

A Detective's Story

Men are often amazed at the talent and cunning that experienced villains employ in carrying forward their plans of plunder and crime. And it is not ungrateful to our feelings, when we find officers of justice resorting to a measure of talent and cunning even greater than their own to arrest and bring to punishment these desperadoes of crime. The following incident in New York 'police life,' taken from the 'Curiosities of Crime,'* is a case in point on this subject. A "Detective" tells the story as follows:

Several years ago I had with much difficulty arrested a clerk in a leading jewelry house, who for a long time had not only successfully purloined from his employers, but had successfully diverted suspicion from himself. He made no confession when apprehended, and was very sullen; but I got facts enough to give me a clue that the property he had taken was sold to the Ehrwitz Brothers, who for a series of years had defied by their "finesse" all the exertions of police and magistrates. After commitment he was 'habeas corpus' – plague on those bothersome writs! Instead of being helps to justice, as in olden times, they had got to be mischievous, and often times – as in the case I now speak of – mere dodges to help an escape. Being somewhat his criminal guardian, I was selected to care for him on his way to the judge's chambers and back again. The argument over, he was remanded; for there was nothing in the points made 'for the liberty of this citizen,' as the counselor with the bombast contended.

Just at the corner of Leonard and Elm streets, as we were going to the Tombs, two intensely countrified fellows came along, and as quick as lightning seized me by each arm, and as quickly my prisoner cut and ran towards Broadway. The thing was so bold and audacious, I was for a moment paralyzed, and they held tightly, too, I assure you. In an instant there was a crowd. "Help me," I cried, "I am an officer!" The crowd came closer; the men released me. One said, "I will get an officer!" The other cried, "Oh, the fellow's drunk!" and off they went, everybody laughing like mad, and crowding closer and closer around me. "Don't be so affectionate," said I; let me out of this!" and I made a lunge at a big fellow, and down he went. At this, another struck me, and I saw at once that the whole thing – rescue, crowd, and all that – must be a premeditated dodge of the "Brothers" aforesaid who were protecting a pal, and had well watched the opportunity.

My bird was gone, and bottling wrath, I said to myself "Very well, gentlemen, you think I don't know you; before nightfall, however, I'll have both you and the prisoner tighter than the kettle-drums at oratorios, or I'll resign my office."

Slinking away, I went immediately to the office of an evening paper, and wrote a bit of intelligence that ---- had escaped, and was probably on his way to Philadelphia, and that Sergeant Baker would take an afternoon train in pursuit. All a blind, of course. From there I instantly went to the shop of a leading jeweler, and told my story. He commiserated. "Now," said I, "if you want to pity and aid me, lend me two diamond rings, four or five watches, and a case of chains. I pledge you my word they will be back to-morrow." "Decoys?" said he, laughingly. "Just so," I returned; for he and I had served each other before. I left with my booty, saying, as I did so, "if you see in the paper that

you have been robbed, tip the wink and humor it, you know.” He laughed, and off I bolted again to the newspaper office, and fortunately got there just as it was going to press.

It was but the work of a moment to write a few lines speaking of a daring larceny in a jewelry shop that morning, bold plunders, &c. – which, coupled with the escape, made the fourth edition of the paper a highly spicy issue. From there I went to the house of a particular partner, in our police business. I told him at 12 o’clock precisely to be at No. -- - John street, with eight or ten men, and come in and make search. “That is Ehrwitz’s den,” says he; “they are cunning; there’ll be nothing found. We’ve tried that before.” “Never you mind,” I rejoined; “this time I’ll be there before you and learn the mysteries.” With a sign of delighted recognition, for he loved a bit of excitement, we separated, he to pick his fellows, and I to put into my traveling bag the costume of a jaunty cracksman which had once before served as a good disguise – the sandy wig and whiskers and check cravat were perfectly irresistible.

By six o’clock, bag in hand, I was at the New Jersey railroad depot. Said I to myself, “John, my boy, somebody interested has seen that piece in the paper, and is watching to see you go. Now you must find out who that somebody is.” Looking around over the crowd carelessly, it was some time before I could venture a suggestion; but finally I hit upon a certain demure-looking person as the spy. So, to try him with a bit of bait, I pulled out a stale telegraphic dispatch, and, holding it so as he could see what it was, scanned it carefully with one eye, while, with the other, I peered over at him. He nibbled, and shortly edged towards my position. I was now almost sure and only wanted a grain more into the scale of doubt. So, taking a favorable turn in the ‘voyage,’ I made over to him and said, “Have you seen an evening paper? I omitted to buy one.” “No, sir,” said he; “but you will get one inside, I think.” I then pulled out the railway ticket, so as to carelessly show it – caught his eyes looking anxiously at it, and felt more convinced. But when, just as I was getting into the train, I saw him whisper to another parsonish cove, and they both looked at me, I was sure of the spy. But, to my chagrin, he got into the carriage and sat near me. I may be baulked yet, I thought, for perhaps he is to follow me through. You may believe I was much relieved when he got out at Newark where I had intended to stop, and so did not compel me to go on to Philadelphia. I had just twenty minutes to spare before the return train came by. I jumped for the hotel, where I was known, applied for and got a room, and in ten minutes was the regular cracksman. My own clothes were put into the carpetbag: and in a short time more was back again in town. At Newark my parson spy got in, and now I felt that I was right to a perfect certainty: Fortunately I had checked my bag, and it could lay until called for. So, unencumbered, I could operate with him as I choose. O took a bold position, and sat down by him. We got into conversation. Presently, I leaned over, and whispered meaningly, “Don’t be fly – I know you. You are Jack Simpson,” (giving him the name of a bold pickpocket.) He started and said, “Sir, do you wish to insult me? I am the Rev. Mr. Jones.” “Ah,” rejoined I, with my fingers to my nose, “and you preach for Moses Ehrwitz, the German fence, I believe?” He looked alarmed. “Don’t be afraid,” said I; “I am Bob Mazy, the Baltimore Faker. But since you are afraid to trust me, I will trust you. This very morning I took jewelry, (producing the borrowed articles,) and was on my way

