

Caught in His Own Trap

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

SOME years ago, in company with one of my officers, who had been through many a hard chase with me, John Davis, better and more widely known as "Prince John," I had occasion to be on the lookout one evening, down by the river, for a well-known character named Cardoza. He had been engaged for weeks in preparing to flood the island of St. Domingo with counterfeit coin, but, unknown to him, I had been on his track from the very first, and only waited until his arrangements had been perfected to show him that I, too, had not been idle.

A vessel bound to Hayti, lying alongside the wharf, was to sail early on the following morning, and I had ascertained that he had shipped as a sailor in her under an assumed name, so I made my preparations accordingly.

Davis and I had been there concealed by some cargo just discharged from another vessel, and which had been covered with tarpaulins, perhaps half or three-quarters of an hour, watching every avenue to the wharf, when at last we were rewarded by the sight of our gentleman coming leisurely down the street which led to the wharf, and having slung upon his shoulders something which, as he approached close, I discovered to be a bag such as sailors carry their clothes in, but which I well knew contained something much more precious to me than a sailor's kit.

Davis nudged me quietly, and we both kept our eyes fastened on him, awaiting the proper opportunity to make sure of him, our only dread lying in his lews, for at the least alarm he would have started off, and he was as fleet and active as a cat. He came cautiously down to the wharf, casting his black, snaky eyes in every direction, but as there were no indications of danger visible he moved on toward the end where the ship was lying. We waited until he had passed beyond our hiding-place, and stealing quietly out, followed him down to the wharf. Davis stumbled over a piece of coal lying there, and at the noise he made Cardoza turned his head and saw at once that he was caught, for we were between him and the upper end of the wharf, and his only chance of escape was a swim.

Davis sprang forward to seize him, and as he did so Cardoza, with an effort of which his slight frame seemed incapable, threw the bag which he had been carrying far into the river, and in a few moments, but not without a desperate struggle, he was clasped in the strong, sinewy arms of the Prince. Another moment sufficed for his ornamentation with the ruffles, and though we regretted the temporary loss of his coin, for we well knew what he had thrown overboard, we were pleased to think how nicely he had been outwitted.

I may have more to say of Cardoza hereafter, and will therefore only say now that he was cleared of this charge, because the coin which he had counterfeited, and which I had caused to be fished up the next day, was not current in this country, and therefore no indictment could lie.

As we were passing up towards Thames Street on our route to the station, I noticed on the opposite side of the street a woman walking slowly down toward the river. In that neighborhood this was not unusual, but from the rustling of silk and glitter of jewelry which shone in the gas light, I judged that she was not of the order commonly seen in that vicinity. Accordingly, I

desired Davis to convey Cardoza to the station, while, crossing over, I started to follow the female who had attracted my attention.

To my great surprise, she continued her steady course toward the wharf which we had just left, and walked on towards the river side, while I followed as stealthily and cautiously as a cat.

My eyes had been so accustomed to the gloom, I could distinguish enough of her appearance to satisfy me that she was young (I judged that from her walk); and from the rustling of her silk dress, which was plainly heard in the stillness of the night, I judged that she was well dressed. Of course I had not been able to distinguish her features, but surmised from her movements that there was some wrong intended.

When she reached the wharf side, she untied her bonnet, and unpinned her shawl; then standing for a moment with her clasped hands upraised as if in prayer, she made a movement to plunge into the river. Having always admitted the truth of the adage that "prevention is better than cure," I darted forward, and just as she was in the act of springing, caught her by the arms and drew her back.

"Well, young woman," I said, as she turned upon me with a singular expression of wonderment, "this is a very foolish piece of business. What does it mean?"

My companion made no reply, but continued to gaze upon me with the same singular expression of countenance, and, being so close to her, I could now discover by the gas light that she was young, and to my thinking very beautiful.

"Come," I said, drawing her gently away, "this is no place for you," and to my great surprise she followed me unresistingly, but still maintained the silence which I had often tried to break.

"You had better go home, young woman, and thank God that he has enabled me to prevent you from the commission of such a crime."

Still no reply; but as my words reached her ears a deep sigh broke from her bosom, and I could feel that her whole frame was quivering with excitement.

"Have you no home nor friends? and what on earth could induce you even to think of such a deed?"

My mute companion made no reply, but shook her head sadly, and as by this time we had reached the street, I paused a moment there, and as she stood facing a tavern, I had a good look at her face and figure.

