

A Phase in Crime

The Philosophical Detective and his Story to an Eagle Reporter

A Sister's Devotion—A Deathbed Promise, and
How it was Kept—"All's Well that Ends Well"

"A queer life, a detective's," was the casual remark of an EAGLE reporter, as he loitered the other morning near the Fulton Ferry, on the New York side of the river.

"You are right," came the brisk reply from a broad-shouldered member of the force, "queer it is in more senses than one; though as a rule you gentlemen of the press don't seem to consider it so. In fact, you set us down as a very ordinary lot of fellows. One would think, indeed, by reading some of the reports in the New York dailies, that a detective has less intelligence and ingenuity than other people. But I tell you, sir, your true detective is a man of feeling and a philosopher to boot, take him all in all."

The officer who thus spoke was one of the ablest and oldest on the New York detective police—a man grown gray in unraveling intricate and knotty questions of crime.

As the day was oppressively hot, and the reporter had an hour or two to spare, he took his acquaintance's arm and marched him into a quiet bar on Fulton Street, where, after the drinks and cigars, he gleaned the following facts, which are given as near as possible in the detective's words:

"Looking into the motives of crime," began this gentleman, "is not only a curious but an interesting study to men of our calling. Laziness and greed are, of course, the common prompters. Along with those may be classed a kind of infatuated notion that the wrong doers for that time, at least, will escape punishment. This last is a pet delusion which more or less overruns all humanity, and turns out more criminals than all the rest of the causes put together. It is so with those pernicious and corrupting nuisances, lotteries—smuggled even yet under our noses, and in many respects in benevolent and beneficial guises. Everybody has a secret belief that they will win. That being a settled matter—you see how rapid the stride—they risk everything—often what is not their own—and lose!"

"So much for the common promptings. Now, what would you say to a case in which none of these were present and in which the criminal not only expected, but earnestly desired the due punishment?"

"I should say it was one out of the ordinary run of such cases," replied the reporter. "As a rule, people guilty of crime are not overanxious to get punished for it."

"You are right there," the detective continued, "and that was what made the one I refer to the more perplexing. It was a day about seven or eight years ago, as some half dozen of us were

awaiting orders at the Central Office, Mulberry Street, that our ears were saluted by the following:

“‘I wish to give myself up as a—as a thief. Would you be kind enough to direct me to the proper quarter.’

“These words were addressed to us generally, after a hesitating knock at the half open door of the room. It was in the afternoon and about dusk. I looked round and saw that the speaker was a young lady of perhaps 19 or 20. She stood in some trepidation just inside the threshold.

“Someone nudged me to answer, but for a few moments I was too surprised and intent on examining the face before me to find words. The face was a good one—nay, an uncommonly good one—white with excitement, shame, or suppressed emotion; but oval, regular and blessed with a pair of deep, speaking eyes and a splendid forehead.

“I handed her a chair, which she accepted without a word. A peculiar silence had fallen upon us all.

“‘This place will do as well as any other,’ I managed to say at last, looking over the blotter and appearing not to find the place easily. ‘Will you favor me with your name?’

“‘Ethel Martin.’ (The answer came without a quiver. I began to write, and then in the same even, unflinching tone, she went on): ‘I live with my uncle, Mr. Martin, in the Bowery. I took a diamond ring valued at \$200 from his bureau, and pawned it for \$20. That is the ticket,’ and she held up a pawn ticket bearing an address in the region of Catharine Street, which I took and examined.

“Though my comrades had sidled off to the other end of the room, apparently heedless or indifferent to our business, I could see that they were one and all as deeply interested as myself.

“‘Twenty dollars; perfectly correct; yet that is a small sum for such a valuable article,’ I observed, more to draw her out than anything else.

“‘They offered me more but I would not take it,’ was the reply. ‘It was all I wanted, and I told them that it would be redeemed in a day or two; for when my uncle discovers what I have done he will redeem it instantly.’

“This information pained and surprised me. The pen dropped from my hand, and I began to look ruefully at what I had written.

“‘Then you have not informed your uncle of the unfortunate circumstances?’ I said, inquiringly.

“‘No. I could not—Oh, I could not do that!’ and a slight trace of emotion disturbed her for the moment. [‘]I left a note at the store and came on here.’

“I began to look at the matter in a more serious light.

“‘Are you aware, Miss Martin, that you have done a very rash, foolish thing? It is highly probable that your uncle would never have placed the case in our hands. You should not have come here.’

“‘I thought myself wise in making these observations but the calm look on the marble face before me dispelled any such idea.

