Mr. John Stott's Difficulty

Less than forty years ago, in a certain west country town of England, lived Mr. John Stott, head of the constabulary, so astute a thief-catcher that his friends thought it a pity he should throw his wits away upon provincial vagabonds, and not give them broad and noble scope as a Bow Street runner. His enemies, the local scoundrels, thought the same; but contented themselves with observing darkly that "he was so sharp that he would one day probably cut himself," or that "he was too clever to live." In spite of these intellectual advantages, or in consequence of them, Mr. Stott was as vain as a peacock, and made the not uncommon mistake of imagining himself even a cleverer fellow than he really was. He kept the little town (for it was a little one then) so clear of evil-doers, and got so complimented thereupon by the bench of magistrates, that he could not conceive that any misdemeanor could be committed which his sagacity should be unable to ferret out, or should fail to bring it home to the true culprit. "I don't pretend for to say," was one of his favorite remarks, "as I was *never* puzzled in my profession, but this I *will* say, as no man ever took me in *twice*"; and then he would resume his pipe with the air of a man who has modestly confessed to a weakness, which no other person would have dreamed of attributing to him. Even his wife believed in Mr. John Stott, and so doubtless would his *valet de chamber,* if he had happened to have kept one.

"Burglary at Sir Robert Air's last night," said he, sententiously, as he sat smoking after supper in his snug little parlor, one summer evening, while his wife mixed his gin-punch after his own particular receipt.

"You have got the wretches, of course," observed Mrs. Stott, paring the lemon-peel so that you could see through it, "or else it would not be my John."

"Well, no," returned the great man, rightly appropriating the last observation as a compliment rather than an expression of doubt as to his personal identity. "The fact is, it's very queer; but I have not got the wretches. I shall have them to-morrow, but at present they are absolutely at large."

"Lor, John! I can scarcely believe you when you tell me. Why, how on earth could they have got away from you? They could not have been ordinary burglars."

"You are right, ma'am," returned the chief constable, with a gratified look; "you have hit the nail exactly on the head. They were not ordinary men; they were acrobats."

"Acrobats!" answered Mrs. Stott, softly; "dear me!"

She had no very accurate idea what "acrobats" were; they might be a religious sect, or they might be a savage tribe, or, possibly, even both. But she had long passed for a woman of sense and sagacity, through maintaining a discreet silence except when her husband's talents seemed to demand her eulogies, and she was not going to risk that reputation now. She had a full share of the curiosity of her sex, but she had more than their ordinary patience. She waited to be informed upon the subject in question, without hazarding the remark which occurred to her, that acrobats

had white hair and pink eyes, and, therefore, could be easily recognized by the constabulary; and she had not to wait long.

"Yes, it must have been them Tumblers," mused Mr. Stott, sipping his punch out of a teaspoon; "and less than three and the boy could never have done it. It was her Ladyship's dressing-room window, as looks out on the back, as they broke in at, and no ladder could have been put there because of the flower-stand. It must have been that little devil in the tights and spangles at top of the three others. I have measured the height from the ground, and it just tallies. That's what comes of allowing them itinerants to be in the place at all. The idea of the mayor letting them have the Town-hall to show their tricks in! I'd put a stop to everything of that sort, if I had my way; and I will do it, too, in future."

"But you will not interfere with Mr. Shaw, John, I do hope, since he has been so pleasant and civil."

"No ma'am, no. Mr. Shaw is a man of science, in his line, and what is more, a man of substance. Mr. Shaw's exhibition is itinerant, it is true, but that is from the necessity of the case. His collection of wild animals is interesting in a high degree, as the rector was observing to me only yesterday. But them acrobats is quite another matter. However, lissom as they are, they must run a little faster, and climb a little higher, I can promise them, before they can get out of the reach of John Stott."

"They stood upon one another's shoulders, and the boy clambered up them, I suppose?"

