

## *A Detective's Story*

From Belgravia

The Moreton Bank was a joint stock affair to the North, with several branches. Each branch was under a separate manager, with high pay, good social position and liberty to do very much as he liked, for the central board of directors had great confidence in their men, and everything worked, very smoothly and successfully. All the managers were men who had been from boys in the bank's employ, and were very well paid and thought much of by the surrounding gentry.

Well, business was slack, and I was sitting in my little office one October day when my head (and only) clerk showed in a visitor. This was Mr. Sherrie, a solicitor in good standing in the city, much in favor with commercial men. I had had two or three things before from him.

“Stanning,” said he, “there's a thing in your line one of my country clients was consulting me about. You, I know, can keep your tongue between your teeth, or you'd never have had anything from me. Well, keep it closer than ever, for not one knows about this affair but my client, you, me, and – the thief. The Moreton Bank is being robbed. How, nobody knows. That's for you to find out. Here's your note of introduction to Mr. Dale, the manager. Go as soon as you can. Do credit to my introduction. Good-morning.”

Well, I was rather glad of the job so that by 6 that evening I was in the town of Moreton; a big but dull place, though I should say there's a good deal of cash and property about.

I saw Mr. Dale as soon as I could. He was a keen sort of man, with bright eyes, quick voice, and iron gray moustache and beard; over fifty. Wife pretty, and very nice mannered; no children. They made me welcome, asked me to take refreshments, and soon Mr. Dale had evidently, like a sensible man, told no one of my errand, for, on reading the note from Mr. Sherrie, he merely said:

“So you want to be recommended some good house property, Mr. Stanning, for investment?”

I said yes, of course. He was a wise man. Even your wife will talk to her maid, and in our line perfect secrecy as to what our business is, is the first thing to be got if we mean to make a hit.

Well, by and by Mrs. Dale wished me good night. She was, as I say, a very pretty woman, younger than her husband by fifteen years, I should think, and they seemed very fond of each other; but she wasn't, I should imagine, trusted by him with many weighty matters, being rather childish. Yet he wanted someone to help him, so I saw when the door closed behind her, and he turned to me with his face full of worry and perplexity.

Briefly sketched, this is what he told me. Robberies of banknotes had occurred for some time. None could be traced. Every care had been taken, every precaution adhered to. He, himself, counted and locked up his cash. Yet, and at different hours, the notes, with irregular intervals between, disappeared. He had, being well-to-do, replaced them for his monthly statements to his directors, and, being a proud man, and sensitive to the slightest breath tarnishing his or the bank's credit, he had not mentioned to any one – not even his wife, nephews or head cashier – these robberies. There was a system of personal supervision and control on his part in the Morton branch, that be a little extra work, appearing nothing unusual, he was able to keep these facts from the knowledge of anyone in the bank – except the thief or thieves.

As for the staff, there were his two nephews and five other clerks, and an old head cashier, Mr. Mitley. His nephews were cousins, sons of his brother and sister respectively named Adolphus Dale and Hugh Lenton. The clerks were all respectable and quiet, especially one Mason, who was considered a most excellent young man.

I immediately resolved in my own mind to keep a special watch on this young man, in consequence of his admirable reputation. As for the notes, they were taken one at a time, and never larger than a £25 one – mostly smaller ones.

I listened to Mr. Dale's statements and theories; not that I had much faith in either, but sometimes one may pick up a grain of sense from amateurs – besides, as they pay the piper, they may, to a certain extent, be allowed to think they call the tune. But when he'd done talking, I felt this was a very difficult business. However he made me stay at his house, always as the gentleman who wanted some houses; and I slept like a top till roused by instinct by somebody creeping past my door. Out I crept, too, and there was Mr. Dale (about 4 a.m.) in a blanket, fancying he heard a noise downstairs. Down he went, but found nothing. Of course not.

"Now, look here, sir," I whispered, "if I'm to manage this, let me do it, but please don't put your oar in."

"I can't sleep," he said. "I get up at all hours; and then in the morning hours I'm in so heavy sleep that I'm always late."

I went back to bed somewhat disgusted, for it was a sharp October night, and I was tired out with my long journey. But his words put an idea into my head, and I remembered something I once read about. However, for the present, I will put this aside.

The next day he took me, after breakfast, into the glass-paneled room where he sat, and through a little peep-hole I scraped in the ground glass reconnoitered the bank staff. There they were, all scratching away with industrious pens, and shoveling out money to the customers, of whom, being market day, there were many.

Now, I don't know why, but I didn't seem inclined to notice any one in particular but Mr. Lenton (Mr. Dale's sister's son) and Mr. Mason, the clerk who bore so admirable a character. They sat side by side in the bank, and were evidently on very friendly terms.

Lenton was a handsome young fellow, with what you call a "dashing" look about him; the clerk was just the contrary, being very quiet and demure – a thoughtful young chap, too thoughtful, I fancied, if he had only the ordinary business on his mind.

