

A Detective's Story

One morning, while I was in the Tombs police court a tall, fine looking woman of about thirty-five was brought in, charged with shoplifting. She was dressed in what was evidently the remains of better days, and her appearance, on the whole, was not unprepossessing. She seemed in no wise embarrassed by the position in which she was placed. She answered in a clear, unfaltering voice all the questions that were asked her, giving her name as Alice Brown, and her residence No. --- East Fifteenth street.

“She’s an old offender,” said Detective B., who happened to be standing by my side, “and she’s sure to be sent up.”

“You know her?” I inquired.

“Oh, yes. She was at one time a ‘kleptomaniac.’ It’s queer, isn’t it, that what is shoplifting in the case of a poor woman becomes ‘kleptomania’ when the criminal is a millionaire’s wife? I know dozens of these ‘kleptomaniacs,’ and they are nearly all women. I’ll tell you a little story about one of these the first chance I get.”

Two or three days later I met B. again, and reminded him of his promise.

“Ah, yes,” he said, “I remember. The story is not a very remarkable one, but it has the merit of being true; and, as it illustrates a phase of New York society which is usually kept shady, it may interest you.”

“One morning, some years ago, Mrs. Clifford, the wife of old Darrell Clifford the millionaire, had her pocket picked while she was shopping at Stewart’s. Her purse, which contained nearly twelve hundred dollars, was taken. Mrs. Clifford was unable to tell exactly where the theft had been committed. She had been in the store twenty minutes when she discovered her loss. All she knew about it was that the purse had been stolen while she was in the store: she was certain that it was in her possession when she entered. Of course the police were notified, but there did not seem to be much probability that the money would be recovered, until a valuable clew was furnished by Mrs. Clifford herself.

“On her return home from Stewart’s after the discovery of the theft, the lady found a solitary diamond ring in the pocket from which the purse had been stolen. It was a very handsome thing, and was worth a couple of hundred dollars. Mrs. Clifford had never seen it before and was at a loss how to account for its presence in her pocket until it occurred to her that it had dropped from the finger of the thief who had stolen the purse. Old Darrell Clifford saw that the ring might be the means of the detection of the pickpocket, and the recovery of the stolen money. He directed his wife to say nothing about it to anyone, and brought the ring to me. The next morning the following advertisement appeared:

FOUND --- a diamond ring on Broadway. The owner can have it by proving property and paying expenses. Call at room 38, --- Hotel, this afternoon between four and five o’clock.

“As you have already guessed the occupant of room 38 that afternoon was no other than your humble servant. It was nearly five o’clock, and I had begun to fear that my scheme was destined to prove a failure, when there came a low tap upon the door.

“ ‘Come in,’ I cried, and a handsomely dressed woman entered.’

“ ‘I have called in answer to this advertisement,’ she began.

“ ‘Ah, yes,’ I said. ‘You have lost a diamond ring?’

“ ‘Unfortunately, yes, sir,’ she replied.

“ ‘When did you lose it?’

“ ‘Yesterday morning.’

“ ‘And where?’

“ ‘I cannot tell exactly. I was out shopping all the morning. I did not miss it until I was nearly home. I think I must have dropped it somewhere between Stewart’s and my residence on Twenty-fourth street. It was too large for the finger upon which I wore it, and slipped off without my noticing it.’

“ ‘Exactly, madam. Please describe the ring.’

“ ‘Well, she described it minutely, When she had finished I took the ring from my pocket.

“ ‘Your description is perfectly correct, madam,’ I said, handing her the jewel. ‘This is the ring, is it not?’

“ ‘It is,’ she exclaimed joyously. ‘How can I reward you, sir?’

“ ‘Will you give me your name, madam?’ I interrupted.

“ ‘Certainly. I am Mrs. Ethan Jasper.’

“ ‘What! the wife of Ethan Jasper, the lawyer?’ I exclaimed.

“ ‘The same, sir.’

“ ‘I was not a little startled; for, as you are aware, Jasper was a well-known lawyer and a man of high social position and great wealth.

“ ‘I am very sorry, madam,’ I said, ‘but I have an unpleasant duty to perform.’

