

Leaves from Detective Life.

“Who came in this carriage, John?”

“Mrs. Myrtle, from the avenue, I believe, sir. She’s met with a great loss. Diamonds I heard them say. The chief’s been waiting for you some time.”

John was the doorman from the Central Office. The carriage was drawn up in front of the station, and with the crimson silk lining, plate glass front and gilt hubs, resembled a miniature palace on wheels.

The two men on the box, clothed in livery and sitting bolt upright, with their arms folded; the polished and highly gilt harness, and the well groomed horses—all indicated the wealth of the owner, the widow Myrtle, whom I knew by reputation as one of the wealthiest ladies of New York.

I passed into the office, and in a moment afterward was introduced to Mrs. Myrtle as the officer for whom the chief had been waiting to take charge of the case.

It appeared from her statement that on the day of her marriage to Mr. Myrtle, that gentleman had presented her with a diamond cross, containing thirteen brilliants, the centre one alone being valued at seven hundred dollars, and the others ranging from five hundred to two hundred and fifty dollars each.

This made a costly ornament—so costly, indeed, that she seldom wore it but kept it carefully concealed in her jewel case. In looking over her jewel box on the morning of the day in which she had come to the office, she had discovered its loss; and there was something curious about this, also.

In putting the jewel away, she had placed it in a small box, wrapped the box in white paper, sealed it, and laid it away among the other valuables—nor had she unsealed it until that day, and then out of mere curiosity; but upon opening the little box she found the jewel gone, and in its place a small but solid piece of lead.

She had taken the box in her hands many times, she said, and as it always appeared weighty, she had no idea, of course, that the jewel was not there, and this was the circumstance that made the time of the robbery a mystery.

She was equally at sea as to who was the probable robber. She scouted the idea that it could have been any member of the household. There was but one beside herself who knew just where she kept her jewels.

This was an old female nurse, who had been in the Myrtle family for years, who had been amply provided for in Mr. Myrtle's will, but who still preferred to remain a member of the household. She was more like a mother than a nurse, Mrs. Myrtle said, "one of the dearest old souls in the world;" and of course she did not take it.

"Who, then do you think did?" asked the chief.

"My dear sir," she answered, "that is what I have come here to ascertain."

As this was one of the cases in which the premises must be thoroughly overlooked before any plan of action could be decided upon, I took the lady's address, and arranged to call at her residence that evening at an early hour.

Then she swept out of the office into her magnificent equipage, and was rolled away.

The Myrtle mansion was one of those palatial residences incident to the lower portion of Fifth Avenue some years ago. It stood on the corner of the avenue, and on an intersecting street; and at the rear end of the lot on the street side was the stable and carriage house, the front wall of which was continuous with, but lower, of course, than the wall of the main building.

It was evidently a stable on the ground floor, with apartments for the coachman and footman above. Having satisfied myself with a leisurely view of the exterior of the mansion, I rang the door-bell, handed my card to a servant, and was ushered into the reception room to await Mrs. Myrtle's pleasure.

In a few moments the lady appeared, and in the course of a conversation that ensued, substantially repeated the statement made at the office in the morning, with some additional words in favor of the nurse.

"Not one breath of suspicion against poor, dear old Jane, Mr. Officer," she said— "not one syllable, because I shall absolutely refuse to listen to it; and, in fact, would prefer to lose the jewels rather than to have her suspected, rightfully or wrongfully."

This was discounting one of my best points very largely in advance; but I simply bowed acquiescence, and requested to be shown to the room in which the missing valuables had been kept.

In compliance with this request, I was ushered into a small parlor on the second floor. Leading out of this room was a small bed-room, luxuriously furnished; and at one side of this room opposite the foot of the bed, was a small rosewood cabinet, containing several little compartments, in one of which Mrs. Myrtle kept her jewels.

“This is the safest place in the house,” said she. “Either Jane or myself are always at home, and we are in and out of here dozens of times during the day. When the servant is engaged in the inner room in the morning, Jane always sits in this parlor, and besides that, the servant does not know where my jewels are kept. This door to the left leads from the parlor into another bed-room which Jane has occupied for years—long before I came here, in fact; and the door opposite opens into an old lumber-room which has been closed ever since Mr. Myrtle's death, two years ago.”

