

Why I Became a Detective

by Hugh Humphrey

“Pi’ ap’—cookin’ ap’—eatin’ ap’—’ere tha go!”

“Tins-ter-men-d!”

“Rag-s! bottles! sacks and bag-s!”

Perdition! how those abominable street hawkers did torment me that afternoon. I was convalescent, just recovering from a dangerous fever. My room was in a two-story building in one of those courts that lead off from Folsom street—a front room in the second story. The day was hot and sultry, that is, for San Francisco, although the thermometer did not range above seventy-five degrees. And there, through the long day I sat and listened to the cries of apple-peddlers, tinkers, junk men, fish-peddlers, wandering glaziers, etc. Occasionally there was an interlude of dog-fighting, or a trial at fisticuffs among the street Arabs that frequented the narrow side-walks of Broughton Court.

How I longed to escape from the interminable din and confusion, and get me out into the quiet suburbs, or across the bay to the cooling oaks of Alameda—but the fiat of my uncompromising physician was, to not leave my room for three days yet, and I must obey.

“Pi’ ap—cookin’ ap—ere tha go!”

A burst of wonderful melody broke in upon the discordant cry of the apple vender. It came from the open window of a house on the opposite side of the court—a house somewhat more pretentious in appearance than the rest of its neighbors. The wonderful notes floated out and silenced for a time the discordant voices below, the before mentioned tinkers, fishmen, and junk dealers. Even two pugnacious looking canines, who but a minute before stood eyeing each other with bristling hair, stopped for a moment and then, wagging their tails good-naturedly, trotted down the court together in an exceedingly amiable and good-doggish manner.

And still from the opposite window came the music of that entrancing melody,

“Sweet Spirit, hear my Prayer.”

I sat down by my open window and listened, was entranced—spell bound. I thought I had listened to fine singing before, but nothing could compare with this. Throughout the whole of the song I was as one in a dream, and when it ended a deep sigh escaped from my bosom. Who could the lovely songstress be? for I was certain one who possessed such a voice as that must have a beautiful face. As I looked there was a glimpse of a young lady’s face at the opposite window, and then the curtain fell, shutting from my view the fair vision.

A curse almost rose to my lips, that I was denied longer to look upon her countenance, but I had seen enough to know that she was surpassingly lovely.

The remainder of that day was no longer tedious. I minded not the chorus of street cries that filled, as ever, the court below. The melody of that voice was in my ears. "Sweet Spirit, hear my Prayer." One spirit, at least, had listened, and was now a soul-entranced slave.

My dreams that night were of spirits of light, and chief among them was my unknown divinity opposite, singing her captivating songs. I awoke to hear in reality the music of her voice, and going to the window I could see that her room was lighted, the sash raised, and behind the embroidered curtain I could see outlines of a perfect face shadowed on the snowy muslin. I could sleep no more that night.

The three days that followed were less irksome than those which preceded. I occasionally caught a glimpse of the object of my worship, and every day was made happy by the melody of her songs. I watched the house closely but never saw anyone except a single servant, an old, decrepit man, go in or out of the building. He went out to the grocery on the corner, once or twice a day, for milk or crackers.

When my physician declared that I might with safety leave my room, my first movement was to try and find out something of the lovely young lady of Broughton Court.

I looked over the theatre bills—no musical celebrity was delighting the opera loving portion of the people. No actress of any especial note was stopping in the city. I went to see my particular friend, Prof. Minim. Minim was certain there was no one in the city possessing any musical fame that answered the description I gave him of the lady. He would come to my room some afternoon, if I was willing, and listen to her singing— probably I overestimated her abilities. I was indignant at Minim for doubting my judgment, but told him he might come that afternoon. He did so, and went away with a large sized flea in his ear.

The next morning, one of the daily papers, in its amusement column, had the following item:

"A gentleman well-known in musical circles, assures us that there is, at present, stopping in this city incognito, one of the queens of the lyric stage. There can be no doubt of it, for the gentleman assures us he has himself heard her sing. Whether it is Miss Kellogg or Patti, our informant declined saying."

I knew very well the gentleman alluded to was Minim, and the wonderful incognito, my beautiful neighbor of Broughton Court.

A week passed and I was still as much in the fog as ever. I questioned the old servant, but found him so deaf that it was almost impossible to convey any idea to him. At length accident brought about the meeting I had been so long endeavoring to effect.

I sat one evening in one of the fashionable restaurants of this city, partaking of a dish of oysters with a friend, when who should enter but the very lady I had thought of, dreamed of, talked of,

for the past week. She was unattended save by the deaf old servant. She took a seat not far from us and gave an order for an ice.