to Philadelphia, when who should be on board but Bob Baker. So I took return train from Rahway.” Instantly he took my hand with a meaning pressure, and told me who he was, and how nicely he had been watching the same officer, and how cleverly he was diddled, going off after his escaped prisoner. And then he laughed merrily; and, egad, I laughed too. But I leave you to judge who had the best of the joke!

Joke, sir! He was no sooner on the New York side of the North river than I seized a policeman who is always about the place, whispered a word to him as to who I was, and then we both had our parson friend by the elbows, and took him as snugly as you please, and, half frightened to death, into the chief’s office. He told me his name in the carriage, and I had immediately perceived he was a very excellent cracksman, and a man whom we had long wanted. It was but a moment’s work to undeceive him, to cower him, and to get him to get a clean breast of all I wanted, after a promise to let him go for information. My friend the policeman was to keep him until morning, when I would return and let him off.

Armed with excellent information, I was soon off, and, calling a carriage, rode within a few doors of the house of the Ehrwitz Brothers. Down stairs they kept a shop, but upstairs I was satisfied they kept a regular crib, merely using the counting room as a blind, and a place in which to shove off articles that from their common use could not be well identified. They were just closing the shop as I went in and asked for the elder. He made his appearance. I told him I wanted some private conversation. At this moment – it was now half past 11 o’clock – my partner entered, most capitally disguised as a countryman, to make a pretended purchase and reconnoiter, and a meaning smile passed between us. He said out very loudly, “Talk away, mine friend; I’sh got no provate place but dish: talk away.”

I whispered in his ear the name of the fellow who was then in durance vile at the station. He started and led the way up stairs. “Vot of him?” said he, as he got up the stairs. “Why just this,” I answered, putting on a bold way, “I met him in the train, watching Jack Baker, who stopped a little journey I was taking, and I turned around with this little swag” – and I produced the jewelry – “some I pulled this morning; and our friend said I couldn’t do better than to sell it to you. I suppose it is worth two hundred dollars or so.” His caution in an instant succumbed to avarice, and he took me into the third story, where he locked the door. “Since you’ve made a clean bosom to me, I can trust you, mine fine fellow, for we are alone – you can never betray me – for there is no corroboration; and dat is where we are safe with you gentlemen! You did the leetle matter well—I read it in ze paper.” Saying this, and smothering a vulgar chuckle, he touched a little spring in the wall, and the false wainscot moved, disclosing a space of two feet behind. I was almost thrown off my guard with joy, for now I saw the whole villainy would shortly be at my disposal. From the recess he took a little box, and in it I saw much of the jewelry that I knew was taken by my escaped prisoner. But where was he? If I did not get him, however else I might succeed, I was not to be satisfied. I therefore angled for information.

“Jack Baker, I see has gone after the fellow who ran away so cleverly,” said I. “All mine work,” he replied; “for I always protect mine friends – mine true friends. But the ‘copper’

)slang for officer) will get ze toss up for his pains – ze bird is in dis cage;” and he pointed with his thumb up stairs. I could scarcely conceal my delight, My heart thumped like a mill-wheel, and the sweat poured from my body into my very stockings. He counted out his money (thinking, no doubt, what a fool I was,) and just shut the wainscot when the church clock hard by struck twelve.

In a few minutes a noise was heard in the hall. My heart thumped louder. The old rascal was a little flurried, but only for a minute, when, unlocking the door, he said : “Perhaps a visit from the police, -- dey will not let an old man be (here he tipped me a wink), and often incommode me. You (another wink) are a peddler, you know, and ---“

Here his hints were cut short, as the door opened, and in came our force, headed by the younger brother, who said: “It is no use – all is the same as when you was last here.”

“All is not the same!” cried I, snatching off my wig.

Down on the floor dropped the old rascal, as I touched the spring and open came the wainscot!

Up stairs in a curious closet I found my prisoner, and altogether was discovered about thirty thousand dollars worth of stolen goods. My first prisoner and my others and now enjoying country air at Sing Sing; and there was a fine sing song on my account the next day, I assure you.

The Athens [OH] Messenger, April 21, 1864

Urbana [OH] Union, July 20, 1864

*Possibly *Strange Stories of a Detective, or, Curiosities of Crime*, New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1863. “by a retired member of the Detective Police” [World Cat attributes authorship to William Russell]