

## *The Police System of London*

The police organization of London, which also embraces a supervision over several adjoining counties surrounding the metropolis and comprising a circumference of ninety miles, is a very perfect one, and may well be compared to a great living machine, keeping watch over the lives and property of two millions and a half of people. But perhaps the most curious is the ‘Detective’ branch of this organization.—In this art, success depends much upon individual qualifications, sagacity in drawing inferences from slight things, fertility of resource, a blood hound tenacity of pursuit, intimate acquaintance with the habits of thieves, and of their probable mode of acting in particular circumstances, and in the knack (and here real genius displays itself) of making a *cast* in the right direction in search of a clue. The old Bow Street professors of the science had attained to great perfection; they enjoyed great advantages, and received great rewards.—The peculiar nature of their business made them courted by the great, as well as feared by the small. Townsend was an intimate, we may say, of princes. Dressed in his customary suit, a yellow waistcoat, blue cloth cast with metal buttons, nankeen pantaloons, white silk stockings, and a flaxen wig, he might be seen walking down Constitution Hall in familiar chat with the Lord Chancellor. We will present the following extract showing the way in which the burglars were detected who broke into Mr. Holford’s house in the Regent’s Park.

“Mr. Holford, having gone to America, left his house, in the Regent’s Park, under the care of servants. About two o’clock in the morning of the 14th of October 1850, the butler heard some persons effecting an entrance into the dining room. He wakened the other servants, and having armed themselves, they went out on opposite sides of the house and suddenly attacked the four robbers, one of whom was knocked down and secured; the other 3 escaped.

Several shots had been fired; one servant, armed with a pistol with a spring bush at one of the robbers, and at so short a distance that the bayonet actually touched him. Traces of blood were found, and it was supposed that the man had been mortally wounded, and having run some way had been unable to go farther, and had probably been thrown by his companions into the Regent’s canal. The fact, however, was, that in the darkness and confusion, the burglar had tripped and fallen just as the trigger was pulled, and had received no injury, except that his hand, striking the end of the bayonet, had been slightly cut, as well as grazed by a couple of shot, and blackened by the powder, and the blood came from another of the robbers, who had been severely wounded in the head and neck by a random discharge of small shot. The third man was unhurt; and nothing was found on the premises but a hat with some very small holes in it. [”]—The mode in which the police detected and arrested these three men will illustrate our previous remarks, and show the working system which gleans information over a wide area, and combines it for practical application.

Next morning the prisoner was brought up for examination; he gave his name as Wm. Dyson; but among the criminal population names are assumed one day to be discarded the next, and afford no clue to the identity of the individual. The first step taken was to place among the crowd some keen observers to watch, not the case, but the *spectators*. As the examination proceeded, and the feelings of the listeners became excited by the dramatic way in which the story unfolded itself, and their varying emotions were more openly manifested, it was noticed by the police that two women were watching the proceedings with an intensity of anxiety which betrayed a

personal interest in the issue. Slight as the chance was, it was not neglected, and they were immediately marked for observation. After the examination, one of these women went to a beer shop, the other to see Dyson in the House of Detention, where he had been remanded. She soon rejoined her companion, and both were tracked across the river into Southwark; there they separated but from house to house the persevering detectives followed the *trail* of each until they reached their respective homes. Local knowledge being now wanted, the Southwark, or M. division was called into action. The woman who had gone to the prison was recognized by them as the mistress of a housebreaker, commonly known to the sobriquet of "Doctor"; the other was soon after ascertained to be living with, and the active assistant of a notorious ruffian of the name of James Mahon. This of course directed suspicion towards Mahon, and now was felt the power gained by a systematic watch over the criminal population. All prisons within the Metropolitan Police District are visited each week by an intelligent constable from every division; besides which it is the custom whenever an offender is arrested and taken to the police station, that he should be brought out of his cell and placed in such a position that every man of the division, as he went on duty, had a good view of him, so that in time their faces become perfectly well known. Moreover a patrol visits the thieves' houses of resort every night, and records in detail all those whom they find there. When it was circulated through the division that one of the Holford House gang, probably "Doctor", had been arrested, and that Mahon was suspected, one of the patrol recollected that at ten o'clock on the night of the burglary, they had found in a public house "Doctor", Mahon, two other men, Mitchell and Robinson, and a woman all apparently in earnest consultation.—The sergeant of the patrol went at once to the House of Detention, and there, in the prisoner Dyson, he recognized "Doctor". During the following nights it was also ascertained that none of the three suspected men appeared at their usual haunts. It was clear, therefore, that the first point was gained, the gang was known; the range of inquiry was at once limited to three known individuals, and the police now turned their undivided attention to the discovery of their places of concealment. Our readers will recollect our explanation of the abundant sources of information that may be opened up by judicious management; money being wanted, it was, under the advise of the magistrate, supplied by a friend of Mr. Holford, and the whole of the Southwark division being on the alert, feelers were put forth in every direction. One man was successful. He was acquainted with a woman who had formerly lived with Mahon, but had been deserted by him and he sounded her. Whether there had been a quarrel, or whether the woman's jealousy at being supplanted was stirring within her, or whether the reward alone was motive enough she consented to give her assistance, and the bargain was struck.—She could not, however, learn where Mahon was concealed, for his companion was faithful to him. But it is the curse of a criminal that friends and foes are alike dangerous, and she managed to find out that the other woman washed his clothes, and on the next Saturday evening would take some to him, and the plan was laid accordingly. When the Saturday night came, the false friend, followed at a safe distance by a "detective," found some pretext for joining the other, and the two women set out together, one carrying the little bundle of clean clothes. They crossed the river and proceeded rapidly by narrow courts and unfrequented dimly lighted streets, in the direction of Shoreditch. So thick and dark was the night that the detective sergeant would have been thrown out, had not this contingency been foreseen and guarded against. Under her dingy dress the confederate had put on a clean white petticoat, and at the sharp turns or crossing the dark dress was raised, and the *white* signal shown to her follower. In this way the whole of London was traversed, and at length they reached a public house in the Kingland Road. Here they stopped, the woman with the bundle went in, the other disappeared. The sergeant soon found a policeman on his beat, and

