

*The Confidential Clerk*  
by A Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

No.— Broadway,  
March 15, 185—

“MESSRS. BARTON BROTHERS would be glad to see Mr. Barker at his earliest convenience, respecting a matter in which they require the aid of his services.”

The above note was put into my hands while I was hanging about the City Hall one morning, waiting the arrival of some of my shadows, who were out on a little affair that made a considerable noise at that time.

I lost no time in proceeding to Broadway, where I had an interview with the principals, at which the confidential clerk was also present.

“Good-morning Mr. Barker. You are very prompt. Greatly indebted to you. We have been very much annoyed lately from missing a large quantity of valuable goods, silks, satins, laces, furs, and other articles, amounting to several hundred dollars; and, although we have for some time kept a strict watch upon those we employ, we have been unable to attach suspicion to any one upon a good foundation. All our young men have been in our employ for some years, and are very steady and respectable. I said *all*, but should except two, who have only been with us a couple of months or so.”

“Is there any peculiarity in the goods you have lost, gentlemen?” I asked. “Could you identify them if you were shown them again?”

“We could only identify them by our own private marks upon them. If these were removed they would be just the same in appearance as other parcels, manufactured by the same houses.—There is one piece of Lyons satin, however, of a new pattern, which we could identify, as it is the only pattern yet taken from the loom. It is sent to us on approval, and we have ordered several hundred pieces of it; but this sample piece has been missing since the day before yesterday, and has given us a great deal of annoyance, because we have taken a large order from a retail house, and they have shown the pattern to a rich customer, and she wants a dress made up of it to appear in at the next L— G— Ball.”

“Can you show me a pattern of this particular piece of goods, gentlemen?”

“Here is a small piece; you see it is “quite novel and very elegant.”

“That will do, gentlemen. I should be able to recognize it among a thousand. Now, gentlemen, am I to understand that you consider that some one in your establishment is the thief?”

“It must be, for the goods are taken from places to which our customers have no access; and whoever has stolen them has taken into calculation the difficulty there will be in fixing suspicion, among so many, upon any particular one.”

“Who is the last to leave at night? Who locks up the premises?”

“Mr. Perkins, this gentleman here,” pointing to the confidential clerk, “is always the last to leave. He stays to see all safe, and when the porter has padlocked the outer door he tries it; the porter then gives him the key, and calls for it at his house next morning.”

“Well, Mr. Perkins, have you any suspicions as to which of the clerks may have committed these robberies?”

“No, Mr. Barker, I cannot say that I have. Most of our clerks are exceedingly well conducted—I may say all, in fact; for we have had the two who were last engaged watched at night upon leaving the warehouse, but nothing improper was seen in their conduct. One goes home to his mother’s, a respectable widow lady, the other generally goes to the Mercantile Library in Clinton Hall, stays there till it closes, and then goes straight home to his lodging.”

“Well, gentlemen, we must take it for granted that the thief is in the house, and must be discovered. You wish me to find out who it is, of course. I will undertake to do so, although it may prove a very long and troublesome job, for I shall have to investigate the habits and doings of your whole staff. How many do you employ?”

“Forty-two, all told, including the porters.”

“Forty-two! Why, if I put all my hounds on the scent it may take three months, if the rogue should happen to be the last taken in hand. If I undertake the business I must stipulate to have the whole matter left in my hands, without any interference on your part.”

“Oh, certainly, Mr. Barker. We cannot go on with the present state of matters; we would rather give up business. We do not mind the expense of your labors; we only hope you may be successful.”

“Well, gentlemen, I shall begin at once; I should like to go through your warehouse, and take a look at your assistants. I am something of a physiognomist, and can tell a thief almost as soon as I look at him. I suppose I can pass for a customer.”

One of the partners escorted me through the warehouses, and the way we turned over things and “took stock” would have amused you. I took the likenesses of all the young men employed.

“You have no idea, Mr. Barker,” said the senior partner, on escorting me to the door, “how distressingly painful it is to me to have to suspect any one we employ. We feel an interest in them all, and would promote their welfare by any means in our power. Whenever a young man shows industry and zeal, and after a few years’ service desires to set up in business for himself, we do not hesitate to help him as far as we can consistently with prudence.”

“I can understand your feelings, Mr. B—, very well, and I hope it will not be long before I am able to relieve your mind. Good-day.”

Upon returning to my crib I found several of my boys waiting to see me.

