

Experiences with Detectives

[M. Laing Meason]

CHAPTER I.—THE LOSS.

NOT long ago a foreign firm in London asked me to assist them in recovering some bonds, the loss of which would have embarrassed them very much. The circumstances under which these documents had been taken from them were very peculiar, so much so that they could hardly move in the affair themselves without injuring the credit of their house. The son of the senior partner, a young man about 25 years of age, was employed by the firm, and acted as a sort of confidential clerk or secretary to his father. The junior partner was often obliged to be on the Continent for several weeks together; and as the senior had very delicate health, and often absented himself from the office for a day or two on that account, he had given, with the full consent of his partner, his son power to sign for the firm “by procuration,” as it is called. The son had, as was only found out when too late, been gradually falling into bad habits, and unknown to his father, used to bet upon races, and otherwise do much that he had been far wiser to have left alone. Latterly his creditors had been pressing him very hard. He had some overdue acceptances, which the holder threatened to tell his father of if they were not taken up. He also owed money to tradesmen, and had even more discreditable liabilities which he would not for the world his father should know of. For some time past he had used his power of signing for the firm to sign checks for £10 or £20 whenever he wanted money. His father had been unwell, the junior partner was to be absent for some weeks, and the check-book, as well as the banker’s pass-book, were left in his hands. At last he had got so deep in the mire of debt and difficulty that there was but two roads open for him—the one to make a clean breast of it, tell his father all he had done, and ask him to pay his debts; the other to leave London and Europe and to go to America. In an evil hour he chose the latter; but before doing so, drew out by check from the bank nearly the whole balance then to the credit of the firm. Fortunately this was only a few hundred pounds, as several large acceptances had fallen due a short time before. But in addition to this money he took with him bonds to a large amount, which represented the greater part of the capital of the firm. These, being shares on foreign companies, were payable “to bearer,” and therefore it was surmised that he must have pledged them. He had been traced to Paris, and from there to Havre, where he had embarked for America. I mention these various circumstances to show how it was that the firm itself could not act openly in the matter without injuring very greatly their credit in the commercial world, and why it was they requested me to find out, if possible, whether these stolen bonds were pledged; if so, where, and for what amount, and to redeem them as cheaply and as quickly as was possible.

A clue—a very slight one, it is true, but still a clue—was given me as to where to begin my inquiry. Nearly all the checks which the young man had drawn without authority in so doing had been traced to the bank where a very notorious money-lender kept his account. This individual had the very worst of characters, having, as was well known, been some years ago mixed up with the robbery of a well-known bank in London—not in deed as principal in the work, but as instigator, receiver of the plunder, and having profited by the plunder very much more than the chief actor in the affair. But the accusation could never be proved against him, and the consequence was that he was a free man, whereas the clerk who had perpetrated the fraud had been for some years in penal servitude.

CHAPTER II.—THE WRONG SCENT.

The object of the firm that employed me to recover these bonds for them was two-fold. In the first place they wanted to get the documents back, but to get them back without creating any scandal or any talk. It was almost of as vital importance for their credit that the conduct of the senior partner's son should not be known as it was that the missing property should be found. This was the reason why they did not wish to appear in the matter themselves. I was to act as if the bonds had been mine. They did not expect me to do any detective work myself, but merely to employ the proper persons for the work, and direct, under private instructions from them, the search. Funds almost to any amount were placed at my disposal. Any expense that I should deem necessary to incur would be met at once. All I had to do was to find out where the bonds were, for what amount the senior partner's son had pledged them, and to recover them for as little as I could, but in any case to recover them. But under no circumstances whatever was the young man who had perpetrated the fraud to be followed to America, nor was his name nor that of the firm to be brought forward.