I have said she was beautiful and very elegantly dressed, and wore some beautiful jewelry. She was above the middle height, and from her complexion and hair I judged her to be French. But I did not choose to take much time in examination; for, feeling assured that there was some extraordinary mystery in the fact of a young, handsome, and elegantly-dressed woman attempting suicide under such circumstances, I determined to convey her to the station, where I

delivered her in private charge of the Captain, Mr. Browning, requesting him not to place her in a cell, but to put her in one of his own apartments for the night, which he promised to do; and having seen her well cared for, I started for my home, well satisfied with the result of my night's work, so far as the arrest of Cardoza was concerned.

In the morning my first care was to go to the station and see the young woman whom I had so providentially rescued. I found her in one of the private apartments occupied by the Captain's family, and was informed that soon after I had left she broke into a violent passion of tears, which seemed to relieve her, but no word could be extracted from her, her only replies being a nod or shake of the head. After that she had thrown herself upon the bed, and was soon buried in a profound slumber, interrupted only by half-broken sobs.

On entering the apartment allotted to her, I found her standing by the mantelpiece, evidently buried in deep thought. As she turned and caught sight of me, her face, which, on my entrance, was of an ashy pallor, crimsoned to the very roots of her hair, and advancing hurriedly toward me, she stretched out both hands, and, as I grasped them, she burst into tears.

"There, there," I said, "don't cry any more; it won't do any good now; only be thankful that Providence led me into the place where I could rescue you from such a death and such a crime. Now tell me," and I requested her to be seated, "what on earth could have induced a young, handsome, well-dressed woman like you to think of suicide?"

She made no immediate reply, but as tears coursed down her cheeks, shook her head slowly and sorrowfully.

"Come, do not be afraid to tell me; perhaps I can help you."

"Oh, I cannot," she said, "I cannot;" and rising, she commenced pacing the floor with quick, nervous steps, and with clasped hands.

As she arose I perceived she had dropped a letter which she had evidently been perusing on my entrance. Of course I looked at the direction, and my astonishment may be imagined when I read on the envelope, "Mrs. Lisette Hawser." For an instant I was taken aback, to use a sea phrase, for this was the very lady to whom Captain Jack, as he was familiarly termed, desired to have the money delivered, and I really wondered that I had not detected her at first, so accurately did she answer the description given of her by the captain.

I made up my mind on the instant, and advancing toward her with the letter in my hand, I said, "Mrs. Hawser," and at the sound of that name she paused suddenly in her walk, and in an instant her tears ceased to flow. I held out the letter which she had dropped, and merely pointed to it.

"You must be mistaken sir," she said; "that letter probably belonged to some other person."

"I am not mistaken," I said, confidently. "This is your property, that is your name, and I have been looking for you for a long time."

“Searching for me!” she exclaimed, opening her eyes to their utmost extent.

“Yes, madam, for you, and from the description Captain Hawser gave me of you, I can only wonder how I failed to recognize you at first. I have a message for you,” and I pulled out my pocketbook.

“A message for me,” she said, with an air of consternation, “and from Captain Hawser! I wonder how he dared—”

“Then I presume I am not mistaken, so this is your property;” and I handed the banknotes which Captain Hawser had given me for her when I should have found her.

But leaving her there, I must go back a few weeks in order to tell you how I came to be searching for her, and how I chanced to be possessed of money belonging to her.

I was walking in the hall of the Custom House, about four weeks previous to this meeting with Lisette, waiting for a gentleman who had been robbed of a very large sum, when I was accosted by Captain Hawser, whom I well knew as an old and favorite sea captain, who, approaching me with an air of mystery, said, “John, come into the sitting room for a few moments. I want to see you on particular business, and was just going to the station for you.”

At his request I followed him into an adjoining room, and seating ourselves, he pulled out of his pocket a roll of banknotes, and tendering them to me, said:

“Now, John, I want you to do a very great favor for me. Of course I don’t expect you to do it yourself; but some of your shadows can do it for me, and when I come back I will pay them handsomely if they succeed. What I want is”—and he held the money in his hand still, for I had declined to take it from him—“that this money—there are five hundred dollars there—should reach the right person.”

“Yes; but, captain,” I said, putting aside his extended hand, “I must know something more about this before I undertake it. I am very willing to oblige you personally; but you will please remember my position.”

“It is because I appreciate it I come to you; for you can do more than any other person. I should not think of troubling you at all, nor even speaking of this matter, only I am off tomorrow, and am very anxious to have this money reach right hands as soon as possible.