“Now, lads,” said I, “as soon as you have got through with R—’s affair, I have another job for you, which will amuse you on evenings. Bartons, of Broadway, suspect some of their clerks of robbing them, so you must watch them at night when they quit the warehouse, and see how they amuse themselves.”

At dusk I had rigged myself up in the “fast style,” with plenty of flash jewelry, &c., and took my stand at the corner of Broadway and Liberty streets. I had marked nearly every man in the establishment, and I felt sure that at least one or two would come up the street past where I was standing, and I was not mistaken. Soon a couple came along together, and they held a consultation at the corner where I was standing as to whether they should go to billiards or coffee. Coffee gained the day.

I followed them to a French coffee-shop in Broadway, then kept by Palmo, who started the first opera house in New York, and waited till they had refreshed themselves. Upon coming out, they proceeded up Broadway to Canal street. Arriving at a certain “billiard-room,” they proceeded upstairs. I waited outside for a quarter of an hour or so, and then followed up.

I found my gentlemen busy in knocking the balls about. I kept dark; they did not bet, and played for a shilling a game. About eleven o’clock they made signs for departure. I got quietly down into the street first. They walked together till they reached the corner of Spring Street, where they parted, one proceeding up Broadway, the other down Spring Street, where I concluded he lodged.

Next evening the same young gentlemen were favored with my special attentions. This time they went to the Olympic theatre, where also I took a seat in the pit. Upon quitting the house they proceeded to a public house, and after partaking of some ale they parted, and proceeded on their respective ways as before. I took a fancy to see where the one who went up Canal Street lodged. He led me a long dance up to Chelsea. Arrived at a door in Charles Street, he applied a night-key, and let himself in.

“So then,” I argued with myself, “there is not much to be made of these young fellows; they are like thousands of others who, after getting through their day’s work, consider themselves entitled to what they call ‘pleasure,’ and find it in billiards and farces.” I followed up some of the other young gentlemen in their turn, and derived considerable amusement from the way in which they spent their leisure hours.

Two of the clerks were members of the Irving Lyceum, where they generally spent their evenings—harmless enough, and very profitable. Another went every night to some theatre; but as he generally resorted to the gallery, I did not consider his habits so expensive as those who smoked and frequented drinking-saloons. One seemed to have a passion for old books, and generally pulled up at some bookstall, where he would spend an hour or two, and then stroll leisurely home. Another had a taste for engravings, and seemed to be a collector. Most of the others were of the moral school; one was a member of the Young Men’s Christian Association;

another a member of a Bible class and a Sunday-school teacher. After leaving his class at the Tabernacle one evening, he proceeded along Broadway, and stopped to speak to a young woman at the corner of Howard Street. In a few minutes they both proceeded together to a house of ill-fame in Church Street.

Thus matters went on for some three weeks, and finding nothing tangible in the suspicions I might have formed of different individuals, I then made my report to Messrs. Barton, and we had a long discussion over the various comings and goings of the young gentlemen in their employ. I cannot say that my communications were calculated to make those gentlemen more comfortable. It was naturally concluded that a member of a Lyceum might have use for more money than a salary of six hundred dollars a year afforded. A patron of the fine arts could spend his years' income upon a few engravings or a picture; a billiard-player might venture to play for high stakes occasionally; and an admirer of the drama might meet, in his visits to the Temple of Thespis, a goddess before whom he might be tempted to fall down and exclaim, "I am thy slave forever."

Upon each of these travellers on the road of life not a little time had been fruitlessly spent, but nothing was elicited to justify a suspicion that any one among them was false to his employers. There were two or three of the clerks who were allowed to leave half an hour earlier than the others, on the plea of being members of certain religious associations which met at seven o'clock. These were the nice young men of the house, the saints of the community, and I had been forbidden to watch them, as they were beyond suspicion. As soon as I learned these facts, I determined to take them in hand, and a week or two served to put me in possession of some very interesting facts respecting two of them.

One, who wore the most sanctified face you ever saw, and who was constantly lecturing his companions for their want of piety, was found to be addicted to low sensual vice. On the score of economy, I suppose, he kept a toy to play with, and kept her in very elegant style: still I could not venture to say that he robbed his employers, although I was puzzled to find out where the money came from. I have known ambitious young men who, upon coming into a salary of four hundred dollars a year, thinking, probably, that it was not easy to get through so large a sum, have at once taken to smoking and to women, and soon found it necessary to make up the unexpected deficiency by embezzlement.

