# *The Forger's Escape*

by Andrew Forrester, Jr.

SOME years ago I was instructed to hunt down a forger, and recover about £3,000, the proceeds of his great experiment, which he then had about his person. He had been a land agent, in a very large way of business, at the West-end of London, and was accounted a man of the highest respectability, although, as it turned out, he had practiced a series of frauds upon his customers, and was utterly insolvent, when he resorted to a bold expedient to obtain capital for some new enterprise in a new country.

Notice was given the police at every port, and every vessel that left London, Liverpool, Bristol, or Hull, was watched for several weeks. The notion then obtained possession of the defrauded that he was concealed in London, or at the farthest on the Continent, waiting his time, perhaps, for a safe voyage to America, or to a Trans-Pacific colony—not as a convict. Ordinary means, such as the offers of rewards, and the employment of common detectives, having failed to discover the delinquent, I was set to work, being told to spare no expense, as the stake was high, and the desire to punish the villain was equally strong.

One evening as I was chatting with my wife, and playing with my two children at home, I was called upon, and told that the fellow had been traced to Southampton, well disguised, and that it was feared he had made good his flight across the Atlantic in one of the steamers from that port.

It was the work of a few minutes to put on my coat, fill a carpetbag, hail a cab, and make my way to the South-Western Station in time to catch the next train.

That night, as time was of the first importance, I had an interview with the landlord of the small and unpretentious hotel in which it was supposed the forger had put up. He described his guest. The description fitted the broad outline of the man I wanted, but the filling in of the two pictures given me greatly differed. This might easily be accounted for by the skill of the criminal's disguise. Yet it would hardly do to take a trip to America and back, incurring large expense, and expending a few whole weeks, on mere surmise. If it happened to be a wrong scent, the facilities of escape would be thus increased. I should feel humiliated, and my employers might not be at all pleased.

I saw the host of the hotel knew more than he was prepared to communicate, and the crass stupidity of the man's intellect made it rather difficult for me to tell how I should extract the secrets he held in reserve. I didn't want, if I could help it, to let the man share the reward, unless I could persuade myself his aid was so essential, that without it the culprit would get away. This I was not at all convinced of.

He told me that he did not read the papers nor did he know about the forgery, nor did he care about the reward, which last averment was a lie. He said that a gentleman had come over from Winchester about a week ago, and had stayed at his house. Who and what the gentleman was, it was no business of his to ask, nor did he then care to know. The man gave little trouble, and paid his bill. He was fond of the country, and took a fly every day to some place which he, the

landlord, thought a pretty or an interesting place. When the ship came, and was ready to start, he went on board, and went off, that was all he knew.

Somebody else, another lodger at the hotel, who had left the morning of that day, knew, or thought he knew a little more about the gentleman. “He came to me,” said the landlord, “after the ship must have got out of the Southampton river, and asked me the name of the gentleman who wore one of the new-fashioned dark straw hats of the shape of common hats. I told him it was Mr. Richards. He said he was blowed if he thought that was his real name. He asked me where he came from. I said Winchester. He said he didn’t believe it was any Mr. Richards of Winchester, but Mr. Wilkinson of London, who had committed forgery, and who had been advertised about.”

This second lodger, who knew Mr. Wilkinson,—what was his name, where did he live? Was he not really then in the hotel? I fear I showed a little impatience.

No, he had gone back to London. Where he lived my host could not tell. He did not even know his name. He was entered in the hotel account-book as “No. 4,” and so his bill was headed.

This was tantalizing. Still I was not yet inclined to let this dull lout so far conquer me as to constrain me to let him share the reward. I resolved to sleep on the affair, and turn it over in my mind. Somehow, it often happened that between the small hours of the morning, as I lay in bed, I could see things more clearly than at any other moment, under any other circumstances.

I said it was unfortunate that I had missed No. 4, but it couldn’t be helped. I would, if my host pleased, just take a bit of supper and go to bed. I took my supper in the snuggery with my host for companionship. He accepted my invitation to have a glass and a cigar with me, but was evidently not quite at his ease, and nothing more did I get out of him.

Towards the end of our conversation, his wife entered the cozy little room, and he said “Mary, my dear, this officer is to sleep here. I don’t think we have got a room empty, except the one that Mr. Richards slept in, and perhaps he won’t feel comfortable in that.” There was an odd leer on his face, just such an expression as an ignorant fellow makes when he thinks he has said a clever thing.

I rather liked the notion of sleeping in that particular room, but of course did not avow any partiality. I merely said it didn’t matter much to me. I could sleep comfortably in a haunted house, or on a murdered man’s couch without fear or trembling. So I had No. 9, and had not only the satisfaction of occupying the room for which I had a preference, but, I believe, also slept between the same sheets as the forger’s body had been lately covered by, for they were not exactly as clean as I could have desired.

My waking dreams did not in this instance help me, but I had resolved, before I went to bed, that as soon as daylight permitted, I would make a diligent search of the room, to see if no corner or cranny contained a trifle, such as a comb, a hairbrush, a shirt collar, pocket-handkerchief, scrap of paper, or indeed anything that might assist in fixing the identity of the Atlantic voyager.

I began this search in the grey twilight of morning. Nothing was in the bed, under it, or in the corners or cupboard of the room. The fireplace was filled up by a board, but not fastened. In the grate was an accumulation of rubbish, deposited by various processes of accident and volition. Among these were some minute particles or fragments of paper, that I discovered to be parts of envelopes torn up small, and, with imperfect caution, not consumed by fire. It is needless to say that I laid hold of these, and as my voyage across the Atlantic would be by way of Liverpool, I thought I might as well examine them further in London, where I arrived by an early morning train.