As I stood looking out, the old cashier, Mr. Mitley, came in looking perplexed. Seeing me, he hesitated. Mr. Dale told him I was a friend, and that he might speak before me.

"Well, sir," said the old man, handing the manager a sheet of paper, "this note account is wrong. There is a £25 note less than there ought to be."

"Nonsense," said Mr. Dale, peremptorily; then, noticing the hurt look of the old cashier, he said carelessly, "I beg your pardon, Mitley, so there is. Oh, I remember, I paid one away on my private account. Debit my account with it."

The old man withdrew, satisfied. Then Mr. Dale, with an angry look, turned to me.

"Another one missing since yesterday, Stanning, even since you've been here. They were all right, as Mitley says, last night."

I said nothing, but thought much; but I wasn't going to commit myself.

When the bank closed (by the way, besides Mr. and Mrs. Dale, their three female servants, a boot-boy, and the two nephews were the persons who slept in the house, while the keys were in Mr. Dale's room, though that didn't prove much, for sometimes notes "went" in the day time) I took a stroll, ostensibly to look at some houses for sale, really to follow Messrs Lenton and Mason, who went off for a walk together. I followed them along a dreary country road, with about the worse flints that ever cut their London boots, till they came some two miles out of town to a public house, the Blue Lion. It was an ordinary place enough, and the landlord, a stupid sort of fellow, but he had some good beer, which is a favorite "vanity" of mine. So I lit my briar-root, drank my beer and studied the prospects while trying to hear what I could of Lenton and Mason's conversation, who were quietly drinking a glass of ale each, in a very harmless way, in the window. Of course, neither of them had caught sight of me in the bank, and as for strangers, there were always plentiful in Morton.

Detectives are said, by people who write about them, to fit facts with their own theories. Perhaps they do, sometimes. Anyhow, I did on this occasion, when I found the object of my two gentlemen's visit to the Blue Lion was to see a well-known sporting paper, which, with so strict a view as was taken in Moreton of banking people, they couldn't have gone to a town public house to see, or bought or borrowed without the chance of a row; for Morton is a place, big as it is, where everybody knows everybody else.

The two poured over this paper as if they had something “big” on the next big race, and I began to think I could guess where the notes went. Not that I endorse the humbug talked about betting when a young fellow comes to grief. There are many things quite as likely to be the cause of it, but in this particular instance I thought it more than probable I had got something like a clew to the puzzle.

After a time the young men retired, having had a long and subdued conversation, and I was left to digest what I had heard – not much, certainly, but something.

I said nothing to Mr. Dale, stayed on in my capacity of investor, who couldn’t find any investments to suit him, and kept my eyes open. Several days passed, and no more notes were missed. Mr. Dale got rather more tranquilized, and Mrs. Dale ventured to play her piano to him in the evening, which, for some time, he had been too irritable to listen to, much to her surprise, as neither she nor anyone else had been told of the missing notes, and he was generally good-tempered with her, though short tempered with most people.

But one day a discovery was made, not through me, though, for my credit’s sake. I had spoken my suspicions of the party concerned to Mr. Dale – namely young Mason. I told him I fancied he was in some way connected with sporting matters, and got for my pains an incredulous laugh and a nasty remark, about detectives’ acuteness. This nettled me so I just told him about the scene at the Blue Lion.

He was enraged, then, I could see, both with me and the two young fellows, but just as he was going to say something about it, in came old Mitley, as usual, with a bundle of notes cashed or paid in. Mr. Dale ran his eye carefully over them, paused, started, consulted his pocket-book, and then said with an affectionate indifference:

“Where did this five pound note come from, Mitley? It’s very greasy.”

“Mr. Mason asked me to change it, sir.”

“Mr. Mason! Very good; you can go.”

The door closed, and the manager turned to me, his face a mixture of regret and anger. “I owe you an apology, Stanning, for laughing at you about Mason. I am most grieved, for this is one of the stolen notes. Still, that doesn’t prove his guilt, and his changing it here looks like innocence.”

“Or like cleverness, sir, in playing a bold game to disarm suspicion.”

“Well, I’ll call him in. Step into that cupboard; you can see and hear without his knowing it.”

In came Mr. Mason, quiet as ever. He stood waiting for Mr. Dale to speak, with an unruffled air of indifference. He was a cool hand.

The manager came to the point at once. "How did this note come into your possession, Mr. Mason?" said he, showing it. "I have a particular reason for asking."

The young chap flushed crimson, and Mr. Dale looked sternly at him. In the cupboard I thought, "Another point for you, Jim Stanning."

"It is a matter of my own, sir, a private matter – nothing to do with the bank," he said, after a pause.

"It has everything to do with the bank, Mr. Mason. This note is a stolen one."

"I know nothing of that, sir. But I would rather not explain how I got it."