“See! that’s her!” I exclaimed, grasping my friend’s arm. “Heavens! is she not beautiful?”

“Pretty good style!” my friend replied, after coolly regarding her for a moment.

“Pretty good! Pshaw! You don’t know a beautiful woman when you see one!” I said heatedly. “She is the most lovely being I ever saw.”

“Style of dress a little loud—don’t you think so?” he queried.

“No, sir; I never saw better taste.”

“It’s not Kellogg, anyhow.”

“How do you know that?”

“Saw her in Paris, last Winter. Not the least resemblance.”

By this time she had finished her ice and was leaving the saloon. As she passed the table at which we were sitting, she, by accident, dropped her glove. The superannuated old servant did not notice it, and hence, ere they were far from the door I stopped her, and with many bows, blushes and stammerings, begged the privilege of returning her glove.

She thanked me pleasantly—Heavens! the music of that voice! She smiled radiantly and as she took it from me our fingers lightly touched. What a magnetic ecstatic thrill shot through my frame! I bowed again, and with much confusion took myself away, not from their sight, however. I determined to follow them and see if I could learn more of her. I had left my friend in the saloon, and at the risk of breaking with him I did not return. Knowing something of my half insane sentiments, he did not regard it as an insult. I dogged their footsteps and only found out what I knew before, that they lived in Broughton Court.

I did a foolish thing the next morning. I inserted a *personal* in one of the morning papers.

“Lady who dropped her glove in a restaurant on Kearny street, etc.—address, A. B. C. this office.”

That evening a *personal* appeared in an evening paper. It was this:

“Deaf old man, Kearny street, last night. Desires interview. Address, Songstress,”

Jubilate! It was my divinity, I was certain. I answered *Songstress*. I just poured it out! I took down “Roget’s Thesaurus of English Words” and worked in all the loving terms I could find—everything synonymous with affection, etc.

My *personal* was answered, too. Answered by “Songstress,” of course. It was not far behind my answer in gushingness. My “Songstress” was a caged bird—very rich—old Gorgon of an uncle wanted to get all the money, etc. Kept her under the strictest surveillance—has seen me at my window when sick—had pitied me—had sympathized with me—*loved me!*

The notes flew thick and fast for a few days. Then a meeting was planned. The old servant was to be bribed, and I, at last, was to clasp in my arms my adored “Songstress.” She had never signed any other name. But what cared I for that? Songstress was more appropriate for her than any name I could have suggested.

The night came, dark and cloudy. I was to enter at the area entrance, which was to be left unlocked, when the old mummy of a servant was to conduct me to her presence. Ten o’clock was the time fixed. I was punctual to a moment. But the door was not opened; it was most securely bolted on the inside. I waited for half an hour and then crept back to my lodgings feeling very much like a thief or burglar. I saw a light in the room of my divinity, and was almost crazy with perplexity and jealousy.

The next morning a little ragged boy left a note at the door for me. It was from “Songstress.” Her plan had failed—old Gorgon of an uncle had put in an appearance that very evening and stopped there through the night. Was going to Sacramento that very afternoon. “Come at ten, my Idol!” so the missive ended.

I went as before. This time the door was unbolted. I stepped in and a suppressed voice said:

“Hist! follow me!”

It was dark as Egypt. The floor creaked beneath our tread and I felt every moment as though I should step into some hidden trap and the affair end disastrously. Along through a narrow corridor I was led, up a winding steep stairway, then along another passage, some what wider. This I judged to be the hall of the front entrance on the ground floor, then up a wide stairway, along another corridor until we stopped before a door. I knew it to be such for I could see the light shining through a slight chink in one of the thin panels.

“When I am gone, knock here,” said my guide, who I was certain was the old servant.

I heard him shuffle off along the corridor and open and close a door.

Only a light door between me and the being I so madly loved! How my heart beat with excitement.

I knocked.

There was a rustle of silken garments, and a musical voice said:

“Come in.”

I opened the door and the next moment we were clasped in each other's arms, and I was kissing her sweet lips.

"At last, at last, my darling!" I murmured. "I feared we never were to meet."

She did not reply. She was sobbing on my breast, and her beautiful golden hair was veiling her lovely features. I gently led her to the sofa, and passing my arm around her drew her to a seat by my side.

I will not describe in detail all the events of that night. Such happiness never had been my lot before. I lived in an atmosphere of ecstasy. I was transported to the seventh heaven of delight. My beautiful "Songstress" was with me. I held her in my arms. I listened to the beating of her heart against mine, the perfume of her breath was on my cheek, and I was happy, madly, wildly happy!

Time flew with our thoughts, and ere we thought of parting the early milkmen were rattling over the rough pave.

