

The Masked Robbers
A Leaf from a Detective's Note-book

by Percy Garrett

Some six or eight years ago I received a requisition from the mayor of a small town in the interior of the State of New York, to visit that place for the purpose of discovering the perpetrators of various highway robberies which had been committed in the neighborhood. I soon reached my destination, and found Elliotsville, the name of the town in question, consisted but of one long, straggling street, containing the usual number of stores, taverns, etc., which are to be found in all country places. The neighborhood, however, was very pretty, and I was not surprised to learn that in summer time it was the favorite place of resort for the dwellers of cities.

My first duty was to call on the mayor, and receive from him the particulars of the crimes he had referred to in his letter to me. I found "his honor" to be a smart, active little man, who in a few minutes put me in possession of all the facts he knew, which amounted to simply that for two or three weeks before my arrival, scarcely a person left the village at nightfall that was not dispossessed of all his money and valuables. All the robberies had been committed by two men who wore crape-masks. No violence had been done to any person who made no resistance; but one or two individuals, who had disputed the robbers' right to their property, had been dreadfully beaten. It appeared that every effort had been made to discover the offenders, but every scheme had proved in vain, and even a detective officer from a neighboring city, who had been engaged to ferret out the criminals, had returned home, giving it up in despair.

An hour after my interview with the mayor (whom I desired to keep my visit a profound secret), I was seated in the bar-room of the Congress House, the chief hotel in the town. It was the middle of the month of December, and intensely cold, so that I was very glad to draw my chair close to a large stove used for heating the apartment. A considerable number of townspeople were assembled there, discussing the events of the day. It was really very amusing to hear their conversation, embracing as it did a hundred different subjects. Politics, religion, Farmer Jones's pigs, were all touched upon; but at last it came to the grand topic, the recent robberies. On this exciting theme everyone had something to say, but I gained no further information than what I had already obtained from the mayor.

By special invitation I went to spend the evening at his honor's house, it being specially understood that I was to be introduced as a Mr. Clark, a New York merchant—that being the name I had thought fit to assume for the occasion.

I found Mr. Dobell the mayor surrounded by his family. The worthy official was disposed to be very hospitable, and soon made me feel perfectly at home. At the tea-table I was introduced to his family, consisting of his wife, two grown-up daughters, and a confidential clerk of his, named Jasper Barton, a young man about thirty years of age. The latter I found to be very intelligent. He was from the New England States, and could converse on almost every subject. At the tea-table the subject of the recent robberies was started; Mr. Jasper Barton was very indignant that such outrages should be perpetrated in the midst of a civilized community, and offered to make one of

a vigilance committee to put a stop to them. I was half inclined at first to impress him into my service; but after conning the matter over in my own mind, I determined to keep my own counsel, and trust to my own unaided efforts to discover the robbers.

I passed a very pleasant evening at the mayor's house. After tea we had music, and I soon saw that Jasper was paying his addresses to the eldest daughter of my host, and that they were favorably received by the young lady and her parents.

"Do you play chess, Mr. Clark?" suddenly said Mr. Dobell, after a pause in the conversation.

"I play a little," I replied.

"Suppose that we adjourn into the dining-room, and leave these young people to amuse themselves as they please," said the mayor.

"With all my heart," I replied, rising from my chair and following Mr. Dobell into an adjoining apartment, where a splendid hickory fire was burning on the hearth. The table was drawn near the fire, the men were placed, and we commenced the game. I soon found that my opponent was not very strong, and that I could easily beat him, so that I was able to think of other things besides the game.

"That Mr. Barton appears to be a very fine young man," said I, while waiting for my adversary to move.

"He is indeed," replied Mr. Dobell. "I may say he is quite a treasure to me."

"Has he lived with you long?"

"He has not been with me more than six weeks, but he has proved more attentive to business than any clerk I have ever had. He is a great favorite with all my customers."

"And a favorite with others besides," said I.

"Yes, he is very attentive to Emily—and he is such a worthy young man that I do not know that she could do much better. It is true he is poor, but I am pretty well to do, and in case my daughter should decide to accept him as a husband, why, I can take him into partnership. Riches do not make happiness, you know."