By the very simple process of going to Havre and inquiring at the American steam-packet office I found out that the absconding man had paid for his passage in Bank of England notes. Of these notes about half were traced as coming from the money-lender of whom I have spoken; the other half were traced as coming from an individual in Paris who followed a like occupation, and who, up on inquiry, I found bore a very similar reputation. I further succeeded in finding out that between scoundrel number one in London—to whom I shall give the name of Mr. Nual—and scoundrel number two in Paris—whom I shall call Mons. Treves—there existed occasional business relations. But whether the money furnished by these worthies had been given for the bonds, in whose hands those documents now were, and how I was to recover them, and yet keep the whole affair quiet, was more than I could see my way to; and in my difficulty, as a matter of course, I applied to Scotland yard, and got one of the best officers of the detective force put under my orders.

It was the first—and I hope it will be the last—time that I ever had anything to do with conducting a criminal affair. But notwithstanding my inexperience, I could see at once that the man sent me by the London police, although recommended especially for the work, would never carry out the business. He was an honest, upright fellow as ever breathed, and would, I have no doubt, have braved any amount of danger in order to carry out a point of duty. Had I sent him on the track of any one who had absconded to America, and had furnished him with the name and photograph of the individual, I have no doubt that he would have brought the culprit back with him. But when asked for an opinion as to where he thought the stolen bonds were, or even, after having got a clue to the person who probably had them, he was asked what would be the best means of recovering them, he seemed quite at a loss what to do or what to advise. Then again, like the rest of his brother detectives from Scotland yard—at least all those that I saw—he was the policeman all over. Although dressed in plain clothes, there could be no doubt whatever as to what his calling was. His favorite costume was a black billycock hat, a dark cutaway coat, and drab trousers; but he might just as well have worn a helmet, a blue tunic, and a leather belt round his waist. More than once as we went along the streets I heard cabmen, roughs, and others say to each other, “There goes sergeant Henry: who is he going to nab?” And when, upon one

occasion—having previously procured him a suit of fashionable clothes—I sent him with a letter of introduction to the man we suspected, stating that he was a Yorkshire gentleman wishing to discount a bill, Mr. Nual knew him at once, and ordered him out of his office. In a word, it seemed impossible to make use of him in the way I required, owing to his appearance being so perfectly well known in London. Had he been able to go to any one and say, “I am Detective Henry, and I want you to tell me so and so,” he might have been of considerable service to me; but to conduct a delicate inquiry of the kind I had in hand he was of no use whatever, and was, in fact, only a hindrance to me. I would have entrusted him with untold gold; but as a detective to find out what I wanted to know I would rather have paid him to keep away.

CHAPTER III.—THE RIGHT SCENT.

After beating about the bush for some ten days in London, it struck me that I might just as well try the other end of the wood, and see whether I could not find my game with less trouble in Paris. Part of the notes which the young man had paid away at Havre had been paid to M. Treves, the money lender in that city; and as it seemed hopeless to persevere on this side of the Channel, I thought I might as well see what could be done on the other; and the morning after my arrival in the capital of France I went to the Rue de Jerusalem, and sent up my card, asking as a particular favor to be allowed an interview with the Chief of Police.

I was not kept waiting more than ten minutes before I was ushered up to the sanctum of the man who had such power in Paris. I at once told him, although without giving names, that my business was to recover certain bonds that had been stolen. He asked me if I suspected any one in particular. I said I did, and told him the name and address of M. Treves. He asked me if I would like to know the kind of character the man bore. I replied that I would like very much to do so; although I had heard already too much of him. He then wrote the name down on a piece of paper, spoke through a tube to someone in a room below, and put the paper in a sort of small lift which was in the wall by his side. We went on talking upon various matters for about five minutes, when a sound was heard through the speaking pipe. The Chief then opened the lift, took from it a slip of paper, and read out the few words which were written as the character of M. Treves:

“A money-lender.”

“Has dealings with young men of good family.”

“Usurious in the extreme.”

“Suspected of receiving stolen banknotes from England.”

“Never been brought to justice.”

“A character tarnished in many ways.”

“Has been twice bankrupt.”