I called to my assistance in shaping these fragments a man I knew who had a particular mathematical genius. He could, by the combinations and analyses of his subtle brain, read almost any cipher, and penetrate the mystery of all these eccentric advertisements which appear so often in the second column of the *Times'* supplement. He has told me the secret covered by the announcement of "No doormat tonight." He has read off, in familiar English, the cabalistic information or sign embodied in "x z a y p n g 7 f a w 3," and a multitude of similar advertisements of greater and shorter length.

This man was a sort of philanthropist in his way. The number of crimes already perpetrated before he knew of them is more than I can guess, and the number he has prevented by timely warning or disclosure is also more than I can tell. I know of many intrigues prevented, elopements frustrated, vile schemes broken before entirely hatched, and a number of foolish and incipiently criminal men and women having been turned from their wicked purposes by the salutary terror his penetration and vigilance have inspired. He held fast by the proverbial wisdom that "what is done, can't be undone," and held his tongue when to open his mouth would effect no good purpose. He never maintained an unnecessary reserve when to speak would prevent the commission of wickedness or folly. As I have said, I considered him, and still look upon him, as a real philanthropist.

My friend never cared for payment, but I always insisted upon his taking a fee when I availed myself of his assistance. On this occasion he earned his money by the rapidity with which he arranged the fragments of paper I brought from Southampton, and enabled me to read for myself the superscription upon an envelope. The shape of the pieces of paper were so nearly alike, as well as so small, that I believe it would have taken me many weary hours, perhaps some tedious days, to have arranged them, although I could of course have done this much.

The result was that I found the man I wanted was indeed no other than the guest at the hotel, and it removed all doubt that he had gone off to the United States in the good ship which had so recently taken her departure from Southampton.

It is needless to say that I was instructed to follow him by the next vessel that left England. It was, as I said it would be, a Liverpool steamer.

There had been some gusty weather that did not inflict upon landsmen any of the disasters or inconveniences which excited the lively imagination of Barney Buntline, so renowned in song, but were a premonitory symptom of danger to those who, under a stress of duty, had to go down to the sea in ships. Still, it was not for me to quail, or by delaying my departure, give Mr.

Wilkinson a chance of getting from New York into the far West or South of the American continent.

Happily, moreover, the day I started from the Euston Station was bright and cheery. The paper told me that the weather prognosticators had last evening consoled the underwriters and merchants of England by an assurance that the vessels which had been knocking about Spithead and the Solent would be able to depart on their several destinations. It was not unpleasant for me to speculate on the prospect of a pleasant voyage.

When I called at the agent's office in Liverpool to secure my passage, which I did the moment after my arrival in the town, I found there a telegram to say that the warrants and papers would not arrive by the next train as appointed, and that as I might have to return, I was not, without further instructions, to engage my passage. Next morning brought me a letter to say that I might return to London as soon as was convenient to myself.

This letter annoyed me, but I did not care to show any feeling on the subject. I took a couple of days' holiday looking at the docks and shipping, and examining the architecture of Birkenhead. When I reached London, I was in no hurry to call upon my instructors. When I did so, I was told with all possible politeness that my services would not, in this matter, be needed any further, and good reasons were assigned for this decision.

The Southampton steamer had sustained some damage in the storm, which, although not serious, the captain prudently thought it wise to repair before he fairly entered upon his voyage. The vessel put into Southampton again. Her return was telegraphed, and the intended victims of the fraud met her as she entered the docks. Mr. Wilkinson, inwardly vexed and anxious it may be fairly assumed, was met by owners of the money he had with him. They found him in a disguise on deck, trying to make himself look as happy and pleasant as a mortal could. He wore a broad straw hat, with a blue band around it, and a brown holland coat, holding in his hand a musical instrument known as a banjo, with which he had amused his fellow-emigrants during the backward progress of the ship.

Acting upon some extra-legal advice, they introduced themselves to him, and told him it was their intention to give him in custody as a forger, but, through a companion, hinted that they might be disposed to spare him on account of his wife and family connections, if he made restitution. The landlord of the hotel was also on the look-out, desirous of getting a satisfaction or revenge out of me, by warning the culprit, because I had not invited him to share the reward, which the fool might have secured for himself entire if he had charged the man himself.

The culprit saw his game was up. He whined and promised the restitution demanded, and (*aside*) vowed eternal gratitude to the hotel-keeper.

All but about £200 of the money was given up. The wretch was allowed to depart in the same vessel to America in which he had taken his passage. Nobody on board knew anything about the matter. I didn't altogether like the business, but I was liberally paid, and had no business to disclose the arrangement by which justice was defeated.

I confess that I was polite enough, or hypocritical enough, to profess to believe the reasons given me for the course taken, which were the pleadings of an unfortunate wife, and a regard for the interests of innocent children. I verily believe it was nothing of the kind. It was an apprehension that the uncertainties of the law might by some remote chance let the criminal escape, and that the money might be lost as well as the heavy costs of such a prosecution as this scoundrel's would have been.

This notion is of course open to cavil or dispute. The reader can, if he pleases, differ from me. All I know is, the object of my search got away, and I have heard that he became a prosperous man in California.

*The Revelations of a Private Detective* by Andrew Forrester, Jr. London: Ward and Lock, 1863. 133-42.