I must say I began to despair of success, and thought seriously of giving up the matter as a bad job, when one evening I was riding in an omnibus along Broadway. Opposite the end of Pearl Street, the omnibus was hailed, and presently a lady dressed in the most expensive and fashionable style got in. The richness of her toilet, and the abundance of jewelry on her person, would have attracted my attention under any circumstances. I thought them singularly out of place in an omnibus. But I was fascinated by her satin dress. It was the identical pattern of the rare piece Messrs. Barton had lost!

"Now then," I thought to myself, "the time has come at last; I am to be rewarded for all my care and anxiety on behalf of Barton & Co." There were no other passengers in the omnibus beside the lady and myself, consequently I felt quite justified in bestowing all my attention upon her. She seemed grateful, and evidently gratified at my silent admiration of her splendid *tour nure*, as the French would say; "make up" as *we* should say. The lady, I thought, was of a rather nervous

disposition; every five minutes she drew out a splendid gold watch set with brilliants, noted the time, and forgot it as soon as noted.

“Madam,” I said to myself, “we must be better acquainted. I cannot ask you for your card, so I will be your page or footman, and escort you safely home. The night is dark, and wolves are abroad: I’ll be your watch-dog.”

When we came opposite to Abingdon Square the lady begged me to stop the vehicle. I did so, and took the opportunity of getting out first. My lady soon followed, and proceeded to No.—.

Of course I made a memorandum of the number of her house, and waited long enough to satisfy myself that she resided in it; for in a few minutes a light appeared in the second-floor front room, and I fancied I could see my lady arranging her hair at the mirror between the windows.

It was too late that evening to make inquiries, so I hastened up to the neighborhood early next morning, with a dummy parcel made up for Mrs. Vernon, No. —, Abingdon Square, the lady’s number. I rang at the bell; the servant who answered it assured me that no Mrs. Vernon lived there, only a Mrs. Glossop.

That was all I wanted. I made inquiries among the shopkeepers in the neighborhood: all the information they could give me was that she had not lived there long—they believed she was newly married.

Of course a watch was set upon the house that evening. I was quietly ensconced in the parlor of a public-house close by, waiting for any thing suspicious that might turn up. I had not sat there long before one of my boys hurried in, and tipped me the signal. I quickly finished my grog, and proceeded to the square. In about an hour a gentleman came out, whom I at once recognized as one of the staff of Messrs. Barton Brothers.

Next night the watch was set again. At about eight o’clock the clerk made his appearance in the square, knocked at No.—, entered, and remained there all night.

I had now some curiosity to see the inside of the house, but it was necessary to resort to some *rusé* to obtain that privilege. Next morning I presented myself at the door dressed as a mechanic, with flannel jacket, corduroys, and a basket of tools over my back. “I was sent by the landlord to look to the gas-fittings.” Admitted of course, and obtained access to every room in the house, accompanied by a chatty little housemaid, upon whom I was very sweet; praised her little foot, promised her a handsome husband, and she, out of pure gratitude, told me lots of news—told me how extravagant “missus” was, and how master and she were always having words—showed me “missus’s” wardrobe—remarkable truly for its richness and variety. The house was elegantly furnished—every thing of the best description—carpets, curtains, mirrors, paintings, rosewood furniture—bed-curtains satin. The bedroom was like a jeweller’s shop. O my! I was perfectly dazzled. I had in my pocket a dime with a hole in it; this I gave to the little housemaid, as a charm, for luck, and I am sure that night she dreamed of “that nice man, the gas-fitter.”

“Where did the money come from for all this luxury? Who pays?” These were important questions in the business, and must be solved by me before I could satisfy my clients. The house was hired in the name of one of Messrs. Barton Brothers’ clerks. Could he keep such an establishment on his salary, liberal though it was? And the lady—what was she? Well conducted, or only a Delilah, ready to betray her *friend* the moment it became her interest to do so?

Next day a watch was again set up on the house, and toward evening I strolled up to see if any thing had transpired. While standing at a corner, talking to my man, I saw one of Messrs. Barton’s porters pass by with a good-sized bundle. We followed him up. He stopped at the door of No.—, and was about to ring the bell, when we laid hold of him, and told him he was wanted.

He seemed too much alarmed to offer any resistance or to ask for any explanation, so he followed us quietly to the station. The bundle was found to contain a roll of rich satin and other valuable articles; and the man, without any reserve, told us that they were given to him to deliver by Mr.—, clerk of Messrs. Barton Brothers, and that he was constantly in the habit of bringing parcels to No.—, Abingdon Square.