"Yes, ma'am that was their ingenious method; and if they had to do with a common mind—though I say it who should not say it—the manner in which the thing was done would have remained a mystery. If a ladder had been used, it must needs have made some mark upon the mignonette-box. My men were all agape when I stated that circumstance, and began looking up in the air, as though some bird had done it. But, of course, when I said 'Them Tumblers!' they saw everything clear enough. Sir Robert, who assisted our investigations in person, was so good as to say that I reminded him of Christopher Columbus and his egg."

"You don't say so!" said Mrs. Stott, admiringly, and wondering within herself what that story was, and whether Mr. Christopher Columbus could possibly have been an oviparous animal. "And did her Ladyship lose much?"

"Some rings and pins, and three or four pounds in gold. Curiously enough, there was a bundle of bank notes upon the dressing table which entirely escaped the young rogue's attention, or her loss would have been much more serious."

"And yet he was such a frank-faced honest-looking little fellow, that I never should have thought harm of him," said good-natured Mrs. Stott; "but of course you're right."

"Well, most probably," observed her lord and master with a short, dry chuckle. "By ten o'clock to-morrow morning, when the justices meet, we shall have this honest-looking young gentleman

and his friends in the Town-hall, taking part in a public performance of another kind than that with which they favored the town last week. And then we shall see what we shall see."

Mr. Stott arose, took his official hat down from its peg, and prepared to go his rounds, a nightly precaution he seldom omitted, notwithstanding the absence of all native criminals from his strictly preserved territory; as for the acrobats, they had fled with the first dawn of morning, and were not likely to return till they were brought back; but he had dispatched two of his small "force" in pursuit of them, and hence there was the more need for his personal vigilance.

"I shall be back at two, as usual, my dear, if not before," said Mr. John Stott.

About two a. m., from long habit, the wife of the chief-constable was accustomed to awake and presently to hear her husband's heavy footfall coming up the stairs; but upon the present occasion there was no such welcome sound. She sat up in bed with her night cap tucked behind her ears, and listened attentively, but in vain, for him. Notwithstanding his precarious calling, Mr. Stott was a model of punctuality, and as Time (which in her opinion was almost the only thing that could do it) went on without him, she began to be seriously alarmed lest this admirable man, whom human ingenuity had never yet baffled, had been overwhelmed by envious Fate. There had been thunder in the air that night, and a bolt might have struck him. But at daylight she heard the front-door open, and a slow tread come up the stairs. The wife of a chief-constable should be above the suspicion of trepidation, but it was so unlike his ordinary step, that it made her heart go pitapat. However, it *was* her husband, whose noble spirit something had evidently cast down. Instead of kicking his boots across the room, as usual, he drew them off, and them sat in his stockings, thinking.

"John" said she, in much confusion and alarm, "what *is* the matter, my dear? Have you not caught them albatrosses?—I mean albinos."

"Yes, ma'am, *they're* safe enough, but the deuce of it is that—in their absence—there has been another burglary. Mrs. Colonel Peewit's house has been broken into just in the same way—through the second-floor back window. It's nothing less than magic, for *that* had a mignonette-box, and there is no mark of a ladder to be found there neither. I've had my bull's eye over every square inch of it."

"Lor, John!"

"There was nobody in the room," went on the chief-constable, musing, "and the window was open, so that the thing might have been done easy enough, when he had once got there. But how he ever *did* get there,—that's the question,—unless the devil had wings."

"But the Devil *has* wings!" was Mrs. Stott's involuntary exclamation; the good lady was so flustered by her late anxiety, that for once she spoke in a hurry.

"You will presently cause me to imagine that I have made a *second* mistake in my life, ma'am,—in the having married a fool," was her husband's stern rejoinder. Then he went on soliloquizing. "The thief, who ever he was, took the same things,—rings and pins, and such-like,—but he also

took a plated inkstand. That looks as if he did not know his trade. And yet, to have effected an entrance just where nobody would have thought such a thing practicable, he must have been most uncommon cunning. Cunning? No, for then I should see the thing as plain as the church tower. It's downright unaccountable. How is it humanly possible that things can be stole out of a second floor window without a ladder, or anything to climb up by, unless it's a water-spout,—*that's* what I want to know. And what's more, even if he got up, how did he ever get down again?"

