

A Detective Story

OPERATIONS OF "SNEAK THIEVES"

HOW MERCHANTS ARE ROBBED

Not very long ago a lady in widow's weeds, accompanied by a gentleman, said to be her brother, came to New York and engaged a home on Fourth street. Her rich dress and refinement of manner, combined with great personal attractions, rendered her neighbors most desirous of obtaining an introduction to her, and curiosity was rife as to where she came from and who she was. Her brother, for he really stood in that relationship to her, was a young man enjoying the command of ready money to a considerable amount, who easily made acquaintances among others of his own age. His manners were very pleasing, and his demeanor was polished, while his attire, though extremely quiet and unpretending, was always in the best possible taste. So favorable was the impression created in the minds of his new friends, that several of them invited him to their own homes, and in a short time his circle of intimates increased to such a degree that he, in his turn, was enabled to give receptions in Fourth street.

His name was Vaughan, and his sister had been married to a Colonel in the Confederate army, who had been killed in an action during the war. Young Vaughan succeeded to a handsome competency on the death of his father; and Col. Wilson, who had also been a man of property, had left sufficient behind him to support his widow in a manner becoming his position. This tale was supported by the evidence of two or three other young men, frequently to be met in Vaughan's apartments, who were also from the South, and was so fully borne out by all the circumstances of the period and their mode of life, that the brother and sister were tacitly permitted to take their place in society as fashionable people.

Among many others who visited Mrs. Wilson was a Mr. Johnson and family, who possessed a large store on Broadway. To this gentleman the widow was especially attentive, and vowed that her purchases for the future should be made from no other person than himself. Day after day she visited his store and bought largely, invariably paying ready money, until his confidence in her was fully established, and he told her that he should be most happy to give her credit, if at any time it might be more agreeable to her. She replied that she was only a woman, and consequently knew nothing of business, so she preferred to pay at once, that she might know exactly how she was situated, but promised to avail herself of this kind offer should she ever feel the need of it. One benefit there was, however, which he could confer on her. Would he be so kind as to show her over his store? She had never had an opportunity before of becoming acquainted with the resources of so large an establishment. Mr. Johnson, only too willing to be polite to so excellent a customer, immediately acceded to her request, and laid his treasures bare before her, and exhibited some of his most costly goods. She asked at what hour business was commenced, at what hour concluded; and after thanking him sincerely for his courtesies, took her leave. It was not long before the worthy merchant had cause to regret this moment of weakness, and subsequent events proved to him how easy it is for a good-looking woman to cajole a man, however wide-awake he may be.

"SNEAK THIEVES"

New York at this time was infested by a gang of rogues who had introduced a new system of shop lifting, and had successfully victimized many of the larger storekeepers in the city. As their course of action was entirely fresh, a new name had to be invented for them, and they were christened “sneak” thieves by the police, from the cunning way in which they effected their depredations and the difficulty experienced in detecting them. Mr. Johnson, who but a few days before had been boasting of his immunity from theft, was much annoyed when on arriving one morning at his store he was informed by his managing man that some very valuable articles had been abstracted during the night or early in the morning. The goods were safe enough when the store was closed the preceding evening, as he had himself seen them, but were missing when the clerks arrived in the morning. Mr. Johnson at once called in the police, and an experienced detective was sent to gather all the information he could on the subject. On hearing the circumstances of the case, this gentleman at once recognized the agency of a sneak thief, and imparted his suspicions to the proprietors of the store, with his reasons for them.

“I should like to have a few words with your porter,” he said.

“Certainly; but I hope you don’t suspect him, as he is an old favorite, and has been in our employ for years.”

“Not in the least; but I fancy he can help us for all that. Did you ever hear of a sneak thief, sir?”

“No. What are they?”

“If you will send for the porter, and stay here while I question him, you will soon understand that.”

The porter shortly entered the room, looking very much alarmed. He had heard of the robbery, and that a police officer was closeted with Mr. Johnson, and naturally feared that he had fallen under suspicion. The first words of the detective, however, relieved him from all apprehension on that score.

