

Who Stole the Plate?
by Andrew Forrester, Jr.

ONE day, as I sat quietly musing in my office, with comparatively little to do, and was planning a nice trip to Ireland, with my wife, solely for the purpose of our mutual enjoyment, and with no concealed or latent professional intent, I was called upon by a person who bore a letter of introduction from a solicitor who had some time previously made use of my services in probing and extinguishing a gigantic fraud upon young scions of the aristocracy.

The business he came upon seemed to be of the most ordinary kind, but, as the sequel will show the reader, it was one of the funniest little romances of the peerage ever described.

After a few words of preface, on either side, the conversation took this turn—

“His lordship,” observed my visitor, “and Mr. Tomlinson our steward, have been endeavouring to quietly find out who has committed several robberies at the Hall within the last few months. It’s a very curious affair, sir, altogether. First one thing valuable is missed and then another. The countess has lost several articles or jewelry, Lady Jane has lost a good many little fancy odds and ends that are worth a good lot of money, and Lady Emily has been nearly driven out of her senses by losing a sweet little gold watch given her as a birthday present by the earl.”

I was already getting impatient. Did the noble lord want me to give up my excursion, to trace and hunt down some petty thief among his own servants? I had no doubt he would pay a reasonable figure for the service, but it was the sort of job I would rather at any time not undertake; and to sacrifice a rare interval of leisure—a golden opportunity for enjoyment—for such a task, I certainly did not like the notion of at all.

“Yes, sir,” I observed petulantly, “a small affair that. Would it not be wise for his lordship’s steward to consult the police about it?”

“Oh, dear no, sir; that’s what Mr. Tomlinson told me to say, and I’m coming to that in a moment. You see, sir, his lordship and our steward both think it must have been done by one of the old upper servants. So I think. Who else could have done it, you know?”

“Well, that’s really more than I can guess,” was my short answer.

The fellow looked blank, and seemed speechless. I wanted to cut the matter short by getting an excuse to evade or decline the business, so I helped him along a bit.

“I should think—that is to say my suspicions would be at once turned to a lady’s maid, or housekeeper, or a female domestic of some kind, having access to the lady’s apartments.”

“Well, you see ours is an ancient and quiet mansion, and although the family, as you know, sir, is a very old and wealthy one, and the Hall is a very fine place, the family all live in a social kind of way, so that a good many people might, if they wanted to steal, find an opportunity of getting into almost any of the apartments.”

“Really,” I said, “after all, I don’t like to undertake such a small affair as this. I have some very heavy and important matters on hand, which I must, or that is, I ought to attend to myself; and, besides, the police would do such a little job as well as I could.”

“Oh, no, sir, his lordship wouldn’t have the regular police employed, because, I believe, he says he wants to know who did it before he makes up his mind whether he will prosecute or not, and if he calls in the police he doesn’t see how he can really avoid prosecuting, if he hands the case over to them. But,” he went on to say, “excuse me, sir, I don’t think it is a very trifling affair, either.”

I smiled.

“Do you think it is?” he asked.

“Why, yes, I don’t call the loss of an odd trinket or two a heavy business,” I replied.

“Ah! I beg your pardon, sir,” he added; “I ought to have told you, first of all, a great quantity of the family plate, which is valuable, has gone, and what’s more, it’s been in the family a very long time, so that the earl wouldn’t take any money for it.”

My appreciation of the job increased, at all events.

“I don’t suppose, sir, that his lordship would mind your expenses, if you would be so good as to find out the thief for him,” the messenger added.

“Your explanation, I now see, puts a different complexion upon the case. Valuable plate, long in the family, heirlooms, I dare say, prized beyond any common estimate of the weight of the metal, may be worth the expenditure of money by a nobleman to recover. It would also be ungracious on my part towards the noble earl and the gentleman who sent you here, if I were not to exert myself to the utmost to restore such property, and to place the thieves at his mercy, if not in the hands of the proper officers of justice.”

“Thank you, sir. All of us upper servants will, I am sure, be very much obliged to you; for, you see, sir, we all of us feel uncomfortable. We don’t know which of us is suspected. All I know, sir, it isn’t me who did it, and I should like to know who it was. I should like to have them transported to Botany Bay, whoever it is.”