“Now,” continued the Chief of Police, “I know that you Englishmen like to take everything by storm. If you attempt to do this in Paris you never will gain your ends. You don’t know in London what the word detective (*police secrete*) means, although none of your novels or plays are complete without one or more of that occupation among its characters. You had better not be seen speaking to any of my people here; but give me your address, and one of my best men” (he called them employees) “shall call at your hotel to-night. Leave the matter to him, tell him all you know, and if the matter can be sifted, depend upon it he will do so. We have,” he continued, “in France, three branches of secret police—namely, the political, the criminal, and the civil. Your affair comes under the latter category, and I will send you an individual who will be useful to you in France, and much more useful than any of your ‘policemen detectives’ in London, even if you take him there with you.”

The Chief was evidently too polite to cast ridicule on anything English before me, but from his manner, more than his actual words, I could see that he did not hold our secret police in very great estimation.

CHAPTER IV.—STILL SEEKING.

That evening as I sat in the court of the Grand Hotel, drinking my after dinner *demi-tasse*, and smoking my after-dinner cigar, the card of Monsieur Bergnet was brought me by the waiter, who said that a stranger wished to see the gentleman occupying room No. 207, which was certainly myself. The card was speedily followed by the owner thereof, who in a half whisper told me he had come to see me on the part of *Monsieur le Chef*. At first I felt sure M. Bergnet was a head clerk, or chief of some department in the Rue de Jerusalem, but he quickly undeceived me. He was, as he said, a member of the secret police in the civil department, in other words a detective. But anything more utterly unlike our English conventional notion of a detective would be impossible to imagine. He was a bright, dapper little fellow of, I should say, about 50 years of age; well dressed in a closely fitting frock coat, with a hat that must have come from a fashionable maker, good boots, well-gloved hands, a morsel of red ribbon at his button hole, and altogether looking like a French military man in plain clothes, or the head clerk in a prosperous bunk. My first thoughts were to contrast him with the big, honest faced, heavy-looking, billycock-hat and policeman’s boots wearing men I had seen at Scotland yard. Monsieur Bergnet accepted a cup of coffee and a cigar which I offered him, and when I put the question to him whether his calling was likely to be known to the frequenters of the Grand Hotel he laughed heartily. “Not only,” he said, “in the Central Hotel, but if anywhere in Paris my occupation was known. I should be no longer worth retaining under Monsieur le Chef. I have been in England,” he continued, “and have seen in Scotland yard your detectives. *Ce sont braves gens*, but *ils ne connaissent pas leur métier*—they are not up to their work. Your authorities make a great mistake. They unite the person who has to detect crime with the individual who has to arrest the criminal; with us it is quite different. I have been twenty-five years an employee in the Rue de Jerusalem, but I never arrested a man in my life. That is the work of the sergeants de ville, either in uniform or plain clothes. Your detectives are nothing more than sergeants de ville in plain clothes. Why, as they walk along the streets *les gamins de Londres* call out, ‘There goes Sergeant Smith, that is Sergeant Jones.’ And now, Monsieur, let me hear in what way I can be of any service to you. Only before you begin, let me beg of you to tell me everything—any family difficulty, any scandal to be avoided, or whatever else may seem a stumbling block in your road. On these

conditions I may be able to assist you. But if you keep back anything from me, it is probable that I may injure instead of forwarding your interests.”

Our coffee finished we strolled out, and while we were walking up and down the Boulevard des Capucins I told him the whole story from first to last, of which the reader has already had an outline. He seemed to take in the whole affair at once, and to recollect the most trivial details respecting it. He told me that he knew something of Mr. Nual and Monsieur Treves, having had more than once to “look up” the latter in the way or business. In the work to be done he seemed to determine at once what was the best line of action. Of this mention will be made presently. One of his plans involved a change of costume and disguise, upon which I remarked that rogues who were ever on the alert would be pretty sure to discover any attempt made by the same individual to disguise himself in more than one character. Upon this Monsieur Bergnet laughed—like everything else he did, his laugh was genial, but gentle and inoffensive—and said: “Look here, mon cher Monsieur, you other Englishmen are fond of betting. I will bet Monsieur one hundred francs that within the next forty-eight hours. Although he has been warned of what am going to do, I will speak to Monsieur four times, and for at least five minutes each time, and on every occasion in different costume. If upon one of these occasions Monsieur recognizes me then I will forfeit my one hundred francs.”