"That is a truism that cannot be disputed," I replied. "He appears to be a remarkably intelligent young man."

"Yes, our parson says he has few equals. Would you believe it, he can speak French and German like natives of those countries!"

"Indeed!" I returned, continuing my game.

We played two or three games, two of which I allowed my adversary to win; for I have long since discovered that nothing sets a man more against you than beating him half a dozen successive games at chess. Mr. Dobell, whom I have before said was a short fat man, decidedly apoplectically inclined, began to grow sleepy, so that his attention was no longer fixed on the chess-board. He proposed that we should discontinue playing, and smoke a social cigar together. I seconded the proposition, and some exquisite Havanas and a decanter of brandy were placed on the table. We made ourselves a tumbler of punch each, and were soon enveloped in the blue wreaths of smoke from our cigars.

We conversed on several subjects, but by degrees our conversation grew more and more interrupted, until at last Mr. Dobell replied only by monosyllables to my remarks, and at last made no reply at all—for he was fast asleep.

I sat for some time gazing on the burning logs, smoking my cigar, and thinking of nothing in particular. At last I began to feel tired, and rose up for the purpose of taking my departure, when I was attracted by a lot of gaudily-bound books placed on a table at the other end of the apartment.

Now, if do I have any one weakness more than another, it is the fondness of turning over new books and reading their title-pages. I could not resist the temptation before me, and going to the table, I sat down beside it and began to examine the books on it. This table was placed near the folding-doors, which separated the dining from the sitting-room. When I first sat down I heard a confused murmur of voices, which, however, grew more distinct, and without listening I was enabled to hear the conversation going on in the next apartment. Perhaps I was in honor bound to move away, but my profession as a detective officer had in a measure blunted these nice punctilios of honor, and I always made it a rule to know everything I possibly could—for I frequently found information, apparently the most unimportant, bore upon the particular case I might be investigating at the time. The speakers in the next room were evidently Jasper Barton and Miss Emily Dobell.

“I have the greatest respect for your father,” I heard Jasper say, “but forgive me, dear Emily, if I say that I have more ambition than to become a partner in a grocery business, respectable though it be. When you are my wife, I want you to shine in the world as a lady of fashion, and not bury yourself in this little town—”

“But Jasper—”

“I know what you would say, dear,” interrupted the young man. “I am fully aware that my present position makes my ambition appear very foolish, but you do not know all. I have already considerable means saved, and have good expectations of being rich very soon.”

“I thought your parents were dead,” said Emily.

“So they are, but I have other relatives living, and rich ones, too. I hope—”

Here his words grew so indistinct that I lost them. For some few moments a confused murmur of voices followed. Then their voices grew distinct again.

“Dear Jasper,” I heard Emily say, “you never told me how you lost the middle finger of your left hand.”

I had noticed at the tea-table that the young man’s hand was minus this finger.

“Did I not?” replied Jasper. “I thought I had told you. When I was a boy—”

I could not hear his explanation, for the reason that he suddenly sunk his voice, and the worthy mayor at that moment waking up, I heard no more of the conversation going on in the adjoining room, which, to tell the truth, did not interest me at all. Rising from my seat, I shook Mr. Dobell cordially by the hand, and returned to my inn.

I immediately went to bed, and, as is my usual custom on retiring for the night, I began to turn over in my own mind the best course for me to pursue. I recapitulated in my own mind all that had been told me concerning the robberies, and the first conclusion I arrived at was, that the perpetrators of them resided in Elliottsville; for it appears that the persons who had been robbed were always addressed by their real names. After a few minutes’ thought on the matter, I made up my mind as to the best course of action for me to pursue, and that was to allow myself to be robbed!

The next day I went through the town and stated to everybody I met, that it was my intention to leave for Albany that night. When the landlord of the Congress House heard my determination, he earnestly advised me not to go, stating that he was certain I should be robbed if I did so. This only made me the more determined, for it was the very thing I wanted. I was inflexible in my resolution, stating to him that, whether I was robbed or not, I must go, as my business was imperative. Among other persons I called on Mr. Dobell, and told him of my determination. I found him alone in his store.