So as to get a clue I was about to pump this loquacious fellow, who was the butler in the household, when he let his suspicions bodily through his mouth in a sentence.

“I dare say many of the servants do feel very uncomfortable, one or two of them, and not without cause, but I am persuaded the family have too much regard for and confidence in you to suspect you in the slightest degree. You need not give yourself the slightest anxiety I can most candidly and sincerely assure you, on that account.”

“No, p’raps not,” he incautiously exclaimed; “but there’s Mr. Tomlinson, now, our steward, who has lived with the family since he was a boy, and whose father was a butler for many many years with ’em, I think he feels, or at least he looks very uncomfortable, as if they suspected him, but I am sure *they* don’t.”

The emphasis on the word italicized was slight and unintentional, and so was the play of that feeble sneer on the butler’s countenance. I, however, critically noted each, and saw that my visitor believed the old steward, who had grown grey in the service of the noble earl and his father, was a thief, or, at least, had a hand in the plunder. I did not believe this, but it was, I knew, of no use probing this lump of selfishness, ignorance, egotism, jealousy, and prejudice for any rational clue to the disentanglement of a mystery recondite enough, I now felt, to give me a zest for the task.

I promised the butler that the matter should have my earliest and best attention. I wanted, of course, to make my approaches under some disguise. I saw the way of doing this. The creature before me would, I also saw, concur in any plausible scheme I might suggest. Here was my disguise.

Addressing my instructor, I observed— “You’re an honest and a shrewd man.”

The man’s round face beamed complacently.

“I see that your integrity and your intelligence can be trusted. I shall confide in you. Now, don’t be startled at what I am about to say. Keep the secret of my suspicions, whether just or unjust, to yourself. Don’t breathe them to a living soul. Don’t mention them to one of your fellow servants, man or woman— least of all a woman.”

I paused. He looked all amazement. A ghost story couldn’t have had more effect upon him than the overwhelming sense he entertained of my judgment upon his merits, and the vast importance and responsibility with which he saw, or thought, I was about to invest him.

“You promise me rigid secrecy, perfect cooperation, and we will soon unravel the mystery.”

“I will do exactly as you want me, sir,” he replied.

“Good. Then I will tell you frankly,” I went on to say, “I suspect that old steward knows more than he would like to tell about this plate.”

The poltroon thought me a magician. His own groundless and vague suspicions were now to him as demonstrated facts, but his wonder and his fears drove him into falsehood.

“Oh, sir, ain’t you mistaken?” he inquired.

“I may be. All men are liable to err. I hope I may be wrong, but I don’t think I am mistaken in this instance.”

The half-witted porpoise grinned horribly, and I proceeded—

“Now, listen to me again. I will soon get the evidence of my correctness or of my error, as the case may be, out of his mouth, or his manner—his embarrassment,” I added. “I must be near him all the while I am at the Hall, and alone with him very much of the time. Now, how is this to be managed? I see. I will drop plump on him. You can just help me in this. Concealing my opinion of his dishonesty, tell him that I think, in order to disguise the object of my visit to your mansion, that I deem it expedient to visit it as his friend and *his* guest. He will fall into our trap. He will be afraid to object, and he may even be foolish enough to think the arrangement a good one for him, as he may imagine that he can humbug me, or put me on the wrong scent.”

“I am afraid, sir,” stammered my instrument, “that he may object to this plan.”

“No he won’t. We won’t give him time to object. You return home by the next train, and I’ll follow you early tomorrow. Tell him what we have agreed, and if he raises a serious objection we may be sure he is the man.”

The butler had not strength of mind to argue with me. It called for less pluck to combat any reasons of the steward against the plan than my orders in the form I put them.

The servant returned home. I called to thank the earl’s private solicitors for their introduction, and next day I went down into the country to the Hall, as arranged.

The earl was a man of mark in the Peerage. His wealth, his territorial possessions, and his great abilities, had made a brilliant and lasting reputation.

His mansion stood in the centre of an agricultural district, nearly midway between two considerable towns, about eight miles from either. There are not many earls in the peerage, and as I am anxious to avoid a disclosure by suggestion of localities, the reader must be good enough to pardon my indefiniteness as to time and place. I do not say in what county the mansion stood, and I think it desirable not to say which quarter of England I was about to visit. It is enough to observe that the Hall was a spacious and a sumptuous residence, fit in every respect for the abode of one of the old nobility of this great empire. Mine is not an imaginative quill, so I drop the poetical, and will not attempt to sketch the scenery.