As a matter of course I smiled at what M. Bergnet said, believing at first he was merely joking, and afterward that he was merely boasting of the faculties he had in his own peculiar line. But he insisted upon holding to the bet, and for the purpose of pleasing him, not for any other reason, I agreed to stake the amount he mentioned. At the Grand Motel we parted, agreeing to meet the following evening and talk over matters.

After M. Bergnet had left me, I recollected that I wanted to purchase a pair of boots, my own being somewhat heavy for the dry climate and clean streets of Paris. I therefore walked as far as the shop of a shoemaker with whom I had dealt formerly in the Rue de Rivoli. It was getting late, and the assistants were commencing to put up the shutters. I did not, therefore, wait to get what I wanted, but giving the number of my room at the Grand Hotel, asked them to send me half a dozen pairs of boots to select from next morning, so that I could try them on before dressing.

The next morning, accordingly, before I was out of bed, one of those male house maids who do out the bedrooms of every French hotel, knocked at my door and told me that a person from my *bottier* had called with shoes and boots, as directed the day before. I jumped up, pulled on my dressing-gown, and admitted the man. He was one of those very decidedly French workmen that one only sees in Paris; and wore one of those curious blue aprons coming up over his chest that are, I believe, a specialty of the French operative shoemaker. On coming into the room he called my attention to the hour, 9:30, as indicated by the time-piece on the chimney, remarking that he believed the pendule was slow, but that the pendule in hotels never went well. I then proceeded to try on the boots, some of which were too large, others too small, and at last the boot maker’s man advised me to have a pair made, and proceeded to measure me for them. Altogether, he was about twenty minutes in the room, during which he stood before me, moved here and there, and gave me every opportunity of looking at him sideways or full in the face. When he had finished measuring me, and had gathered the various boots and shoes he had brought into the bag, he startled me by asking me whether I knew a certain Monsieur Bergnet. Before I answered, and

before I had the slightest glimmering of the truth, the man pulled off a very natural-looking black wig, as well as an equally natural looking short cropped beard and mustache, and there stood my friend, the employee of the *police secrete* in the civil department. He was amused at the amazement depicted on my countenance, but merely said: "Au revoir, Monsieur; you will admit that I have won one point out of four toward gaining the bet." Before I could reply he had gone.

CHAPTER V.—THE WAGER.

It may be supposed that I was naturally somewhat out of temper with myself for having allowed myself to be taken in so soon after Bergnet had made the bet with me. I made a very determined resolution to look closely at every one that should come near me for the next two days. Not that I wished to win M. Bergnet's money, nor would I have taken it if I had found him out in his disguise. But still no Englishman likes to get worsted in a wager, more particularly when the loss of it indicates that he is not so observant as he might be. When the man chambermaid answered my bell I looked at him, half expecting that it was again M. Bergnet in disguise. This, however, only proved to be an idea, for the man was the same as had taken my clothes to brush them half an hour before. But this did not prevent me, as I went downstairs, from looking at every one I met as if he was a police agent trying to hide his real character from me. In the vestibule of the hotel I found a young man waiting to deliver into my hands an important letter from London, which had been sent under cover to my bankers in Paris, in which house the young man was a clerk. I am afraid he must have thought me mad, for, instead of opening my letter, I stared in to his face, determined to see whether I could by any chance detect any likeness to Bergnet. But there was no margin for deception; the young man was so thoroughly English in his appearance, and so much taller than the detective officer, that I very soon saw the latter was not trying again to take me in. However, I wandered forth, determined not to be caught again. But I was very soon taught that my own mother wit was as nothing when compared to that of my French friend.

