

The Village Thief

The people of the village of M— were alarmed. They could scarcely retire at night without being robbed. Stores, houses and families were pilfered, but who performed the nefarious deed or deeds could not be discovered. Guns and other warlike weapons were in demand; but these were ineffectual, for the guilty party still exercised his vocation with impunity. Police had been placed upon his track, but their efforts to discover him were unsuccessful; no clue to the appearance of the thief could be obtained from his victims; all of the latter agreed that they were plundered, not by an established band, but by *one* individual. Some said that immediately before they were robbed, they had noticed “a large fierce-looking fellow” prowling around their premises; others affirmed that the guilty party was “a small, fine-looking man” and, lastly, there were a few superstitious ones who declared that the robber was not a *man*, but the emissary of a certain individual supposed to govern the warm regions. With these conflicting reports, it would puzzle the last-named gentleman himself to discover the thief. It was for these reasons that the villagers were alarmed.

I was neither a detective nor a policeman, but, as a large reward had been offered for the apprehension of the thief, I concluded I would attempt his capture. Accordingly, I started for the village of M—. That night I stopped at an obscure inn, some ten miles from the village. Having stowed away my baggage and eaten my supper, I went into the barroom, where I found an old man conversing with the proprietor. I picked up a paper and pretended to be reading, but in reality was listening to their conversation. They were talking about the robberies that had been committed in the adjacent village. The old man seemed to know a great deal about the subject— so much so in fact, that my suspicions were somewhat aroused and I determined to watch him. They were both sitting with their backs toward me, and did not notice the surreptitious glances I cast at them above the corner of the paper. The old man’s right arm was hanging over the side of his chair, and he held a pocketknife in his hand. I noticed while he twirled it around, that it was a peculiar one. It had two blades and something which resembled a prong. While he was handling it in this manner it fell from his grasp, near my chair. He started hastily to pick it up, but ere he reach it I stooped down and picked it up, and gave it to him; but not before I had noticed the letters “B.K.” cut upon the horn case. The old man thanked me for my trouble, and then placed the knife in his pocket, while I pretended to resume my paper. I was almost certain that the object of my suspicions was not an old man, as he feigned to be; for I observed, when he started for his knife, that he manifested too much agility for one of advanced years; besides, he seemed very anxious to conceal the knife, after I had seen it. For those reasons I determined to watch him. After remaining a few minutes longer, he inquired of the proprietor what time the first stage left in the morning for the village of M—. I had not originally intended to start at so early an hour, but I now determined to go at the same time. Accordingly the next morning I found myself on the way to the village, in company with the old man.

We had been traveling for about an hour, during which time we had not spoken. At length my companion asked me if I thought “the robber” would be caught. I answered in the negative; and then, in a seemingly boasting manner, added. “But I do not fear him, and if he succeeds in robbing me, he is welcome to his plunder.”

“If he knew where to find you, he might visit you,” my companion quietly remarked.

I carelessly answered: “Should he desire to visit me, he can find me at the principal hotel in the village of M—.”

The old man made no reply. We arrived at our destination. I got out of the coach first, to see about my baggage, and when I returned my companion was gone. I was sorry he escaped me, but, hoping I might yet discover him, I started for the inn, which was soon reached.

About two hours after, a man, who appeared to be a minister, arrived. He had a number of tracts, which, having distributed, he was shown to his room, which was on the same floor and opposite that of mine. He did not show himself again until supper time, when he informed us that he was a traveling minister, and intended remaining in the village a few days.

The next morning three of the boarders announced to the landlord that they had been robbed, and among them, the minister.

The latter was just narrating the fact when I came into the room. In the course of his narration, he drew a handkerchief from his pocket; this action jerked out something, which fell upon the floor. Looking down, I discovered the same knife which I had seen in the possession of the old man, and with the same initials upon it. The minister hastily picked it up, and then turned towards me. I pretended to have observed nothing. He seemed somewhat satisfied, and resumed his narrative.

Now, for the first time, the idea struck me that the old man in the stage-coach—the *minister*, and the object of my pursuit—was the man before me. I did not, however, communicate my suspicions to anyone, as the proper time had not yet arrived, but intended that he should not escape me. That night two new boarders were robbed. The proprietor began to feel alarmed; in the presence of us all he said he was certain the guilty party was someone in the house. With assumed indignation I exclaimed: — “I am willing, and insist upon being searched; and hope for their own vindication, those present will submit to the same ceremony.”

All agreed to this, for the satisfaction of the proprietor; but though everyone— the “minister” included— was searched, nothing was found. I then proposed that each of the boarders should watch for a night until the robberies ceased; and, knowing the influence of example, offered to stand guard for that night myself.

This plan seemed to please the “minister,” for he not only acceded to it, but persuaded the others to agree to it. Accordingly, that night I entered upon my self-imposed duty.

All the sleeping apartments were on the second floor, immediately fronting each other, and separated by an entry near ten feet wide. About midnight, while walking up and down the passage, in pursuance of my duty, the “minister” opened his door, and inquired if I would go to the well and bring him some water, offering to watch during my absence. I replied that I was willing to oblige, and asked for his pitcher. He answered that he had nothing in his room but a tumbler, and that was occupied, and desired me to lend him mine. I knew what he told me was false; nevertheless, I pretended to be ignorant of his real intention, and unlocked my door, passed into the room, procured a pitcher, and then came out, purposely *leaving the door open*, but taking the

key with me. There was no light in the entry save that given by the moon. By the aid of this I reached the stairs, passed down, opened the front door, and then closed it. Instead of going out, however, I hastily took off my shoes and crept silently [up] the stairs again. I reached the top in time to see the “minister” enter my room. I paused for a moment to allow him time to get well at work, then crept softly up to the door, and peeped into the room. He was stooping over my trunk, with his back towards me. I heard him force it open, and then take out my purse. He rose and turned to go out. I let him reach [the] door, and then, before he discovered me, sprang upon him, and in a moment crushed him to the floor, and called for assistance. Meanwhile he struggled fiercely to rise, and would probably have succeeded, had it not been for the opportune arrival of several boarders. With their assistance I secured the villain. Two of us guarded him till morning, when we had him conveyed to prison. I searched his room, but for a time could discover none of the missing property. His trunk appeared to contain nothing but [clothes], but after a second inspection, I discovered a secret recess, which, having broken open, I found a number of banknotes, some cash, and all the articles of jewelry, etc., which had been stolen from the boarders. When the prisoner found we had discovered the missing property, he confessed that he had stolen it, and that he was the individual who alarmed the villagers. He also acknowledged that he was the pretended old man who had accompanied me in the stage. He was sent to prison, where I believe he is now engaged in the classic occupation of stone-cutting.

Cecil Whig [Elkton, MD], February 04, 1860