A glance through the bed-room windows showed me that the stable and carriage-house formed a continuation of the main building, and had apartments in the upper story for the coachman and groom, as I had previously mentioned.

“Have you the key to the door leading to the lumber-room, Mrs. Myrtle?”

“Certainly I have. Is it possible you desire to explore it? Here Jane!”

A motherly-looking and very old lady, with a tottering gait, responded to Mrs. Myrtle's call, and was introduced to me as the Myrtle family nurse.

An instinctive feeling that Mrs. Myrtle was right in the estimate of Jane's innocence pervaded my mind in a moment.

I could see at once that she was one of those lovable old ladies that one feels drawn toward and to confide in her at once, and then to suspect her of a wrong would be a little worse than sacrilege.

From a bunch of keys hanging by her side she selected the proper one, and I unlocked the door. The interior of this room was utterly dark, but Mrs. Myrtle came quickly with a small astral lamp, by which I could see that the apartment was long and narrow, covering the same space in length as that occupied by the parlor and bed-room.

Mrs. Myrtle and Jane both objected to going into the dismal place, and I explored it alone. There were trunks, and old boxes, and dilapidated picture frames, piled up in different places, and musty papers scattered over the floor, all covered with dust, that must have been a long time accumulating.

A pile of discarded damask curtains, also covered with dust, completed the contents.

At the rear end of the room, just where the stable building should join the house, one of the damask curtains was hung up. It was dusty, like the others, but the dust appeared to have been recently disturbed.

Closer observation disclosed the shape of a door behind the curtain made flush with the wall. Then I noticed that the dust had been freshly brushed from some of the boxes in places, as if the

edge of a coat or a dress had recently been drawn over them, and upon one was the print of a hand, as if some one, groping in the dark, had slipped and had attempted to steady themselves.

Mrs. Myrtle smiled as I emerged from the room.

“I am so glad you have come back safe and sound,” she said. “Jane and I were quite ready to cry police, if you had encountered anything terrible,” and she gave vent to a hearty laugh.

I made no response to this pleasantry, other than to shake my head a little knowingly, but this did not save me from a further sally.

“You gentlemen of the detective profession are so provokingly mysterious,” she continued, “that one might die of curiosity twenty times before having it once gratified by you. But come, have no theory to give us?”

“None tonight madam; by your permission I will be here to-mor-row evening at this hour, and can then speak more definitely.”

“Another whole day of suspense!” she said, as I bade her good evening, and then, calling me back, she whispered, “You don't suspect Jane?”

“Not for a moment!”

“I am *so* grateful. Good-night, sir!” and I departed.

The years will be many and long before the image of Mrs. Myrtle, as she appeared that evening, is effaced from my mind.

Young, rich, handsome; her eyes brilliant, and her cheeks roseate in the flush tide of perfect health; her costume of rich material and subdued colors; her dark hair neatly arranged in the prevailing style; her voice musical; her manner vivacious; and all composing a picture to which the luxurious surroundings—the gems of art, the paintings adorning the walls, and the odorous and many-colored flowers in the mantle vases—formed a most appropriate and elaborate setting.

The following morning found me in the vicinity of the Myrtle mansion at an early hour, and in a position where I could see without being observed. The carriage was outside of the stable, and the footman was busily engaged cleaning it.

The sight of this fellow somewhat astonished me. There had been no occasion for my observing him closely on the previous day, when he was sitting on the box of the carriage. but now I recognized him as a man who had once been arrested for some offense, the nature of which I could not just then call to mind; but the sight of his face completed my theory of the Myrtle robbery, and I returned to the Central Office.

That same evening I called upon Mrs. Myrtle.

“What is your footman’s name?” I asked.

“Why, what a question! His name is Thomas Bowler.”

“How long has he been in your employ?”

“Not quite five weeks.”

“And the coachman and groom?”

“Oh, they have been in the family for years.”

