

French Detectives.

Some five or six years ago, being on a visit to Paris, I went to see a friend, a French gentleman I had known for many years, who, with his wife and only daughter, lived in a small house in the Faubourg St. Germain. I found the family one and all in the greatest possible excitement. During the night their domicile had been broken into and property to the value of about 30,000 francs (£1,200), consisting of plate, jewels, money and bonds, had been stolen. My friend was by no means a rich man, and the loss was to him a very serious one. The strangest part of the affair was that no one seemed to have the slightest idea by who or how the lost things had been taken. They were kept in a large iron-clamped chest, which was never moved out of the *salle a manger*, and which was found in its usual place next morning, but with the lock forced open. The servants of the family were only two in number, and consisted of an elderly man and his wife, who had been in the same service for more than ten years. They did not sleep on the same floor as their master and mistress; but, as is usual in Paris, occupied a room some stories higher in the *mansarde* or attic. They had a key by which to let themselves in from the back stairs to the kitchen in the morning; but at the time of the robbery neither one nor the other had been in the dining-room where the chest was kept until after my friend's daughter had found out what had happened. The lady of the house had locked the chest—it was her usual habit before she had retired to rest the previous night. The key was found hanging on a nail at the head of her bed, its usual place. The theft must have been committed between eleven p. m. when the chest was locked, and eight a. m., when the daughter discovered the loss. The *concierge* declared that no one save those who lived in the house had passed his lodge during those hours. The door of the apartment opening on to the main staircase was found locked and the key on the inside. Altogether it was a most mysterious business, of which no one could make anything save that the property had vanished; therefore, it must have been taken by someone.

My friend resolved to go at once to the Rue de Jerusalem—the Scotland yard of Paris—and ask the authorities to inquire into the matter. I suggested an agent de police or policeman from the nearest station might be called, but was told that that was not the way they did things in Paris. The policeman that kept order in the streets, and those whose business it is to discover what has become of stolen property, are two departments perfectly distinct from each other. Being anxious to see how our neighbor managed affairs of this kind, and whether they were better up to their work than our London detectives, I accompanied my friend to the Prefecture de Police, where he sent in his card, and we were at once, ushered into the presence of a quiet-looking elderly gentleman, one of the *sous-chefs* of the department, who looked more like a bank manager, or head clerk in a large mercantile house, than a man whose occupation was to indicate where the thieves and others who were “wanted” could be laid hands on.

A Frenchman is nothing if he is not polite. The individual into whose sanctum we were shown welcomed us with a civility which nothing could exceed. He heard my friend's story from first to last, made a few notes with a pen in a kind of diary which he had on his

desk, and now and then asked a question or two respecting the house and apartment which had been robbed, the servants, visitors, and other matters. But he did not detain us long. The interview was over in twenty minutes. The sous-chef then told my friend that he would send one of his subordinates to see the chest the next day. In the meantime would my friend prepare a list and as minute a description as possible of the property that had [been] stolen? As a rule Frenchmen, no matter to what rank of life they belong, have the greatest possible respect for all who are in any way connected with the police, and never dream of disputing what they say, but my friend was some what annoyed at what he [d]eemed useless delay, and asked whether the police agent could not be sent at once. The sous-chef, however, overruled his objection, and said it was best, for many reasons, the agent should not go the house until next day. "In the first place," he said, "I do not wish any one but yourselves to know that the gentleman who will call on you to-morrow is in any way connected with the police. He will send up a card, and you will be kind enough to receive him as a friend—talk to him of the robbery in the presence of your servants as you would to any casual acquaintance.'['] He then turned to me and said, laughingly "We do not manage these affairs as you[']d in London. "We don't affiche our police; we don't send constables (he pronounced the word "conestabel") to make a fuss and put every one on their guard; we like to do things quietly; the result is better." He then bowed us out and we took our departure, not over assured as to what the upshot of the affair would be.

"Un monsieur qui desire vous voir," said my friend's man-servant next day, [putting] a card into his master's hand, just as we were finishing our mid-day meal, and a gentleman-like, middle-aged man was shown in. He was close shaved as to the chin and upper lip, but wore small whiskers, more like an Englishman of business of ten years ago than a native of la bel[le] France. He was well, but not fashionably dressed, and carried a small cane, with which he kept gently tapping his boot when not speaking. When the servant was in the room he confined his conversation to generalities, and gave his opinions freely on the political subjects of the day. When my friend spoke of the robbery and pointed to the chest out of which the property had been taken he merely glanced at it, looked at the lock for a moment, and then turned the conversation.

He asked madam to call her maid and talk to her on some indifferent subject. This was done, and I watched his face during the time the woman was present; but he merely looked at her once, and continued talking to me.

The only point on which he seemed really anxious was to obtain a fuller description of the articles lost than that he had been already furnished with.

