

The Detective's Story

My name is – no matter. I am called Tony. I have never been a member of the regular police, and I hope my vanity will be pardoned when I say that I consider my occupation a grade or two above it; since it must be evident to every one that a dull person may be and often is a serviceable policeman, while a detective has no chance of success without a ready perception and a close study of human nature. I am intuitively possessed of a faculty of imitation, which I have cultivated to be of great service in my business, as it enables me to assume, in a very deceptive manner, the disguise of any character I please; indeed, so many different parts have I played, and in such various company have I mixed, that it seems to me a serious problem, at times, where my proper position in society lays.

I have a partner in business whose real name I have no right to make public. He is a coarse-featured person, and is capable of converting himself by means of dress into one of the most rough-looking and repulsive of men. While in one of the meanest of his disguises, some one gave him the name of “Slouch:” and this rather repulsive sobriquet attached to him at first in the spirit of pleasantry, is now about the only name by which I address him. He is a good hearted fellow; muscular and courageous, and he has, in more than one instance, saved me from great peril, if not actually my life. Slouch has a remarkable faculty of reading crime in the face. His conclusions are generally correct; yet how he arrives at them has always been a mystery to me. My own suspicions are the result of some theory, and I will freely confess that my imagination has often led me astray. It is different with Slouch. A single look at the suspected person seems enough for him. He has often upset a nicely-woven tissue of apparently corroborative incidents for me by a glance at the party suspected, a shake of the head and a gruff and provoking dissent. Only one instance occurred where I was right and he was absolutely wrong, but as its recital would be a digression, I shall reserve it for another time.

We were sometimes together, and at other times widely separated. There is not a railroad, canal, or steamboat line in the United States that one or the other of us has not traveled over in the pursuit of our calling. Recently we have been sojourning in San Francisco.

Some time since the officers of the P— bank in the city of New York gave information to the police that their notes had been extensively counterfeited in a manner so alarmingly perfect that many of the spurious bills had passed through their own hands without detection; in fact, the first intimation of the crime was the perceptible inflation of their paper in circulation. Every line and shade of the original bill was reproduced in the counterfeit in such a perfect manner, that without the aid of a microscope, detection was utterly impossible. Once discovered, it was plain that no other counterfeiting process could so completely imitate the genuine but the art of photography, and in that science the manipulators must have been skilled.

Slouch and I went to work at once, led by the incentive of a very large conditional reward. We labored for many weeks without success. There was not a single photographic establishment in that large city that escaped our visits in disguise, and in my zeal to succeed in the undertaking, I studied the process of the art from beginning to end. Nearly three months had been fruitlessly spent in this way, when one evening a messenger was sent to us from the cashier of the bank, requesting us to hurry to his room. He informed us that two passenger tickets had been purchased

that day at the California steamship office, every dollar for which had been paid in the spurious bills. He had made some inquiries himself in the matter, and informed us that the ticket agent had no recollections of the persons from whom he had received the money, and that the steamer would sail at 9 o'clock the following morning.

Slouch and I took the matter into consideration, and urged by the advice and counsel of the bank officers, we determined to take passage on the same boat. A trunk was hastily packed with our motley wardrobe, and after agreeing upon our disguises, we sailed out the next morning, taking different routes, and proceeded without any show of haste to the vessel. I hesitate to say that I was much disguised on this trip, because my appearance, as near as I could make it up, was that of a well-dressed gentleman of fortune traveling for pleasure, and, of course, the first cabin was chosen for my quarters. Slouch had selected a very repulsive disguise, and might have been seen, as the vessel left the pier, awkwardly striding among the strange passengers, the most perfect semblance of a sneak-thief I ever saw. As a precaution, we bore a letter of introduction to the master of the vessel, indorsed by the chief of the New York police. Slouch and I were, of course, apparent strangers, and were as widely as possible separated on ship-board.

Only a few days of our voyage had passed before I had succeeded in winning the good opinion of my companions in the cabin, while my partner, in the same time, by his manners and appearance, had made himself an object of suspicion and distrust to the whole steerage. There was an unusually small number of us in the cabin, and among them not a single person whose demeanor could create a suspicion of crime. The women without exception, were extremely ladylike and entertaining, and I was inclined in their society to forget the grand purpose of my voyage; but Slouch got me occasionally aside, and talked business so intensely that I became a little more vigilant and attentive.

