

The Sofa,
A Detective Policeman's Story

by Charles Dickens

“What young men will do, sometimes, to ruin themselves and break their friends hearts,” said Sergeant Dornton, “it’s surprising! I had a case at Saint Blank’s Hospital which was of this sort. A bad case, indeed, with a bad end!”

The Secretary, and the House-Surgeon, and the Treasurer, of Saint Blank’s Hospital, came to Scotland Yard to give information of numerous robberies having been committed on the students. The students could leave nothing in the pockets of their great-coats, while the great-coats were hanging at the hospital, but it was almost certain to be stolen. Property of various descriptions was constantly being lost; and the gentlemen were naturally uneasy about it, and anxious, for the credit of the institution, that the thief or thieves should be discovered. The case [was] entrusted to me, and I went to the Hospital.

“Now, gentlemen,” said I, after we had talked it over, “I understand this property is usually lost from one room.”

Yes, they said. It was.

“I should wish, if you please,” said I “to see that room.”

It was a good sized bare room down stairs, with a few tables and forms in it, and a row of pegs, all round, for hats and coats.

“Next, gentlemen,” said I, “do you suspect anybody?”

Yes, they said. They did suspect one of the porters.

“I should like,” said I, “to have that man pointed out to me, and have a little time to look after him.”

He was pointed out, and I looked after him, and then I went back to the Hospital, and said, “Now, gentlemen, it’s not the porter. He’s unfortunately for himself, a little too fond of drink, but he’s nothing worse. My suspicion is that these robberies are committed by one of the students; and if you’ll put me a sofa into that room where the pegs are—as there’s no closet—I think I shall be able to detect the thief. I wish the sofa, if you please, to be covered with chintz, or something of that sort, so that I may lie on my chest, underneath it, without being seen.”

The sofa was provided, and next day at eleven o’clock, before any of the students came, I went there, with those gentlemen, to get underneath it. It turned out to be one of those old-fashioned sofas with a great cross beam at the bottom, that would have broken my back in no time if I could ever have got below it. We had quite a job to break all this away in time; however, I fell to work, and they fell to work, and we broke it out, and made a clear place for me. I got under the

sofa, lay down on my chest, took out my knife, and made a convenient hole in the chintz to look through. It was then settled between me and the gentlemen, that when the students were all up in the wards, one of the gentlemen should come in, and hang up a great-coat on one of the pegs. And that great-coat should have, in one of the pockets, a pocket-book containing marked money.

After I had been there some time, the students began to drop into the room, by ones, and twos, and threes, and to talk about all sorts of things, little thinking there was any body under the sofa—and then to go upstairs. At last there came in one who remained until he was alone in the room by himself. A tallish, good-looking young man of one or two and twenty, with a light whisker. He went to a particular hat-peg, took off a good hat that was hanging there, tried it on, hung his own hat in its place, and hung that hat on another peg, nearly opposite to me. I then felt quite certain that he was the thief, and would come back by and bye.

When they were all upstairs, the gentleman came in with the great-coat. I showed him where to hang it, so that I might have a good view of it, and he went away; and I lay under the sofa on my chest for a couple of hours or so, waiting.

At last the same young man came down. He walked across the room, whistling—stopped and listened—took another walk and whistled—stopped again, and listened—then began to go regularly round the pegs, feeling in the pockets of all the coats. When he came to the great-coat, and felt the pocket-book, he was so eager and so hurried that he broke the strap in tearing it open. As he began to put the money in his pocket, I crawled out from under the sofa, and his eyes met mine.

My face, as you may perceive, is brown now, but it was pale at the time, my health not being good; and looked as long as a horse's. Besides which, there was a great draught of air from the door, underneath the sofa, and I had tied a handkerchief round my head; so what I looked like, altogether, I don't know. He turned blue—literally blue—when he saw me crawling out, and I couldn't feel surprised at it.

“I am an officer of the Detective Police,” said I, “and have been lying here, since you first came in this morning. I regret, for the sake of yourself and your friends, that you should have done what you have; but this case is complete. You have the pocket-book in your hand and the money upon you, and I must take you into custody!”

It was impossible to make out any case in his behalf, and on his trial he plead guilty. How or when he got the means I don't know; but while he was awaiting his sentence, he poisoned himself in Newgate.

We inquired of this officer, on the conclusion of the foregoing anecdote, whether the time appeared long, or short, when he lay in that constrained position under the sofa?

“Why, you see, Sir,” he replied, “If he hadn't come in the first time, and I had not been quite sure he was the thief, and would return, the time would have seemed long. But, as it was, I being dead certain of my man, the time seemed pretty short.”

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