

A Detective Story

One day, as I returned to police headquarters, after having put in several hours on a till tapping case, I found a queer looking old man awaiting me. He was, I should say, at least 55. He wore a reddish wig, shaved clean, was very precise about his clothing, and was eccentric in speech and action. As he met me, he said:

“Dem it, sir, but you should have more manners than to keep me cooling my heels around a place like this!”

“But I didn’t know you were here.”

“But it was your business to know! Dem it, sir. I am put out with you, sir!”

“Well, I am here, and now what can I do for you?”

“Resign your place here at once!”

“What?”

“Can’t you understand the English language? Resign, sir.”

“For what reason?”

“That you may engage with me.”

He handed me his card, and I saw that his name was Ronald Terry. After a bit he informed me that he was an old bachelor, with plenty of cash, and that he had a scheme on hand which he wished to work out. He offered to engage me for two years at four times the salary I was then receiving, but would not tell me what the work was. After two or three interviews with him and after ascertaining from trustworthy men that he was what he represented himself, I closed with his offer. The day I entered upon his service he said to me:

“You have been in most of the large cities of the United States. Did you ever happen to notice a situation like this: A street about fifty feet wide running off a business street at an angle, but only two blocks long before it ended at a bluff? This short street is built up with brick houses. On the first corner on the right is a drug store. The intersecting street is hardly wider than an alley and is not paved.”

“I think you will find something very like it in almost any city, excepting the bluff. It is not unusual for streets to come in that way.”

“But the bluff. If the short street does not end at a bluff our search will be useless.”

“We shall have to go from town to town until we find it.”

“Exactly, and we start tomorrow. Be at my hotel at 8 o’clock in the morning. I shall lay out our route, and whenever we arrive in a city you will do the searching. That’s what I have hired you for.”

From the foregoing you will be prepared to believe that I thought him “light in the head,” as the expression goes, if no worse. However, as he had the money and was his own master, and as he was paying me a big salary, it was not my business to find fault. I soon discovered that he had his own peculiar ideas in the most trifling matters. For instance, I was not to know him when on the train. I must, if possible, take the front end of the car, while he took the rear. At the hotel I must, if such an arrangement were possible, sleep on the floor above him. Any business between us must be done as formally as if we had never met.

At our first stopping place he planned to stay just so many days. I was to cover only so much of the city per day. A queer duck you will think him, but I couldn’t record the tenth of his strange doings and sayings.

We went directly to Portland, Me., to begin our search, and although I could have covered the city in two days he planned that we should stay sixteen. Therefore, after the first two days, I had nothing to do but loaf around. On the seventh day he sent his card to my room with a request that I call upon him on a matter of business, and when I entered he asked:

“Well, what progress in your search?”

“I can find no such steet here, sir.”

“Very well; I give you nine more days in which to make sure.”

I spent the nine days in fishing and sailing, and we went from Portland to Augusta. We put in six days there, and then went to Montgomery, Vt. We took each state in rotation, visiting every city above 10,000 population in each state, and by the time we were through with the state of New York the first year was up. Every day found Mr. Terry the same queer, quaint specimen of humanity. The same formality was observed, and once, in a railroad smash-up, when I ventured to address him to inquire if he had been hurt, he looked at me with a cold stare and replied:

“Dem it, sir, you must have mistaken me for some one else!”

We were well along in the second year, and were in Wilmington, Del., when I met an old friend from the west and told him what a wildgoose chase I was on. He looked at the diagram for a few minutes and then said:

“You’ll strike this in Cincinnati. I could guide you to the exact spot.”

He went fishing into his baggage and found an old map of Cincinnati, and in five minutes we had located the spot. I sent my card up to Mr. Terry, and followed it to inform him of my discovery, but he sat down on me with:

“Dem it, man, if you are tired of my ways and wages, you can quit! I told you at the outset that I should run this thing myself!”

And to prove that he meant to, he planned a route which did not permit us to reach Cincinnati for nearly four months. He gave me to understand, on arriving there, that we should remain thirty-one days; and, although I could have found “B” street in an hour, I knew Mr. Terry too well to object to his plans. On the second day I went over the street. It was ancient and rather queer; but no more so than many others. It was tenanted by a poor but respectable class of people.

Naturally enough, I had always had a great curiosity to know why my queer employer wanted to find this street, and so, day in and day out, I pursued my investigations. I asked every resident for information of Terry, but no one had ever heard of him. The last house on the left hand side was chock up against the bluff. One standing on the high hill, of which Cincinnati has so many, could have dropped a stone down upon the roof of this house, which was old and untenanted. I inspected it outside and in, and saw from its condition that it had been unoccupied for years. It was a frame, and the floors were about gone, the plastering all off, and the doors and much of the partitions had been carried away for fuel. It struck me that this old house held the key to the mystery, but though I searched high and low I could find nothing.

On the morning of the thirty-first day Mr. Terry sent for me and inquired if I had found the street. This was the only time he had spoken to me since our arrival. I replied that I had, and he then said:

“You will go to your room, lock yourself in, and remain until I send for you.”

I did nothing of the kind. I skipped out, reached “B” street, posted myself in the hallway of a tenement, and an hour later saw Mr. Terry appear. He went straight to the old house, was inside for half an hour, and then came out with a package in his hand. I took it to be a package of papers wrapped in oilskin. He walked off without a glance to the right or left, and I took a short cut and reached the hotel first. After dinner he sent for me and said:

“Our search is ended. You have been faithful and sensible. Here is the balance of your salary for the second year and here is \$1,000 extra. Good-bye, sir.”

“But won’t you enlighten”—

“Dem it, sir, good-bye,” he interrupted, and I picked up my money and went, and to this day have never got at the bottom facts. —New York Sun

Daily Kennebec Journal [Augusta, ME], January 7, 1890

Atchison [KS] *Champion*, January 12, 1890

Topeka [KS] *State Journal*, January 14, 1890

Xenia [OH] *Daily Gazette*, January 15, 1890

The Athens [OH] *Messenger*, February 13, 1890

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