Among the male passengers was one who especially engaged my observation. He was a person of conspicuous appearance, not unhandsome in face, faultless in figure, and rather foppishly attired. He wore a dark imperial and moustache, a large brilliant upon his scarf, two or three diamond rings upon his fingers, and carried a delicate rattan cane with a deal of grace. There was an assumed air of dignity, and a patronizing air about him that disgusted me, the more as I could detect in his expression of features a weak and shallow mind. This person gave his undivided attention to the lady passengers, was prodigal in his comments to them, and was fast becoming a favorite. He appeared a perfect stranger to me until about the sixth day out, when seeing him early one morning before his toilet was made, his face became invested with an old familiarity. I became suspicious at once that he was playing a false part, and I began watching him more closely. On the first occasion that offered I engaged him in conversation, and it required but little skill to bring out that he too was travelling for pleasure.

I noticed also that he had a lively eye upon a certain quiet and very handsome lady, who was apparently without a protector, and whose costly silks and abundant jewels indicated no lack of funds. He was free to tell me that his name was Ross, and particular to hint on every occasion how fortune had favored him with wealth. The lady spoken of had attracted my attention, and I confess to feeling at the time a little tender partiality toward her. The reader, therefore, will not be surprised that I was conversant of Ross's gallantries to her, and that I was somewhat annoyed when I saw that she seemed to regard him with favor. Perhaps it was the stimulus of a rival,

perhaps the woman's charms alone, that aroused me to regard her; but at any rate I fell to gazing upon and thinking of her, and that, too, after only two or three short and rather cool interviews, wherein I utterly failed to exchange a single tender look. Meanwhile, Ross, to my utter discomfiture, was admitted by her to the most confidential tete-a-tetes.

It was about this time that I began to scrutinize Ross more closely, with the view of detecting his complicity in the crime I was employed to discover. The more I reflected the more I became convinced of the reasonableness of my suspicions. He was in my opinion, a person not likely to accumulate wealth. His habits were too extravagant for that, and besides, the vulgar inclination he had of alluding to his abundant means denied the probability of his inheriting money. If such a person had much money, it was quite likely to have been unlawfully obtained. It appeared a significant fact to me that this man evaded all my hints to discover his source of wealth. His business, whatever it might have been, was never once alluded to by him, and any method by which I could obtain a clue was to be sought for. Did he understand the art of photographing? If he did one good point was made. I had failed in every attempt to find his occupation until the following opportunity occurred, in availing myself of which I claim some sagacity.

Ross came limping to me one evening, bearing an expression of pain. I inquired what the matter was, at which he dropped into a seat beside me, and in a coarse manner began cursing his corns, which appeared to be the cause of his lameness. While he was lamenting his misfortune an idea had occurred to me. I had been troubled with corns myself, and had eradicated them with nitrate of silver, a chemical much used in photographing. "Mr. Ross," said I, "you can be effectually relieved by an article you have probably used, and quite likely you have with you."

"What is it?" inquired he, anxiously.

"That is a chemical that stains the skin and hair black," said I.

"Indeed!" said Ross, with forced surprise, and apparently quite uneasy.

"It is an article quite indispensable in the art of taking pictures by the solar light," said I, gazing directly into his eyes.

"Yes?" said Ross, with inquiry.

"Nitrate of silver; did you ever use it?" I inquired.

"No!" he said, curtly, and dropping his eyes before my gaze, he arose and left me, unmistakably embarrassed and annoyed.

This interview nearly settled the question in my mind in regard to his criminality, and the prospect of bringing him to justice pleased me. I observed him closer than ever. He appeared less lame the morning after I had suggested the remedy, and on the second day his lameness had entirely disappeared. I ventured to ask, after congratulating him on his improvement, whether he had obtained the chemical aboard, and although he denied it, I had but little doubt he had availed himself of my remedy. Fortunately, to discover whether he had, was completely within my

power. If Ross had applied the chemical to his corns, a blackened [indelible] stain remained, which important fact I was determined to find out. Slouch and I met frequently to compare notes, and our interviews were generally late at night. He always came to me upon the quarter-deck, and as ill-luck would have it, had been observed by Ross trespassing upon the quarter forbidden to occupants of the steerage.