"Perhaps not. But you had better, and when my nephew returns" (he was out driving Mrs. Dale in her pony carriage), "I shall ask him for an explanation of how he and you, my clerks, came to be at a pothouse studying a sporting paper." (Here the young chap looked – if you will excuse my little joke – quite chap-fallen, as I've heard Hamlet say.)

"However, I've known you and your parents so long," the manager went on in a kinder tone, "that if you'd only admit you've been betting, like a couple of young fools, I will see what can be done, though I am very wrong in doing so, to hush the whole thing up."

The young man thereupon vowed and protested that he and Mr. Lenton never betted, and that, as for the note, he had it paid him by Mr. Phillips, the grocer.

"Then, he must know something about it. And why was it paid you?" asked Mr. Dale.

Here Mason looked very red again; and stammered out that it was for a prize bull-terrier pup. Being urged by Mr. Dale to explain further, he confessed that he and young Lenton had a joint stock of bull-terriers, which they bred and showed. Hence their study of the sporting paper. Mr. Dale seemed somewhat to believe this story (though even breeding bull-terriers scandalized his non-sporting heart), but I didn't, and thought what a muff he must be to swallow such rubbish.

However he gravely enjoined secrecy on Mason, dismissed him, and then went with me to see Mr. Phillips, who was a sporting grocer of very free and easy manners, and not a customer of Mr. Dale's establishment.

Mr. Dale was too official, and the grocer turned rusty. So I tipped him the wink to go, and, remaining alone, got him to accompany me to his favorite house of call, where we had Irish cold together (I was supposed on this occasion to be former owner of the hotel), and he became very talkative, though expressing his dislike of that "stuck up manager" in a manner uncommon among gentlemen who want doubtful bills discounted.

He confirmed Mason's story completely. As for the note, he believed he took of a bookmaker named Flash Dick at Doncaster, on the previous "Leger Day" – a tall, black eyed man with splendid teeth.

I felt puzzled again. Certainly, betting and the note had some connection, but not according to my theory. So home I went, told Mr. Dale what I had heard, and found him very doubtful of my proposals of doing him any good. He seemed thoroughly worried, said he should not speak to his nephew that night, but should take some chloral and go to bed early, and he did so.

Now I had had a curious fancy or recollection of something read formerly that occurred to me when as I said just now, I found him prowling about the house at small hours, and that was of a man robbing himself when in his sleep. This might be so here, or, which was far more likely, Mr. Lenton (whom I still suspected) might, having seen his uncle take his sleeping draught, think it a fine chance to do a little wide-awake walking on his own account.

Anyhow, I resolved after the house was quiet to watch. I was peeped, I confess.

Well, I hid myself in the cupboard which commanded a view of the safe, and wretchedly cold it was, besides a most cramped position to stand in. I got sleepy and disgusted, when a noise caught my ear, very slight, but enough. There was somebody about. I was alert – all eyes and ears in a minute. Now, at all events, I should discover something, and then a faint light gleamed through the door opening into the bank, and came around the corner toward the glass room, and the figure carrying it was Mr. Dale. Yes, I could swear to his blue dressing gown anywhere, for he would sometimes smoke in it, and – but – why was it pulled over his head?

And there, as the figure stopped before the safe, the dressing gown was thrown back from the head, and showed a mass of flowing brown hair and a pale, beautiful face, the eyes full of terror – the face of Mrs. Dale.

I saw her from her shapely head to the bare white feet that peeped under blue edge of dressing gown. Like a flash it passed through my mind. How clever it was to wear her husband's dressing gown, knowing how he sometimes prowled about. Of course, she took the nights when he slept, tired out; and, of course, she had the keys at her command. But who would have thought it?

She stooped, opened the safe, took out some notes, selected one, relocked the safe, and gave a long, shivering look around. Meanwhile – for duty's duty – I blew her light out and snatched the note from her hand. She gave a scream that I shall never forget, and fainted. I was sorry as I ran up to her husband's room; but if I hadn't called his own eyes as evidence he'd never have believed me. I aroused him, showed him the note, told him the thief was in the bank parlor, and begged him to come down. He threw his clothes on, glanced at his wife's empty place, then, with a look of such agony, as touched even my tough heart, he ran downstairs.

She was lying there, the keys clutched in her hand. He frantically kissed her, dashed water in her face, and revived her. The kneeling, shivering, sobbing woman told all. She had robbed the safe, and no one else knew of it. The notes were sent to her only brother – a thorough scamp – supposed to be dead, recently turned up, but idolized by his sister, and a mere gambler – in fact, the very Flash Dick Mr. Phillips knew.

I left husband and wife together. The next morning poor Mr. Dale made the fullest apology to his nephew and Mason, and resigned his appointment. No one knew the secret but myself, and I didn't need his entreaties, when he gave me my handsome fee, to respect it. And he and she sailed for Australia, for his private means were good. Whether she was a good wife to him afterward, I don't know – anyhow, she ought to have been.

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