was a wild, feverish fire, ever burning in the black, dazzling eyes, which at every varying emotion seemed to throw off sparks like those from hardened steel when smitten.

We soon became quite intimate, and I was on the point of inviting her for a promenade in the garden, and had just turned my head to look at Mrs. R——, when I heard a slight click!—and felt a gentle pull about my waist. I did not start, for I almost expected: but looking around carelessly, I met the cold features and fiery eyes of Madame Delauney turned upon me, and I thought I could perceive a purple hue rippling beneath the surface of her pale skin, like the waves of a lake. I did not look down; fortunately it was not necessary, for Madame Delauney's back was towards a large pier mirror and as I glanced into it, I beheld—my watch chain hanging from my vest pocket! one side of it had been cut!

I was now convinced. The mysterious adept at pocket picking, who had thrown the *crème de la crème* of New York into a fit of regular excitement, and made them fear to appear in public with their jewelry—the being who had caused each one of the “first circle” to mistrust the honesty of the other—stood before me— Yet how was I to proceed? It would not do to arrest her on the spot—Mrs. Johnson would never forgive me for the scandal it would create, and the whole company would lose their enjoyment. I was in a dilemma, and as one of the young widow's friends approached, I made my obeisance and turned away. As I walked toward Miss Belle her mother intercepted me, and asked what prospects I had; was there any suspicious person in the company?

“Several madam,” I replied with mock gravity.

“Gracious me! Who are they?”

“Mr. Le Clair, whom you introduced,” I replied, laughing.

“No jesting,” said she. “Have you learned anything?”

I put my hand down to show her my cut watch chain, but—it was gone! The fish had run away with the bait, hook and all.

The affair was getting serious, and I excited.

“My dear Mrs. R——,” said I, “give yourself no unease; you will lose no more jewelry after tonight. Permit me to speak a word to Belle.”

Hastening to the side of my fair *chaperone*, I whispered:

“Can you be discreet?”

“As wisdom,” she said smiling.

“And play a part?”

“Like *le grande tragedienne!*”

“Then invite Madame Delauney to promenade on the rear piazza—the night is beautiful—from there stray onto the garden, and take a position near the gate which opens into the next street. Keep her engaged and be astonished by nothing that occurs.”

Belle arched her brows understandingly, and nodded assent. I next strolled carefully into the hall, opened the front door and looked out. Raising my finger, the driver of my own carriage approached. It is almost needless to state that he was a policeman in disguise.

“What luck?” he asked.

“Good. Drive down the narrow street, skirting the house and stop at the garden gate.”

The house was situated at the corner of a narrow street, with a brick wall extending from the rear to the next house. This wall screened the little flower garden, and contained a gate for the use of the servants.

When I returned to the drawing room Belle and Madame Delauney were absent. I found them in the garden, and plucking some flowers, and I joined them, making some casual compliments. As soon as I had joined them Belle started off for the house. Madame was about to follow when I quickly arrested her.

“Madame Delauney, you are my prisoner.”

“What do you mean, sir?” she gasped, recoiling from me.

“That I arrest you for theft. When you next steal a detective’s watch chain, you should be more expert.”

As I spoke I opened the gate, and revealed the carriage and policeman.

The scene caused her to cower before me. I then told her in hurried words that her whole career was known to me; that if she would go peaceably she might save much shame and disgrace. She hesitated for a moment, and then drawing herself up proudly she replied:

“I will go with you, but you had better beware, when I have proved these accusations false!”

I assisted her in the carriage, and taking a seat opposite, we were whirled rapidly away towards the office.

Although the hour was late, I found the industrious old chief up. He smiled graciously as I led my beautiful prisoner, and narrated the incidents connected with her arrest. She was of course searched, but nothing was found, until turning up the wide sleeves of her bodice, we found a number of secret pockets, in one of which was my watch chain. She evidently had not commenced her operations of the evening. The next day Madame Delauney's residence was searched and nearly all the missing property recovered. Her house was a rare depository of jewelry of every kind and estimate.

Upon conviction, she confessed that she had first learned the art of theft from her husband, who was accustomed to show her each new scheme of villainy that was revealed to him in his connection with the Paris police. The ring before noticed had a spring diamond knife for a setting, which would easily strike through any golden ligature, and she was thus easily able to secure her prize. She pleaded that poverty was the cause of her crime as prior to the death of her husband she had lived honestly. She suffered a slight penalty, on condition that she would leave the country.

Wisconsin Patriot, December 3, 1859

The Democratic Press [Fond du Lac, WI], December 21, 1859

The Union Democrat [Manchester, NH], June 26, 1860

The Republican Journal [Belfast, ME], July 6, 1860

The New London Chronicle, March 28, 1861

Detroit Free Press, March 31, 1861