Hearing these remarks put aloud, and in an interrogative form, Mrs. Stott thought it incumbent upon her to speak, and the more so, as she had ingeniously elaborated a theory of her own to account for the whole mystery.

"If nobody could have got in from the outside, John, people as was inside could have done it easy enough. It was one of them trapesing servant girls, who dresses so fine, and is always wanting money to buy gewgaws, you may take my word for it."

"I don't suppose, ma'am," returned the chief-constable, with supreme contempt, "that the Bench of Justices would 'take your word for it,' even if *I* was weak enough to do so,—which I am not. The servants are all above suspicion, both at Sir Robert's and Mrs. Peewit's,—that was the first thing as we looked to, of course. But even if it were otherwise, do you suppose that thieving is an epidemic, that it should break out in one household to-day, and in another to-morrow, as this has done? You had better go to sleep, ma'am, and leave me to think the matter out alone." Which, accordingly, this great man, having drawn his night-cap on, the better to consider in, proceeded to do. Two burglaries on two following nights, in a town under his personal superintendence, and nobody yet in custody! He had never imagined that such a plot could befall his 'scutcheon! It was not impossible, in a town so slenderly guarded, that a ladder might have been employed without detection, but, most certainly in neither of these cases had such an instrument been used. The flower boxes had, in both instances, projected beyond the sill, so that the top of any ladder must have rested on them, and left its mark. There was also no trace of the foot of it in the soil below,—or sign of an attempt to remove such trace,—although, in the case of Sir Robert's house, there was a flower-bed immediately beneath the window." Mr. Stott, in short, brought all his intelligence to bear upon this prob'em in vain, and nothing came of it but headache.

Next day, the whole town was in a state of intense alarm. The previous robbery had created much excitement among the inhabitants, but not so much on account of the crime as of the sagacious manner in which their chief-constable had discovered the mode of depredation; but now, not only had a second outrage been committed, but the fact of its occurrence while the acrobats were away had proved their innocence of this particular offense (though the magistrates, not knowing how else to account for their seizure, committed them for a month, as rogues and vagabonds), and negatived Mr. John Stott's solution of the riddle altogether. The chairman of the Bench, who had been accustomed to suck that official's brains before addressing his audience in the Town-hall, had nothing to say upon the subject except to recommend people to shut their second-floor windows, which, since it was very warm weather, had most of them cultivated flower-boxes did not give general satisfaction.

The next night, the mayor's own house was robbed in a precisely similar manner.

It was on a Friday, and the [local] papers, which came out the next day, published second and third editions, to describe the details. Besides the burglary, [a] sort of sacrilege had been committed. The thief had actually possessed himself of the Municipal Mace. This beautiful object, although not intrinsically valuable, had apparently excited his greed, for he had dragged it out of its case as far as the window, and thence let it fall with a report that had alarmed the house, and dented the ground below. When the door was opened, however (which the servants declined to do, until the "proper authorities" arrived), the marauder had vanished, and with him this Emblem of Authority, as well as a pair of his Lordship's boot-hooks. There happened to be nothing kept in that room but the mayor's boots and the town mace. But the incident was, of course, as distressing to Mr. John Stott as though the regalia had been plundered. He felt that his great reputation was giving way under these repeated shocks; while the rest of the constabulary were of course over-whelmed with disgrace; and the Tory newspapers openly advocated "stringent measures" and the calling out of the Yeomanry.

