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Recollections of a Police-Officer
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The Pursuit

by William Russell

The reader need scarcely be told that albeit police officers, like other men, delight, chiefly, to recount their *successful* exploits, they do nevertheless, experience numerous and vexatious failures and disappointments. One especially, I remember, the recollections of which did not pass away for several weeks. I had been for some time in pursuit of a rather eminent rascal, though one young in years, and by marriage respectably connected, who by an infamous abuse of the trust reposed in him by the highly respectable firm who employed him, had contrived to possess himself of a large sum of money, with which, or at least with the portion of it falling to his share—for we discovered that he had for some time been connected with a gang of first-rate swindlers—he hoped to escape to America. The chase was hot after him, and spite of his double turnings, and the false scents adroitly thrown out by his confederates, with the view to favor his escape, I at last fairly ran him to earth in Plymouth, though in what precise spot of it he burrowed, I could not for the moment ascertain. Neither was I well acquainted with his features, but in the description of his person furnished me, there were certain indelible marks which, upon strict examination, could not fail to establish his identity. He purposed, I ascertained, to attempt to leave England in a barque bound for New York, which was to sail from Plymouth on the day after I arrived there. Of this I was fully satisfied, and I determined to capture him on board. Accordingly, about half an hour before the ship was to sail, and after all the passengers had embarked, two of the local officers and I got into a boat which I had sometime previously engaged to be in readiness and put off to the vessel. The wind was decidedly fair for the emigrant ship; and so swiftly did it blow from the northeast, that four hands, I was informed, were required, not indeed to convey us swiftly out, but to pull the boat back against the wind and strong tide, which would be rushing outside the breakwater. The sea dashed smartly at times over the boat, and the men pulled their on-wester caps well over their eyes, to shield them from the blinding spray. We were speedily on board, and the captain, although much annoyed at the delay, paraded his motley crew before us, but to my extreme surprise, our bird was not amongst them!

Every possible and impossible hiding place was thoroughly but vainly searched—and we were at length compelled to a reluctant admission that the gentleman we were in quest of had not yet honored the captain of the *Columbia* with his patronage.

We sullenly returned into the boat, and the moment we did so, the anchor, which was already afloat, was brought home;—the ship's bows fell rapidly off; her crowded canvas dilated and swelled in the spanking breeze, and she sprang swiftly off upon her course. It was a pretty and somewhat exciting spectacle; and I and my companions continued to watch the smartly handled vessel with much interest, till a point of land hid her from our view. We then turned our faces towards Plymouth, from which I was surprised to find, we were apparently as distant as ever. “The tide, let alone the wind, is dead against us!”

growled the master of the boat, who was now pulling the near oar, in reply to one of the Plymouth officers. This man had sneered on going out. A quick suspicion flashed across me. "Where is the other boatman who came out with us?" I sharply demanded. The old seaman, instead of replying, turned himself half around towards the weatherbow oar, exclaiming, "Easy there, Billy—easy, let her nose lay a little closer to the wind!" This, I readily saw, was done to conceal a momentary confusion, arising from the suddenness of my question—a very slight one by the by, for the fellow was an old man-of-war's man, with a face hardened and bronzed by service, weather, grog, and tobacco smoke. I repeated the question in a more peremptory tone. The veteran first deliberately squirted a mouthful of tobacco juice over the side, and then with an expression of his cast-iron phiz, which it is impossible by words to convey a distinct idea of, so compounded it was of a diabolical squint, lamb-like simplicity, and impudent cunning, replied—"That was a passenger to Yankee Land—a goin' there, I'm purty suspicious, for the benefit of his health."

I looked at the Plymouth officers, and they at me. The impudent ingenuity of the trick that had been played upon us, seemed scarcely credible. "He—he—ho—ho!" rumbled out of the tobacco stifled throat of the old rogue. "If he wor somebody you wanted, it wor uncommon well done. Didn't you observe him jump into the main chains of the barkey, just as you were leavin' on her, and cast us off a minute afterwards? He preferred stoppin' with us whilst you wor rummagin' the hooker—he—he—ho—ho!"