making himself known, secured his services, and directed him to bring two more. He then entered the house, and there, in a large room, where a number of thieves were smoking and drinking, he saw the object of his pursuit, Mahon, sitting beside the woman whose faithful services had so unwittingly betrayed him. Fortune seemed disposed to shower her favors on the police officer, for a little farther off he spied Robinson.—Confident in his ascendancy over any number of criminals, he allowed one policeman to show himself at the door, and with the quiet business-like manner that characterizes the detectives, he walked up to Mahon and told him “he was wanted.” The robber felt that his hour was come; as to resistance, notwithstanding the number present, no one so much as thought of it.—Each in his secret soul was relieved to find that *he* was not the person “wanted,” and was quite willing to sacrifice Mahon for the benefit of the community present; besides, for anything he knew, the whole division might be behind the policeman at the door. At a signal from the sergeant, this man now came in, his place however, for the sake of appearances, being immediately taken by another. Mahon, with perfect submission, went to the bar, where he was searched and handcuffed; Robinson was also arrested, and both prisoners were removed to the station house.

Some important evidence was supplied by a cabman, who had read in the newspapers the account of the robbery. He had been on his stand not very far from Holford’s House, when, about 2 o’clock in the morning on the 14th of October, (the hour a which the attempt had been made), a man ran up to him, and saying that his hand had been bitten by a dog, asked him to pump some water upon it, that he might wash away the blood. Immediately afterwards another man, *Without a hat*, and with blood pouring from his face and neck, ran up to the stand, called the cabman, and jumping hastily into the cab, was driven off towards the Strand. When the cabman was brought to the police office, he was confronted with Mahon, and recognized him as the man who had washed his hand at the pump. On the hand being examined, it was evident not only that the wounds had not been occasioned by the bite of a dog, and therefore his story to the cabman was false, but they corresponded to the cut of the bayonet and graze of the shot, and the dark blue stain of the gunpowder was still there. The wounds, however, were healing, and the hand returning to its natural state, so that these curious pieces of circumstantial evidence would have been lost, had there been much delay in Mahon’s apprehension.

It was of course surmised that the wounded man who called the cab, was the remaining one of the gang, Mitchell, and his conduct rendered this highly probable. While proceeding on his way, he heard a chaise coming after him in a gallop; he instantly called to the cabman to stop, jumped out, and, though almost fainting from loss of blood, attempted to run away. The chaise, however, passed on, and he returned, but in the extremity of his terror all considerations of prudence gave way before the one thought of watchfulness against pursuit, and he would not enter the cab again, but got upon the box. In the Strand he was put down,—the cabman, getting another fare, drove off, and all farther trace was lost.

The police, however, thought in these circumstances a criminal trying to escape, and finding his strength failing, would most probably desire to [be] driven *towards* his place of concealment, but would stop short of it in order to baffle pursuit, and were satisfied that Southwark was the cover he had gained; this coincided with the belief that Mitchell was the man, and the M. division were again set in motion. This time recourse was had to one of those women who, living by the vices of others, are perhaps the most degraded and infamous of the human race. For a stipulated

reward she engaged to endeavor to ascertain Mitchell's hiding place. Her information was, however, necessarily at second hand, and therefore imperfect, besides being tardy. Three times did the officer search houses which were indicated to them, but without success, Mitchell having got away before their arrival, and it seemed doubtful whether there was not some double treachery going on. The next place named was a house in Little Surrey Street, Blackfriars' Road; but as it was a private house kept by persons apparently supporting themselves by honest labor, it was necessary to proceed with much caution. A policeman was found who was a friend of the nearest baker, and who learned from him that an unusual quantity of bread had of late been supplied to the house; another policeman was acquainted with the owner of the house, and contrived on some pretext to get the door opened. The sergeant then went in and asked who the lodger was. While the parley was going on, the face of a woman, listening anxiously, appeared over the bannisters, and she was recognized as having been with the gang in the public house on the night of the burglary. All hesitation was now over, and on going to the bedroom they found Mitchell (who had been wounded by the discharge of small shot) with his head and neck enveloped in bandages and bread poultices; he was in a miserable state, for hitherto he had been afraid to get medical assistance. The officers, having now fairly run their game down, treated him with great kindness; he was carefully removed to the station house, every comfort provided for him, and a surgeon procured to dress his wounds. When taken to the police office, the hat with the shot holes was found to fit him, and he confessed his guilt.

There still remained one man undiscovered, for Robinson was set at liberty, the police having learned that though he had remained with the gang till a late hour, he had quitted them before they went to Holford's House. The real offender, who had been the contriver of the whole, was afterwards arrested on 'information they received,' but as he had taken no booty, was not marked, and could not be identified, he was necessarily discharged for want of proof; the other three were transported for life. The complete success of the police, however, shows the efficiency of the present system. No single officer could have traced out all the actors in the business; it required a systematic supervision of the criminal population, and a special instrument for each special purpose, as well as combined action over a wide area. —*Edinburg Review*.

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This story was prefaced with the note  
"From an article on this subject in a late number of the *Edinburg Review*, we extract the most interesting passage—that which describes the wonderful operations of the detective force. The passage contains [of] two thrilling narratives."