“Now, my man, I want to ask you a few questions, and you must answer me carefully. Don’t be frightened, we know that you have had nothing to do with this robbery, but I fancy that you can help me in finding out who has.”

“Very good, sir; but I don’t know how.”

“Who closed the warehouse last night?”

“I did, sir.”

“Are you certain that all was securely fastened?”

“Exactly the same as every other night.”

“And the fastenings had not been tampered with in any way when you undid them this morning?”

“No sir.”

“Well, now, who was the first person to whom you spoke to-day?”

“I think it was Mr. —.” (Naming one of the clerks.)

“Ah, but thinking won’t do. Did not any one speak to you, or ask any question of you?”

“Yes, a gentleman did ask me what time Mr. Johnson usually came to the store, as he wanted to see him about some orders.”

“What sort of a man was he? Can you describe him?”

“He was a young gentleman, very pleasant spoken, dark, with a moustache, and very well dressed. He said that he came from the country, and was a traveler to a firm in the same line as ours, who were going to buy largely from us.”

“Was he alone?”

“No, there were two others with him, sir, both nice-looking young gents.”

“Did he come in?”

“Oh, yes, he came in; I had just opened the door, and was sweeping the floor, so he walked straight up to me and—”

“Did his friends come in too?”

“I’m not quite sure of that, but I think they must have, as it was raining, and they wouldn’t stand out in the wet.”

“Should you know them again if you saw them?”

“I should know two of them—the one who spoke to me and another, who had a carpet bag in his hand. He walked a little lame.”

“That’ll do, porter, you need not say anything outside, but I am afraid we have not learned much.”

“All right, sir.”

As soon as he had gone the detective turned to Mr. Johnson and said: “You will get your property back, I expect sir. Those three men are sneak thieves, and if they are the same I believe

them to be, I think I know them. They always pursue the same plan. First of all they discover from a confederate, generally a female, the place where the best booty is most easily obtained. They then rise early in the morning, and wait outside until the porter opens the door, taking great care that no one is observing them. One then enters and addresses the porter, telling him some such tale as this fellow told yours, and while he is talking the other two adroitly slip whatever they can into a bag which they have with them, and decamp as soon as it is filled. They are always well dressed, and would appear to be thorough gentlemen to those not conversant with their tricks, and mention that they have just come up from the country, in order to account for their being so early in the morning. You will hardly believe it, perhaps; but thieves carry about with them external marks of their profession, which, to a detective officer, are unmistakable. For instance, they have a peculiar walk and movement of the arms; they are generally ungloved, and carry nothing in their hands, while they are continually glancing on one side or the other to see if they are being watched. I would guarantee to pick a thief out from among one hundred honest men, let his general appearance be what it may.”

DETECTIVE WORK

The detective then took his departure, promising to communicate again with Mr. Johnson as soon as he had anything of importance to tell him, and proceeded to headquarters to report. He had observed three young men frequently walking about together, and from their general appearance had set them down in his own mind as thieves of some sort or other although he knew nothing positively against them. He was irresistibly reminded of the trio by the robbery in Broadway; and the description given by the porter of the man who conversed with him coincided remarkably with one of them who had attracted his special notice. He determined, therefore to keep a sharp lookout and trace them home, should he again run against them.

Mr. Johnson, meanwhile, after attending to several matters of business started to go up town, and on his way up town met young Vaughan, who seemed strangely excited at the encounter. He turned, however, at Mr. Johnson's request, and listened attentively to his account of the robbery, expressing a hope that the perpetrators would soon be brought to justice. He did not seem very well pleased nevertheless, when he heard that the detective conceived that he already had a clue, and was unable to conceal his agitation when his companion remarked in a whisper: “Do you see that man? he is the officer whom I have engaged; it is singular that we should meet him.”

Vaughan suddenly remembered that he had forgotten a commission entrusted to him by his sister, and hastily bidding Mr. Johnson “Good-by,” hurried off in an opposite direction. The detective immediately came up and asked his employer who the gentleman was who had just left him; and, on hearing that he was a friend of the family, gave a long, low whistle expressive of the most intense surprise.