Around the house was an ample park, in which deer roamed at their will. Burglars would, I was sure, find the distance between the high road and the house exceedingly unfavourable for their operations. I was sure that the robbery had been in great part, if not entirely, effected by some person or persons in the household.

It was, I saw, lucky that I had thought to borrow the instruments now at the bottom of my not over-genteel portmanteau. They were burglarious tools. The implements of dishonour and dishonesty in a thousand ways are turned to the account of virtue, law, and justice. I hoped, but I could not rely upon the expectation of finding the plunder still on the premises.

The butler, who communicated to the steward my design to play the part of his friend, was relieved at finding no opposition. The old man played the part assigned him at the outset with skill, and grace, and dignity, as he could, I am sure, play many a nobler part in the wonderful drama of human life. He met me at the side entrance to the Hall with the cordiality of an old friend, and I reciprocated that geniality in my own best style. There was a small body of spectators—composed of domestics of the family. We were not, however, I fear, clever enough to deceive them. The butler's departure and his return was understood to mean something, and my subsequent arrival, I am afraid, established my reputation as "a policeman in disguise" among the family.

The reader has already been told that I did not really suspect the old steward, and knows the motive for a somewhat elaborate contrivance. If it failed I cannot help it, nor did it, after all, matter in the least. I hasten to state that I succeeded, before I left the Hall, in discovering who stole the plate.

I had comfortable quarters, plenty of the best to satisfy and cheer the material part of human nature, and a pleasant companion in my ostensible friend the steward. I had also to bear with some elements of discomfort. The servants treated me with various moody reserve and rude *hauteur*. Every tone, gesture, mannerism, tacit and open, seemed to say in an unspoken language, "Do you suspect me, Mr. Policeman? Would you like to search my boxes? Dare you arrest me in the Queen's name? Oh! don't think you're deceiving me—I know what you are, Mr. Detective." In short, they were as unpleasant as they could, or I should rather say, as they dared to be, in the little intercourse I had with them.

The noble earl and his family were at the Hall. He probably avoided me. I certainly did not see him until I asked for and had, at my own distinct request, an interview with him.

I had thought it possible, upon the assumption that the missing plate might still be concealed in some wrong place within the mansion or the adjacent grounds, that the depositor in such odd receptacle might wish to return it to the proper chest, after my arrival at the Hall. I did not care to be thus balked. Accordingly, in the presence of the butler and the steward, I sealed that chest with my own seal, and kept the seal itself always about my person. I also gave the butler strict orders never to let the closet in which the plate-chest stood be unwatched or unguarded for a moment night or day. This enabled me to walk about very much at my ease, taking observation and stock of such men, women, and things, as fell in my way.

All my instincts and instructions, and all my experience, failed to detect in an ordinary servant a sign or indication which betokened the thief.

As I rambled at times about the grounds around the Hall, I saw a gentleman on at least twenty occasions, and it was not long before I discovered that he took especial interest in my movements. After about the second or third apparently casual meeting between us, he entered into conversation with me. This was not remarkable. He was a man of peculiar habits. Sometimes he was taciturn, at others extremely affable to all persons. He knew my profession and functions. He spoke to me at once freely on the subject,—expressing his regret at the affair, and inquiring whether or not I thought I was on the track of the culprit, at the same time

generously hoping that the earl would not prosecute, especially if the theft should turn out to be the act of an old servant of the house. It was not long before I saw that this pleader for the criminal would have been pleased to have had my back turned upon the Hall, and I do not go too far in saying, that he would have paid the cost of a fly to the railway station, and for a first-class ticket for me thence to London. He was a pale and sickly looking young man, consumed by philanthropic notions, with a character for the practical. During three days, and many interviews, this young gentleman persuaded me, that he was moved by an excess of humanity to his evident dislike of me and my calling, and his desire to spare the uplifted rod from falling on the criminal's back.

Such opinions of mine about him, however, did not last over that time. I then came to the conclusion that he was the man who had stolen the plate.

Was I right, or was this another intermediate perplexing error of judgment, such as all men engaged in tentative experiments must encounter? Can the reader try his or her patience a bit longer? In the end I succeeded. It is worth while to exercise a little patience. I say that I then set him down as the plate stealer.

