

Three “Detective” Anecdotes

Charles Dickens

I. THE PAIR OF GLOVES

“It’s a singular story, sir,” said Inspector Wield of the detective police, who in company with Sergeants Dorton and Mith, paid me another twilight visit, one July evening; “and I’ve been thinking you might like to know it.”

“It’s concerning the murder of the young woman, Eliza Grimwood, some years ago, near the Waterloo road. She was commonly called the countess, because of her handsome appearance and her proud way of carrying herself; and when I saw the poor countess, (I had known her well to speak to,) lying dead, with her throat cut, on the floor of her bedroom, you’ll believe me that a variety of reflections calculated to make a man rather low in his spirits came into my head.

“That’s neither here nor there. I went the morning after the murder, and examined the body, and made a general observation of the bedroom where it was. Turning down the pillow of the bed with my hand, I found underneath it a pair of gloves. A pair of gentleman’s dress gloves, very dirty; and inside the lining the letters TR, and a cross.

“Well, sir, I took them gloves away, and I showed ’em to the magistrate, over at Union Hall, before whom the case was. He says, ‘Wield,’ he says, ‘there’s no doubt this is a discovery that may lead to something very important; and what you have got to do, Wield, is to find out the owner of these gloves.’

“I was of the same opinion of course, and I went at it immediately. I looked at the gloves pretty narrowly, and it was my opinion that they had been cleaned. There was a smell of sulphur and rosin about ’em, you know, which cleaned gloves usually have, more or less. I took ’em over to a friend of mine at Kennington, who was in that line, and I put it to him—‘What do you say now? Have these gloves been cleaned?’ ‘These gloves have been cleaned,’ says he. ‘Have you any idea who cleaned them?’ says I. ‘Not at all,’ says he; ‘I’ve a very distinct idea who didn’t clean ’em, and that’s myself. But I’ll tell you what, Wield, there ain’t above eight or nine reg’lar glove cleaners in London,’—there were not at that time, it seems—‘and I think I can give you their addresses, and you may find out, by that means who did clean ’em.’ Accordingly, he gave me the directions, and I went here, and I went there, and I looked up this man, and I looked up that man; but though they all agreed that the gloves had been cleaned, I couldn’t find the man, woman, or child that had cleaned that aforesaid pair of gloves.

“What with this person not being at home and that person being expected home in the afternoon, and so forth, the inquiry took me three days. On the evening of the third day, coming over Waterloo Bridge from the Surrey side of the river, quite beat, and very much vexed and disappointed, I thought I’d have a shilling’s worth of entertainment at the Lyceum theater, to freshen myself up. So I went into the pit, at half-price, and I sat myself down next to a very quiet modest sort of a young man. Seeing I was a stranger, (which I thought it just as well to appear to

be,) he told me the names of the actors on the stage, and we got into conversation.—When the play was over we came out together, and I said, ‘We’ve been very companionable and agreeable and perhaps you would not object to a drain?’ ‘Well, you’re very good,’ says he; ‘I shouldn’t object to a drain.’ Accordingly we went into a public house, near the theater, sat ourselves down in a quiet room upstairs on the first floor, and called for a pint of half-and-half, a piece, and a pipe.

“Well, sir, we put our pipe aboard, and we drank our half-and-half, and sat talking very sociably, when the young man says, ‘You must excuse me stopping very long,’ he says, ‘because I am forced to go home in good time. I must be at work all night.’ ‘At work all night?’ says I. ‘You ain’t a baker?’ ‘No,’ he says, laughing, ‘I ain’t a baker.—‘I tho’t not,’ says I, ‘you haven’t the looks of a baker.’ ‘No,’ says he, ‘I’m a glove cleaner.’

“I never was more astonished in my life, than when I heard them words come out of his lips. ‘You’re a glove cleaner, are you?’ says I. ‘Yes,’ he says, ‘I am.’ ‘Then, perhaps,’ says I, taking the gloves out of my pocket, ‘you can tell me who cleaned this pair of gloves? It’s a rum story,’ I says. ‘I was dining over at Lambeth, the other day, at a free-and-easy—quite promiscuous—with a public company—when some gentleman left these gloves behind him? Another gentleman and me, you see, laid a wager of a sovereign, that I wouldn’t find out who they belonged to. I’ve spent as much as seven shillings already, in trying to discover; but if you could help me, I’d stand another seven and welcome. You see there’s TR and a cross, inside.’ ‘I see,’ he says. ‘Bless you, I know these gloves very well; I’ve some dozens of pairs belonging to the same party.’ ‘No?’ says I. ‘Yes,’ says he. ‘Then you know who cleaned ’em?’ says I. ‘Rather so,’ says he. ‘My father cleaned ’em.’