"I suppose," sighed his wife upon this Saturday afternoon, "there is no chance of your going with me to-night to the show? And yet it seems such a pity, after that civil Mr. Shaw has sent us these tickets; and you know I never enjoy anything—let it be wild beastesses, or what not—without you, John. How fine they look, with this picture of the lion and the unicorn,—though the bill says as the unicorn is dead,—with *Shaw's Show*, 'patronized by all the crowned heads of Europe,' and 'admit the bearer,' with his autograph in the corner, in red ink! Why, the mayor's own invitations are not more splendid."

"Don't talk of the mayor, woman, for that makes me think of the mace," replied her husband, with a shiver. "I don't wish to see any show but one, and that's the man that stole that mace, with a pair of handcuffs on him, or, what would be better still, a-standing underneath a bit of wood, with a rope round his neck, and a parson by his side. But there, it's no good wishing. Upon my life, I sometimes wonder if the Devil himself is not a-doing on it all to vex me."

"Lor, John, you make me creep!"

"Well, I can't make you *fly*, I reckon," replied Mr. Stott, surlily; "and yet that's what this fellow can do, confound him! He's like a bird of the air,—a bird of prey."

"Well, John, do you know I can't help sometimes thinking—only I would not have mentioned it unless you had—that, perhaps, after all, it is a bird! You know a magpie is a thief by nature."

"And so you suppose a magpie could have stolen the town mace, do you? Why, you are a greater fool than the newspapers."

"I forgot the mace, John," observed Mrs. Stott, humbly.

"I wish I could forget it," growled the chief-constable. "You had better put on your bonnet, and take my ticket round the corner to Mrs. Jones, who will be glad enough to go with you; only take care Shaw don't keep you both, and put you in a cage for a pair of owls. There I'm sorry to be so

rude, Mrs. Stott; but the fact is I feel as I shall go out of my mind unless I tackle this mystery; and I must be left alone to think it out."

So Mrs. Stott, obedient wife as she was, attired herself in gorgeous apparel, and, accompanied by her friend and neighbor, the Parish doctor's wife, honored Mr. Shaw's menagerie with her presence. It was a sort of fete which that practical student of Natural history (which included some knowledge of mankind) had given to the inhabitants of the town, and everything was on a very splendid scale. The show was lit up by rows of chandeliers, made of circlets of wood and candles, from the latter of which, as they of necessity hung very low, the tallow dripped upon the heads of the company; but that was not found out till the next morning.

The floor and cages had been thoroughly swept and garnished, and some attempt had even been made, by means of unguents and spices (or, in other words, chlorate of lime), to mitigate the odor that hangs about all establishments devoted to the reception of wild beasts. But it must be confessed that this last refinement was a failure—it was like the jar of *ottar*, which, "do what you will, the scent of the roses would cling to it still;" only in this case the perfume was the result of a combination; the hyena and the muskrat, the royal Bengal tiger and the marmoset, each contributed their *soupcon*. In place of the usual showman, Mr. Shaw himself, with an elegant white wand, pointed out the various objects of interest, explained their habits, and narrated anecdotes of their extraordinary sagacity. The monkey-cages, as usual, were the chief attraction; their innocent gambols, and the remarkable *penchant* they exhibited for biting each other's tails, were the admiration of the beholders. Mrs. Stott, while regarding these parodies upon mankind with a contemplative air, was very nearly—indeed, literally within half an inch or so—paying a great penalty for her philosophic abstraction. A ribbed face baboon of gigantic size, looking not unlike one of Mr. Cooper's Indian heroes in his war paint, made a snatch at her fingers, which, loaded with rings, happened to be ungloved, for she had just been taking refreshments.

"Your charms even vanquish the brute creation, Mrs. Stott," observed the clerk to the magistrates gallantly; "the enamored animal seeks your hand."

"Yes; but, like the rest of the male sex, for what is in it, or on it," replied Mrs. Jones who had been an heiress in a small way till her husband removed from her the invidious distinction by spending all her money.

The ribbed-face baboon screamed with disappointment, and swung by his rope headforemost, and with his eyes shut, for the rest of the evening.