Who was this person?

I knew him. It was not the first time I had seen him. Former acquaintance had not, however, led me to form a bad opinion of him. Why did he try to thwart me, or preach his maudlin sentimentalism to me?

Within two more days it became plain to me that my affable acquaintance could not endure me, and I had no love for him, for he was, I thought, the thief. We could not, I felt assured, long remain under the same roof, wide and hospitable as our common shelter might appear to those who do not know the expansiveness of aversion. On the third day following this idiosyncratic detection, a public meeting was to be held at the nearest town (in the morning, for the convenience of the ladies) of "the Society for Mitigating the Severity of Justice towards Juvenile Offenders, and Superseding Whipping by Lollipop Association," and my sallow-faced acquaintance was moved by the spirit of human kindness, or something else, to attend this demonstration. I had no objection to his going there, or anywhere else out of my way. I was glad when he was gone. I was not to be drawn away myself by him, but as soon as he was gone, I determined to hasten my own departure for London.

When I saw him fairly out of the way, I knew that no person could mar the effect of my demonstration.

Within an hour after my pale-faced acquaintance had left the Hall, and before he had time to open his mouth to advocate the claims of his pet charity upon the purses of ugly old maids and frowsy dowagers, I sent a message to the earl, craving the honour of an interview with him.

That privilege was readily conceded.

I was conducted to his lordship in the library. He received me urbanely. Not five minutes, scarcely ten sentences passed, when we arrived at this point of a dialogue—

“My lord,” I said, “I have discovered the thief, and unless all my experience goes for nothing, I can hand over to your lordship quietly (as I should wish to do) the whole of your missing plate.”

I was to an extent safe in this, because unless I was altogether wrong as to the person who was the thief, I must almost be right in supposing that the plate was still in the mansion.

“I think this office would have been as well performed by my steward,” observed the earl.

“Your lordship will pardon my suggesting that I should esteem it a personal obligation, if your lordship will yourself share my further investigations.”

“In what part of this Hall do you suppose the property to be concealed?”

“I will show your lordship.”

“If you please—But do you know the passages and ways of this house?”

“One of the very first things I informed myself about, my lord.”

“I will follow you, sir,” the earl remarked.

I led the way to the apartments of the sallow-faced young man. I had picklocks of the finest potency. They would open any Chubb or Bramah lock—any thing but a guilty conscience.

I stopped at the sallow-faced young man’s door, and turned to furtively scan the earl’s countenance.

An agony, resulting from concentrated grief, hatred, good and evil affections, and impotent vengeance, was to be traced in that nobleman’s face.

“My son’s apartments. You are wrong, sir,” he groaned rather than exclaimed.

“No,” I answered, “I am right.” In pity, I added, “I must discharge my duty. I must perform the work for which you engaged me and brought me here. No living soul knows my suspicions but your lordship.”

Abruptly, as if consoled by the fact, and the assurance of secrecy to which it led, and yet too proud to acknowledge so much, he said— “Proceed, sir.”

We entered the apartments. I looked about me. I saw in one room a military portmanteau, which had traveled much. I opened it. There was the missing plate!

The earl did not move a muscle or change colour. He turned to leave the apartments. I followed him, until we arrived near the door of the outer room. I then preceded him. He took my delicate hint. He turned the key upon the evidences of—I think it is called kleptomania. He then walked back to his library. From a drawer he took out his cheque book, filled up a draft on his bankers and handed the same to me. I silently, by gesture, expressed my thanks, and went out into the park.

Within an hour I saw the steward. I told him that I saw no use in stopping at the Hall. I informed the old man that I had seen the earl and told him the same thing. I added, that I should get back to London at once. I thought it better not to discuss with that proud nobleman how the plate was to be restored, but left him to act upon his own judgment in that matter. I believe that the plate has not yet been found by anybody, except myself and its lawful owner. I look into the papers, expecting some day to read about a fabulous case of conscience, or a paragraph explaining how thieves carried off a booty from a lordly mansion, and after keeping it a long while, were impelled by the stress of newly awakened righteousness to restore it to its noble proprietor.

