Burbridge the Actor

An English Detective's Story

The neatest and about the longest job I ever was concerned in was young Mr. Burbridge's case, and that I did in London without any help from the London police. He was in the theatrical profession; a smart young chap, greatly trusted by his manager—made a sort of confidential secretary of, and allowed to keep the accounts and all the cash. No one checked or counted t'other. One fine morning he went off with a big sum. He had been to the bank and drawn a check to pay the weekly wages, but he went off instead, leaving the treasury empty and the whole company whistling for their "screws." The manager was half mad, and he come at once to the police. The chief sent for me.

"It's a bad business, thoroughly bad, and we must get him," he said.

"No idea which way he's gone?" I asked.

"None; that's for you to find out. So take up the case at once. Spare no pains—spend what money you like, only catch him if you can."

In jobs of this sort, sir, time goes a long way, of course. But it ain't everything. Burbridge had got a good start, several hours or more, but it was no use my rushing off after him in a hurry, particularly as I did not know which way to rush. So I set myself to think a little before I commenced work. The "swag" stolen was large. The thief would probably try to make tracks out of the country as soon as he could, but which way? To Liverpool, perhaps, and by one of the ocean steamers to the States; or to Hull, and so to Sweden and Norway; or London, and so to France and Spain. I sent one of my men to the railway station to make enquiries, and another to wire the police at the ports, and to Scotland yard to watch the continental trains.

The job I kept to myself was to find out what I could about young Burbridge's ways—who his friends were and how he spent his time. It's the only way to get a line on a man who has made off in a hurry and left no clue. So I made at once for the fellow's room. He lived in comfortable apartments over a tobacconist's, and was a good customer of his landlord, to judge by the number of pipes I saw over the mantlepiece, all of which were as well colored as a black-and-tan. The rooms were just as he left them—he might really have been coming back in half an hour only he didn't quite intend to, not of his own accord. The chest of drawers was full of clothes; there were boots already polished; brush and comb on the dressing-table. In the sitting-room the slippers were on the hearth, acting plays lying on the sofa and about the floor, a writing desk and— papers?

Not a single scrap—not a letter, or an envelope, or even an unreceipted bill. He'd made up his mind to bolt, and he'd removed everything which might give us the smallest notion of which way he'd gone. It was just the same at the theater. He'd had a sort of dressing-room there, which he'd used as an office, with a desk in it, and pigeon-holes and a nest of drawers. It was all left ship-shape enough. Files of play-bills, of accounts receipted and not, ledgers and all that; but not a paper of the kind I looked for. I made a pretty close search, too. I took every piece of furniture

bit by bit, and turned over every scrap of stuff with writing on it, or without. I forced every lock, and ransacked every hiding place, but got nothing anywhere for my pains.

The manager was with me all the time, and he didn't half like it, I can tell you. No more did I, although I wouldn't for worlds show that I was vexed. I tried to keep him up, saying it would come out all right—that patience in these things never failed in the long run—and I got him to talk about the young chap, to see if I could come upon his habits that way.

"Who were his friends now?" I asked.

"He had none in particular—not in the company, at least—nor out of it either."

"That's queer. None at all—no lady friend? Wasn't he sweet upon one or the other of your stars? There's Miss Plantagenet, now; and Miss Fortescue, and Miss—"

"He couldn't bear the sight of them; that's why I liked him so much. He was so quiet and steady; no flirting and philandering; stuck close to his books and his business."

"Never took a holiday, even?"

"Well, now and again he went away for a few days at a time; not far—to London only. His mother lived there, he said, a widowed mother."

"Who wore silk tights, and danced breakdowns, and played in burlesques," I said, quietly, as I drew out of the blotting paper a photograph of a young lady in a—well, nearly Zulu costume, there was so little of it: a fair-haired little bit of a thing, with a pretty, rather modest face, which I felt I should know again. The picture had the photographer's name on it, and the address, that of a good street. This was my line, of course.