It was then that we arranged all for an elopement the following night. I was to come with a close carriage—the old servant was to be plied with wine until he was in a state of drunken stupefaction, and then, together we were to hasten to the magistrate's and take the vows that would bind together

"Two souls with but a single thought,
Two hearts that beat as one."

We exchanged rings as pledges of our murmured vows, and reluctantly, at last, I tore myself away from her adored presence. The old man was summoned by the ringing of a bell, and I was conducted in the same manner as before to the area door.

It is needless to say that my eyes did not close for the remainder of the night. About daylight I must have dropped asleep, for the sun was pouring in at the uncurtained window when I awoke. The whole city was astir. I knew it was pretty well on in the forenoon for I could distinctly hear the cry—

"Pi-ap'—eatin' ap—cookin' ap! 'ere tha go!"

I sprang from my bed and looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock! I glanced out of the window to the building on the opposite side of the court. Something was going on there that instantly arrested my attention. Hastily dressing I went down into the court. A young man was tacking on the door a card "To Let."

An express wagon was standing near and two men were removing some furniture from a room on the second floor. I did not like the appearance of things.

“Some mistake here, is there not?” I said, addressing the young man who had just finished putting up the card. “This house is not for rent is it?”

“No mistake, sir, I think,” he replied. “The party gave up the key early this morning, and said she should want it no longer. She only rented it for a month. Would you like to look at the rooms?”

I bowed, and walked in and up stairs to the very room I had entered in such a mysterious manner the night previous. Some of the furniture was still there and I had no difficulty in recognising it.

The expressmen came in after the sofa. “Do you know anything about the parties who have just left this house?” I asked.

“No, not much. An old man on Third street sent us here for this truck—said he bought it of a young woman early this morning. She was gone before we came.”

I wandered around through the rooms—they were as bare as an empty barn—and then out into the street. Then I went out to a restaurant for a cup of coffee. I could eat nothing—my appetite had left me. I took up a paper, but the morning news had no interest for me. At length my eye rested on the column of *Personals*, and this was what I read:

“Broughton Court—You’re bilked. S.”

Bilked! Yes, so I began to have a slight suspicion. Just then my eye rested on the ring I had received from my wonderful songstress. I looked at it carefully. Bilked again! for it was the cheapest paste. The one given in exchange was a fine opal. But that was not all. I possessed two rings—the opal and a beautiful diamond ring, an heirloom in my family, that had descended to me through many generations of ancestors. And that diamond ring was gone! Fool! dolt! simpleton! I could have kicked myself out into the street, I was so enraged.

“Soft-headed fool that I was, I deserved to be swindled! With my eyes open I had walked into a trap that any schoolboy could have understood.

My diamond! A pretty good month’s work for her, whoever she might be.

I considered the subject for some time, and finally thought I had best place the matter in the hands of a detective. I could not lose my valuable heirloom without some effort to recover it.

That afternoon I walked into the office of the Chief of the Detective force. That worthy was alone, and I gave him the outlines of the case, without letting him know fully what an egregious ass I had made of myself. He smiled curiously.

“I think I know who she is,” he observed. “Sings well, you say?”

“Divinely!”

“Has fine hair, eh?”

“Liquid golden!”

“Dresses well?”

“Her taste is perfect.”

The Chief took down a goodly-sized photographic album, turned over the leaves, and then handed me the volume open.

“Does that look like her?” he asked.

“It is a perfect likeness. Where did you get it?” I asked.

“Crazy Sal has had a place in the ‘Rogues’ Gallery’ for several years,” he answered. “She stands high in her profession.”

“Her profession?”

“Yes; shoplifter and general confidence woman. She is a valuable piece of property for that old man—he is her father, it is supposed.”

On the opposite page of the album was the picture of the old reprobate, and under it were written several *aliases*, with “Patrick Harrigan, real name.”

My wonderful charmer also boasted of a multiplicity of names, among which were: Nancy Harrigan, Crazy Sal, Irish Jenny, Mademoiselle Clarice Duval, Perilo, Cettiti, etc.

“Well, sir,” I asked, “What is to be done?”

“Nothing, at present,” said the Chief. “She will keep shady for some time now. It will be useless to make any move for a month, at least. Call round in about that time.”

I left the office, and in a month, called as directed. The Chief could give no clue to her whereabouts. It was evident she was not in the city, for nothing had been reported at the office of late, that was in her peculiar line of business.

“Sir,” said the Chief, “I do not think it advisable to move about this yet. You see we have no clue. She hasn’t sold the diamond—of that I am certain. I’ve kept a good lookout at all the places in the city where they deal with her class. Until she does attempt to dispose of it, we have nothing to work on, you understand? Besides,” he continued, “the force is short now. I haven’t a single man to detail for this case.”