“Where does he live, sir? I'm sure I have seen his face somewhere.”

“At No. — Fourth street. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, simple curiosity; it's a way we have,” and he, too, left the puzzled merchant.

The latter slowly continued his journey, and racked his brain in vain to elucidate the mystery of Vaughan's sudden departure, but it never occurred to him to attribute it to the coming in sight of the detective. As he was in good time and was obliged to pass Fourth street on his way, he made up his mind to call upon Mrs. Wilson, and, if he found her brother there, to ask him the cause, fearing that he had offended him. The widow was sitting in her drawing-room, and displayed a great deal of pleasure at seeing her visitor, and sympathized most heartily with him when he narrated his loss to her. She asked him a great many questions as to the opinion of the detective, and was hardly less confused than her brother had been; when Mr. Johnson alluded to the probability of a speedy capture of the offenders, and added that his porter could swear to one at least of the gang.

Mrs. Wilson at this juncture became so alarmingly pale, that he feared she was about to faint, and sprang up to open the window and admit the fresh air. As he rose from his chair the door was violently opened, and Vaughan burst into the room, his clothes disordered, his face heated, and his whole aspect denoting great anxiety. Seeing Mr. Johnson, he hesitated, and a look of intelligence and alarm was exchanged between himself and Mrs. Wilson. He then, by a great effort, partially recovered his composure, apologized for the mode of his entrance, and said that he had expected to see his sister alone, and had something of importance to say to her. The merchant immediately prepared to leave, and had exchanged farewells with the widow, when the door again opened, and, to his amazement, his warehouse porter entered with a letter in his hand, and gave it to him without saying a word. After obtaining leave from the lady—Vaughan had moved to the window, and was looking out, with his back to the rest—he broke the seal, and read the following line in pencil: "Don't leave the room till I come!" written upon a card bearing the detective's name. Though he could not for the life of him guess at the meaning of the above, he determined to do as he was bidden, if possible, and contented himself with nodding to his porter, and saying, "Tell the gentleman to be quick, then."

The porter vanished, and Mr. Johnson, although feeling acutely the awkwardness of the situation, did the best thing he could do under the circumstances, and asked Vaughan wherefore he left him so abruptly in the street. The former endeavored to make some reply, but his nervousness increased so painfully that it was incoherent.

THE ARREST

Once again the door opened, but this time it was the detective who appeared, closely followed by a couple of policemen. Advancing straight to where Vaughan stood, apparently transfixed with fear, he laid his hand on his shoulder and said:

"Will you come quietly? or must I use force?"

To the dismay of Mr. Johnson, who expected an outburst of passion, Vaughan asked in a trembling voice:

"What is it you want me for?"

“Robbery of \$6,000 worth of goods from this gentleman’s store. Have you anything to say about it?”

“Not to you.” And he held out his hands for the handcuffs.

During the scene no one had thought of Mrs. Wilson, but their attention was now called to her by a heavy fall upon the ground, and they perceived that the unfortunate lady had fainted away. Mr. Johnson, as soon as he could breathe again, demanded from the police officer the meaning of the intrusion, insisted upon it that there was some mistake, and attributed the agitation of Vaughan and his sister to the horror they felt at a charge of this sort being brought against a gentleman.

The detective, without saying a word, fitted the handcuffs on the young man’s wrists, and signed to the policemen to remove both from the room. As soon as the door closed behind them (Mrs. Wilson was carried out) he smiled and said: “I know well enough what I am about, sir, but did not like to arrest friends of yours until I had satisfied myself that I was not wrong in my suspicions. Vaughan is the man who held your porter in conversation, while his confederates were securing the plunder, and from all accounts it seems they knew well where to go. Mrs. Wilson was often in your store, I am told; can you tell me whether she appeared to examine the place at all?”

In a moment a light broke over the mind of Mr. Johnson, and he remembered his interview with the widow, some few days before.

“Why,” he said, “I showed her all over the store myself. What a fool I must have been.”

