

The Modern Science of Thief Taking

The last number of Dickens's Household Words, contains a number of curious articles under this head. The writer commences with the proposition that if thieving be an Art, thief-taking is a Science. He says, very truly, that all the thief's ingenuity; all his knowledge of human nature; all his courage; all his coolness; all his imperturbable powers of face; all his nice discrimination in reading the countenances of other people; all his manual and digital dexterity; all his fertility in expedients, and promptitude in acting upon them; all his Protean cleverness of disguise and capability of counterfeiting every sort and condition of distress; together with a great deal more patience, and the additional qualification, integrity, are demanded for the higher branches of thief-taking.

If an urchin picks your pocket, he continues, or a bungling "artist" steals your watch so that you find it out in an instant, it is easy enough for any private in any of the seventeen divisions of London Police to obey your panting demand to "Stop thief!" But the tricks and contrivances of those who wheedle money out of your pocket rather than steal it; who cheat you with your eyes open; who clear every vestige of plate out of your pantry while your servant is on the stairs; who set up imposing warehouses, and ease respectable firms of large parcels of goods; who steal the acceptances of needy or dissipated young men;—for the detection and punishment of such impostors a superior order of police is requisite.

He gives a number of instances to show the extreme acuteness and dexterity of the London Police Detective Police. The following is a striking one:

Not long since, a trunk was rifled at a fashionable hotel. The theft was so managed, that no suspicion could rest on any one. The Detective sergeant who had been sent for, fairly owned, after making a minute examination of the case, that he could afford no hope of elucidating the mystery. As he was leaving the bed-room, however, in which the plundered portmanteau stood, he picked up an ordinary shirt-button from the carpet. He silently compared it with those on the shirts in the trunk. It did not match them. He said nothing, but hung about the hotel for the rest of the day. Had he been narrowly watched, he would have been set down for an eccentric critic of linen. He was looking out for a shirt-front or wristband without a button. His search was long and patient; but at length it was rewarded. One of the inmates of the house showed a deficiency in his dress, which no one but a Detective would have noticed. He looked as narrowly as he dared at the pattern of the remaining fasteners. It corresponded with that of the little tell-tale he had picked up. He went deeper into the subject, got a trace of some of the stolen property, ascertained a connection between it and the suspected person, confronted him with the owner of the trunk, and finally succeeded in convicting him of the theft. At another hotel robbery, the blade of a knife, broken in the lock of a portmanteau, formed the clue. The Detective employed in that case was for some time indefatigable in seeking out knives with broken blades. At length he found one belonging to an underwaiter, who proved to have been the thief.

The higher class of thieves are known in London as the swell-mob. They are said to number in the metropolis about two hundred men. They hold the first place in the "profession" and are not

to be detected, except by the exercise of the great vigilance. Their cleverness consists in evading the law, and the most expert among them are rarely taken.

One “swell,” named Mo. Clark, had an iniquitous career of a quarter of a century, and never was captured during that time. He died a “prosperous gentleman” at Boulogne, whither he had retired to live on his “savings,” which he had invested in house property. An old hand named White lived unharmed to the age of eighty; but he had not been prudent, and existed on the contributions of the “mob,” till his old acquaintances were taken away, either by transportation or death, and the new race did not recognize his claims to their bounty. Hence he died in a workhouse. The average run of liberty which one of this class counts upon is four years.

The gains of some of the swell mob are great. They can always command capital to execute any especial scheme. Their travelling expenses are large; for their harvests are great public occasions, whether in town or country. As an example of their profits, the exploits of four of them at the Liverpool Cattle Show some seven years ago, may be mentioned. The London Detective Police did not attend, but one of them waylaid the rogues at the Euston Station. After an attendance of four days, the gentlemen he was looking for appeared, handsomely attired, the occupants of first-class carriages. The Detective, in the quietest manner possible, stopped their luggage; they entreated him to treat them like “gentlemen.” He did so, and took them into a private room, where they were so good as to offer him fifty pounds to let them go. He declined, and overhauled their booty; it consisted of several gold pins, watches, (some of great value,) chains and rings, silver snuff boxes, and bank-notes of the value of one hundred pounds! Eventually, however, as owners could not be found for some of the property, and some would not prosecute, they escaped with a light punishment.

In order to counteract the plans of the swell mob, two of the sergeants of the Detective Police make it their business to know every one of them personally. The consequence is, that the appearance of either of these officers upon any scene of operations is a bar to anything or anybody being “done.” This is an excellent characteristic of the Detectives, for they thus become as well a Preventive Police. We will give an illustration:

You are at the Oxford commemoration. As you descend the broad stairs of the Roebuck to dine, you overtake on the landing a gentleman of foreign aspect and elegant attire. The variegated pattern of his vest, the jetty gloss of his boots, and the exceeding whiteness of his gloves—one of which he crushes in his somewhat delicate hand—convince you that he is going to the grand ball, to be given that evening at Merton. The glance he gives you while passing, is sharp, but comprehensive; and if his eye does rest upon any one part of your person and its accessories more than another, it is upon the gold watch which you have just taken out to see if dinner be “due.” As you step aside to make room for him, he acknowledges the courtesy with “Par-r-r-don,” in the richest Parisian *gros parole*, and a smile so full of intelligence and courtesy, that you hope he speaks English, for you set him down as an agreeable fellow, and mentally determine that if he dines in the Coffee-room, you will make his acquaintance.

