

Hunting Rogues
by William Russell

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I am not about to reveal the “secrets of the poor house” or the private arrangements of Scotland Yard. The higher positions held by detectives have always been beyond my reach, and I have not therefore been in communication with the legal advisers of the treasury, my occupation being only subordinate to a private detective. In the few years, however, that I was thus employed I was engaged in matters which it may be interesting to record, while the publicity cannot be injurious either to individuals or public security.

I will now proceed to give one or two examples of the kind of business we detectives have to negotiate in the hope that my narrative may prove interesting at least to those whom it may specially concern.

It matters not what my former occupation was; like many others, after dissipating fortune, I found myself alone in the world and without money. For the small amount of twenty-eight shillings a week I became a subordinate to a private detective. My primary value consisted in a perfect knowledge of some of the “gambling hells” in the west of London. For days I was closeted with my superior, giving him information concerning the frequenters of these places, the amounts won and lost in an evening, the hours of attendance, and the doings of the “bankers.”

After describing this gentleman or the other, my superior would say:

“Ah, we know him! Cautious card.”

“He’s a right to gamble; got plenty of money.”

“That fellow wins his money on the race course, and always loses it on the green cloth.”

“It’s the young swells I want to know about; those that the spiders are getting into their nets; there’s something to be made out of them.”

At last I described a young gentleman who was evidently new to the game of hazard. He came night after night, I said, and generally left minus a hundred or two, ready cash, but never gave checks or IOUs, so that his name was unknown to the majority, though he went by the cognomen of “The Duke.”

“That’ll do,” said my superior; “we must look after that gent.”

“Then,” said I, “there is another young gentleman who comes only once a month; he’s always supplied at that time with clean bank of England notes, from one hundred to ten, and generally loses something like a thousand in one night. But once I saw him positively break the bank and carry off nearly seven thousand pounds. He came next day, contrary to his usual custom, and he played on that and the two succeeding days, and before he left on the last night had to borrow a

sovereign to take him home. After that, however, he paid his periodical visits, and does so up to the present time.”

“Well,” said my superior, “he must be looked after. But first you must plant yourself opposite this place where they meet, and follow the young gentleman No. 1, find out where he lives, his occupation, etc. There now; that’s employment for you the next two days; report to me the third morning. I leave the matter entirely in your own hands, and this will be a test of your usefulness to me.”

“You are not going to make a raid on the place?” said I.

“Oh no,” he returned; “that don’t suit my purpose. I don’t want to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs; let me have my bit out of it, and then perhaps the Scotland Yard folks will spot the den.”

That same night I paced during the weary hours of night up and down the street where the gamblers’ house was situated. Between three and four o’clock in the morning one after another the habitués of the place turned out, and at last the young gentleman I wanted. There was little difficulty in finding out where he lived, for he gave directions to the cabman in very audible tones. But my next great object was to find out if he had any place of business, and after taking a few hours’ rest, I was in sight of his residence by nine o’clock, in the morning. A little before ten, the gentleman made his appearance, and, walking some distance, took a seat inside an omnibus. I got outside, and discovered, after a few inquiries judiciously made, that he was cashier in the establishment where I had traced him, and the nephew of the principal of the firm. My work being completed, I went home and reported to my superior next morning, who was quite satisfied with my first commission.

The following day a “gentleman” (for private detectives can dress like noblemen when it suits them) called at Messrs. ——’s, Leadenhall Street. They were foreign merchants. He wished to see the head of the firm.

“Your business, sir?” was the question.

The answer was, “Tell him I must see him; I come on important business.”

And he did see him, and communicated to him his belief that something must be wrong, as his nephew, the cashier, was spending lots of money in gambling.

Accounts were examined, and the cashier was seen no more in Leadenhall Street or at the hell. The private detective was satisfied, and so the matter ended.

Now we had to look to gentleman No. 2, and having watched for two days without finding his whereabouts, my superior went with me, and at a comparatively early hour on the night of his usual periodical visit he appeared in the street, and I pointed him out to my superior, who, as the public houses were not closed, dodged him about until he entered a tavern, where we followed. Then there was a quiet and confidential conversation between my employer and the gentleman.

The latter at first indignantly denounced the assumption of anyone daring to catechise him, but upon being told that he was addressing a detective, he quietly pulled out a card stating:

“That’s my address; If you have any charge against me, you can make it.”

