

The Stolen Potatoes
A Detective Sketch
by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

It was at the time when that queen of the potato family—the Early Rose—first made its appearance; and the scene of the story was in Lycoming Co., Pa., within the limits of Hughesville. Adam Waldron was a well-to-do farmer, stock-breeder, and general trader in country produce, who not only kept a sharp eye upon the best breeds of horses and cattle, but who was also sure to secure seed necessary to the raising of the most approved crops upon his farm. Following his custom, he learned of the excellent qualities of the Early Rose potato before one of them had been seen in his neighborhood, and such confidence had he in the variety that he ordered, from the nearest available dépôt, twenty bushels to be sent to his address by rail. This was early in the spring, several weeks before planting time.

The potatoes arrived on time, and were on exhibition at the railroad station one whole day before Mr. Waldron took them home; and as they were in bags, and as the owner was very accommodating, as well as proud of his acquisition, everybody who so desired had the privilege of examining them. And they were, certainly, beautiful potatoes—the handsomest, many declared, ever seen in that section. And another thing than the intrinsic merits of the tubers caused them to look particularly beautiful. The crop of potatoes in Lycoming County had been very poor during the year last passed, and at that time a potato fit to eat was hard to find.

Mr. Waldron carried his potatoes home, and stored them in an old building—a sort of half-underground barn—at a considerable distance from his dwelling. It was so early in the season that frost might yet be troublesome, and the owner put the potatoes in this out-of-the-way place because so much of it was built into the hill-side that frost, even in winter, could not make its way into the protected part of it. The tubers were safely deposited in the basement of the hill-side barn; the only door secured by a massive padlock; and thus matters were left to rest until the planting time should come.

A few days after storing his new potatoes Mr. Waldron, taking advantage of a few weeks between the March thaws and the season for plowing, when there was nothing of work to be done on the farm, hitched up a span of roadsters and took his wife and little ones off to visit a near relative who lived twenty miles distant, intending to be gone two weeks; and he so arranged matters with the boys of a neighbor that his two hired men—a farm-hand and a groom—might be absent a week at the same time.

Adam Waldron made his visit, and enjoyed it, and at the end of two weeks he returned to his home refreshed and invigorated. On the day following his return the idea occurred to him that he would like to see how his Early Rose potatoes stood it; so he took the key from a private drawer of his writing-desk, where he had put it for safe-keeping, and went forth, happily, as it proved, alone.

He reached the old hill-side barn, and applied the key to the lock. For a little time there was trouble. The key did not move freely in the lock. At length, however, by an extra pressure, he

threw the bolt and removed the lock, and was soon in the apartment wherein he had deposited the potatoes. But—what did he behold? He rubbed his eyes, and took a second look.

“Mercy! Can it be possible?”

He looked in every direction, and even went so far as to ascend to the loft above, to see if, by any possible hocus-pocus, a portion of the tubers could have been spirited up there.

Where he had left ten full bags of choice potatoes—with two bushels to the bag—he now found two poor bags, and even they had been ripped open and overhauled. Yes!—sixteen bushels of the beautiful—the really priceless—potatoes had been stolen during his absence.

He stood for a moment like one dazed—utterly bewildered, —but when the first shock had passed, he went and locked and secured the door, so that no one might enter, and then sat down and reflected. Of course the potatoes had been stolen. And, —they must have been taken by some one who knew of their existence and whereabouts. Also, —the thief must have been acquainted with the premises. As for the mode of entrance, it might have been by a false key, or it might have been done by picking the lock. It was a spring lock, so that when once unlocked the relocking was easy.

Who could have done it? It must have been somebody who knew that the men folks of the establishment were away, and not liable to return in a hurry. That would point to an acquaintance; but he did not like to suspect any of them. Still, he must find out, if possible, who was the thief. How should he do it?