It was useless bandying words with the fellow; and though I felt desperately savage, I had sense enough to hold my tongue. "Pull smartly," said one of the Plymouth officers, "a shot will bring her to yet."

"Why, ay," rejoined the imperturbable seaman, "it mout you could get speech of the admiral in time; but I'm thinkin' we shall be a good while yet pullin' in agin this chopp n' wind and head sea."

And sure enough they were! More than another hour, by some boatman's craft unexplainable by me, for the sailors apparently rowed with all their might, were we in reaching the landing place, and by that time all chance of compelling the return of the Columbia was long past.

It would be, I knew, impossible, to prove complicity on the part of the owner of the boat with the escaped felon, and I preferred to digest the venom of my spleen in silence, rather than by a useless display of it to add to the chuckling delight of the old rascal of a boatman.

We had passed some distance along the quay when one of the local officers, addressing a youngish sailor, who, with folded arms and a short pipe in his mouth, was standing in philosophical contemplation of the sea and weather, said, "I suppose there is no chance of the emigrant ship that sailed a while ago putting in at any other port along the coast?"

The man took the pipe from his mouth, regarded the question for a few moments with an expression of contemptuous curiosity anything but flattering to its object, and bawled out, to a weather beaten seaman a few yards off, "I say, Tom Davis, here's a Blue Bottle as wants to know the name and bearin' of the port of the Land's End which the barkey that sailed a while ago for Ameriker with a northeaster kicking her endways is likely to bring up in. I'm not acquainted with it myself, or else I'd tell the gentleman."

The laugh from two or three bystanders irritated the officer, and he would have indulged in an angry reply had not his more prudent comrade taken him by the arm and urged him away.

"Ay, ay," said the veteran addressed as Tom Davis, as we were passing him, "Jim, there, had always got plenty of jawing tackle aboard; but, Lord love ye, he's a poor dumb cretur about the signs of the weather. He's talkin' about northeasters, and don't see the wind's beginning to chop about like a bum-boat woman with a dozen customers around her. It's my opinion, and Tom Davis ought by this time to be summat of a judge, that, instead of a north-easter, it's a precious sight more likely to be blowing a sou'-wester before two hours are past, and a sneezer, too; and then the Columby, if she ha'nt made a good offin', which she is not likely to have done, will be back again in a brace of shakes."

"Do you think it possible," I eagerly asked, "that the Columbia will be obliged to put back into Plymouth?"

"I don't know about *probable*. It's not so sure as death or quarter day, but it's upon the cards for all that."

"Will it be early 'n the night, think you, that she will be run in, if at all?"

"Ah! There now, you wants to know too much;" said the old seaman, turning on his heel. "All I can say is, that if you find in an hour or so's time, the wind has chopped round to the sou'-west, or, within pint or two, and that it's blowin' the buttons off your coat one after another, the Columby, if she's lucky, won't be far off."

This half bantering prediction of the old seaman was confirmed by others whom we consulted, and measures for preventing our quarry from landing and again giving us the slip, were at once discussed and resolved upon. We then separated, and I proceeded to the tavern at which I had put up to get some dinner. I had not gone far when my eye fell upon two persons whose appearance there surprised as well as somewhat grieved me. One was the young wife of the criminal on board the Columbia.