We locked the man up for the night, and next morning took him with the bundle to Broadway, leaving him outside in charge of an officer, while I went in and communicated to the firm what I had seen, and what had taken place.

Messrs. Barton appeared thunderstruck. They could not believe it. Thought there must be some mistake. What! the man of all others in whom they had reposed the greatest confidence—the one of all others the least to be suspected! They were incredulous.

“Better send for Mr. Perkins, gentlemen, and hear what he has to say.”

The confidential clerk was then summoned. When he entered the room, as soon as his eyes fell upon me, I observed a convulsive twitching at the corners of his mouth, and he cast his eyes down upon the floor.

“So we have discovered the thief, Mr. Perkins,” said I quietly.

“Ah!” said he, “discovered—how?” and his voice trembled with emotion; “and who is he?”

Catching his eye for a moment, I looked steadily at him, and slowly repeated his name:—

“Mr. George Perkins!”

“Tis false,” said he. “Who dare accuse me?”

“I’ll find one who will do that very soon,” I replied. And the next moment the porter and his bundle were confronted with him. Finding himself caught, he dropped his bluster, and put on an air of injured innocence. Finally, when he found the damning evidence too strong against him, he made a full confession. He had plundered his employers to the extent of some thousands.

That same day we paid a visit to a certain lady at No.—, Abingdon Square, with a polite request that she would surrender her ill-gotten plunder. How she fretted and fumed! She was just going out for a drive to Bloomingdale. The carriage was waiting at the door.

“But must I give every thing up? Can I not keep any thing? Where is that wretch Perkins? Why is he not here to protect me?”

“Mr. Perkins will not come here again, and has quite enough to do to protect himself. Every thing here seems to be obtained from plundering his employers. If you do not wish to be arrested as a receiver of stolen goods, you will make no more trouble, but surrender the house and its contents quietly. Here is a note from Mr. Perkins, which will show you that we do not act without his knowledge and sanction.”

“My God! What shall I do? Where shall I go?”

“If you will take my advice, ma’am, you will immediately pack up a small trunk of articles necessary for a lady’s wear, and go and take a quiet lodging for a week or two, until you can turn yourself round.”

“Stolen! All these things stolen! Perkins a paltry thief! I am astonished! He told me he was a partner in the house of Strang, Perkins & Co., and I believed him. What a fool I have been!”

“Not the only one, madam; but make the best of it.”

The lady took my advice. She ordered a servant to bring a small trunk into the room. It was brought by the chatty little housemaid, who recognizing me in my new costume, started upon seeing me, and dropped the trunk on to the floor.

“I am going into the country for a few days, Ann. Bring me a change of things, and put them into that trunk. You may send the brougham away and call a cab.”

I had a hard struggle with the lady when we came to the jewelry, which she was extremely unwilling to part with, especially her watch set with brilliants. She seemed to have a perfect passion for these baubles.

“Must I give up my rings?”

“Every thing, madam.”

Then the water-works were set going. She threw herself into an easy chair and sobbed violently. The fingers of each hand were covered with rings. She drew them off one by one, till only a wedding ring and keeper remained. When I saw that I said,—

“There, that will do; you had better keep those.”

There was a pair of diamond earrings that it took a long time to get out of the lady's ears. I fancied they must be riveted in.

“Cab's at the door, ma'am.”

Sobbing more violent than ever.—Ann looked on in blank amazement. I dare say she wondered what all this had to do with gas fitting.

At last my lady summoned resolution enough to bid “a sad farewell to all her greatness,” and she ordered the cab to drive to Grand Street, and drove off.

A few days afterward there was a sale of furniture and other effects at a certain house in Abingdon Square, and the articles fetched very good prices. Little Ann, the housemaid, helped me to make out the inventory.

As for Mr. Perkins, his employers dealt leniently with him, on account of his wife and young family. He was not prosecuted. The proceeds of the sale of the furniture, &c., reduced the losses of the firm to a few hundred dollars; and, on condition that the late confidential clerk would emigrate to California, Messrs. Barton Brothers paid for the passage of himself and family out.

I met one of the firm a few months ago. He told me that Perkins had been very successful as an accountant and shipbroker there, and had just remitted them a draft for two thousand dollars to [indemnify] them for any loss they might have sustained through him.

They made me a present of that gold watch you see hanging over the mantelpiece, as an acknowledgment of my services, besides paying all expenses.

There are a good many such fools as Perkins, who will risk every thing for a Delilah.

Russell, William. *Strange Stories of a Detective; or, Curiosities of Crime*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1863. 141-7.

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