

An English Detective Story

I shall never forget the 13th of December, 1879. The streets of the great city of Manchester had grown depressingly desolate, and a dense, black fog prevailed over the town.

Benumbed with cold, I found, to my great joy, a cheerful fire blazing in my room, which, thanks to my comrade, who had retired for the night, was considerably prepared for me. I took off my great coat and muffler, drew a chair close to the fender, and began thinking over the incidents of a case I had that afternoon brought to a successful issue, when, with the suddenness of a nightbird's scream, I heard a piteous and prolonged scream issuing from beneath the unshuttered window.

I sprang to my feet, and gazing in the direction of the sound, saw a wild, white face, with long, disheveled hair hanging over an ill-clad form, gesticulating in a beseeching manner close to the fire-lit panes.

"This is very strange," I involuntarily exclaimed, "and puzzles me not a little. What can it mean?"

Then striding toward the door, I flung it wide open; but there was nothing before me—only the black, choking fog and the dead silence of the street. Pushing back the door, I turned to reenter the room, when my eyes caught sight of a piece of white paper that lay upon the wide sill of the window. This is what it said:

If you would stop more crime, perhaps murder, come at once to No. 13, Tomson's court. Am followed. Heaven save me and my child! What shall I do? Rescue us and God bless you!

LIZZIE THORNELY

Be careful. Conceal yourself. Watch. Top of room at back.

Thornley—Thornley! The name appeared familiar to me.

I put out the office lights, for the bell of St. Peter's had just rung out the hour of 1. I decided, whatever might be the consequences to my unknown visitor, to go home and sleep over the matter and then report the circumstances to the inspector, so as to receive his sanction before putting my plans into execution.

Late in the forenoon of the same day I returned to the office and duly reported my experience of the previous night.

"This looks like a serious job for you, Lomax," said Inspector Jones, as soon as I had finished my report. "Just turn to the album there and look at S and T for a portrait of 'Springer,' or 'Saxley,' or 'Thorndyke.' He has done seven years, but has not accounted for himself for a long time. Is that it? Ah, good! Take it with you, and if you get a chance of comparing it with the original and you find they agree, nab him, that's all. Would you like Schofield with you?"

“No,” I answered.

“Well, in any case be quite prepared to face rough work, for if your man should turn out to be the one I suspect, look sharp, I advise you.”

After these and other timely hints I retired to the wardrobe adjoining Jones’ room. I went in a clean-shaven, good-looking man of 27, and in half an hour afterward came out again in the character of a middle-aged woman, dressed in a rather seedy suit of black.

I must not forget to mention, though, that I took with me a small wallet of pins, needles, and tape, under the pretext of having these for sale. My get-up was perfect. I looked to all the world like one who had seen better days, but was reduced not to a state of genteel poverty.

It was close upon 3 o’clock in the afternoon when I sailed out of Albert street, and drizzling rain was making matters most uncheerful. I had no difficulty in finding Tomson’s court. Proceeding along the dark and narrow yard, I passed into No. 13 unseen by anyone. The room was situated at the end of a long, dark and winding lobby, and the stench that met me was almost overpowering. I paused a moment listening, but not a sound did I hear. Then I knocked at the door, very feebly at first, then louder and louder, and yet there came no response to me.

“Surely, I am the victim of a hoax!” I thought to myself. “The room is evidently tenantless.”

Stooping down, I peered through the keyhole, and by the very dim light that shone within, I saw what I thought was a chair upset. I knocked again, so as to be certain there was no one in the room, and still received no answer. My curiosity was now aroused. I took from my pocket a small bunch of skeleton keys—I never went without them—and noiselessly opened the door. As soon as I entered I stood aghast at the sight that met my eyes. In one corner of the room, stretched upon a heap of straw, I saw the form of a woman, half naked and motionless, with her eyes closed as if in death. I staggered toward her, turned her face to the light, and, merciful heavens! recognized in her the mysterious midnight visitor whose wild look had so possessed me. I turned her head more to the light, and was horrified to see a thin stream of blood oozing from her snow-white brow down upon the fair hands of a little babe that nestled to her breast.