I had seen her once in London, and I knew, as before intimated, that she was of respectable parentage. There was no exultation in her countenance. She had no doubt, followed or accompanied her husband to Plymouth for the purpose of furthering his escape, and now feared that the capricious elements would render all the ingenuity and boldness that had been brought into play of no avail. She was a mild-looking pretty woman—very much so, no doubt not until trouble fell upon her, and wonderfully

resembled the female in the ‘Momentous Question,’ so remarkably indeed that when years afterwards, I saw that print, I felt an instantaneous conviction that I had somewhere before met with the original of the portrait; and after much puzzlement of the brain, remembered when and where. The resemblance was doubtless purely accidental, but it was not the less extraordinary and complete. She was accompanied by a gray-haired man, of grave, respectable appearance, whom I at once concluded to be her father. As I passed close by them, he appeared about to address me, and I half paused to hear what he had to say; but his partly formed purpose was not persisted in, and I proceeded on my way.

After dining, I returned to the quay.—The wind, as foretold, was blowing directly from the south-west, and during the short space of time I had been absent, had increased to a tempest. The wild sea was dashing with terrific violence against the breakwater, discernable only in the fast darkening night by a line of white foam and spray which leaped and hissed against and over it.

“A dirty night coming on,” said a subaltern officer of the port, whom I had previously spoken with; “the Columbia will, I think, be pretty sure to run in with the tide.”

“When do you say is the very earliest time she may be expected?”

“Well, in my opinion, judging from where she was when I was on the lookout a quarter of an hour ago, not under three hours. Let me see. It is now upon the stroke of five; about eight o’clock I should say she will be here; certainly not before, perhaps much later; and if the captain is very obstinate, and prefers incurring a rather serious risk to returning, it may be of course not at all.”

I thanked him, and as remaining on the bleak quay till eight o’clock or thereabouts was as useless as unpleasant, I retraced my steps toward the Royal George Tavern; calling in my way of the Plymouth officers, and arranging that one of them should relieve me at ten o’clock; it having been previously agreed that we should keep an alternate watch during the night of two hours each. I afterward remembered that this arrangement was repeated in an uncautiously loud tone of voice at the bar of a public house, where they insisted upon my taking a glass of porter. There were, I should say, more than a dozen persons present at the time.

The fire was blazing brightly in the parlor of the Royal George when I entered, and I had not been seated near it many minutes before I became exceedingly drowsy, and no wonder, for I had not been in bed the previous night, and the blowing of the wind in my eyes for two hours had of course added greatly to their weariness. Habit had long enabled me to awake at any hour I had previously determined on, so that I felt no anxiety as to oversleeping myself; and having pulled out my watch, noticed that it was barely half past five, wound it up, and placed it before me on the table, I settled myself comfortably in an arm chair, and was soon sound asleep.

I awoke with a confused impression that I had quite slept the time allotted to myself, and that strangers were in the room, and standing about me. I was mistaken in both

particulars. There was no one in the room but myself, and on glancing at the watch I saw that it was but a quarter past six. I rose from the chair, stirred up the fire, took two or three strides up and down the room, listened for a few minutes to the howling wind and driving rain which shook and beat against the casement, sat down again, and took up a newspaper which was lying on the table.

I had read for some time when the parlor door opened, and who should walk in but the young wife and an elderly gentleman whom I had seen on the street. I at once concluded that they had sought me with reference to the fugitive on board the Columbia; and the venerable old man's rather elaborate apologies for intrusion, over, and both of them seated on the side of the fireplace opposite me, I awaited with grave curiosity to hear what they might say.

An awkward silence ensued. The young woman's eyes were filled with tears, were bent on the floor, and her entire aspect and demeanor exhibited extreme sorrow and dejection. I pitied her, so sad and gentle did she look, from my very soul. The old man appeared anxious and careworn, and for some time remained abstractedly gazing at the fire without speaking. I had a mind to avoid a painful, and I was satisfied, profitless interview, by abruptly retiring; and was just rising for that purpose when a fiercer tempest blast than before accompanied by the pattering of heavy raindrops against the window panes, cause me to hesitate at exposing myself unnecessarily to the rigor of such a night; and at the same moment the gray-haired man suddenly raised his eyes and regarded me with a fixed and grave scrutiny.