The extent of my perplexity can be imagined when, while waiting anxiously to have an interview with my partner for the purpose of devising a method to have a peep at Ross's toe, Ross himself came to me in a confidential way, and whispered that he was keeping a close watch upon that thievish-looking fellow (describing my partner), that his scarf-pin had been stolen, and that he was suspicious it had been taken by Slouch. I managed with some difficulty and risk to whisper a few words to my partner shortly after requesting him to keep away from me until the next day. Meanwhile I set my wits to work to get a look at Ross's foot. We were then sailing in a low latitude. The nights were sultry and warm, and all the windows and doors that decency would allow open during sleeping hours, were left so. Ross's apartment, being near mine, I arose late in the night, and taking a lamp, I held it concealed beneath my hat, and stole noiselessly within his chamber. Nothing but a sheet covered him, and I gently raised its corner, and thus exposing his foot, I set the rays of my lamp upon it. A pretty large spot, as black as ink, disfigured one of his toes. His deep and measured respiration emboldened me to remain longer, and I gave a good look at his face in a state of repose. The conviction again, and with more force, presented itself that I had known him before. I returned to my berth, puzzling my brain to replace him in my recollections, but without success.

Having proceeded thus far, I contrived on the following morning, to see my partner, when I laid the whole matter before him. I had no doubt of his approval of my stratagem to implicate Ross; but he surprised and mortified me by shaking his head in a dubious way. My nitrate-of-silver test evidently went for nothing with him. The physiognomy of Ross had already been submitted to his wonderfully scrutinizing examination, and his judgement had pronounced him innocent of the crime. I argued and endeavored to reason with him upon the suspicious manner of Ross, when I had mentioned the remedy for his corns, and his inexplicable concealment of the chemical which there could be no doubt he carried with him; to all of which Slouch scarcely deigned a reply. While I was urging him to carry the matter further, he interrupted me with the following question:

“How would you like to make love to the gal with the pearl bracelet?”

I replied that I was half in love with the lady already, and that it would be a pleasant undertaking; expressing, however, some doubts to my success.

“Isn't she pretty?” said I.

Slouch shrugged his shoulders, gave me a sly wink, and burst into a laugh.

“Make love to her,” said he.

“For what” said I, becoming a little uneasy.

“Business,” answered my partner.

“Explain yourself,” said I.

“Well,” said Slouch, “you must make up to that gal in a sort of loving, serious way, and we’ll both see a little fun.”

I was about to call for a further explanation from my partner, when I chanced to observe Ross watching us from a distance. I left Slouch at once, and went sauntering off in a careless way.

I felt a good deal annoyed by this interview with my partner. He had treated my stratagem with indifference, and had regarded my affinity for a lady with levity. The idea of my being requested to make love to her as a cool business transaction, with a predicted result of witnessing fun! Slouch was something of a wag, but I knew from the manner of his request that he expected some results more than amusement. I had now an additional incentive to make myself agreeable to the lady, and I determined to bring my art to bear that success might follow.

I began by paying her marked attention, and intruded upon her society when ever I could find her apart. She treated me at first with a suspicious reserve, but I persevered because she was really attractive, because her indifference in a measure wounded my vanity, and for the less important reason that it was furthering some scheme of my partner to bring to justice the criminal or criminals upon whose hunt we had started. My efforts were not wasted; I could discover after a while that the woman was really becoming fond of me. Her manner toward me became serious, and she began to welcome my attentions with undisguised delight. My intimacy with her, however, cooled my admiration. I perceived in her a cruel, selfish nature, impulsive, sensual, with only the shadow of a conscience. A mere voluptuous figure dressed up with art and superficial graces. I soon became cloyed with her company, and would gladly have retreated had not the business consideration induced me to follow up the affair, which I did, I must confess, in such an ardent and heartless manner, that she actually declared her preference for me above all men she had met. At this stage I became uneasy with my position, for hardened as I had become by contact with crime, I do not think any person can charge me with cruelty to women. I accordingly contrived to see Slouch, and demanding an explanation, refused to proceed a step further.

“Now, Tony,” said my partner, “since you talk of leaving the gal, I’ll tell you exactly how the matter stands. That ’ere gal has got a husband. He is our game, and you must bring him out.”

“A husband! where?” I inquired.

“On board this very ship,” said Slouch.

“Who is he?” I anxiously asked.

“He’s a dark-complected, wary-looking chap in the steerage. I set my eyes on him the first day out and have been watching him ever since. When Ross began sliding up to the gal I noticed he

watched him like a cat; but as I made it out, he saw she was fooling with Ross – having a little fun all to herself, and then he got easy again. Now, thinks I, if Tony gets after that gal in a serious sort o’ way, there’ll be a man I know in the steerage bobbin’ round awful.”

