

*Strange Stories of a Detective Officer;
or,
Curiosities of Crime*

by A Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

Introduction

“Ah, sir! Things are not now as they were when I was a young man; very different, I assure you. Thirty-five years have not passed away without some changes; and I have seen a thing or two in that time. Why, sir, if I were to tell you all I have been through, it would fill a volume as big as the family Bible. Many’s the villain I have brought to the gallows. Yes, sir, I took a pride in it; and if there had been no Jack Ketch, why I would have hung them myself, rather than justice should have been balked.”

“No feelings?” You think a policeman has no feelings, do you? Well, perhaps we do get a little hardened with out-and-out rogues; but let me tell you, sir, there are times when a policeman finds out that he has got a heart, like other men, and often in the right place, too. A man can do his duty, and still be a man. Why, there was that case — . But, no, I’ll tell you that some other time. You want to know how I became a policeman. Well, sir, I’ll tell you. ’Twas partly luck, partly choice. I think I was born for the thing; cut out for it; one of Nature’s policemen — it came quite natural. Why, sir, I was a policeman long before the new police was thought of. When a boy, I was mighty ’cute at finding out things. If I saw anything going on wrong, didn’t I follow it up and ferret it out! Many’s the nice little game I have spoiled by poking my nose in where I had no business; but I couldn’t abear to see anything wrong about. Why, there was Barney: didn’t I find out where he stowed away the eggs he took from under the hens early o’ mornings, and sold to the shopkeeper in the village? And didn’t I find out where Bob stole the clover his rabbits got fat upon? And where Sammy hid the pippins he stole out of master’s orchard? And master’s daughter, too, didn’t she agree to run away with that chap from New York, and didn’t I prevent it just in the nick of time, locking up the young lady, and going to the gent who was kicking his heels at the appointed place, and chaffing him till he grew mad with vexation and disappointment, and wanted to thrash me, but I wouldn’t let him? If there is such a thing as a nat’ral policeman, I am sure I’m one; and it takes a good deal of natural talent, as well as experience, to be a real detective.

As I was saying, I was always in the way, turning up where a fellow was least expected. I verily believe everybody stood in dread of me, and that all were hearty glad when I left my native village to come up to town to seek my fortune.

Well, after several attempts to gain a settlement in the great city, I at last found myself, as I told you, in a large printing office. I had been there about a month, when one day I was sent for by the head of the firm to his private room. When I went in he addressed me in a friendly way; asked me how I liked my employment, and so forth; till at last he said, “We are going to discharge our private watchman for drunkenness, and we think the place would suit you. How do you feel inclined about taking it?”

“Sir,” said I, “that depends upon the wages.”

“You will receive as much as you do now for the present, and if we see you get on well we shall give you more.”

So I agreed at once, and entered upon my new office the next day. I was timekeeper as well as watchman, from seven at night until six in the morning; and I kept a sharp look out, I can assure you. I could always tell when a fellow was carrying off anything in his pocket, by the cast of the eye he gave me as he passed by the window of my little crib; and when I hailed the culprit he made no resistance, but always came in quietly, and turned his pockets inside out.

The prentice boys gave me the most trouble: they were almost always beset by junk dealers, who encouraged the lads to plunder. I followed up two or three of these rascals, and succeeded in getting them tried at Quarter Sessions; but the amount of property which it could be proved they had received was so small, they did not get the punishment they deserved.

I was very fond of an active life, and after a year or so I grew tired of being boxed up all night, so I tried for a watchman’s place out of doors, and soon succeeded in getting what I wanted; and for the next seven years, through summer’s heat and winter’s cold, in wet and dry, in frost and snow, I trod my beat, and that was in Broadway, up by the Carleton House.

Most of the watchmen were old men. I was the youngest that had been known among them, and they could not make it out how it was that I had taken to that sort of life. The *fast* gents found out to their cost that they had woke up the wrong passenger when they fell foul of me. They had it all their own way with the poor old men; but when they played their pranks on me they found they had “caught a Tartar.”

I continued in this until the new police was established. Well, I joined the force, and you have no idea what a difference there was between the new system and the old, or rather, between system and no system. There was a good deal of animosity against us for a long while, and all sorts of opprobrious epithets were bestowed upon us. They called us Mayor’s Pups, and dear knows what. I am rather quick-tempered, I must confess, and it required a wonderful deal of resolution to forbear pitching into some of the saucy vagabonds who used to taunt and try to aggravate those very useful public servants, the policemen. People took it into their heads that we were “spies,” and that foreign tyranny was being introduced under our blue uniforms. It took some time for the public to become reconciled to us; but they settled down to right notions at last, and I think the excellent discipline and general good conduct of the men have fairly entitled them to the favor they now enjoy from all good citizens.

Ah! Times *are* altered. Why, sir, I can remember when the first omnibus started in New York. There were no cars in those days — nothing but old, dirty, lumbering hackney coaches — regular caravans — very useful at burglaries to carry off the plunder. As for railroads, why they came in before the new police; and we have been getting on faster and faster ever since, so that now my old legs can’t keep up with the times at all: it is time for me to retire. What I managed to save keeps me very comfortable, so you will be always welcome to come and listen to one of my

yarns; and if you print them, why don't give the names, that's all, for I don't want to hurt anybody's feelings.

Tell everything? Why, of course I can't. Might compromise the innocent. Yes, I know a good many things that people don't suspect. I know, or at least I think I do, who murdered Dr. Burdell, and so do a good many more; but they don't like to tell, nor more do I — it might put some folks to great inconvenience.

Which was the greatest case I ever had? Well, now, that is hard to say, because we think every one the greatest while it is on, and there is no knowing what may turn up before you get to the end of it. If you mean which was the hardest work, why, I reckon running after an absconding debtor — or skating after him, I should say — that was a hard night's work, and no mistake. Collaring those forgers was no easy job either; but, after all, there is not much to choose. When your hand is in, why you go at it tooth and nail, and you pretty soon make a hard job of it.

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