“In an instant every vestige of color left the woman’s face, then I was certain I had the right person. It was another case of ‘kleptomania,’ you see.

“ ‘What do you mean?’ cried Mrs. Jasper, in an almost inaudible voice.

“I briefly explained the situation to her. She listened in silence. When I had finished she burst into tears. The charge was false, utterly false, she said. Surely I would not be so cruel as to arrest, and bring disgrace upon her and her husband. The ring, she explained, must have been stolen from her by the person who picked Mrs. Clifford’s pocket. I informed her that she would have an opportunity to prove her innocence in court, and that she would have to accompany me. If I dared to arrest her it would cost me my position upon the force. This and many other equally ridiculous things she said, and finally she tried to bribe me. I was as patient as I could be with her; but at last I told her that if she made it necessary, I should be obliged, much against my will, to force her to go with me. Then she summoned a carriage, in which she accompanied me without any more words. A search was made at her residence, but the missing purse was not found. Mrs. Clifford was sent for, and she identified the prisoner who had stood by her side for some minutes at Stewart’s lace counter. She entered a complaint against Mrs. Jasper.

“The prisoner’s husband was wealthy and influential, and of course did everything in his power to secure his wife’s release. Mrs. Clifford was induced to withdraw her complaint, and Mrs. Jasper discharged. But the stain still remained upon her name; many persons believed her to be guilty of the crime of which she had been accused. Ethan Jasper was a very proud man, and the disgrace which his wife had brought upon him cut him to the quick. But within a week after Mrs. Jasper’s discharge a well-known pickpocket, John Emory by name, who was confined in the Tombs on a charge of theft, confessed that he had stolen the ring from Mrs. Jasper and had afterwards picked Mrs. Clifford’s pocket. There were people ill-natured enough to say that Emory had been paid for making this confession. It happened, curiously enough, that Ethan Jasper was this man’s counsel, and you will acknowledge that it did not seem altogether improbable that he had been bribed. But in the minds of the majority of people the pickpocket’s confession cleared Mrs. Jasper of all suspicion. Emory was sentenced to a term of imprisonment, and the matter was soon forgotten.

“Nearly two years had passed when fashionable society was startled by the statement from John Emory, who had served out his term and returned to New York, that he had not stolen either Mrs. Jasper’s ring or Mrs. Clifford’s purse, but that he had been payed by Ethan Jasper to confess the crimes. Then it came out. The confession, indeed, had been a false one, and Mrs. Jasper had really stolen the purse. The lawyer had given his client a receipted bill for counsel fees and a large sum of money besides to make the bogus confession. At the expiration of his term Emory had returned to New York and gone to Jasper demanding five hundred dollars as the price of his continued silence. The lawyer had paid the money and Emory had returned again and again until his victim had at last lost all patience, refusing to accede to the blackmailer’s demands, and ejected the scoundrel from his house. Then Emory ‘gave away’ the whole affair. His confession was the means of bringing forth statements from various shop-keepers and other persons from whom Mrs. Jasper had within the past two years stolen money and goods, and with whom the unhappy husband had compromised.

“It was a genuine case of ‘kleptomania,’ if ever there was one; for Mrs. Jasper had no motive to steal. Her husband had surrounded her with every luxury, and it must have been an innate love of crime or a strange mental disorder that prompted her to commit these thefts. When the exposure came Jasper separated from his wife and left the city. He is now practicing in Chicago, but they say he is broken down mentally and physically, and is but a wreck of his former self.”

“And the woman--- what became of her?” I asked, as the detective paused.

“You saw her in court the other morning,” he replied.

“What, Alice Brown?” I exclaimed.

“Exactly. She has developed into a clever professional thief. It’s strange, but the life seems to suit her better than that which she led when she was the honored wife of Ethan Jasper. A strange case, isn’t it? There’s material in that woman’s career for an interesting psychological study.”

Franklin [NY] Gazette, December 25, 1885

The [Hagerstown, Maryland] Herald and Torch, January 28, 1886

The Republican, February 6, 1886

Catoctin Clarion [Mechanicstown, MD], February 18, 1886