"This war of the elements," he at last said, "this war of the elements, and wild uproar of physical nature, is but a type, Mr. Waters, a faint one, of the convulsions, the antagonisms, the hurtful conflicts ever raging in the moral world."

I bowed dubious assent to a proposition not apparently very pertinent to the subject, which I suppose chiefly occupied his mind, and he proceeded.

"It is difficult for dim-eyed beings such as we are always to trace the guiding hand of the ever-watchful Power which conducts the events of this changing, many-colored life to wise and foreseen issues. The conflicts of faith with actual experience are hard for poor humanity to bear, and still keep unimpaired the jewel beyond price of unwavering trust in Him to whom the secrets of all hearts are known. Ah, sir, guilt, flaunting its vanities in high places—innocence in danger of fetters—are perplexing subjects to dwell upon!"

I was somewhat puzzled by this strange talk, but hopeful that a meaning would presently appear, I again silently intimated partial concurrence with his general views.

"There is no longer much doubt, Mr. Waters, I believe," he added after a few moments, in a much more business-like and sensible tone, that the Columbia will be forced back again, and that the husband of this unhappy girl will consequently fall into the hands of the blind, unreasoning law . . . You appear surprised . . . My name, I should have mentioned before, is Thompson; and be assured, Mr. Waters, that when the real facts of

this most unfortunate affair are brought to your knowledge, no one will more bitterly regret than yourself that this tempest and sudden change of wind should have flung back the prey both you and I believed had escaped upon these fatal shores.”

“From your name, I presume you to be the father of the young woman, and”—

“Yes,” he interrupted me, “and the father-in-law of this innocent young man you have hunted down with such untiring activity and zeal. But I blame you not,” he added, checking himself—“I blame you not. You have done what you conceived to be your duty. But the ways of Providence are inscrutable.”

A passionate burst of grief from the pale, weeping wife, testified that, whatever might be the fugitive’s offences or crimes against society, he at least retained *her* affection and esteem.

“It is very unpleasant,” I observed, “to discuss such a subject in the presence of relatives of the inculcated person, especially as I yet perceive no useful result likely to arise from it; still, since you as it were force me to speak, you must permit me to say that you are either grossly deceived yourself, or attempting for some purpose or other to impose upon my credulity.”

“Neither, sir—neither,” replied Mr. Thompson, with warmth. “I certainly am not deceived, myself, and I should hope that my character, which I doubt not is well-known to you, will shield me from any suspicion of a desire to deceive others.”

“I am quite aware, Mr. Thompson, of your respectability, still you may be unwillingly led astray. I very much regret to say that the evidence against your daughter’s husband is overwhelming, and, I fear, unanswerable.”

“The best, kindest of husbands!” broke in the disconsolate wife; “The most injured, the most persecuted of men!”

“It is useless,” said I, rising, and seizing my hat, “to prolong this conversation. If he be innocent, he will no doubt be acquitted; but as it is now close upon half past seven o’clock, I must beg to take my leave.”

“One moment, sir,” said Mr. Thompson, hastily. “To be frank with you, it was entirely for the purpose of asking your advice as an experienced person, that we are here. You have heard of this young man’s father?”

“Joel Masters? Yes. A gambler, and otherwise disreputable person, and one of the most specious rascals, I am told, under the sun.”

“You have correctly described him.—You are not perhaps acquainted with his handwriting?”

“Yes, I am; partially so at least. I have a note in my pocket—here it is—addressed to me by the artful old scoundrel for the purpose of luring me from the right track of his son.”

“Then, Mr. Waters, please read this letter from him dated Liverpool, where it appears he was yesterday to embark for America.”

The letter which Mr. Thompson placed in my hands startled me a little. It was a circumstantial confession addressed by Joel Masters to his son, setting forth that he, the father, was alone guilty of the offence with which his unfortunate son was charged, and authorizing him to make a full disclosure should he fail in making his escape from the country.—The letter went on to state where a large amount of banknotes and acceptances which he had been unable to change or discount, might be found.

