

The Black Valise

AND WHAT CAME OF THE CIPHER WRITING

WRITTEN FOR THE NEW YORK CLIPPER

by Barry Croton

When Sandford & Salisbury's jewelry store was broken into and robbed of twelve thousand dollars' worth of goods, I was employed by the firm as bookkeeper. It will perhaps be remembered that the robbery caused considerable excitement at the time of its occurrence. The value of the articles stolen, as well as the skill with which the burglars did their work, combined to make the affair generally known. New York, however, forgets so rapidly that I may be pardoned for briefly reciting in this connection the circumstances of the case.

The burglary was committed on a Sunday night—I think the first Sunday in August. The store was entered from the rear by forcing open the heavy iron shutters, and then cutting through the window with a diamond. Once inside, the robbers had proceeded, with the aid of a full kit of tools, to open the safe. This they had accomplished by patient work, and had then rifled the contents, carrying away with them only the most valuable articles. Among these were forty-eight diamond rings, ranging in value from fifty to three hundred dollars, twenty-four gold watches, worth in all two thousand seven hundred dollars, twelve sets of coral jewelry, and a large number of chains, necklaces and finger rings. The tools, which were of remarkably fine workmanship, they left behind them. Evidently the job had been done by experts.

Immediately upon the discovery of the robbery, Messrs. Sandford & Salisbury furnished the police with a minute description of the articles stolen, and also engaged the services of two well-known detectives. There was no clew to lead to the perpetrators of the deed. They had done their work so cleverly that not a trace of their identity existed. The detectives spent two weeks in a fruitless search for the criminals, and then recommended the firm to offer a reward of twenty-five hundred dollars for the return of the property.

“If you do that, and promise not to prosecute ‘em,” said one of the officers, “you’ll probably get the things back. Otherwise, it’s mighty doubtful.”

But Messrs. Sandford & Salisbury were not the sort of men to offer immunity to thieves.

“We will pay two thousand dollars for the return of the property,” they said, “and another thousand for the conviction of the robbers. But we will not agree to let the robbers go, if we once get hold of them.”

Perhaps it was the vague but golden possibility of earning this three thousand dollars' reward which sharpened my wits and led me to undertake a bit of detective work on my own responsibility.

It so happened that, about two weeks after the burglary, I picked up a copy of *The Herald* one day, and in glancing over the column of “Personals” my eye was attracted by the following singular cryptogram:

XX. 8. 1. 22. 5. 0. 19. 1. 12. 20. 5. 4. 0. 20. 8. 5. 0. 19. 23. 1. 7. 0. 1. 20. 0. 10. 1. 11. 5. 19. 0. 5.
22. 5. 18. 25. 20. 8. 9. 14. 7. 0. 17. 21. 9. 5. 20. 0. 20. 8. 21. 19. 0. 6. 1. 18. 0. 13. 5. 5. 20. 0. 13.
5. 0. 1. 20. 0. 7. 18. 1. 14. 4. 0. 19. 20. 0. 6. 5. 18. 18. 25. 0. 20. 15. 4. 1. 25. 0. D. 15. 3. 12. 15. 3.
11. 0. 19. 8. 1. 18. 16. XX.

It is to be confessed that at first sight the foregoing is discouragingly blind to one unacquainted with the key. And yet it flashed upon my mind that possibly this puzzling combination of figures might have some bearing upon the robbery. Acting upon this thought, I cut out the notice and placed it in my pocketbook until I could find leisure to undertake its solution.

That same evening, in the seclusion of my own room, I sat down to the task. I assumed, at the outset, that the figures conveyed some message which the writer desired to hide from the general reader. A careful examination showed me that the dot, or period, was used with much more frequency than any of the other characters—one hundred and two times in all. I therefore concluded that it could not stand for a letter, but must be employed to separate the letters one from another. This was proceeding upon the theory that the figures were used in place of the alphabet. Next to the dot, I found that the cipher occurred most often—that is, where it was immediately preceded and followed by the dot. By no process of reasoning, but rather by a sudden conviction, I jumped at the conclusion that, as the dot was used to separate the letters, so the cipher was used to separate the combination of letters or words. Here, then, was my first step. I next proceeded to separate the figures into groups, making the division at the points where the ciphers stood. When this was done, I found that the combination 20, 8, 5, would, upon my theory, represent a word of three letters; and immediately “the” suggested itself to my mind. This gave me t=20, 8=h and 5=e. Now, e is the fifth letter in the alphabet, and it occurred to me that as the 6 represented the fifth letter, perhaps 8 represented the eighth letter. This, indeed, I found to be the case, h coming eighth in the alphabet. The theory was still further strengthened by the t, which is the twentieth letter, and which was represented by the figure 20.