“It’s a woman, of course,” continued the captain, with a smile, “and the case is just this:—Some voyages ago, coming across the Atlantic, I had only one female cabin passenger—a tall, elegant, well-informed French girl; just such a woman as any man might fall in love with.

“I did become very much attached to her, and in the end she began to like me as well as I did her. She was coming to this country on an invitation from a childless aunt, who resided in Baltimore,

and who, being possessed of ample means, had promised to make Lisette her heiress, if she would come over and live with her; and it was in pursuance of this invitation she came over with me.

“Well, as I said, we became very much attached to each other, and I promised to marry her as soon as we got ashore; but that did not go down with her—she knew too much for me,” and the captain winked meaningly.

“Well, and what then?” I asked, a little nervously; for the captain’s cool recital of his wickedness had made me a little angry.

“Not much. After we got in port I managed matters so that we lived together as man and wife. The fact is, I couldn’t get over it any other way, so I made believe to marry her, and instead of going to Baltimore, she only went as far as Philadelphia, and has lived with me ever since.”

“And passed as your wife?”

“Certainly; why not? She thought she was married, and that was enough.”

“It was an unmanly villainous thing, Hawser, and if it wasn’t for the poor girl’s sake, I wouldn’t meddle with the matter at all.”

The captain coolly shrugged his shoulders, and said—

“That is as people think. It was not any thing very uncommon among sailor men, anyhow.”

“I don’t believe many sailor men are such rascals as that,” I replied.

“Well, have that as you choose. Such things wear out, you know, and just after I came in on my last voyage, I made up my mind that we had lived together as man and wife long enough; so one day, thinking I would cut the matter short, I sat down and wrote her a very pretty and affectionate letter. I told her that circumstances compelled me to part from her, much as I regretted it, and that she must make the best of it. I wrote, also, that our marriage, as she believed it, was no marriage at all, by reason of the absence of any proper authority to perform that ceremony, and that, so far as I was concerned, she was at liberty to marry, in *reality*, any one she chose. I offered to pay her passage back to France, if she chose to return, or to see her safely conveyed to her aunt at Baltimore; and I added that nothing should be known of the past, unless she chose to make it public.

“I sent this letter in the morning, and stayed away all day, so as to give her a chance to think the matter over and make up her mind. When I went back at night she wasn’t there; nor the next day, nor the next—and I’m blessed if I’ve been able to lay eyes on her since. Now I suppose you understand what I am up to, don’t you, John?”

“I think I do,” I replied, half musingly.

“I don’t want to leave the poor girl unprovided. She had an elegant wardrobe and some money, but not much. I want you to put some one on her track, and see that she gets that money. There’s five hundred dollars in that envelope; that will keep her from want.”

“Well,” said I, when the captain had finished his recital, “that is a case appealing to my sympathy, and, for the poor girl’s sake, I will have every effort made to discover her whereabouts; but I tell you frankly, I’m thinking it will be the worse for you if I do. Now, then, hand me the money,” and I took it from him and placed it in my pocketbook. “I will put one of my best boys on the scent tomorrow; I promise faithfully to make every effort, captain, and I will do it with the more pleasure, because I hope she will yet bring you up with a round turn.”

“Well, I’m agreed,” he replied, laughingly, and he then proceeded to give me a full description of her personal appearance, her jewelry, and some particular articles of her wardrobe. Armed with this information, I repeated my promise to do my best, and parted from the captain firmly resolved that if I ever discovered the young girl, and there was the slightest possible opening, I would bring the coldblooded villain to book.

You may, however, now perceive why I was in search of Lisette, and will wonder with me that I had not recognized her at first sight.

To resume my narrative, then, where I left off:

Lisette gradually grew more composed, and I drew from her the history of her early life, her meeting with the captain, and her subsequent supposed marriage to him.

“Now about this marriage,” I asked.

“When he overtook me in Philadelphia, the captain told me that in Pennsylvania it was only necessary in law for the parties to say, in the presence of witnesses, that they intended to live thereafter as man and wife, and of course I believed him, for I really loved him.”

“I am very glad you did believe him, for your own sake.”

“Glad that I did believe him?” echoed Lisette, with an amazed look.

“To be sure I am, because he told you the truth. Never mind now,” I interrupted, seeing her start of amazement; “answer me two or three questions. Where was the ceremony performed?”

“At a hotel in Philadelphia, the day after our arrival.”

“And who was present on the occasion?”

“No one that I know. Three of the waiters in the house were called in, and in their presence we promised to become man and wife.”