“‘You think so,’ she simply answered; ‘but I know my uncle better. When he hears all I can tell, he will not only leave me here but appear against me.’ I started and stared again. What was under all this? I fidgeted, fretted and fumed for a time, and then got out a little sharply—

“‘You are not bound to answer any of my questions, and your answers will be used against you; but why if you wanted \$20, could you not have got the sum from your uncle in the ordinary way without resorting to crime?’

“‘The question was a natural one; the words simple; yet to her they seemed to have a sting. Her hands were clasped tightly over her heart; a sudden glistening of the deep eyes told me she was fighting to keep back her tears.

“‘Yes, that is what the world will say,’ she managed to answer, with a little shivering sigh. ‘Simply because he would not have given it without knowing what it was for.’

“‘Then you wanted it for a particular object?’

“‘I did. I had to get it. I would have died sooner than have failed!’ and the flashing look of determination lit upon their eyes to their inmost depths.

“‘Without knowing why, I was beginning to have a strange admiration for this poor criminal. It seemed to me that she was just the sort of woman who, where duty called, could walk calmly into a fire, and there be slowly consumed before a hooting world without once flinching. In a word, she seemed to be the stuff of which martyrs are made.

“‘May I ask what that object was?’ I inquired after a pause.

“‘I read the refusal before it was near her lips.

“‘It is useless—I cannot tell!’

“‘Could it be that she was being bled by some villain? I looked at the noble, still face, and the idea fled instantly.

“‘Have you no other friends?’ I asked.

“‘Yes, there is my brother and my aunt. We all live together. My own parents are dead.’

“A slight flush—very slight—mantled her face as the word ‘brother’ escaped her lips, and I instantly followed it up.

“Does your brother know what you have done?”

“He does not.”

“Her words were simple and plain—but oh, the depth of agony that was conveyed in the tone! For a moment she lost command of herself and covered her face with her hands, while something between a moan and a sigh broke from her and told of the torture within.

“Then you would not wish him to know?”

“I would not; but that is impossible. He must soon hear, and then he will know—know— What am I saying? I am foolish—mad perhaps—do not heed what I say?” and she scanned my face fearfully, as if afraid that she had unconsciously betrayed herself.

“And in reality she had; for though the words were meaningless and unintelligible, the look that accompanied them, by directing my thoughts in a particular channel, gave me an inkling of a clue.

“Are you not allowed pocket money of any kind by your uncle?”

“Oh, yes; he allowed me five dollars every month; but it was—was all gone.”

“There was a hesitation, crimsoning and confusion in her answer that told me plainly that the ‘five dollars every month’ had gone the same road as the twenty lent on the ring. And where was that? It was not spent on herself—on dress, jewelry, or frivolity. I could read that in her whole demeanor. Yet it had gone—mysteriously evaporated. Someone had got it. Who was that someone? She must love him, at least, to be ready to die rather than [fail] to supply his wants.

“A quick step and hasty cough on the step outside put an end to my thoughts and caused the self-accused [criminal] to start up with all the flush gone from her cheeks and a wild fear in her eyes.

“Oh, sir,” she gasped, “that is my uncle—I hear him coming. I cannot face him. Put me—oh, put me away somewhere, where I will not be seen!”

“Without a word I opened the door of a side room, closed it as she disappeared, and then turned to answer the knock of the newcomer.

“The door opened and a sharp looking businessman of fifty or so—not particularly harsh looking—entered the room.

“My name is Martin—my place of business is in the Bowery,” he abruptly began with an anxious look, [‘]Did my niece call here saying something about a ring?’

“‘She did—she is here now.’

“A blank, dismayed look overspread his face.

“‘What is to be done?’ he faintly inquired.

“‘You must decide that,’ I replied. ‘It seems to be a family matter. Better get her to withdraw her statement and take the thing out of our hands altogether.’

“‘With all my heart,’ he answered, readily catching at the suggestion. ‘What a disgrace it would be to her poor brother—a clever, rising young man, esteemed by everyone. But what could she want with the money?[]’

“I shook my head in silence.

“‘What did she do with it? That is what I want to know,’ he added, with an emphatic tap on the desk with his knuckles.

“‘She will not tell.’

“‘She will not what?’ he cried, hotly and in surprise, as an angry flush mounted his face. ‘Do I understand you to say that the thievish jade will not say what she did with the stolen money?—for stolen money it is, to all intents and purposes.’

“‘I understood her to say so.’

“The cloud on his brow deepened and darkened [until] it looked stern and foreboding enough.

“‘Let me see her,’ he said, shortly; ‘I’ll make her speak!’

“I thought not, but, of course, his request was complied with, and I led him into the next room before his niece.