I was now confident that I had solved the riddle. The writer had simply substituted figures for letters, using the dots and ciphers as marks of division. It was only necessary for me to make out a table, making A = 1, b = 2, and so forth, and then restore the letters in place of their equivalents. This done, I found that the cryptogram read as follows:

XX. Have salted the swag at Jake's. Everything quiet thus far. Meet me at the Grand Street Ferry today, D o'clock sharp. XX.

The “D,” I reasoned, must stand for the time at which the meeting was requested; and, as the writer used figures for letters, it seemed fair to [assume] that he had used letters for figures. I therefore translated “D,” the fourth letter in the alphabet, as 4. And assuming that the double XX's at the beginning and end of the message were used simply to establish the identity of the writer, my solution was complete.

Of course, I had no proof that this cryptogram had been written by one of the burglars who had robbed my employers. I was forced to accept that on my own belief. But it was evident that the communication had reference to stolen property, and I was sanguine enough to hope that it would prove the thread which would lead me to the three thousand dollars' reward. Had I succeeded in solving the riddle before the hour appointed for the meeting, I might have got a very tangible hold on that thread. As it was, I could only wait.

On the third day following, I was delighted to find a second "personal" in the cipher writing, signed as before with a double X, and reading, when translated, as follows:

Be at the Grand Street Ferry at 4 o'clock today. Jake will meet you with swag.

At three o'clock that afternoon I left the store and set out for the Grand Street Ferry. I went alone, for the reason that I had confided to no one my success in solving the cryptogram; nor did I care to divide my chance of winning the reward. It lacked twenty minutes of four when I entered the ferry-house. At that hour of the day, the boats coming from Williamsburg carry but few passengers. I took up my position at the gate where I could distinctly see everyone who passed through the ferry-house into the street. I waited perhaps ten minutes before a boat arrived. Then I watched with eager eyes. Among the passengers I noticed a large man, dressed in a suit of plaid clothes, who carried in his hand a small black valise. I felt instinctively that he was the man for whom I was looking. As he emerged into the street, I saw him recognize a friend, and, after a moment's conversation, the two boarded a car. I went out and took a seat in the same car. Jake's companion—for I was confident that this was "Jake" — was a man of medium height, fashionably dressed in a suit of dark clothes, and with the outward bearing of a gentleman. His face was intelligent, and but for a deep scar on the left cheek would have been handsome. I noticed that his hands were as white and delicate as those of a woman.

When the car reached Broadway, the two men got off, and I followed their example. They walked up the west side of the street to Bleeker, turned the corner, and went half a dozen blocks or more from Broadway. I dogged their footsteps without attracting their attention. Finally they turned into an ordinary four story brick house. Then, making sure of the premises, I started rapidly back towards Broadway. By this time I was intensely excited, but my mind was clear and active. I was satisfied that the black valise which I had seen contained stolen property. Whether that property belonged to my employers remained to be proved. I was further satisfied that, having got the valise safely into the house, the men would not be likely to take it out again for the present.

With all haste I made my way to police headquarters, where, without informing the Superintendent of my belief with respect to the robbers, I told him that I needed the assistance of two officers to recover some stolen goods. The men, in citizens' dress, were put at my disposal, and together we returned to Bleeker Street.

In response to our vigorous ringing of the bell, the door was opened by a young woman, who demanded somewhat sharply "what we wanted?"

"We want to see Jake," said I promptly.

The girl eyed us with suspicion as she replied:

“Jake aint here.”

“Yes, he is!” said I decisively. And without wasting any more words we entered the house.

In the front room on the third story we found the two men whom I had followed from the ferry. Evidently they had heard us enter the hall below, and, thus warned of their danger, they had hidden the valise.

“What do you want here?” demanded the smaller of the two men as we entered the room.

“We want,” said I, “the valise which your friend here brought from Williamsburg, by way of Grand Street Ferry, this afternoon.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about, sir,” said the burglar indignantly. “If you don’t clear out of this house I will call the police!”

But in the end it did not seem necessary to call the police. A careful search of fifteen minutes revealed the black valise, hidden under a trap in the floor. Upon opening it, we found that it contained the missing articles which had been stolen from the safe of Sandford & Salisbury.

Jake and his companion are now serving out a ten years’ sentence at Sing Sing. Their associate who wrote the cryptogram was never discovered. And I have only to add that, if he ever should be, I shall take occasion to thank him for furnishing me the clew by which I won the three thousand dollars’ reward.

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