On the mat at the stair-foot there stands a man. A plain, honest-looking fellow, with nothing formidable in his appearance, or dreadful in his countenance; but the effect his apparition takes on your friend in perspective, is remarkable. The poor little fellow raises himself on his toes, as if

he had been suddenly overbalanced by a bullet; his cheek pales, and his lip quivers, as he endeavors ineffectually to suppress the word "*coquin!*" He knows it is too late to turn back, (he evidently would, if he could), for the man's eye is upon him. There is no help for it, and he speaks first; but in a whisper. He takes the new comer aside, and all you can overhear is spoken by the latter, who says he insists on Monsieur withdrawing his "School" by the seven o'clock train.

You imagine him to be some poor wretch of a schoolmaster in difficulties; captured, alas, by a bailiff. They leave the inn together, perhaps for a sponging house. So acute is your pity, that you think of rushing after them, and offering bail. You are, however, very hungry, and at this moment, the waiter announces that dinner is on table.

In the opposite box there are covers for four, but only three convive. They seem quiet men—not gentlemen, decidedly, but well enough behaved.

"What has become of Monsieur?" asks one. None of them can divine.

"Shall we wait any longer for him?"

"Oh, no—Waiter—Dinner!"

By their manner, you imagine that the style of the Roebuck is a "cut above them." They have not been much used to plate. The silver forks are so curiously heavy, that one of the guests, in a dallying sort of way, balances a prong across his fingers, while the chasing of the castors engages the attention of a second. This is all done while they talk. When the fish is brought, the third casts a careless glance or two at the dish cover, and when the waiter has gone for the sauce, he taps it with his nails, and says enquiringly to his friend across the table, "Silver?"

The other shakes his head, and intimates a hint that it is only plated. The waiter brings the cold punch, and the party begin to enjoy themselves. They do not drink much, but they mix their drinks rather injudiciously. They take sherry upon cold punch, and champagne upon that, dashing in a little port and bottled stout between. They are getting merry, not to say jolly, but not at all inebriated. The amateur of silver dish-covers has told a capital story, and his friends are reveling in the heartiest of laughs, when an apparition appears at the end of the table. You never saw such a change as his presence causes, when he places his knuckles on the edge of the table and looks at the diners *seriatim*; the courtiers of the sleeping beauty suddenly struck somniferous were nothing to this change. As if by magic, the loud laugh is turned to silent consternation. You now, most impressively, understand the meaning of the term "dumbfounded." The mysterious stranger makes some enquiry about "any cash?"

The answer is "Plenty."

"All square with the landlord, then?" asks the same inflexible voice as—to my astonishment—that which put the Frenchman to the torture.

"To a penny," the reply.

“*Quite square?*” continues the querist, taking with his busy eye a rapid inventory of the plate.

“S’help me—;”

“Hush!” interrupts the dinner spoiler, holding up his hand in a cautionary manner. “Have you done anything to-day?”

"Not a thing."

Then there is some more in a low tone; but you again distinguish the word “school,” and “seven o’clock train.” They are too old to be the Frenchman's pupils; perhaps they are his assistants. Surely they are not all the victims of the same *capias* and the same officer!

By this tune the landlord, looking very nervous, arrives with his bill: then comes the head waiter, who clears the table; carefully counting the forks. The reckoning is paid, and the trio steal out of the room with the man of mystery behind them, like sheep driven to the shambles.

You follow to the Railway station, and there you see the Frenchman, who complains bitterly of being “sold for nothing” by his enemy. The other three utter a confirmative groan. In spite of the evident omnipotence of their persevering follower, your curiosity impels you to address him. You take a turn on the platform together, and he explains the whole mystery. “The fact is,” he begins, “I am Sergeant Witchem, of the Detective police.”

“And your four victims are?”

“Members of a crack school of swell-mobs-men.”

“What do you mean by ‘schools?’”

“Gang. There is a variety of gangs—that is to say, of men who ‘work’ together, who play into one another's hands. These gentlemen hold the first rank, both for skill and enterprise, and had they been allowed to remain would have brought back a considerable booty. Their chief is the Frenchman.”

“Why do they obey your orders so passively?”

“Because they are sure that if I were to take them into custody, which I could do, knowing what they are, and present them before a magistrate, they would all be committed to prison for a month, as rogues and vagabonds.”

“They prefer then to have lost no inconsiderable capital in dress and dinner, to being laid up in jail.”

“Exactly so.”

The bell rings, and all five go off into the same carriage to London.

This is a circumstance that actually occurred; and a similar one happened when the Queen went to Dublin. The mere appearance of one of the Detective officers before a “school” which had transported itself in the Royal train, spoilt their speculation; for they all found it more advantageous to return to England in the same steamer with the officer, than to remain with the certainty of being put in prison for fourteen or twenty-eight days as rogues and vagabonds.

So thoroughly well acquainted with these men are the Detective officers we speak of, that they frequently tell what they have been about by the expression of their eyes and their general manner. This process is aptly termed “reckoning them up.” Some days ago, two skillful officers, whose personal acquaintance with the swell mob is complete, were walking along the Strand on other business, when they saw two of the best dressed and best mannered of the gang enter a jeweler's shop. They waited till they came out, and, on scrutinizing them, were convinced, by a certain conscious look which they betrayed, that they had stolen something. They followed them, and in a few minutes something was passed from one to the other. The officers were convinced, challenged them with the theft, and succeeded in eventually convicting them of stealing two gold eye-glasses, and several jeweled rings. “The eye,” said our informant, “is the great detector. We can tell in a crowd what a swell-mobsmen is about by the expression of his eye.”

It is supposed that the number of persons who make a trade of thieving in London is not more than six thousand; of these, nearly two hundred are first-class thieves or swell mobsmen; six hundred “macemen,” and trade swindlers, bill-swindlers, dog-stealers, &c.; About forty burglars, “dancers,” “garretteers,” and other adepts with the skeleton-keys. The rest are pickpockets, “gonophs—” mostly young thieves who sneak into areas, and rob tills—and other pilferers.

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