My employer dexterously turned the matter to his own account by asserting that his only wish was to put the gentleman on his guard, as the gambling establishment was being watched, and there would be a raid upon it in a day or two. Upon this, the gentleman was profuse in thanks, and passed over something to my employer, which so satisfied him that he voluntarily offered me a sovereign, which I was nothing loath to accept for the part I had taken in the matter.

My conduct is approved, and I am sworn in a special constable. I have little matters to do which it is not interesting to relate, because they apply to ‘poor people’ who are never worth consideration, and convictions are easily gained against them. But one evening I am walking with my employer down Oxford Street; it is late at night, and when near the Oxford music hall, we notice a young gentleman pulling out his gold at the bar of a tavern and treating liberally those around him. The youth has evidently not been used to the company with whom he is now associated. He blushes at remarks, is dull at comprehending low jokes, yet tries to appear at ease, is profusely liberal, and dashes down his money as if he were a millionaire.

“Hulloa!” whispered my employer, whose experienced eye marks a victim; “there’s something wrong here.”

And he tries to engage in conversation with the young man, who only responds with:

“What will you have, sir?”

You’d think a detective would refuse to take anything at a suspected person’s expense. Not he; that’s his opportunity.

“Well, thank you,” my employer replied. “There’s me and my friend here; suppose we have two drops of brandy, eh? Three penny’orths.”

“Better say sixpenny-worth,” answered the youth. “Here, Miss; sixpenn’orths of brandy.”

It is drawn. We drink and talk. Drawing information out of the silly youth as easily as one draws beer from a tap, my employer presently says:

“Let’s see, what time was it when you left the office this afternoon?”

“I haven’t been there since eleven o’clock in the morning; not at Bishopsgate Street at least.”

Here was something important got out of the youth; and the detective, following up the idea and taking a bold shot, says:

“But you were expected at the other place?”

“Well, yes.”

“Let’s see, where is your other place?”

“Oh! in Wallbrook.”

“You ought to have been there, you know.”

Upon this the youth turned pale, but did not answer.

“What’s the number of your place in Bishopsgate?”

The youth gave it.

Then came the more pertinent questions:

“How much money have you got about you? Where did you get it from?” etc.

The boy gave such fencing answers, that at length my employer took him quietly outside, saying:

“You must know that I am a detective officer, and I am not going to part with you till I have communicated with your employer and your friends.”

Then came the last stroke of conviction:

“Oh, it will all be put right, my father will satisfy Mr. ——”

We took that poor young man under our charge (he was only seventeen;) he was placed in a room in my employer’s house under my care; and having found who were his parents as well as his employers, the detective officer first went to his parents. Never shall I forget the deep affliction of the mother, who, in the absence of his father abroad, came down immediately on receipt of the news.

“O, my boy,” she cried, “what have you done? Tell me all. O, dear! O, dear! And your father away, and your sister ill! What is it? What is it?”

“O, mother, mother!” replied the youth, weeping, “I never did such a thing before. But the governor sent me to pay nine pounds all in sovereigns, and I lost one, and then I was afraid to go back.”

“And so you got into bad company, and spent the rest. O, you naughty, wicked boy!”

“I don’t know what to do. By good rights,” said the detective, “I should take him off to the police station, instead of keeping him here; but I must see what Mr. —— says.”

“Yes. Oh, let me go with you to Bishopsgate Street, sir; and I am sure Mr. —— will not be hard upon the boy,” replied the mother.

To this my employer assented; and in the end the youth was allowed to return home: and the detective was rewarded for saving the youth.

One morning we received a telegram to watch a certain train arriving at Euston Square from Birmingham. A lady described, had left that town by train for the purpose, it was said, of eloping with a man who was to meet her at the London terminus; and the disconsolate husband, too late to stop her, wanted her actions watched by the detectives. I was sent. I saw the lady and gentleman meet; she threw herself into his arms and sobbed. I heard him say: “It will be all right, Millie.” A cab was called. I heard the address they were to be driven to, and followed the vehicle, to assure myself this was their destination. I watched until midnight, and they never left the house; and then I called up my employer and told him the address.