It was 1 a. m., and the chief constable's wife had been in bed since midnight, but she had not fallen asleep. She was awaiting the arrival of Mr. Stott, in hopes that he might have some good news to tell her, or to comfort him with her sympathy in case he hadn't. It was a beautiful night, and she had left the window open, through which the soft fresh air came gratefully enough after the atmosphere of the menagerie. She would be able to catch the majestic footfall of her lord while it was yet a great way off, and she was listening for it. Presently, through the deep summer stillness, sounded a human step, which, albeit not that she was expecting, seemed familiar to her. It was a step which, although it moved with quickness, had a slight limp such as she had noticed in the gait of Mr. Shaw. Yet he had himself assured her that very evening that he was a man of

early habits, and always shut up his house on wheels before twelve o'clock. It was most unlikely that on the night of his fete, of all nights, he should have made an exception to this salutary practice; and yet she knew no other step than his like that step. It stopped beneath the window, and then there was a sliding, scrambling noise, as though something were struggling up the water-pipe that ran down the side of the house, and she felt at once that the mystery of these nightly thefts was about to be solved.

She was frightened, of course; but she did not shut her eyes and put her head under the bed clothes, as most ladies would have done under such circumstances; on the contrary, she stared so hard at the window, that the sides seemed to meet, and leave no window at all. Or was it that the space had become obscured by the presence of the marauder? Yes, that was it; and what a marauder!

The face of the intruder she could not catch; but she saw that he was quite black, very inadequately attired, and provided with a long tail. That late imprudent reply of hers to her husband, "But the Devil *has* wings," came into her mind with terrible emphasis. No wonder that even the chief-constable's vigilance had failed to—

Ah, that face! There was no mistaking those very strikingly marked features! It was, without doubt, her late admirer, the ribbed face baboon; and, whether from motives of delicacy or fear, Mrs. Stott did dive under the bedclothes then, with only her nose left out to breathe through, like the elephant when under water, as Mr. Shaw had instructively informed her not three hours ago.

She could hear a little, however, as well as breathe; and she distinctly caught the quiet chuckle of her visitor, and the chink of her rings as he swept them off the dressing-table with his hairy paws. Presently, there was a shrill whistle from below, and the chuckling ceased; and then came the sliding, scrambling noise again. The ribbed face baboon had put the rings in his mouth—having no pocket—and slid down the water-spout to his master with the spoil.

"John," cried Mrs. Stott, when the chief-constable put in his long-wished for appearance, and as soon as he had got inside the door, "I've found it all out."

"Pshaw!" said her husband contemptuously.

"Lor," cried she, "well, you *are* a wonder! How ever did *you* find out it was Mr. Shaw and his ribbed face baboon?"

"Never you mind ma'am," rejoined Mr. Stott, with his old confident air; I *have* found it out. And now let me hear how far your testimony goes in corroboration of my views."

The next day, "from information received," as he darkly hinted, the chief-constable apprehended the keeper of the menagerie, and searched his house on wheels with such effect that all the stolen property was recovered. Mr. Shaw, it appeared, had trained the ribbed-faced baboon to climb up water-spouts and sweep from dressing-tables all articles that glittered, which accounted for his taking the plated inkstand and the municipal mace. If his education had been suftered to progress, he would doubtless in time have been taught to carry off bank-notes and railway

dividends. But, thanks to Mrs. Stott, his occupation was henceforth gone. The chief-constable, however, got all the credit for the discovery, and was held by everybody, including his wife, in higher estimation for sagacity than ever. It was true that he had been at fault at first, and in more than one instance; but then, as he himself observed: "I may still say as no man ever took me in twice,—for this was not a Man, but a Hape."

The above curious incident happened at Shrewsbury in 1834, and was without doubt the circumstance on which Edgar Poe founded his famous story of "The Murder in the Rue Morgue."—*Chambers' Journal*.

Plymouth [IN] *Weekly Democrat*, May 6, 1869