Since the events which I have just described occurred, I have ascertained, in an accidental way, that the distinguished young nobleman whose peccadilloes at home I found out, had been in trouble several years ago over a similar affair. The case I here refer to arose somehow thus:—The young gentleman held a commission in a regiment of cavalry, then quartered in a distant settlement. He was a favourite, or at least a source of admiration to his brother officers, for although he took no part in their wild adventures, he was far from an unpleasant companion. He was a temperate man, without being ascetical; and as he did not affect the character of a purist, the mess were in no way annoyed by his moderation. He had, in fact, in this way, and by his really superior intelligence, become the most popular man in the regiment, when things happened which precipitated him into disgrace. The officers of his regiment missed a variety of small articles from their quarters, and one of them lost a valuable gold watch. It is needless to say that there was an awful row amongst the officers when it was ascertained that the thief was the favorite of their mess. Some kind friend, however, interfered to screen the delinquent from the worst consequences of his crime. The matter was hushed up. One condition imposed upon the offender was, that he should either become seriously ill, or find out some urgent private business requiring attention in England. He was of course not unwilling to yield this mild demand. It is not unlikely that the detection of his peccadilloes operated upon his mind and body so as to facilitate his application to the doctors for the requisite certificates, which he obtained. Shortly afterwards he returned home on sick leave, and was not long after that allowed to sell out of the regiment.

The ambition of the gentleman seems to have taken a turn at this point of his career. He has not for several years been known to take any interest in military affairs, but he has set up, and been admitted as an authority upon matters of civil government and administration. He sits at this present moment in Parliament, and no important debate, in the House of Commons, finishes without a speech from his lips. I fancy that he must, however, often suffer deep humiliation at the hands of an indelicate opponent. For example, I happen to know that awhile since, at a general election, he was invited to stand for a great constituency. A requisition with more two thousand

signatures was presented to him, but he did not accept the flattering invitation. The reason why he now signed a truce with ambition is to be discovered under his fears. It happened that I was employed on “the other side” to watch the movements of certain persons, and I thought it fair to whisper in the ear of our principal agent the story of the plate. He was naturally delighted, and sent me to inform one of the electors, who was also a trusted and confidential secondary agent in the election. To my surprise I found that he knew something about the forthcoming candidate which I did not. I told him about the loss and discovery of the plate at the old Hall, and he told me about the colonial kleptomania of the distinguished politician.

What should we do? Neither of us wanted to ruin so lofty a man by blurting out the obnoxious facts. We soon determined upon the course to be taken. Our secondary agent was, as I have said, an elector. He wrote a polite letter to the enemy. In this epistle the writer expressed his regret that a sense of his political duty should impose upon him so disagreeable a task as that he undertook in writing on this unpleasant subject, with, it would seem, the prospect of having to take another step far more painful to him than the present. He was, he said, entirely actuated by a stern sense of public duty. No particle or atom of personal ill-will or partisan animosity lurked beneath his intentions. He would gladly escape from his position, if any honourable road out of it could be shown. He could not see his way out of the difficulty, except by abandoning his duty. Yet, perhaps, he might—it was just possible—he might be altogether spared the unpleasantness he dreaded. The recipient of the requisition might decline to stand. The writer hoped so. That would cut the knot. He should then be spared the necessity of making statements so grievously affecting a man of worldwide reputation. This was the most he could hope. He would cling and adhere to that hope until the last. Still, in candour and in frankness—it was far better to exhibit at the outset than allow the crisis to arrive, and the victim be unwarned—he would say that he should not shrink, if the candidature were so far persisted in, from mounting the hustings and opposing the distinguished candidate, on the grounds that a man who had been compelled to leave the army by peculiarly mean offences, and who was so far afflicted with the mental derangement known as kleptomania as to rob his noble father’s plate-chest, was not a fit and proper person to represent a great constituency in Parliament. The writer again explained that he clung to the hope of being spared this serious and painful duty; but if the necessity arose, he must and would encounter it.

No direct answer was given to that letter. The candidate, however, did *not* come forward. He declined the invitation on the ground that his former constituents requested a continuance of his services, and he could not part from them. He was returned once more for a pocket-borough of his father’s, and he will, I suppose, remain a Member for that place until he is elevated, by the natural order of succession, to a peerage.

The Revelations of a Private Detective by Andrew Forrester, Jr. London: Ward and Lock, 1863. 235-53.