“Leave the rest to me,” he said. And the next morning he discovered the lady and gentleman were there under different names, and had separate rooms. “This won’t do,” he said. “We must wait for further evidence before we can make a case.” But he telegraphed to the husband that the address was known. My duty was to watch the fugitives; and I found they went to a lawyer’s in Lincoln’s Inn Fields, and remained there two hours, and then returned, and so passed the first day; but I had to watch all night. The second day the irate husband came to town and went to the house where his truant wife was domiciled, in company with the detective, thinking he could find out more than had been recorded to him. They were met by an indignant gentleman, who, in reply to the question, “Where is my wife?” said:

“She is with me, under my protection, until she gets rid of a horrible and brutal husband.”

“And what right have you sir, to give protection to another man’s wife?”

“The right of a brother and guardian! She had written to me previously of your brutal conduct, and then telegraphed that she could bear it no longer. The telegram is here, sir. ‘Oh, Sam! What am I to do? My life is in jeopardy. I dare not wait my husband’s return.’ I had only returned from India a few days, and on receipt of that I telegraphed: ‘Come by ten o’clock train: I will meet you at Euston Square. Sam.’ This telegram I presume you saw, for it was left behind, I am informed; and you thought there was an elopement.”

I never knew all the ins and outs of this affair, which I verily believe was a sell; at least it never came before the court, to my knowledge. My employer I presume got well paid for it, for he never grumbled about its being time lost. I got a paltry five shillings for night watching, over and above my wages.

As to watching houses and persons, I have had to take a house and record faithfully every person who went in and out of it during the day for three weeks and a month at a stretch, not knowing why or wherefore. Very monotonous work this has been; nothing to come of it but poor-wages, an uncomfortable, unprofitable sort of existence. I have had to follow a person from one end of

London to the other, and make a record of every call that he made, and have never been used as a witness to prove anything. I began to think that my superiors had all the loaves and fishes, and I only got the crumbs that fell from their table. If there was anything to be done which would bring in something handsome, why, my chief did it himself.

A banker's son, making too free with his father's name, is to be taken into custody by the detective, to be well frightened, and relieved of his ill-gotten spoils and; then returned to his parents without the world knowing of his crime. Yes, sometimes the family plate has been carried off by some hopeless son, and the detective's aid is called in to recover it but to hide the crime. And, indeed, if truth were told, nearly one half the cases of robbery of late years have been more or less under the cognizance at least of those closely associated with the family circle.

I once thought that I might make a name for myself as an honest detective. I began to see that there was scarcely a tradesman in London, scarcely a merchant that was not robbed by his underlings, if not by those of a higher grade. I watched carefully and confided my secret information to employers. In some instances the persons were dismissed; that was all.

"We don't care to prosecute," the principal would say, "for trivial matters; it is too much trouble and expense. We would rather submit to small losses than be forced to attend the criminal courts."

I happened to mention to the manager of a large publishing firm not a hundred miles from Paternoster Row, that I knew his employers were robbed and systematically robbed every week. He did not believe me. I then challenged him to give me the name of any book he had in the establishment, and I would get it in three days without its passing through the countinghouse in the ordinary way. He gave me the name of a work of which there were only three in stock, and the selling price was two guineas. I had only to go to a certain rendezvous, talk slang, and say what I required and the price I was prepared to give, and I knew I should get the book. And to the astonishment of the manager I presented it to him on the third day with his trademark still upon it.

"Well," he said, "this must be put a stop to. I must see the principals; and you must call tomorrow and give us full information."

I called as requested, and gave the principals the name of the three who shared in the plunder.

"Ay," they said, "as to the first, that's the porter; we'll prosecute him. The second is the son of a person who has considerable interest in the business; they are a most respectable family; we cannot prosecute him. The third is a confidential messenger; and he is so exceedingly useful to us, that we don't well see how we could do without him. No; we must not prosecute him. But the porter, we will give him into custody if you like."

I replied that I could not take one without the others; that it was a great pity, after all my time and trouble expended in sifting the matter, they would not make an example of the lot. No; they would not do it; but gave me a five-pound note, and asked me to say no more about it!

I suppose I expressed annoyance at this although I received a larger gratuity than I had hitherto done; and I am afraid that I made no secret of my annoyance, for I wanted this to be my stepping-stone to advancement; but it was not to be. Neither was my conduct admired by my superiors, who told me that I should keep a still tongue, and further, that I had no right to take action in any matter on my own responsibility. And as there was no hope of advancement, I retired from the service to enter upon more profitable employment.

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