

Altogether Too Smart

When I was studying my profession in the goodly city of B——, my chief visitor at the exceedingly modest lodging I occupied was no less a person than the chief of police, who almost invariably dropped in of an evening on this way to the office, to smoke a pipe with myself and such of my fellow students as happened to be there on the same errand. He had known my father, and insisted upon it that he was the greatest lawyer of his generation—an opinion which, I regret to say, was not that of the public at large.

On the other hand, my father had often spoken of the chief as the “best detective he ever heard of,” and this praise seemed to me much better deserved than the other, for the chief was certainly a detective born, not made. He had as little of the look and manner of the ideal detective as could well be imagined, and always sneered at what he called the “stage idea” of detecting crime by reasoning from a profound knowledge of criminals. “What a detective wants,” he used to say, “is chiefly common sense, and the more of that he uses the better he will get along.”

He used to amuse us with narrations of different jobs which he had “worked up,” as he called it, and one night I asked him: “How is it that criminals always seem to leave such easy clues to their work?”

Said he: “Because they can’t help it. A man is almost always caught by some blunder that one would think a child would have foreseen and prevented, but I caught one man by his knowing too much.”

“How was that?”

“I’ll tell you while I smoke another pipe. It happened while I was employed by the Girdle Express company as detective. One day the ‘old man’ (the chief always called the head of the company the ‘old man,’ though himself his senior) sent for me and said: ‘Look here, H., here’s a case for you; none of us can make anything of it, and you must settle it.’”

“What is it,” said I.

“Just this: About three weeks ago a box of specie was shipped from a bank in St. Louis to a New Haven bank by our express, and it arrived a thousand dollars short, and we had to pay the difference. Now we want you to catch the thief.”

“Perhaps it was short on the start.”

“No, it wasn’t. We have investigated that, and find it was all right, and the box was sealed with four seals, which were unbroken when delivered at the New Haven bank, where the cashier opened it.”

“Maybe the cashier—”

“No, he didn’t. We are all right at both ends of the route, and the money was certainly stolen by some of our employees, and that is what bothers me. I don’t care about the money, but we can’t afford to keep a man who steals.”

“Can’t you give me any clew?”

“Not that I know of. Here’s the box.”

And at that he pulled out an ordinary specie box, made of pine boards, and with four seals around the cover bearing the stamp of the company. This did not seem to promise much, and while I sat turning it over the old man said:

“You see there isn’t much to go by there.”

Just then I saw the mark of about two-thirds of a hammer-head, very faint, on the bottom of the box. That gave me an idea. Said I:

“How much money was there in the box?”

“Twenty-five thousand dollars in twenty dollar gold pieces.”

“Can you tell me whose hands it passed through on the trip?”

“From D—— east I can; west of that you will have to go to Chicago.”

At that he rang a bell and ordered a book to be brought, in which was recorded the names of the messengers on the route at the time the box went from D—— to New Haven, the times of the trains, and the points at which they stopped. I looked this over carefully, but didn’t find what I wanted, and said, “I must go to Chicago; the money was stolen west of D——.”

“How do you know?”

“Never mind now, I’ll tell you when I find the man.”

“All right, only find him. Here is a letter to the head of the Chicago office, and a check for what money you want. When will you start?”

“Tonight. Meantime don’t let anybody known what I’m about.”

“All right, but catch the man.”

I started that night, and, on arriving in Chicago, lost no time in reporting to the company’s office, where I asked for the route book, and soon decided that the robbery had been committed between there and St. Louis. I then went carefully over the list of messengers who had had charge of the box between those two cities, asking the history of each one. At last I pitched upon one, and, as I don’t want to give his name, I will call him Jones. Said I, “Who is this Jones?”

“What! Jones; why he is our oldest messenger—been with us ever since we started. Good heavens! you don’t suspect him?”

“Certainly not,” I replied, “but you see I want to know all about these men. What was Jones’ business before he entered your employ?”

This required consultation of another book, and I was informed he had been a carpenter. “All right,” said I, “when does he go on again?”

“Tomorrow night, but for God’s sake Mr. H——, don’t suspect him! You might as well suspect the old man himself.”

This nettled me a little, and I answered, rather sharply, “I suspect no one, but he took that money; now give me a ticket for St. Louis, and a note authorizing me to ride in the express car on the way back, and I will prove what I say.”

Knowing my standing with the company he complied with my demand, though only after a great deal of grumbling, and I went on to St. Louis to return by the train on which Jones was messenger. I soon made my way into his car, and, by aid of my credentials, scraped an acquaintance with him. I found him a pleasant, gentlemanly man nearly forty-five years old, but with an air of premature care and anxiety about him, as though he were haunted by some unacknowledged trouble. I chatted with him about everything except the robbery, until we passed P——, when I knew we had nearly an hour before we would reach the next stopping place. I then turned the conversation on express robberies in general, and the duties and responsibilities of agents, and finally said to him:

“You have a hammer in your safe?”

“Yes.”

“Let me see it.”

He produced it, and at the same time I brought from a bundle I carried the specie-box, turned it bottom up before him, and said:

“Fit that hammer into that mark.”

“Wh—what do you mean?” he stammered.

“Fit it in!” said I; and he did so, the fit was perfect.

“Now,” said I, “I will give you half an hour in which to produce that money you stole from that box.” Of course he blustered, but I stood firm, and finally said: “See here; on such a night you were messenger on this train; in your charge was this box, containing specie; you turned it bottom up just about at the point on the road that we are now; you whittled out a pine wedge, drove it between the bottom and side of the box so as to raise the bottom, and then reached your hand in and raked off what pieces you could without wrenching the bottom entirely off; then you nailed the bottom down again, but while doing it the car gave a sudden jolt and you struck over and your hammer made that mark on the box.”

He dropped into a chair at once, exclaiming:

“My God! How do you know all that?”

“Never mind how I know it,” said I, “but give me the money.”

“Will the company prosecute me?”

“I don’t know—if you return the money, perhaps not.” Well, to make a long story short, he did return the money, and I returned triumphant. He was dismissed, but not prosecuted, in consideration of his long service.

“But, chief,” said we all, “we didn’t exactly see how you caught your man, nor wherein he was too knowing—enlighten us.”

“Well,” said he, “it was all common sense. That hammer mark showed me the box had been opened from the bottom, and that it had been done while the cars were in motion, or else the man would not have made such a mis-stroke. I knew it must have been done between two stations far apart, to give time for the robbing, and, last of all, I knew it was done by a carpenter—”

“But how?”

“Because only a carpenter would have known that he could drive a pine wedge between the pine boards of the box without leaving a mark—any one else would have used an iron or hardwood wedge, and left the mark of it on the edge of the box—so you see this man excited my suspicions by knowing too much or being too cautious.”

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