“‘Where does your father live?’ says I.—‘Just round the corner,’ says the young man, ‘near Exeter street, here. He’ll tell you who they belong to, directly.’ ‘Would you come round with me now?’ says I. ‘Certainly,’ says he, ‘but you needn’t tell my father that you found me at the play, you know; because he mightn’t like it.’ ‘All right!’—We went round the place, and there we found an old man in a white apron, with two or three daughters, all rubbing and cleaning away at lots of gloves, in a front parlor. ‘Oh, father!’ said the young man. ‘Here’s a person been and made a bet about the ownership of a pair of gloves, and I’ve told him you could settle it.’ ‘Good evening, sir,’ says I to the old gentleman. ‘Here’s the gloves your son speaks of. Letters TR, you see, and a cross.’ ‘Oh, yes,’ he says, ‘I know these gloves very well, I’ve cleaned dozens of pairs of ’em.—They belong to Mr. Trinkle, the great upholsterer in Cheapside.’ ‘Did you get ’em from Mr. Trinkle direct,’ says I, ‘if you’ll excuse me asking the question?’ ‘No,’ says he; ‘Mr. Trinkle always sends them to Mr. Phibbs’, the haberdasher’s, opposite his shop, and the haberdasher sends ’em to me.’ ‘Perhaps *you* wouldn’t object to a drain?’ says I. ‘Not in the least!’ says he. So I took the old gentleman out, and had a little more talk with him and his son over a glass, and we parted excellent friends.

“This was late Saturday night. First thing on the Monday morning, I went to the haberdasher’s shop, opposite Mr. Trinkle’s, the great upholsterer’s in Cheapside. ‘Mr. Phibbs in the way?’ ‘My name is Phibbs.’—‘Oh! I believe you sent this pair of gloves to be cleaned?’ ‘Yes, I did, for young Mr. Trinkle over the way. There he is in the shop!’ ‘O! That’s him in the shop, is it?—Him in the green coat?’ ‘The same individual.’ ‘Well, Mr. Phibbs, this is an unpleasant affair; but the fact is, I am Inspector Wield of the detective police, and I found these gloves under the

pillow of the young woman that was murdered the other day, over in Waterloo road!’ ‘Good heaven!’ says he. ‘He is a most respectable young man, and if his father was to hear of it, it would be the ruin of him!’ ‘I’m very sorry for it,’ says I, ‘but I must take him into custody.’ ‘Good heaven!’ says Mr. Phibbs, again, ‘can nothing be done?’ ‘Nothing,’ says I. ‘Will you allow me to call him over here,’ says he, ‘that his father may not see it done?’ ‘I don’t object to that,’ says I; ‘but unfortunately, Mr. Phibbs, I can’t allow of any communication between you. If any was attempted, I should have to interfere directly. Perhaps you’ll beckon him over here?’ Mr. Phibbs went to the door and beckoned, and the young fellow came across the street directly; a smart, brisk young fellow.

“‘Good morning, sir,’ said I. ‘Good morning, sir,’ said he. ‘Would you allow me to inquire, sir,’ said I, ‘if you ever had any acquaintance with a party of the name of Grimwood?’ ‘Grimwood! Grimwood!’ says he, ‘No!’ ‘You know the Waterloo road!—Happen to have heard of a young woman being murdered there?’ ‘Yes, I read it in the paper, and very sorry I was to read it.’ ‘Here’s a pair of gloves belong to you, that I found under her pillow the morning afterwards!’

“‘He was in a dreadful state, sir; a dreadful state!’ ‘Mr. Wield,’ he says, ‘upon my solemn oath I never was there. I never so much as saw her, to my knowledge, in my life!’ ‘I am very sorry,’ says I. ‘To tell you the truth, I don’t think you are the murderer, but I must take you to Union Hall in a cab. However, I think it’s a case of that sort, at present at all events, the magistrate will hear it in private.’