“My dear sir,” said he to me, when I told him what I intended to do, “let me persuade you to give up the idea. You will never detect the criminals that way, and you may be seriously maltreated.”

“I have thought the matter over, Mr. Dobell,” I replied, “and have concluded that it is the best course for me to pursue; and when once I have made up my mind, nothing can turn me.”

“Well, you know best. I must leave the matter entirely to yourself.”

“Where is Mr. Barton this morning?” said I. “I do not see him here.”

“He has just gone down to the bank.”

“You have said nothing to him as to my real character?”

“No, indeed—not a soul in this place knows who you are excepting myself.”

“That’s right! Be good enough to keep my secret until you see me again.”

So saying, I bade him goodbye, and left the store. I had not gone a dozen yards down the street, before I met his confidential clerk, Mr. Jasper Barton.

“Good morning, Mr. Clark!” said he, shaking my hand.

“Good morning!” I returned, “or rather I should say, goodbye!”

“What, are you going to leave us?”

“Yes, I leave for Albany tonight.”

“Are you not afraid?”

“Afraid of what?”

“The robbers.”

“I had forgotten all about them—no, I am not afraid of them, though perhaps I ought to be, for I often carry considerable funds with me. By the by, can you tell me where the bank is? I wish to change some money.”

“The bank?—O, yes! Take the first turn to the left, and you will see a brown stone building—that is the bank.”

I thanked him, and hurried on. I soon transacted my business at the bank and then returned to the inn. When it was quite dark I ordered my horse, and putting two ten dollar bills in my purse, both of which I carefully marked with red ink in one corner, I started on my journey. As I intended to make no resistance, I had provided myself with no weapons of defense.

It was a bitter cold night, and intensely dark. The sky overhead was covered with thick, murky clouds, through which not a single star penetrated; the wind, which was from the northeast, blew a cutting blast in my face, but I pushed on, animated by the hope that I should discover some clue to the perpetrators of the robberies. I soon left the lights of the town behind, and entered upon an open country road. For two or three miles nothing occurred to arouse my suspicions, and I began to fear I had made my journey for nothing. But suddenly I felt my horse’s rein seized, and saw the bright barrel of a pistol gleam before my eyes.

“I want your money, Mr. Clark,” said a rough voice.

“Ah, you know me, then!” said I.

“Yes, you are the stranger who has been staying at the Congress House.”

“I am,” I returned, scrutinizing the robbers closely, for I now discovered there were two of them.

“Come, hand over your money!” said one of the men, touching me on the arm.

“Certainly,” I replied; “it is no use resisting, for I am unarmed. I have not much money with me, but what I have you are welcome to.”

So saying, I handed to one of the robbers the purse containing the two marked ten dollar bills. He opened it, and appeared very much disappointed.

“You have more money than that about you,” said he.

“No indeed, that is all I have.”

“You were seen to go into the bank at Elliottsville this morning.”

“True, but that was to send money away, not to receive it.”

“Well, we must search you.”

“Very well; as I said before, I cannot resist.”

The robbers searched me very expeditiously, turning my pockets inside out. At last they were compelled to come to the conclusion that I had spoken the truth.

“I suppose you expected that you would be stopped, and that is the reason you did not bring your money with you,” said one of the men.

“That is exactly the truth,” I replied. “I was told that I should be certain to be robbed; and although I thought that perhaps I might escape, I thought it better to be on the safe side.”

“Well, we can’t get blood out of a post, so I suppose we must be satisfied. Good night!”

“Good night! You have spoiled my journey, though. It is of no use to go on to Albany without any money. I shall have to return to Elliottsville.”

“We are sorry to have inconvenienced you. Good night!”

“Good night!” I repeated, and turning my horse round, started back for the town I had so lately quitted.