“Ah,” said the detective, laughing, “it’s the old game, after all. I thought so; a clever woman is always to be found in conjunction with these fellows.”

“Well, I could forgive the sister; she may have been led away; but as for her brother”—

“Lord bless you, sir—he is no more her brother than you are; all we have to do is to sit still, and we shall shortly have the rest of the gang here. When I left you I ran off to your store, after setting a watch on the houses, and brought the porter back to me. I was at a standstill for a moment as to the best step to take next, when I was told that you had gone into the house. I then scribbled the note and sent it up, to enable your man to take a look at the prisoner, as I did not wish to make a mistake, and also to detain you in the room in case they should attempt to escape. He swore positively to him, although he only saw his back, and on his doing so I came up myself, and the rest you know, as far as this house is concerned. I despatched one of my men to make inquiries of several of the leading railway ticket offices, and from his report I have good reason to believe that the whole party meditated an emigration to some of the large cities out West to-morrow. So we have only just had time to put the stopper upon them.”

Mr. Johnson, burning with indignation at discovering the real character of the people he had been associating with, resolved to stay and see the end of the whole affair. In the course of an hour the front-door bell rang violently, and two young men, of eminently exterior, were ushered into the

room. Seeing two strangers seated there, they were considerably astonished, and muttered something about expecting to find Mr. Vaughan.

“All right, sir,” said the detective; “I will lead you to him when I have had a moment’s conversation with you. Be kind enough to allow me—” and he advanced with handcuffs in either hand. They attempted to bluster; but on being told that the “game was up” and Vaughan in custody, they subsided, and looked very blank indeed. In a few minutes they were all conveyed to prison, before any intimation of the occurrence had reached the ears of the neighborhood.

RECOVERING PROPERTY

One thing remained to be done, and that was to ascertain the whereabouts of the stolen property. The amount must be, all agreed, very great, to have enabled the conspirators to keep up so good a style. This difficulty was easily solved. One of the policemen on watch had seen the young men issue from a house a few doors distant from the one occupied by Vaughan and his sister. On repairing thither, startling revelations took place. It was found that Mrs. Wilson had been the manageress of a baby institution, and derived large profit therefrom. How she obtained the children is and ever will be a mystery. Certain it is that the police, when they searched the house, discovered several infants, and all the necessary appliances for many more. The nurse in charge (for the babies were well tended) implied that a great number had been sent away at various times, and the only probable solution of this strange matter was that there existed in New York a class of people who were able and willing to pay heavy premiums to any person charitable enough to relieve them from the trouble of rearing their offspring. In the lower apartments valuables of all kinds were brought to light, such as silks, jewelry, gold ornaments, etc., and for many of them owners were found. The three young thieves are all undergoing long sentences, but the implication of Mrs. Wilson, (who was really well born, and the widow of a colonel) was no easy matter, with such consummate tact had she acted her part. She did not, however, escape scot-free, as Mr. Johnson, to his own chagrin, learned that the fair widow had availed herself of his kind offer a few days previously and had succeeded in obtaining a quantity of goods on credit, that were lost to him forever.

For obvious reasons we have suppressed the real names of the chief actors in this little comedy; but our readers may rest assured that in every other respect the tale is strictly true.

New York Evening Post, January 29, 1870
The Portland [ME] Daily Press, February 5, 1870
The Manitowoc [WI] Tribune, February 17, 1870
Watertown [WI] Republican, February 23, 1870
The Republican Journal [Belfast ME], February 24, 1870
Valley Herald [Chaska, MN], February 24, 1870
The Holt County Sentinel [Oregon, MO], February 25, 1870
[Battleboro] *Vermont Pheonix*, March 25, 1870
The [Keene] New Hampshire Sentinel, March 31, 1870
Hornsville [NY] Tribune, April 8, 1870
The Democratic Press [Ravenna, OH], May 12, 1870

Fayetteville [TN] Observer, Thursday, June 9, 1870

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Saturday Evening Mail [Terre Haute, IN], May 3, 1873