“A private examination took place, and then it came out that this young man was acquainted with a cousin of this unfortunate Eliza Grimwood, and that, calling to see this cousin a day or two before the murder, he left those gloves on the table. Who should come in, shortly afterwards, but Eliza Grimwood? ‘Whose gloves are these!’ she says, taking ’em up. ‘Those are Mr. Trinkle’s gloves,’ says her cousin. ‘Oh!’ says she, ‘they are very dirty, and of no use to him, I am sure. I shall take ’em away for my girl to clean the stoves with.’ And she put ’em in her pocket. The girl had used ’em to clean the stoves, and, I have no doubt, had left ’em lying on the bedroom mantelpiece, or on the drawers, or somewhere; and her mistress, looking round to see that the room was tidy, had caught ’em up and put ’em under the pillow where I found ’em.

“That’s the story, sir.”

II. THE ARTFUL TOUCH

“One of the most beautiful things that ever was done, perhaps,” said Inspector Wield, emphasizing the adjective, as preparing us to expect dexterity or ingenuity rather than strong interest, “was a move of Sergeant Witchem’s. It was a lovely idea!

Witchem and me were down at Epsom one Derby day, waiting at the station for the Swell Mob. As I mentioned, when we were talking about these things before, we are already at the station when there’s races, or an Agricultural Show, or a Chancellor sworn in for a University, or Jenny Lind, or anything of that sort; and as the Swell Mob come down we send ’em back again by the next train. But some of the Swell Mob, on the occasion of this Derby that I refer to, so far kiddied us as to hire a horse and shay; start away from London by Whitechapel, and miles round; come into Epsom from the opposite direction; and go to work, right and left; on the course, while we were waiting for ’em at the rail. That, however, ain’t the point of what I’m going to tell you.

While Witchem and me were waiting at the station, there come up one Mr. Tutt; a gentleman formerly in the public line, quite an amateur Detective in his way, and very much respected.

‘Halloa, Charley Wield,’ says he. ‘What you doing here? On the look out for some of your old friends?’ ‘Yes, the old move, Mr. Tatt.’ ‘Come along,’ he says, ‘you and Witchem, and have a glass of sherry.’ ‘We can’t stir from the place,’ says I, ‘till the next train comes in; but after that, we will with pleasure.’ Mr. Tatt waits, and the train comes in, and then Witchem and me go off with him to the hotel. Mr. Tatt he’s got up quite regardless of expense for the occasion; and in his shirt-front there’s a beautiful diamond prop, cost him fifteen or twenty pound—a very handsome pin indeed. We drank our sherry at the bar, and have had our three or four glasses, when Witchem cried suddenly, ‘Look out, Mr. Wield! Stand fast!’ and a dash is made into the place by the Swell Mob—four of ‘em—that have come down as I tell you, and in a moment Tatt’s prop is gone. Witchem, he cuts ‘em off at the door, I lay about me as hard as I can, Mr. Tatt shows fight like a good ‘un, and there we are, all down together, heads and heels, knocking about on the floor of the bar—perhaps you never seen such a scene of confusion! However, we stick to our men (Mr. Tatt being as good as any officer,) and we take ‘em all, and carry ‘em off to the station. The station’s full of people, who have been took on the course; and it’s a precious piece of work to get ‘em secured. However, we do it at last, and we search ‘em; but nothing’s found upon ‘em, and they’re locked up; and a pretty state of heat we are in by that time, I assure you.

I was very blank over it myself, to think that the prop had been passed away; and I said to Witchem, when we had set ‘em to rights, and were cooling ourselves along with Mr. Tatt, ‘we don’t take much by this move, anyway, for nothing’s found upon ‘em, and it’s only the braggadocia after all.’ ‘What you mean, Mr. Wield.’ Says Witchem. ‘Here’s the diamond pin!’ and in the palm of his hand there it was, safe and sound. ‘Why, in the name of wonder,’ says me and Mr. Tatt, in astonishment. ‘how did you come by that?’ ‘I’ll tell you how I came by it,’ says he. ‘I saw which of ‘em took it; and when we were all down on the floor together, knocking about, I just gave him a little touch on the back of his hand, as I knew his pal would; and he thought it was his pal, and gave it to me.’ It was beautiful, beauti-ful!

Even that was hardly the best of the case, for that chap was tried at the Quarter Sessions at Guilford. You know what Quarter Sessions are, sir. Well, if you’ll believe me, while them slow justices were looking over the Acts of Parliament, to see what they could do to him, I’m blowed if he didn’t cut out of the dock, sir, then and there; swam across a river, and got up into a tree to dry himself. In the tree he was took—an old woman having seen him climb up—and Witchem’s touch transported him!”

III. THE SOFA

“What young men will do sometimes to ruin themselves and break their friend’s hearts,” said Sergeant Dornton. “It’s surprising! I had a case at Laint Blank’s Hospital which was of this sort. A bad case, indeed, with a bad end!”