“She must have heard us approach, but she neither moved nor looked up. She sat with her face in her hands, motionless as a statue.

“‘Ethel,’ said her uncle, with some sternness, ‘take away your hands and look me in the face?’

“Mechanically she tried to obey.

“‘Now tell me what have you done with the twenty dollars?’

“‘Uncle—oh, uncle,’ she cried, suddenly springing from her seat and dropping at his feet, ‘do not ask me that!’

“‘Shameless girl—think of your brother, how you will disgrace him. If he had deceived me in this way I would have gone to see him hanged without scruple.’

“I knew it! I knew it!” moaned the poor girl at his feet. “Why did we not both die and be buried with mother!”

“What! do you dare to class yourself with him, and you a thief? You will never see or speak to him again if you do not say what you have done with the money. When I tell him of this he will spurn you from his presence.”

“Oh, no; oh, no, uncle, dear uncle, he will not spurn me—I know he will not!” she passionately exclaimed. “But will it disgrace him if I go to prison?”

“Undoubtedly it will. It will disgrace us all.”

“Then do not tell him of it; send him out of the way so that he will never know,” she eagerly entreated.

“You would like it, I dare say,” the uncle sneered. “But no; there will be no screening with me, and as you have made your bed so must you lie on it. The moment I get back I will tell him of your disgrace.”

“A scream interrupted his words. ‘Don’t! oh, don’t tell him very suddenly; he might say something rash—I mean he might forget himself, and—and feel it dreadfully. Oh, uncle, if you only knew it all, you would forgive me ten times over.’

“There was a visible softening about the old man’s face. He turned away and dabbed furtively at his eyes with a silk pocket-handkerchief for some moments in silence.

“I know I would, Ethel,” he said, in a broken voice at last, “and I will forgive you, and you shall go back with me and nothing shall ever be said of it to anyone, if you will only say what you did with it.”

“A weary, heavy sigh was the girl’s only answer.

“The old man put his hand lovingly and affectionately down on her shoulder.

“Ethel,” he said, “do you remember your mother’s death bed?”

“[‘]Oh, uncle, could I ever forget it?”

“[‘]You there promised—with one arm round Charlie and the other round your dying mother—to watch over him, shield him from every ill and danger, to guard his life with your own if necessary. Ethel, such a promise is, if possible, more binding than an oath. How can you neglect it, and bring this slur upon his name?”

“Oh! oh! oh!” The three cries came out as if he was tearing her very heart asunder. But still there was no answer. His face became gradually stony and stern.

“Will you answer me?” he almost shouted.

“She started to her feet with one maddened spring; with blazing eyes and reckless defiance she drew back and cried:

“Uncle! kill me if you will, I shall not answer!”

“His temples suddenly showed the swollen and started veins as his fury kindled from her defiance.

“You are a disgraceful thief, and shall rot in prison before I stretch out a little finger to save you!” he hoarsely cried. ‘But I have more to ask. Where is all the money you were allowed regularly? You had no call to spend it all.’

“No answer. Wringing of hands—sobs, even—but no words.

“And where is your watch? You have not worn it for weeks.’

“[‘]I sold it. It was my own—my mother’s gift. I thought I had a right to sell it.’

“You had a right, certainly, but what did you want with the money?”

“I cannot tell.’

“Then listen! You are no longer a [niece] of mine. Mr. R—, I charge that woman with stealing my ring, and afterward pawning it for twenty dollars!’ and in his excitement he turned whiter than the girl he was accusing.

“I think you are acting hastily,’ I ventured to advise. ‘If you will only hear me for a moment.’

“I will hear nothing!”

“Then that settles it,’ I sharply rejoined. ‘You may go. The case is already entered.[’]

“Very stiffly and sternly he stalked back to the other room, lifted his hat, deliberately tugged it on, and left the building.

“I was disturbed, grieved, annoyed, and slowly returned to the room containing my prisoner.

“Oh, sir,’ she cried, addressing me with streaming eyes as I entered, ‘would you listen to me for a moment?’

“With pleasure,’ was my reply. ‘I am very sorry indeed that you ever came here; for it seems to me that you are not of the stuff that makes criminals.’

“Bless you—oh, bless you for these words!’ she ejaculated, her utterance choked by her emotion. ‘I have done wrong, I know, but I could not act otherwise without doing worse. My own sweet mother looking down on me from heaven will not think that I have sinned. But there is just one thing I would like—if you can allow it—that is to see my brother or write to him. Is it possible?’

“It is with certain restrictions. You may write to him; but no letter can pass out from here without first being opened and read.’

“Then I could not see him here in—in prison?’

“Yes, I guess I can manage that for you.’

