

A Man About Town

It is not often that society revenges itself upon the tricks played it by one it has courted. The votaries of fashion are not unfrequently made the victims of the adventurer, but for the sake of concealing their own want of sagacity the wrongdoer is seldom punished. Nevertheless, there are episodes now and then occurring, which, if they met the public eye, would afford a rich morsel of humor and ridicule. One of these came under my own observation a few years since. I had done some business for a well known merchant, and he was pleased with the manner I had executed it. I was not surprised, therefore, when he came to the Chief's office one day and desired to speak with me.

“I have some work for yourself and friend,” said he, referring to my partner.

“What is it?” I inquired.

He then went on to detail to us the particulars of a number of successful robberies that had been perpetrated recently in the society in which his family moved. Strange as it may appear, all of these were done at fashionable gatherings, either at his own house or those of his neighbors.

“It would be impossible,” he said, “to suspect any of the guests; yet the servants had been strictly watched, and no evidence could be found to implicate any of them. Diamond bracelets mysteriously disappeared from the wrists of fair ladies; gentlemen lost their jewelry, watches and chains, and even gold-headed canes, in the most unaccountable way. At every house where a fashionable party met, some robbery of this description ensued. It had begun to create an intense excitement. Ladies were afraid to appear with jewelry about them; gentlemen hesitated to display their diamonds, and were restless when any one approached them. Suspicion had grown up, and a coldness, which began to assume a very serious aspect, had been engendered between several families. The matter, he said, would have to be sifted, but how to do it he was at a loss to know.

I told him he would have to introduce me to his fashionable acquaintance, and as his guest. I attended the next party at his house. Even a stranger could discern the coldness and lack of free and genial kindness that pervaded the assembly. The atmosphere seemed to breathe suspicion. Everybody suspected his neighbor. Gentlemen were watched closely as they paid their [*devoirs*] to fair ladies, and the belles to whom devotion was offered freely, was eyed keenly lest they should spirit away a more costly jewel than the gentleman's affections. One gentleman, however, I noticed at once as entirely free from these [unworthy] suspicions. His manner was radiant with a gay *insouciance* that charmed everyone. His repartees were brimful of wit and sparkled with fun, while the bright smile with which every lady greeted him, showed that he at least had not fallen under the cloud that had settled on the rest. Tet I noted the rapid lightning-like glance with which he surveyed everybody that approached him. Sometimes the great dark eyes would darken with a shade of anxiety as he encountered a stern looking visage, and then flash out merrily as he saw it harbored no suspicion of him. The man fascinated even me. I saw he was acting. His conduct, apparently controlled by a natural kindness of disposition, I perceived was the result of consummate impudence and nerve, and a *sangfroid* that enabled him to invest it with a genial grace and apparent carelessness. The half startled eager look which he sometimes threw around him, overlooked by his associates, was seen by me.

I had settled in my own mind that he was the culprit. But to anyone else my conclusions would have appeared uncertain and my suspicions vague. Still I watched him. I was eager to see how he would maneuver his successful larcenies. For more than an hour he radiated from one part of the wide salon to another apparently unsettled in his mind, or eager to make his *devoirs* to all. At last his arm was given to a lady and, they strayed out upon the verandah. I at once solicited the pleasure of a promenade with my fascinating hostess, and while charmed with the sprightly grace and witty nonsense of my companion, still kept an observant eye upon the Mercutio whose brilliant nothings were charming his inamorata as a serpent fascinates a bird. The man was a study. I could hear, as I passed them, his love-voiced pleasantries, the wit that flashed and sparkled from his tongue as diamonds sparkle and flash in the lamplight. I almost began to doubt the justness of my own suspicions, when suddenly his hand crept to the lady's ear; a sparkle and flash of diamonds, a sparkle and flash of wit, and he led her back to the drawing room, her fair face radiant with blushes, but the pink-like ears no longer cumbered with the gawdy jewels. Again and again was the same maneuver repeated with others, and each time some costly ornament disappeared, some beautiful bauble had been lost.

But this was not all I saw. The fascinating stranger I soon discovered had striven from a jewel that he prized less than those of which he had bereft his friends, but one perhaps that would stand him in more account in the hour of need. Many a fair face flushed at his approach—many a heart throbbed audibly as his low words were whispered into willing ears. The thief was a lady killer too.

As yet, I had not learned his name, and I sought out my host to ascertain it.

“Who is that gentleman yonder?” I inquired.

“That! oh, he is a wealthy young Englishman; buy the way a lord, too, but at present *incognito*. He is known as Mr. H——. I don't mind telling you confidentially, but he will shortly become my son-in-law.”

“Indeed!”

“Oh! yes, a charming fellow. Would you like to know him?”

“Well, yet, after a bit; but it is somewhat unpleasant Mr. K—— to break up well established confidence and expose those whom we admire. Still it is my duty to tell you the man's a thief.”

If a thunderbolt had fallen at his feet, he could not have been more astonished.

“What, sir!” he gasped, amazement and indignation struggling for mastery in his face.

“It is, I tell you!”

“You must be mistaken, or mad.”

“Call the man into a private room and I will prove it.”

He could not object to this, and Mr. H—— was politely requested to follow his expectant father-in-law to the library. Thither I had already proceeded them. Mr. H—— came in chatty and pleasant, but in a little put back in noticing a stranger present.

“This gentleman wishes to speak with you,” said my host, motioning to where I stood, but not deeming it necessary to mention the fictitious name I had assumed for the evening.

“Yes,” I replied, “Mr. H——, I desired to compliment you on the skillful way you have of appropriating other people’s jewelry.”

He stood under the blaze of the chandelier as I spoke, and the light shone fair and full in his face. At the words, a livid hue crept into his cheeks and a ghastly pallor succeeded it. His teeth chattered as he tried to speak, and his knees smote under him.

“It is useless to attempt to deny it,” I said. “I am a detective officer and have watched your proceedings all the evening. Look here!” and before he had time to prevent me, I had drawn from his pocket the jewelry which a short time before had been worn by the guests of my host.

“What do you say to this?” I asked, turning to Mr. K.

“My God, it is true!” And the strong man shook as the truth of the accusation burst upon him. “But my daughter, my child, what am I to do?”

The villain saw at once the advantage this relation gave him, and grew insolent on the instant. I told him, however, that this would stand him in no service. If he restored the property he had taken, I would let him go. If not, I should lock him up. He was cunning and shrewd, and accepted the proposition. The next day the jewels were returned to their owners, with a polite apology from Mr. H., and the evening steamer saw him on his way to more congenial climes.

But the romance did not end here. It was not a great while before the family of the merchant were plunged into great affliction by the strange evasion of their daughter. What became of her, and her brief and sad experience, may form the subject of another sketch. At present, it can add but little interest to the story of a man about town.

The Daily Picayune [New Orleans, LA], August 22, 1869

Fayetteville [TN] *Observer*, September 30, 1869

The Fremont [OH] *Weekly Journal*, October 8, 1869

The Democratic Press [Ravenna, OH], November 25, 1869

The Bossier Banner [Bellevue, LA], January 1, 1870

This story was part of a series titled “A Detective’s Experience” and featuring detectives Mr. F—— and Mr. I—— that was published in the Sunday *Daily Picayune* from August 1868 to November 1869.