While I was conversing with the highwaymen, I had done my best to endeavor to penetrate their disguise, but all my efforts had been entirely unavailing. The masks they wore had entirely concealed their faces, and their voices were quite strange to me. In fact, owing to the darkness of the night, I had not been able to catch the slightest glimpse of the form of one of the men, and the

other I felt certain was an entire stranger to me. I began to be afraid that my plan would fail, but still I did not wholly despair.

I soon formed my plan of action. I felt assured that the robbers must be inhabitants of the town, and I made up my mind that I would go to the entrance of the town and watch for their return, and then follow them home. I soon reached the first house, and concealed my horse in a neighboring thicket, and then returned to the cottage of which I have just spoken.

It was evidently an old building, and its dilapidated condition informed me that it was unoccupied. The upper windows were all boarded up, the chimney was in ruins, and the yard attached to it looked the picture of desolation. I walked round the house, but not the slightest sound greeted my ears. The thought then struck me that it would be an excellent place to watch from, and I determined to enter it. I tried the door, and to my joy I found it unfastened. I entered, and found myself in a moderately-sized apartment, with a low ceiling, and entirely destitute of furniture. My first proceeding was to examine the room minutely. I found in a recess a large cupboard, but nothing else in the apartment merited any notice.

I now approached the window, and opening the shutter, found to my joy that no one could pass along the road without my being cognizant of the fact. I threw up the window, and determined to await there the issue of events.

Perhaps an hour elapsed, and I began to grow very tired and sleepy. The wind blew very keenly through the open window, and pierced my very bones. As time passed I had serious thoughts of giving up my expedition as a failure; and yet the knowledge that there was no other entrance into Elliottsville, and the firm conviction that the robbers must be inhabitants of that town, made me hold on a little longer. At last I heard the sound of footsteps on the hard ground. Every minute they grew more and more distinct, and I felt certain that the robbers were approaching. In a moment or two I saw their dusky forms in the distance—but to my extreme surprise and consternation, I saw them crossing the road and making directly for the door of the uninhabited house in which I was watching. It did not take me a moment to creep away from the window; in less than a minute I was safely concealed in the cupboard which I have before mentioned. I had scarcely entered it before the front door opened, and the two robbers advanced into the room.

“Not much luck tonight,” said one of them.

“We can’t expect it to rain gold every night,” said the other. “Taking all things into consideration, we have done remarkably well during the last week.”

“Not so bad, that’s a fact! You must own there is a good deal of credit due to me for planning our expeditions. There is not the slightest suspicion attached to us.”

“Yes, I must say you have managed things well. People little think when they are talking to me of the robberies, that I am the man who relieved them of their superfluous cash.”

“How miserably cold it is here!” said the other, changing the conversation. “Where are the matches?”

“They are on the shelf in the cupboard,” replied his companion.

This was by no means pleasing information to me; to tell the truth, I really felt afraid. In spite of the cold weather, my body was bathed in perspiration, when I heard one of the robbers approaching my place of concealment. I drew myself into the smallest possible space, and could actually hear my own heart beat. The robber opened the cupboard, and I held my breath. My good fortune, which has so often befriended me, did not forsake me this time; for the first thing he put his hand on was the box of matches, and I was, comparatively speaking, safe. In another moment or two I saw a light gleaming through the chinks of the cupboard door.

“What, in the name of fortune, did you leave the window open for?” said one of the men.

“I didn’t leave it open,” replied the other.

“Yes, you did.”

“No, I didn’t!”

“What is the reason it is open now, then?”

“How should I know? You left it open yourself, I suppose.”

“Well, it’s no use arguing about it—it’s open now,” said the first speaker, shutting it down.

I was very glad to find that they did not suspect any one of having entered during their absence, and I began to hope that I might get out of my difficulty scot free. I did not forget the end I had in view, and bringing my eye in close proximity to the key-hole of the door, I distinctly saw the two men. One of them was tall and powerfully built, the other was much shorter. I confidently expected that they would remove their masks, but I was disappointed, for they kept them on, and I was no nearer recognizing them than when they were in the dark.

“Now, then, let us proceed to business,” said one of the men. “What is our booty tonight?”

“Well, there’s that twenty dollars we took from that Mr. Clark, the New York merchant; a gold watch we took from Farmer Johnson, and the two rings we took from his wife.”