“You informed me, last evening, that you had a step-son—Mr. Myrtle’s by his former wife—and that the young man was at school. I desire that you send your groom to attend him as a body-servant for a time. Then have your solicitor advertise for a groom, and employ the man I shall send him.”

Mrs. Myrtle shook her head and laughed; then became serious, and interposed numerous objections, but finally acquiesced.

Three days after this the groom was at work. It was Joe Tracer, as a matter of course. Judging from all the surroundings of the case, I had come to the conclusion that Bowler was the robber, and that his detection could be accomplished only through gaining his confidence. This was why Tracer had become a groom.

He was not long in getting on intimate terms with Bowler, and, after working with him a week, the latter informed Tracer of the door leading out of the stable-loft, and through which access could be had to the house through the lumber room.

Then Tracer proposed a plan to rob Mrs. Myrtle of all her jewels, and undertook to ascertain in just what part of the house they were kept. Bowler informed him that he had already ascertained this fact from a woman who had once been in Mrs. Myrtle’s service, and whom he intended shortly to marry.

As the plan for this robbery progressed, Tracer and Bowler grew still more confidential. One morning, the former exhibited to the footman a huge roll of bank notes, informing him that they were the proceeds of the sale of a diamond brooch which he had purloined at his former place of service in a neighboring city; that he had a friend who dealt in such articles, who had removed the diamonds from the brooch and disposed of them for a commission, and without asking any unpleasant questions.

The bait took even better than we expected.

“When I was in South America,” said Bowler, “I got a diamond cross, and I’ve had it ever since, because I’m afraid to sell it. Maybe you can help me with it.”

“Go with me any night you please,” answered Tracer, “and I will show you my friend. He will buy it, and won’t be too inquisitive.”

Of course I was to be the “friend” in the case, and, for the more perfect personation of the character, hired a little shop on the east side of the town, placed a few boxes on the shelves, hung up a quantity of old clothes, put on a long gray beard and a pair of glasses, in addition to a suit of greasy clothing, and patiently awaited their coming.

It required two days’ time, after this, to enable Tracer to work the matter up to a right point; but on the evening of the third day, when I had lighted my whale-oil lamp, and had seated myself among the old and musty garments, they made their appearance.

“Good-evening. gentlemens,” I said, in the best broken English I could command.

“Good-evening!” responded Tracer. “Here is a friend of mine who wants to transact a little business. Treat him as well as you did me, and he will be satisfied.”

Bowler came forward and shook hands cordially, and then produced a small linen handkerchief, tightly rolled up, and from which he brought out the diamond cross. It certainly was a magnificent jewel, its coruscations filling the dingy room even under the dull light of an oil lamp.

I examined it with great seeming care; and then, holding it up nearer to the light, said, contemptuously:

“My friends, these are only paste.”

“Paste? They can’t be paste!” exclaimed Bowler, with sudden and nervous anxiety. [“]A lady had them—I mean a gentleman, as would never wear—”

[“Tracer.] Lady is what you mean, and that lady is Mrs. Myrtle.”

Within the next moment, Bowler was in irons, and in the course of the ensuing half hour had fully confessed the theft, stating that he had learned from the woman previously alluded to, but whose name he refused to divulge, the details regarding this particular jewel; that he had prepared a box precisely like the one in which it was kept; had placed a piece of lead in it and sealed it up; had procured false keys with which to open the doors, and, watching his

opportunity, when the family were at breakfast on one occasion, had gone boldly in and made the exchange.

When Mrs. Myrtle subsequently held the glittering cross in her elegant hands, she could do no less than award us “gentlemen of the detective profession” the compliment of being something more than simply mysterious.

When Mr. Thomas Bowler was removed to the penitentiary, as he was after pleading guilty to the theft of the jewel, he paid us a similar compliment—albeit he was less choice in his mode of expressing it.

This work was published in
The Seattle [WA] Daily Intelligencer, October 2, 1877

This work was reprinted as
“The Diamond Robber” in
The Advocate [Sturgeon Bay, WI], November 9, 1889