An idea struck me.

“Chief,” I asked, “why can’t I be commissioned to work it up?”

“You!” and a broad smile spread over his face.

“I suppose, now,” said I, “that you are thinking of my stupidity in allowing myself to be so easily duped by her. Experience is a good teacher. I think she or any one else would fail, if they tried another such a game on me.”

“Couldn’t appoint you as a *regular*, sir, but you might be sworn in as a *special*. Call round tomorrow; I’ll see.”

I called as directed, and the result was, that I was sworn in as a special detective policeman, and assigned to the task of discovering the whereabouts of Nancy Harrigan, confidence woman, etc.

A week’s work in the city satisfied me that the Chief was right. She had left not the slightest clue as to her whereabouts. I was getting discouraged, and was thinking of throwing up my commission, when an advertisement in an obscure interior paper attracted my attention. It was this:

SLUICE FORK HALL,

Wednesday Evening Oct. 16th, 18—.

UNPARALLELED ATTRACTION!

MADemoiselle CLARICE CAMPIO announces to the citizens of this place that she will give one of her wonderful

CONCERTS

At the above Hall, on Wednesday evening next.

Mademoiselle Campio is acknowledged to be the finest female vocalist living.

She has sung in all the principal theatres in Europe, and is now making the tour of this country, after which she will return, and sing the coming Winter at La Scola, Milan.

Mademoiselle Campio will be assisted by Prof. Perotti, who will preside at the piano, etc., etc.

Admission \$1.00

Mademoiselle Campio! I never had heard of this artiste. I was certain Mademoiselle Campio had never sang in San Francisco. I consulted a *theatrical directory*, and found there no Mademoiselle Campio. Evidently, Mademoiselle Campio was a fraud. It was quite likely that Mademoiselle was no other than my past-time divinity, Nancy Harrigan.

I showed the paper to the Chief.

“Go for her!” was all he said.

Accordingly I *went for her*. I had a hard chase of it, round through the roughest part of the mines. I came up with her at last, in a little town in Tuolumne county. Mademoiselle Campio had advertised well here, and the entire population were out to listen to the wonderful voice that had achieved such renown at La Scola. etc.

At a late hour I entered the little hall and took a retired seat, but one that gave me a good view of the stage.

“Professor Perotti presided at the piano.” The piano, in this case, was a dilapidated melodeon with a very weak constitution.

Professor Perotti I recognized as Pete Murphy, the endman, bones, of a defunct minstrel troupe of San Francisco. The Professor played an asthmatic prelude and Mademoiselle made her entrance. Heavens! but she was lovely! There was no mistaking her, however. It was my adorable “Songstress,” Nancy Harrigan, *alias* Crazy Sal, etc., and on her hand glittered my own diamond ring!

She bowed smilingly, and commenced the air that had so captivated me—

“Sweet Spirit, hear my prayer.”

Notwithstanding the unpleasant duty I was to perform that night, I must say I never enjoyed a concert more. The applause was loud and prolonged.

It was over at last, and the crowd slowly departed. I stationed myself near the door and waited for her to appear. At length she came from behind the curtain, leaning on the arm of Professor Perotti. As they were about to pass me, I placed my hand on her arm, and at the same time clicked my pistol in her face.

“I arrest you, Miss!”

She looked me in my face a moment, and then burst into a loud laugh:

“Hillo, sonny! have you brought the carriage along? Have you got the license, my ducky? Quick, or the old uncle may be round! Ha! ha!” and she laughed in the merriest mood imaginable.

“No nonsense, this time, Nancy, I tell you!” I said; and throwing back my coat, I showed my star. “Grand larceny, my beauty. You’ve secured board for five years, at least.”

“Professor,” I added, turning to Murphy, who stood trembling with fear, “I do not know as I have any business with you, although let me tell you, you are not in the best of company. I have

provided lodgings for Mademoiselle Campio in the calaboose tonight. You can see her in the morning if you wish. At present, we must bid you good night.”

Pete Murphy slunk away in the darkness, and that was the last I ever saw of him. I took Nancy to the lockup, and, hoping that some *sweet spirit* would hear her prayer, I bade her “good night.”

We started on the stage the next morning for San Francisco. Nancy was the merriest travelling companion I ever met. Her observations upon the places and persons we passed were laughable in the extreme. At almost every station she would persuade me that I ought to hunt up a magistrate and have the ceremony performed before the old Gorgon of an *uncle* should overtake us.

Nancy Harrigan was convicted of grand larceny at the next term of Court, and the Chief was so well pleased with me that I was placed on the regular, force; and thus it was that I became a detective.

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