The arrangement between Bergnet and myself was that we were to meet after breakfast, say about 1 p.m., in the open space of the Palais Royal, and that whoever should arrive first would wait for the other, on one of the chairs opposite the Cafe Vefour. It was getting on toward 11, when the idea struck me that I would breakfast at the said cafe, and then, with cigar, coffee and that morning's *Galignani*, would pass away the time until Bergnet should arrive, taking in the meantime special care that I should not be deceived again, or, at any rate, not so easily as I had been in the morning.

The forenoon, as it often is in the month of May in Paris, was warm, though not unpleasantly hot, but quite enough so to render a breakfast in the open air preferable to eating inside. I therefore took up my quarters at one of the outside tables, and while ordering my omelette and cutlet of the waiter, a seemingly very old gentleman came up and seated himself at the next table to me, calling for a *demitasse*, and proceeding to read a copy of the *Figaro* which he had brought with him.

Although few Englishmen have traveled more on the continent than myself, I have the same objection which distinguishes my countrymen all over the world toward making new acquaintances. I might have sat at my breakfast and the old gentleman might have read his *Figaro* for the whole day without my making any advances toward him. Having, however,

finished his coffee and taken out his portemonnaie to pay for it, some two or three pieces of money slipped from the old gentleman's hand and rolled toward my feet. I naturally stooped and helped him to look for them; he thanked me, paid the waiter, called for a *petit verre*, and we naturally commenced talking together. Curiously enough, the conversation turned upon the facility of detecting persons who wished to disguise themselves; the old gentleman maintaining that, as with individuals, so with nations, no person could hide his peculiarities, or the peculiarities of his race. "For instance," he went on, "let a military man dress *en bourgeois*, or a civilian put on a uniform; a Frenchman have his clothes made London, or an Englishman go to a Parisian tailor; there was no doubt but that men of an ordinary observance could easily distinguish what the individual really was. Thus," he continued, "no one could mistake Monsieur to be anything but an Englishman, and one who has most probably been in military employment in his own country. In the same way, I," meaning himself, "could not pass for anything except a French man, a *flaneur*, and an unmistakable frequenter of the boulevards."

He was such a chatty, genial old gentleman that the time passed away imperceptibly. We talked about the success of Schneider in London; about the Emperor's health; about the French elections, and what not. I accepted a pinch of snuff from him, and he tried one of my regalia cigars. At last, as the time drew near when Bergnet ought to have made his appearance, I began to look at my watch, and to glance round to see whether the police agent had taken up his quarters on any of the chairs which were then filling very fast with the usual after-breakfast coffee drinking crowd of well-dressed middle-class Paris idlers. Seeing I was looking for someone, my companion said: "Perhaps Monsieur is expecting a friend?" "Yes," I replied, "I made an appointment with a gentleman to meet me here about one o'clock, and I am afraid I shall miss him in the crowd." "Perhaps I can assist Monsieur," said the old gentleman: "Is Monsieur's friend a short *svelt* little man? is his name Bergnet? because if so, he is at Monsieur's disposition."

With this the old gentleman took off his hat, bringing away with it the gray false side and back hair he wore; he straightened himself as he sat in his chair, and, behold! Monsieur Bergnet was before me. I had actually sat and talked to him for upward of an hour, without having the least idea to whom it was that I was speaking. Rather than be beaten again—which I felt certain would be the case if I continued to tempt fortune—I at once gave in; paid M. Bergnet the five napoleons I had lost, and begged that he would subject me to no more humiliation by taking me in again as to his appearance and disguise.

CHAPTER VI.—FOUND.

The day following that on which Bergnet had twice deceived me by disguising himself, he set to work in earnest to try and recover the bonds of which I was in search. When I learned from him, and, indeed, saw with my own eyes, that he called upon M. Treves, the French money-lender, as an English gentleman in difficulties who wanted to discount a bill, as a young Swiss who wanted employment as a clerk, and as a German who had got some bank notes which he wished to get rid of quietly, as being stolen property; when I saw that in none of these disguises he was found out, I began to be less ashamed of myself for having been taken in. Certainly, in some matters the old saying in the Crimea, "They manage these things better in France," holds good. How it was brought about I never knew (except that I had to pay about £5 for the business), but within a