“One thing more—I will never be able to repay your kindness—I would like word to be conveyed him to come and see me *before my uncle can see him.*’

“I consented to this, and, having given me her brother’s address, I started for the place at once, not quite sure, however, but I was making an arrant fool of myself.

“As I walked there some odd questions cropped up in my mind. I dare say had the poor girl been a professional thief, or of a depraved nature, she would have been more guarded in her utterances; but as it was, here and there she let slip words, looks and gestures which, though meaningless to her uncle, were not quite so to a professional ferreter out of guilt like myself. These slips had always been made in connection with her brother. Even now was I not on my way to forewarn him of danger?

“Unconsciously I found myself speculating on the real character of the young man—whether he was extravagant, given to betting, billiards, or any other genteel amusement likely to [swallow] a lot of money. There was evidently a strong bond of love between sister and brother.

“I got to the young man’s place of business at last, but was informed that he was at a restaurant on the opposite side of the street.

“After some further inquiries, I found him.

“Your sister wishes to see you immediately at the Mulberry Street Police Station,’ I said, after calling him out.

“He turned deathly pale.

“Is she hurt?—an accident?’ he faintly gasped.

“No; she is perfectly well and unhurt. She has given herself up for appropriating and pawning a ring of your uncle’s for twenty dollars.’

“He staggered as if he had been shot, groping aimlessly in the air, with his head drooping backward; and thinking he was going to faint, I caught him by the shoulder. Then he slowly let his face droop into his hands, and groaned out,

““Oh, God, have mercy on me! Has it come to this?”

““She wishes to see you *now*, before your uncle meets you,’ I went on.

““She is innocent! I tell you she is innocent!’ he cried with a strange flushing of the cheeks. ‘I can prove that—I will soon have her set at liberty; I will not allow this sacrifice!’

““For heaven’s sake don’t say anything now!’ I anxiously interposed. ‘Remember I am a detective, and bound to report all I hear. See your sister first, then decide between you what will be best.’

“He saw at a glance that I had probed the secret— wrung my hand—and was off.

“I also slowly made my way to headquarters and got there some time after him.

“The meeting between the sister and brother was of the most painful character; but as they were alone, nothing that transpired was known to us. It fell upon me to tell them that the time allotted for the interview had expired, and on entering the cell these words from the lips of the young girl caught my ear —

““—my promise to mother. Let *me* suffer now—it is better that one should suffer than both.’

“Both were in tears, but while the young man was pallid and stupefied with grief, the sister appeared in much better spirits, and even smiled in my face as I entered. I led him from her side; but when he got to the cell door he woke with a start.

““No! I tell you, no!’ springing back to her side. ‘I will not allow this—I will tell all—’

““Hush!’ answered the girl, instantly whitening and placing her hand on his mouth. ‘Remember! mother!’ and she pointed solemnly upward.

“He covered his face with his hands and groaned aloud.

““Good will come of it,’ she sweetly continued. ‘You have given me your promise now—by mother’s memory—and I know you will not break it. What does it matter though I suffer? I am nobody in the world—I mean no one will ever miss me. Yes, the future is bright, Charlie dear, and I am glad!’

““If I had known. Oh, if I had only known that you had done that to get the money, you would never have been here.’

“‘Hush! The past is behind us—let it go and think of the future,’ she cheerfully whispered. ‘Uncle will understand it all sometime, and then he will not need to be asked to forgive me; for he loves you Charlie—remember that—he loves you as dearly as he could have loved a son. And what a terrible blow it would have been to him? Oh, I shudder to think of it!—it would have killed him!’

“‘Ethel, you are an angel,’ he hoarsely rejoined, with his head bent on her breast. ‘But I must think. I fear I must save you! I would never forgive myself if I did not. My brain whirls just now—I am not myself—but I will think! Goodbye—goodbye!’

“‘He came now readily enough. I closed the cell and he hurried from the spot, and I saw him no more till a week after—the day fixed for the trial. He and his uncle entered the Tombs Police Court together when I first caught sight of him, and I must say the first glance shocked, horrified me. He was pale and sunken—the merest shadow of what I had seen seven days before. As for the old man, he seemed very stern but was otherwise looking as usual.

“‘We passed into the courtroom together, and shortly after the case was called and the prisoner appeared.

“‘She came in like a queen, her face radiant and smiling, and instantly made a favorable impression on all present—with the exception of her uncle, who merely grunted out the word—

“‘Minx!’

“‘The charge was read and Ethel Martin at once plead ‘Guilty.’

“‘The judge appeared embarrassed and a slight pause ensued.