“I congratulate you, Mrs. Hawser, with all my heart,” I said, rising and bowing. “Yes,” I continued, as the blood rushed to her face, “I congratulate you very sincerely, for you are as lawfully his wife as though every priest in Christendom had used bell, book and candle over your nuptials.”

“Is this really so?” she asked in a low, nervous tone, whilst I could see the tears starting to her eyes.

“As truly as that you are seated there, madam. Now, will you confide your matters to me?”

“I have no friend on earth, sir,” she said sadly, “and I shall be but too happy to prove my entire confidence in and gratitude to you. Do with me as you choose.”

“And you won’t make another such a silly attempt?”

“On my word of honor, no, even though you fail to render me the justice which is my due, and save me from the odium and disgrace he would have cast upon me.”

“How cunning the rascal was; but he has committed himself this time. I can see through his plan at once. He procured the waiters as witnesses, because he knew that in a few weeks or months at farthest they might be scattered all over the country, and it would be impossible to get hold of them and prove the marriage. I am going to take hold of this matter myself, and if those waiters are alive, I’ll have them before Captain Jack comes back.”

Providence aided me, for in less than three weeks I had two of them. One I found at a New York hotel, one at a noted restaurant not far from it, and the other had gone to Chicago. However, two were enough for my purpose, and having received their assurances that they remembered the circumstance perfectly, and could identify both parties without doubt, I promised them twenty-five dollars each if they would be at hand when I required their services.

Thus armed, I paid a visit to Lisette, and made her heart leap with joy at the intelligence I had to communicate, and she could scarcely find words to express the gratitude she felt for the warm interest I had taken in her behalf. She was resolved, she said, never to live with him again, but as soon as she was recognized as his wife she would either go to Baltimore or return to her home in France, as circumstances might dictate. I made no effort to change her resolution, but preferred to leave that matter to her woman’s heart. I would do my part, and she might then act as she chose.

I watched daily for the ship’s arrival, and by the time my patience was nearly exhausted she was announced. I sent at once for my witnesses, whom I had kept all the time under the surveillance of my shadows, so that they should be forthcoming, and stationed them in the magistrate’s private room, to be ready when wanted.

Of course I had communicated to the magistrate every thing that had occurred, and he was almost as much rejoiced as myself at the success which had attended my operations.

About one o'clock Captain Hawser came up with his report, accompanied by the clerk of the consignees, and, seeing me in conversation with the magistrate, came up, and after the usual greetings and inquiries said, in a mysterious manner, "I want to see you after I get these things through."

Of course I was ready to see him, for in addition to my witnesses, Lisette was also in the private office, awaiting in painful, anxious suspense, the important interview which was so soon to take place.

Captain Hawser's papers were soon dispatched, and as he rose to depart from the office, expecting me to follow him, I met him halfway, and invited him into the private office, and as we moved along he found time to whisper, "Have you seen Lisette yet?"

I made no reply, but ushered him into the little private room, where he was confronted with the object of our search, he turned to me for an explanation, and as he turned his eye caught sight of the two waiters seated there, whom he recognized on the instant.

"Caught, by jingo!" he exclaimed, as I answered his look of amazement by a meaning smile, as much as to say that "I had kept my promise by bringing him up with a round turn."

"Leave us alone," he said, biting his lips, and addressing me.

I beckoned the waiters to follow me, and, stationing an officer at the private door which led into the passage, so that the captain could not get away through that door, I waited with something of impatience the result of the interview. When it terminated, Captain Hawser, opening the door on a jar, beckoned me in.

I was met by Lisette, who, with a face beaming with smiles and tears, held out her hands to me, which I warmly grasped. She could not speak her thanks, and I did not need them, for I saw that she was happy.

It seems she must have forgotten or changed her resolution never to live again with Captain Hawser, for they went out of the office arm in arm, much to the gratification of the magistrate and myself.

Captain Hawser was grateful to me for having kept his secret, except so far as it was necessary for me to communicate it to the magistrate; and in testimony of his appreciation of the service I had rendered to both, had his first child christened after me, which, however, by the way, cost me a silver cup.

Hawser and his wife lived some years in apparent happiness in a beautiful cottage on Staten Island, and I was often the recipient of some pleasant token of remembrance from Lisette.

The captain and I met occasionally, and he never failed to admit that he had been very nicely, through my instrumentality,

CAUGHT IN HIS OWN TRAP.

Russell, William. *Strange Stories of a Detective; or, Curiosities of Crime*. New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1863. 111-6.

This story was previously published in England in *The Detective's Note-book* by Charles Martel, 1860.