week after I put the matter into Bergnet's hands M. Treves' only clerk was arrested for complicity of fraud in something or other. I don't think he was guilty, and I am quite sure he was not detained very long by the police, for I saw him the next day walking along the boulevards as if enjoying a very agreeable holiday. But in the meantime M. Treves engaged a young Swiss with flaxen hair as his employee, and that Swiss bore very strong resemblance to my friend Bergnet. This young Swiss clerk had a friend who often came to see him at his master's office, and who must have been twin brother to a subordinate agent of the police, who was very clever in all blacksmith's work, and who had a curious fancy for taking wax impressions of all the keys that he came across. Be that as it may, the Swiss clerk had not been more than a week with M. Treves when I was shown by M. Bergnet a copy of the indorsement which certain bonds, contained in the safe of the money lender, bore. This copy so far satisfied me that there remained but one thing to be done, and that was to get hold of the originals. M. Bergnet had conducted the affair so very well that I resolved to put myself entirely in his hands, although I doubt very much whether at the Guildhall or Bow street the way that I set to work would have been considered quite justifiable.

Acting, therefore, under advice, and anxious to get back the bonds with as little scandal as possible, I called one afternoon upon M. Treves, and asked to see that gentleman alone. The Swiss clerk at once admitted me to his master, but not before I had noticed that in the anteroom there was a person who looked uncommonly like an individual I had seen in the Rue de Jerusalem, but who now did not wear his uniform. M. Treves, who was a gentleman of about 50, seemed to think I had come upon some business which would be profitable to himself, and asked me in the blandest tone what he could do to serve me. I did not beat long about the bush. I told him that two months previously a young man of such name had fled from Europe to America, and that before doing he had pledged with M. Treves certain bonds, representing such a sum of money. These bonds belonged to such and such a firm in London, and they had authorized me to pay £300 for their recovery. That if M. Treves was willing to accept my offer the little business could be got over at once; but that if not there was a police agent outside into whose custody it would be my disagreeable duty to consign him pending an investigation before the authorities of having received stolen property knowing it to be such.

At first the money-lender blustered a good deal and asked how I dare suspect him of any such transaction. I am afraid I said that letters had been received from the young man confessing where the bonds were that he had pledged. But be that as it may, the documents were given up after a very short parley, and M. Treves received from me in French gold a sum representing £300 in English sterling coin of the realm.

The Swiss clerk disappeared that evening, and was never again seen at M. Treves' offices. But curiously enough his own clerk reappeared the next day, saying that it was all a mistake, and that the police had liberated him from custody. M. Bergnet was seen the same fore-noon to enter Lafitte's bank, and to come out buttoning his pocket as if there was something more valuable than usual there-in. For my own part, I can only say that I received the thanks of the firm that had employed me, and with those thanks a check which took three figures to write. And so I suppose everybody was satisfied for even M. Treves received for the bonds nearly £100 more than, as we afterward found out, he had advanced upon them.—*Belgravia*.

New York Times, March 9, 1873

American Citizen [Canton, MS], April 5, 1873

Evening Star [Washington, DC], May 17, 1873

Chicago Daily Tribune, May 18, 1873

The versions published in America cite no author; however, this story was written by M. Laing Meason and first published in England in *Belgravia* in February 1873. The original has this additional introductory paragraph:

JUDGING from the many letters and leading articles which have lately appeared in the papers on the subject of our Metropolitan Police, it would seem that the public is not altogether content with the present organisation of that force, and more particularly with that portion of it whose duty it is to find out crime and criminals, which would otherwise be hidden and screened from justice. Now I am old enough to remember how, when during the Crimean war the utter disorganisation of the administrative portions of our army caused so much indignation throughout the country, great good was effected by comparing the working of our system with that of the French, and that those incomprehensible people called 'the authorities' were by degrees brought to adopt very much of what was good in the military organisation of our neighbours. With this intention, and for the same purpose, I propose to give my own recent experiences with two detectives, the one English and the other French, and leave my readers to draw their conclusions between the practical working of the two systems.