“And how has he behaved during my gallantries?” I inquired.

“It’s better than a play,” said Slouch, shaking his sides with suppressed laughter. “The chap and I got to be chums, you know. So I took a seat alongside him while he was squinting toward you and the gal, and I says, “There’s a lovin’ couple, ain’t they?” Then he looks at me and says, ‘Maybe she’s somebody else’s wife.’”

“That’s no hindrance,’ says I. ‘That ’ere gal, anybody can see, has gone spooney after that man, and widder or wife, he can lead her where he likes.’

“Then he gets up, rolling his eyes, and biting his lips, and goes pacing back and forth on the deck. Pretty soon he sets down again and asks me what my opinion is of woman. ‘Wimmin,’ said I, ‘is not to be trusted. Frailty, thy name is woman. Do you know who proposed that ’ere toast?’ says I. ‘I can’t say as I do,’ says he. ‘William Shakespeare,’ says I, ‘the wisest man that ever lived. If there was anything about wimmin he didn’t know, there’s no use in any other man’s trying to find it out.’ ‘Then,’ said I, ‘You don’t look very well. May be this rough weather is affectin’ you.’ ‘I am a little sick,’ says he, and then muttered to himself, ‘there’ll be a sicker man than me aboard this boat soon.’ Look out sharp for him, Tony. He’s got a very jealous disposition, and I can see by his eye that he means mischief.”

“Well, Slouch,” said I, “what do you advise?”

“Go on with your love moking, Tony; lay it on pretty thick and strong. I’ll keep wide awake that he don’t hurt anybody. Pitch in strong and we’ll bring him out.”

Upon reflection, I resolved to act in accordance with the recommendation of my partner. The motive that could induce a man and his wife to separate themselves, hold no communication, nor recognize each other upon a journey like this, was a suspicious one. The fact that two tickets were purchased with the spurious bills accorded exactly with the case. So, deciding that the end would justify the means, I determined to push my advantage with this fickle, inconstant woman, to test the sagacity of Slouch and my own reasonable surmises.

The following evening was calm and clear, with just sufficient starlight to create dim shadows upon the deck, and to exhibit the outline of objects about. I had been making myself as agreeable as possible to the woman during the early evening, and about ten o’clock, at my suggestion, she took my arm for a promenade upon the upper deck. Almost every person had retired, and save the officers of the watch and two or three straggling passengers, we were alone. A man lay extended on one of the seats, wrapped in a cloak, and apparently asleep, while, on the seat opposite, another person whom I recognized as Slouch, was stretched out in apparently the same somnolent manner.

While we sauntered back and forth in that dim starlight, whispering love that was false, I held a distant eye on the figure in the cloak, and saw that it turned and twisted as we receded, and remained quiet only as we approached it. Counterfeiting the ardor of true affection I placed my arm around the woman's waist, and while treading back and forth in this condition I observed the figure by a side glance, as we reached the greatest distance from it, rise spasmodically into a sitting posture, and then drop again as we returned, and resume its quietness. I proposed now to rest awhile, and after seating ourselves a little distance from the pretended sleeper, I made so bold as to place my arm around her neck and give her a sounding kiss. Before I could turn myself to note the effect, I felt two powerful hands grasp my shoulders, and without time to assume a position of defence, I was forced backward upon the deck. A man stood bending over me with his knee upon my breast, and grasping my throat tightly with his one hand, he placed his face near mine.

"You wretch! what are you doing with my wife?" said he, hissing the words between his teeth.

"That'll do for the present," said Slouch as he turned my adversary over with his muscular arms. "Give me the cuffs, Tony, and then go call the captain."

The captain came at our request, and having shown him our commission, he gave us permission to search the baggage of both husband and wife. In the husband's trunk was found complete photographing apparatus and a large number of counterfeit bills in a partly finished state. Among the wife's effects were found many rolls of the perfect bills as well as the scarf pin that had been stolen from Ross. The prisoners were safely returned to New York, underwent a due course of law, and are both at present time serving out their sentences at Sing Sing.

The singularity of Ross's conduct was well explained, when near the termination of our journey, Slouch chanced to recognize him as a once sandy-haired and whiskered employe of a fashionable hair-dressing establishment in New York.

As nitrate of silver was the potent magician that transformed his yellow locks to a sable hue, it is not to be wondered at that he should exhibit a sensitiveness at its mention and its presence in his pack.

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