“The secretary, and the house surgeon, and the treasurer of Saint Blanks’ Hospital came to give information of numerous robberies having been committed on the students. The students could leave nothing in the pockets of their great coats, while the greatcoats were hanging at the hospital, but it was almost certain to be stolen. Property of various descriptions was constantly being lost; and the gentlemen were naturally uneasy about it, and anxious, for the credit of the institution, that the thief or thieves should be discovered. The cause was entrusted to me, and I went to the hospital.

“Now, gentlemen,’ said I, after we had talked it over, ‘I understand this property is usually lost from one room.’

“Yes,’ they said, ‘it was.’

“I should wish, if you please,’ said I, ‘to see that room.’

“It was a good-sized bare room downstairs. With a few tables in it, and a row of pegs all round for hats and coats.

“Next, gentlemen,’ said I, ‘do you suspect anybody?’

“Yes,’ they said, ‘they did suspect somebody. They were sorry to say they suspected one of the porters.’

“I should like,’ said I, ‘to have that man pointed out to me, and to have a little time to look after him.’

“He was pointed out, and I looked after him and then I went back to the hospital, and said, ‘Now, gentlemen, it’s not the porter. He’s unfortunately for himself, a little too fond of drink, but he’s nothing worse.—My suspicion is that these robberies are committed by one of the students; and if you’ll put me a sofa in that room where the pegs are—as there’s no closet—I think I shall be able to detect the thief. I wish the sofa, if you please, to be covered with chintz, or something of that sort, so that I may lie on my chest, underneath it, without being seen.’

“The sofa was provided, and the next day at eleven o’clock, before any of the students came, I went there, with those gentlemen, to get underneath it. It turned out to be one of those old-fashioned sofas with a great crossbeam at the bottom, that would have broken my back in no time, if I could ever have got below it. We had quite a time to break all this away in the time; however, I fell to work and they fell to work, and we broke it out, and made a clear place for me. I got under the sofa, lay down on my chest, took out my knife, and made a convenient hole in the chintz to look through. It was then settled between me and the gentlemen that when the students were all up in the wards, one of the gentlemen should come in and hang up a greatcoat on one of the pegs.—And that great coat should have, in one of the pockets, a pocketbook containing marked money.

“After I had been there some time, the students began to drop into the room, by ones, and twos, and threes, and to talk about all sorts of things, little thinking there was anybody under the sofa—and then go upstairs. At last there came in one who remained until he was alone in the room by himself. A tallish, good-looking, young man of one or two and twenty, with a light whisker. He went to a particular hat peg, took off a good hat that was hanging there, tried it on, hung his own hat in its place, and hung that hat on another peg, nearly opposite to me. I then felt quite certain that he was the thief, and would come back by-and-bye.

“When they were all upstairs, the gentleman came in with the greatcoat. I showed him where to hang it, so that I might have a good view of it; and he went away; and I lay under the sofa on my chest, for a couple of hours or so, waiting.

“At last the same young man came down. He walked across the room, whistling—stopped again, and listened—then began to go regularly round the pegs, feeling in the pockets of all the coats. When he came to the greatcoat, and felt the pocketbook, he was so eager and so hurried that he broke the strap in tearing it open. As he began to put the money in his pocket, I crawled out from under the sofa, and his eyes met mine.

“My face, as you may perceive, is brown now, but it was pale at that time, my health not being good; and looked as long as a horse’s. Besides which, there was a great draught of air from the door, underneath the sofa, and I had tied a handkerchief round my head; so what I looked like, altogether, I don’t know. He turned blue—literally blue—when he saw me crawling out, and I couldn’t feel surprised at it.

“‘I am an officer of the detective police,’ said I, ‘and I have been lying here since you came in this morning. I regret for the sake of yourself and your friends, that you should have done what you have done; but this case was complete. You have the pocketbook in your hand and the money upon you; and I must take you into custody.’

“It was impossible to make out any case in his behalf, and on his trial he pleaded guilty. How or when he got the means I don’t know; but while he was awaiting his sentence, he poisoned himself in Newgate.”

We inquired of this officer, on the conclusion of the foregoing anecdote, whether the time appeared long, or short, when he lay in that constrained position under the sofa?

“Why, you see, sir,” he replied, “if he had not come in the first time, and I had not been quite sure he was the thief, and would return, the time would have seemed long. But as it was, I being dead certain of my man, the time seemed pretty short.”

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