“We will pursue our usual custom,” said the taller of the two robbers; “conceal the watch and rings, and divide the money.”

“That’s soon done; there’s one of the ten dollar bills, and now to conceal the other things.”

The robber handed his companion one of the ten dollar bills, which I noticed he placed in the side-pocket of his vest; and then going to a particular plank in the floor, he raised it up, and I saw a deep hole, which appeared to be filled with valuables. He concealed the watch and rings in this hiding-place, and then replaced the plank.

“We have got a pretty good haul in there,” said he, as soon as he left the place. “When are we to divide?”

“I think it will be safe to continue this game a week or two longer, and then we shall have to vamoose.”

“But before we do that, we ought to try some of the houses in the town; there’s old Dobell, for instance—he keeps lots of money always at his house.”

“Yes, that’s easy enough got at; but that must be the last thing done.”

“I agree with you—but where’s the brandy? I am as thirsty as a dog—let us have a drink.”

“The brandy’s in the cupboard on the top shelf. I’ll get it,” returned the robber’s companion.

I now thought it was all up with me. The robber approached the cupboard with the lamp. A sudden idea entered my head—it was the only thing left for me to do; it might, or it might not, prove successful. The moment the cupboard door opened, quick as thought, I blew out the light before the man had time to look in.

“Confound the draught!” said the man, stamping his foot angrily on the ground.

Again I held my breath. Without waiting to relight the lamp, the man groped about on the shelf, and to my joy found the bottle he was seeking. He closed the door again, and again the lamp was lighted.

I now hoped that they would remove their masks for the purpose of drinking, but again I was disappointed; they merely lifted them up, and I did not catch the slightest glimpse of their features. But when the tallest robber took the bottle in his hand, I saw something that set the blood dancing through my veins.

After drinking a considerable quantity they took up their hats and left the house. When they had been gone half an hour, I also left; and finding my horse in the same place that I had left it, I proceeded at once to my inn, and entered as if nothing had happened.

In reply to the interrogations of my landlord, I merely informed him that when I had got some distance on the road, I had changed my mind, and determined to put off my journey to Albany for the present.

I went to bed and slept soundly that night. The next morning I sauntered down to Mr. Dobell’s store. I found the owner and Mr. Jasper Barton there; they both appeared to be extremely surprised to see me.

“Why, Mr. Clark,” said Mr. Dobell, “you back again! I thought you were at Albany.”

“I might have been,” I replied, “but I had the misfortune to be robbed just outside of the town.”

“How shameful!” said Mr. Barton. “Can nothing be done to stop these outrages?”

“I think there can,” said I; “and my business here this morning is for that special purpose.” And then advancing to Mr. Barton, I laid my hand on his shoulder, and said, “Mr. Barton, you are my prisoner! I accuse you of having robbed me last night!”

“You are mad, sir!” said Barton, turning as pale as death.

“Not quite,” I returned; and before he was aware of it, I dived my fingers into the side-pocket of his vest, and drew from it the bank-note for ten dollars with my private mark in red ink in the corner. I had seen him place it there himself, so I knew where to find it. Mr. Barton had revealed himself to me when he raised the bottle to his mouth to drink. I then detected the absence of the middle finger of the left hand, and was sure of my man. The accused at first stoutly denied my accusation; but when he learned that I had been concealed in the cupboard in the room where he had concealed his dishonest gains, he confessed all, revealing the name of his accomplice, who was an ostler employed at one of the inns of the town.

Mr. Jasper Barton and his companion are now undergoing a sentence of imprisonment in the State prison. Most of the property that had been taken was discovered in their secret hiding-place, and returned to their rightful owners.

The fact of the other day receiving wedding-cards from Miss Emily Dobell, who has lately married a Mr. Theodore Johnson, the son of a wealthy farmer, recalled the circumstances of this affair to my mind, and I determined to make it public.

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Leaves from the Note-Book of a New York Detective: The Private Record of J.B., Ed. John B. Williams, M.D. New York; Dick and Fitzgerald, 1865