“This letter,” said I, “is a very important one; but where is the envelope?”

Mr. Thompson searched his pocket book; it was not there. “I must have dropped it,” he exclaimed, “at my lodgings. Pray, wait till I return. I am extremely anxious to convince you of this unfortunate young man’s innocence. I will not be more than a few minutes absent.” He then hurried out.

I looked at my watch; it wanted five-and-twenty minutes to eight. “I have but a very few minutes to spare,” I observed to the still passionately grieving wife; “and as to the letter, you had better place it in the hand of the attorney for the defense.”

“Ah, sir,” sobbed the wife, raising her timid eyes toward me, “you do not believe us, or you would not be so eager to seize my husband.”

“Pardon me,” I replied, “I have no right to doubt the truth of what you have told me; but my duty is a plain one, and must be performed.”

“Tell me frankly, honestly,” cried the half-frantic woman, with a renewed burst of tears, “if, in your opinion, this evidence will save my unhappy, deeply injured husband? My father, I fear, deceives me—deceives himself with a vain hope.”

I hesitated to express a very favorable opinion of the effect of a statement, obnoxious, as a few moments reflection suggested, to so much suspicion. The wife quickly interpreted the meaning of my silence, and broke at once into hysterical lamentation. It was with the greatest difficulty I kept life in her by copious showers of water from the decanter that stood on the table. This endured some time. At last I said abruptly, for my watch admonished me that full ten minutes had been passed in this way, that I must summon the waiter and leave her.

“Go—go,” said she, suddenly rallying, “since it must be so. I—I will follow.”

I immediately left the house, hastened to the quay, and, on arriving there, strained my eyes seaward in search of the expected ship. A large bark, which very much resembled

her, was, to my dismay, riding at anchor within the breakwater, her sails furled, and everything made snug for the night. I ran to the landing steps, near which two or three sailors were standing.

“What vessel is that?” I asked, pointing to the one which had excited my alarm.

“The Columbia,” replied the man.

“The Columbia! Why, when did she arrive?”

“Some time ago. The clock chimed a quarter-past eight as the captain and a few of the passengers came on ashore.”

“A quarter-past eight! Why, it wants nearly half an hour to that now!”

“Does it though? Before you are ten minutes older, you’ll hear the clock strike nine.”

The man’s words were followed by a merry, mocking laugh close to my elbow. I turned sharply round, and for the first and last time in my life felt an almost irresistible temptation to strike a woman. There stood the meek, dove-eyed, grief-stricken wife I had parted from but a few minutes before, gazing with brazen impudence in my face.

“Perhaps, Mr. Waters,” said she with another taunting laugh, “perhaps yours is London time; or which is probably more likely, watches sometimes sleep for an hour or so as well as their owners.” She then skipped gaily off.

“Are you a Mr. Waters?” said a customhouse official who was parading the quay.

“Yes—and what then?”

“Only that a Mr. Joel Masters desired me to say that he was very much grieved he could not return to finish the evening with you, as he and his son were unfortunately obliged to leave Plymouth immediately.”

It would have been a great pleasure to have flung the speaker over the quay.—By a great effort I denied myself the tempting luxury, and walked away in a fever of rage. Neither Joel Masters nor his son could afterwards be found, in spite of the unremitting efforts of myself and others, continued through several weeks. They both ultimately escaped to America and some years afterwards I learned through an unexpected channel, that the canting, specious old rascal was at length getting his deserts in the establishment of Sing Sing. The son, the same informant assured me, had, through the persuasions and influence of his wife, who probably thought justice might not be so pleasantly eluded another time, turned over a new leaf and was leading an honest and prosperous life at Cincinnati.

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Prior to the British publication of this volume, a pirated collection of the stories—titled *Recollections of a Policeman by Thomas Waters, An Inspector in the London Detective Corps*—was published in America (New York: Cornish and Lamport, 1852).