“‘Ethel Martin,’ he said at last, ‘I am exceedingly sorry to see you in such a position. From the statement of the case before me it appears to me that you are not in one sense the real criminal. Some other has influenced you to this course. That other you persist resolutely in screening. The case should never have been brought here at all, but as it is before me, and you have plead guilty, the sentence of the court is —’

“‘Stop!’

“‘Everyone looked round, and some started to their feet in amazement. The speaker was Charles Martin, who, in spite of every remonstrance, was elbowing his way forward to the bar.

“‘Are you mad?’ I heard the uncle cry.

“‘No. I am as sane as the judge who sits there. I have been mad—have been—but will be so no longer!’

“‘Remove that man,’ commanded the astonished judge to the officers of the court.

“‘I will not be removed until you have heard me speak, let him attempt it who dares!’ was the reckless rejoinder. ‘Your Honor, humbly I ask liberty of the court to say one word before you pass sentence on my sister.’”

“It was now the prisoner’s turn. Before the judge could reply she had wildly started up and imploringly clasped her hand to the bench.

“‘Judge! oh, judge!’ she cried, with all her smiles gone and a deadly pallor in her face, ‘I pray you do not listen to him—he’s mad—does not know what he is saying. He would say anything in his madness to save me. Oh, take him away—take—’

“At this point her voice became choked, and with a burst of tears she covered her face with her hands and sank into her seat. I believe there was not a single dry eye in the whole court.

“‘But I will be heard,[?] persisted her brother. ‘She wishes to sacrifice herself to save—’

“‘Hush! Charles!’ and she laid one finger on her lip, while with the other hand she pointed toward heaven.

“For one moment there was a dead stillness in the courtroom and then the sound of someone—a man—sobbing among the audience broke in upon our ears.

“Mr. Martin was crying.

“‘God forgive me!’ he groaned. ‘I have wronged that girl, judge,’ he suddenly cried rising and pressing forward, ‘let me add my entreaties for my niece. I have been a cruel, hard-hearted, blind old idiot to bring the matter here at all.[?]’

“A sudden shout of applause shook the room. As soon as silence was restored and the judge had some wiping of his eyes and coughing to clear his throat, we heard him pronounce these words—

“‘I was about to say when I was interrupted, that considering the peculiar nature of the case, and bearing in mind the fact that the young lady has already been several days in prison, the sentence is that she be cautioned against a repetition of the offense and then discharged.’

“At this moment there was a commotion at the bar, and someone cried out—

“‘Quick—a glass of water, the prisoner has fainted!’

“Of course, the burst of applause rising on every side was instantly checked till the water was brought, and she slowly recovered; then it was renewed and prolonged with a persistence which the judge tried in vain to rebuke.

“Then the audience listened impatiently while the prisoner was being cautioned, and as we hurried her into a side room, something like a cheer broke out behind us.

“Humbled and broken by the strange discovery that had flashed on him in the courtroom, Mr. Martin approached the weeping girl, encircled her with his arms, and strained her to his breast.

“‘Oh, Ethel, my poor little sufferer! only say that you forgive me.’

“‘And Charlie—will you forgive him?’

“‘I will do anything to atone for my cruelty. Charlie, my boy, if you were in a difficulty why did you not confide in me?’

“‘Because,’ interposed his sister, smiling through her tears, ‘you would have seen him hanged for it—you said so.’

“‘But his accounts were always straight.’

“‘Yes’—and an arch smile accompanied her words—‘they were always straight, because I remembered my promise to mother and straightened them.’

“‘Ah, I guessed that. I thought I was shot when the truth came to me. Mr. R——, come here! I am afraid you have known more about this all along than myself. How did you guess it?’

“‘Simply because I knew something of a sister’s devotion.’

“‘And you, young scoundrel,’ added the old man, turning with affected sternness on his nephew, ‘what shall I do to you?’

“‘Do what you like—kill me if you choose; it will be no worse than I deserve,’ was the humble reply. ‘I don’t care what happens now that she is safe. If she had gone to prison, a condemned felon, I would have shot myself—I had prepared for it.’

“The quiet, emphatic words instantly drove the color from the cheeks of both his hearers.

“‘Charlie!’ burst in the horrified old man, ‘promise me this instant that you will never harbor such a frightful intention again.’

“‘I promise—it is the last time,’ said the youth, as his sister and he became entwined in each other’s arms, and they looked upward together. ‘I have promised it—’

“‘To mother!’ added the girl, and the bright ethereal look that accompanied the words seems to linger before me even now.”

The broad-shouldered man having thus delivered himself, rose to his feet, and, bidding the reporter good day, sauntered into Fulton Street.

The Brooklyn Daily Eagle, August 21, 1881