I made up my mind to follow on to London at once. Then one of my men came in to say that Burbridge had been seen taking a ticket—to London? No; only to Shrivelsby—a long way short of it. It was some game, I felt certain. He might have gone to London and paid excess fare – but I wired to Shrivelsby, and also to town. No one like him had been seen at Shrivelsby; he hadn't got out there, that was clear. Only one person did, and that wasn't he; at least the person didn't answer to his description. It was only a man in a working-suit—a mechanic on the lookout for work. Nor had he been seen at Easton; but that was a big place, and he might easily have been missed.

So I started for London at once, taking the photograph and another of Burbridge, whom I had never seen in my life. It is not difficult to hunt out who owns a *carte de visite*, particularly when the portrait is that of a theatrical. I found the person who answered fast enough, directly I went to the photographer's place. There was a likeness of her in his album, in the very same suit, and her name to it, Miss Jessie Junniper. I soon found out more, too. Before night I knew that she was playing at the Royal Roscius, and that she lived in a street of little villas down Hammersmith way.

I took lodgings myself in the house just opposite, and set up a close watch. In the morning, early, Miss Jessie came out, and I followed her to the Underground Railway. She took a ticket for the Temple Station. So did I, and I tracked her down to the theater. Rehearsal of course. Three hours passed before she came out again. Then a man met her at the stage door, a very old gentleman, who leaned on a stick, and seemed very hump-backed and bent. They went down the Strand together to Allen's, the great trunk maker, and through the windows I saw them buy a couple of those big trunks, baskets covered with black leather, such as ladies take on their travels.

"Um," thought I, "she's on the flit."

I was only just in time.

Then they went down to Charing Cross station, and so back to Hammersmith. The old gentleman went into the house with Miss Junniper and stayed an hour or two, and then took his leave. Next day Miss Junniper did not go out. The boxes arrived, and towards midday an oldish lady—a middle-aged, poorly dressed, shabbily-genteel lady—called and stayed several hours. But no Burbridge, and nobody at all like him. I began to feel disappointed.

The third day Miss Junniper went out again to rehearsal; the old gentleman met her as before, and the two drove this time in a cab to the city. I followed them to Leadenhall Street, where they went to the office of the White Star Line. I did not go upstairs with them, and somehow I lost them when they came out. I ought to have guessed then what I did not think of till late that night.

Of course the old gentleman was Burbridge himself. He was an actor and a nipper, therefore, at a disguise. He'd been play-acting all along. He was the mechanic at Shrivlesby, the shabby-genteel old lady, and the old man most of all. I won't tell you how I cursed myself for not thinking of this sooner. I was almost too late when I did. My gent had left the villa (to which they had returned) and he did not come back next day nor the day after; and I was nearly wild with the chance I'd lost. He'd got the "office," that's what I thought, and I was up a tree.

But the third day came a telegram for the young lady. I saw the boy deliver it and go off, as though there was no answer. Then she came out and I followed her to the telegraph office. I saw her message and send it off. I'd have given pounds to read it, but I couldn't manage it; the clerk—it's their duty—wouldn't let me. I was countered again, and I was almost beat, and thinking of writing home to say so, when I saw in the compartment Miss Junniper had been writing her message. She wrote it with a hard pencil which showed through. There was the address as plain as ninepence—no mystery or circumlocution—"Burbridge, King's Head Hotel, Kingston."

I was there the same evening, just before his dinner. I asked if Mr. Burbridge was there. Sure enough. He wasn't a bit afraid of being took, I suppose, so far off the line of pursuit; so he had stuck to his own name, and was not even disguised. He gave in without a word. The tickets were on him, and in his bag upstairs a lot of the cash he had stolen; likewise a wardrobe of clothes—the old gentleman's suit and all the rest.

Did he enjoy his dinner?

Well, not much. I joined him, and didn’t handcuff him; but I ate the best part of it myself, and I think I deserved it, too.

Morris [MN] *Tribune,* April 15, 1880
The [Clarksville, TX] *Standard,* April 23, 1880

Reprinted as "A Detective's Story" in *The Oxford* [IA] *Mirror*, June 3, 1880 and *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, June 14, 1880