I knelt down beside them, and, placing my ear to the heart of the woman, found it was still beating. In an instant I requisitioned my brandy flask, and, after considerable difficulty, succeeded in pouring a few drops of the fluid down her throat, and was soon rewarded by perceiving signs of returning consciousness. Her eyes opened and her lips began a nervous twitching at the corners.

“Pray, for the present do not agitate yourself,” I exclaimed in a well-assumed female voice. “You will feel better presently and then you will speak a little.”

An object which arrested my attention was a strong, capacious wardrobe in an opposite corner, facing the bench. Its folding doors stood a little ajar, and I grew curious to know the character of its contents. I was just rising from my seat with the intention of making a closer inspection, when

the woman opened her eyes and beckoned me to her side. Then, in a voice just above a whisper, she said:

“Who are you that have found your way into this miserable dwelling?”

“I am a woman peddling a few simple wares,” I answered, “but how I managed to find myself here is more than I can tell; yet I am thankful I have reached you, if it is only that I may be of some simple service to you, for I see you need a helping hand.”

“Ah, ‘tis true, ‘tis true,” she replied, “but I fear your assistance has come too late—yes, too late.”

“I hope not. Tell me, though, how you have come by that wound in your temple. Is it the result of a fall?”

“No, no; it was done by him—my husband. He struck me with a hammer because I would not consent to his taking away my child.”

“Merciful heavens, can such things be? Where is he now?” I somewhat eagerly inquired.

“I—I cannot tell,” she answered; and she appeared to be growing fainter by the exertion. “Last night a little before 12 he came home in a terrible temper. I saw murder lurking in his eyes, and after listening to his fearful oaths, I ran to the police station pursued by him. I could not attract attention. He overtook me just as I reentered this room, and—Hark! What is that?”

Instantly we were all silent as the dead and listened. The faculty of hearing is remarkably keen with me, and I soon came to the conclusion that someone was crouching behind the door. I motioned to the woman to be silent while I crept noiselessly to the open wardrobe. I closed the folding doors from within, and, as good fortune would have it, discovered a large crevice through which I could see the movements of any one who might choose to enter the apartment.

The poor woman’s head sank on the pallet of straw, apparently in a swoon, and all was stillness again.

The minutes that elapsed seemed hours to me, and I was beginning to think that after all my ears had deceived me, when, very slowly and without the faintest sound, the door opened, and the figure of a short, stout, bushy-bearded man crept in. He stole to where Lizzie Thornley lay; he bent over her as if to assure himself that she was unaware of his presence.

“Um! She must have been muttering in her sleep, I reckon. I could have sworn, though, that I heard two voices. Curse her! And you would have split on me, would you?” he growled between his teeth. “I wonder if she’ll croak this time?”

The rays of the setting sun were just glinting through the latticed pane; his face was straight before me, but I did not recognize it. To my unspeakable surprise, however, he proceeded to divest himself of his flowing beard and wig, and then I beheld in him the long-looked-for coiner,

Bill Thornley. My first impulse was to spring suddenly upon him, but his next movement deprived me of any such intention.

Slipping his fingers in his waistcoat pocket he drew forth a small key. With this he opened a secret panel in the wainscot of the wall, and there I saw great piles of glittering coin, which my practiced eye told me were spurious. One by one he placed them noiselessly in a large bag beside him, then relocked the panel, and after closely examining his pistol, laid that on the bench preparatory to resuming his hirsute disguise.

With the rapidity of a panther springing on its prey I flung open the wardrobe door and sprang on him. The suddenness of my appearance struck him motionless and dumb. He could but glare at me, while I held him in a vice-like grip, and his lips trembled and grew ashy pale.

At such a moment as this a detective needs all the coolness and determination he can command, for then it is that his victim is almost powerless of resistance.

At least such was the case with the ruffian Thornely. I made short work of him. As for his wife and child, for such they proved to be, I had them tenderly conveyed to the Royal infirmary, where, for ten long days and nights, she and her baby lay, and then their spirits crossed the confines of a better world.

Thornley was found guilty, and I had the satisfaction of hearing him sentenced to a long term of penal servitude.

St. Paul [MN] Daily Globe, July 10, 1886

The Milwaukee [WI] Sentinel, July 17, 1886

Barbour County Index [Medicine Lodge, KS], October 10, 1888