My friend offered to give him details then and there, but he declined to wait for it, on the plea that by prolonging his visit he might arouse suspicion among the servants. We suggested meeting him near the Rue de Jerusalem; but he laughed at the idea, saying that if he were once seen near the police office his occupation would be gone, as he would be no longer of any real use as an agent of the police. So an appointment was made to meet at the Cafe du Helder, on the Boulevards, where a more detailed description of the lost property should be given to him. He then took his leave, but asked me to accompany him

down stairs, so as to impress the concierge with the idea that he was an acquaintance of some standing. Before arriving at the bottom, I found my friend had managed to dirty his coat in a manner which necessitated his turning into the concierge's lodge to borrow a clothes brush, thereby gaining an opportunity of casting an eye round the small room and on its occupier. To me, being initiated, the object was palpable, though quite unsuspected by the individual in question. When the brushing was over, we walked out together, and in the course of conversation we touched upon the way in which some persons can so disguise themselves as to hide their individuality from their most intimate friends.

I expressed myself as being doubtful whether this could be really done, provided the parties to be deceived were on the look out for such deception. My companion differed from me, and offered to disguise himself so effectually that he would, in the course of the next twenty-four hours, speak to me for at least ten minutes without arousing my suspicions. I accepted the challenge, and staked the price of a dejeuner at any cafe he would like to name. He agreed, and the very same day won the bet in the following manner:

Shortly after leaving the detective I met an old friend, who asked me to dine with him at Versailles that evening. I agreed to do so, but could not leave Paris as early as my friend intended to do, and, therefore, told him I should go down by the 5:30 train from the Gare St. Lazare. I did so, and as I got into a first-class carriage I remarked a short, gentlemanly-looking man, with white hair, who followed me into the same compartment. Frenchman-like, he began to talk about things in general, and we chatted, more or less, all the way to Versailles. When within ten minutes or so of our destination my new friend quietly took off his hat, pulled off a wig, got rid of a mustache, and, to my utter amazement, sat revealed before me as my friend, the detective! How he had managed to find out that I was going to Versailles which I had no idea of myself when I left him or how he had so effectually concealed his appearance, that I, sitting within three feet of him, had no idea he was the man I had left some four hours previously, are problems which I cannot solve. The detective himself only laughed when I asked him how he had contrived it. He was evidently greatly flattered at the amazement I displayed; but, beyond showing me with some pride his wig and mustache, he was very reticent, and would not enter into any details. That he had fairly won the breakfast there could be no doubt, but he said he would rather put off the event until he could see his way as to whether or not he should be able to recover a part of the property my friend had lost. We then parted, he taking the train back to Paris, I going on to the house where I was engaged to dine.

This was on the Thursday evening. On the Monday, about eleven a. m., the waiter of the hotel where I was staying told me that a gentleman wished to speak to me. He was shown up, and this time the detective was not disguised. He told me that for reasons which I would learn later, he thought it better to come to me than to go to my friend's house in the Faubourg St. Germain. He said he had good news; for that he believed that the greater part of the stolen property had been recovered, and asked me to go the Prefecture de Police on the following day, about two p.m., and to take my friend with me. We did so, and found that what the detective had told me was true. Among other valuables that had been stolen was a canvas bag containing between two and three hundred napoleons.

These had disappeared; but the jewelry, the plate, and what was still more surprising, the bonds, payable, as all such documents are in France, au porteur (to the bearer), had been found, and were ready for my friend to identify. This was easily done, but nothing was allowed to be touched for the present, as it would have to be sworn to at the trial which would shortly take place. When my friend returned home he found that while he was at the Prefecture the concierge had been arrested for conniving at the theft, and in the lodge was found, in a hidden cupboard, the bag containing the money. In a word, without fuss, publicity or loss of time, the whole of the property which had been stolen the week before was in the hands of the police. In ten days more the trial was over. The concierge and two of his relations were each condemned to five years of travaux forces (penal servitude), my friend got back the whole of his property, and, what to me as an Englishman seemed much more extraordinary, the total expense of the proceedings came to something like one hundred francs (£4). Even this payment was nearly all voluntary, for my friend insisted upon making a small present to the detective, who had done his work so well.

To give any details as to how the valuables were found, or how the robbery was traced to the concierge, is not in my power. The French police are invariably very reticent, especially in cases like the one I have attempted to describe. They have a theory that publicity on such occasions is a very great mistake and hinders justice. I called with my friend on the sous-chef to thank him for the trouble he had taken. He was a very intelligent person and evidently a man of education. He had been in England on business connected with his office, and spoke very freely about our police and their ways of doing business. He considered that such of the force as were employed in maintaining public order as doing the very best in Europe; but of our detective system he had a very low opinion. [As] he said, very truly, no sooner is a robbery committed in England than the utmost publicity is given to the whole affair, and the thieves are as well aware of what steps are [being] taken to unravel the matter as the [police] themselves. It is true that a certain number of our police wear plain clothes instead of uniform, but it is certain that these are as well known to the criminal classes of London as their brethren who wear [blue] tunics and helmets.

In Paris the detective who is engaged in tracing crime is, so to speak, hidden from public view. He rarely goes even to the Prefecture de Police; he has his order given by either by a confidential agent or by a letter written in cipher. He mixes in society and meets all sorts and conditions of men, but his occupation is known to very few persons indeed. So much is this the case that the French detectives very seldom know each other—that is to say, Monsieur A. may be very well acquainted with Monsieur B., but neither of them know that the other is employed by the police. I was told by one of the authorities in the Rue de Jerusalem that in London the undiscovered are to those that are discovered in the proportion of three to one. If the French police are right in their statements the larger the robbery that takes place in Paris the greater chance there is of its being found out, whereas in London we know the exact contrary to be the case.

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