Ah! He had it. He arose and went out, carefully locking the door behind him, and putting the key in his pocket: and he knew that he alone, of all his household, possessed the secret of the theft; and he meant to keep it so. He did not mean that a soul on earth should learn from him that anything had happened out of the way; and with this determination, and with the key of the hill-side barn-door in his pocket, he went about his business as usual. He was very soon satisfied that the two women, who had been left alone in charge of the house during his absence, had no idea of the disappearance of the potatoes; and he also readily assure himself that the neighbor’s boys—two of them—who had looked to the cattle while he and his hired men had been away, had not the slightest suspicion of any wrong at the old out-of-the-way barn.

A week passed away, during which Mr. Waldron went about his business as usual. Once during that time a neighbor had asked him if he would be willing to sell a bushel, or a half a bushel, of his new seed potatoes; and another neighbor had questioned him about the peculiar properties, or qualities, of the Early Rose potato, regarding rot, and also in regard to the time required for them to reach maturity—ripeness. But the men had both been honest and sincere, and he had answered them properly.

At length, on Saturday afternoon, Mr. Waldron was at the post-office, where a goodly number of citizens were assembled, awaiting the arrival of the last mail of the week. By and by his attention was arrested by the peculiar movements of a man who had twice approached as though for the purpose of speaking, and who had twice turned away. Waldron recognized him as Luke

Sudleigh, a man who lived ten miles or more away, and kept a boarding-house—it might be called a small tavern—for the accommodation of the workmen in an extensive machine-shop; and he was himself a machinist by trade.

What more natural than that Mr. Waldron should think of the missing potatoes in connection with this man? His feeding so many hungry mouths would account for the desire for the esculent tubers, while his knowledge of the use of fine tools for working in metals would solve the lock-picking part of the mystery.

The thought went through Waldron's mind like a flash, and it left a considerable light behind. He moved so as to give the man an opportunity to speak to him, —and to do it privately. The bait took. As Sudleigh saw the farmer by himself in a quiet corner he advanced once more, with a forced smile upon his face, and offered his hand.

“How'd you do, Mr. Waldron? Hope you're well.”

“Quite well, thank you. How is it with yourself?”

“Fair to middlin'; but I'm pokin' along. It's hard times, though, —rough on a man at has to cut his cloth close.”

Waldron assented with a nod.

“By the way, Mr. Waldron,” with an effort so palpable that it was easily detected, “d'you ever find out anything about them pertaters o' yourn—them 'at you lost?”

“Yes,” answered Waldron, with a bounding emotion,—“that mystery is solved to my entire satisfaction.”

“Wal, —I declare! That's good. How was it?”

“I'll tell you,” said Waldron. And looking squarely into the man's eye, and lowering his voice to a lower key, but increasing its power, he added—“Luke Sudleigh, there are but two parties living who know of the disappearance from my barn of those potatoes. I am one of those parties; *the other—IS—THE—THIEF!*”

The man heard the words, so significantly pronounced, and met the keen, penetrating gaze of the speaker's eyes. A moment of dazed, bewildered silence, and then his knees shook beneath him, and the blood forsook his face. He tried to speak, but the words stuck in his throat.

“It is of no use, Mr. Sudleigh. You fancied I had advertised my loss; but I have not. I have at home a wife and two children, besides the help upon my place, and not one of them has the least suspicion that I have lost a potato! As I told you before—the fact is known only to myself and to the thief. I have waited very patiently, believing that, if I held my peace, I should know in the end.”

After a time Luke Sudleigh gained strength enough to take the farmer's hand, and beg of him, in a gasping manner, that he would come away, where they could speak in private.

And out of doors, in a far corner of a horseshed, the culprit begged for mercy. He had the sense to see that he was detected beyond the possibility of escape. Denial would only result in a search-warrant; and a search-warrant, served on his premises, would make his crime public. He had never yet appeared before his fellows as a felon, and if he could escape that dreadful fate, he would do anything. He would pay to the last penny of his possessions.

Never mind his further pleading; and never mind the admonitions of the really tender-hearted farmer. Suffice it to say, that but few of the potatoes had been used, so that most of them were returned; and as Mr. Waldron would thus have full as many as he could require for seed, he did not feel the loss. But he would accept nothing in the way of remuneration, save the man's humble acknowledgement and repentance. He felt himself more than repaid for the few tubers missing by the grand success of his detective scheme.

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