

Caught in a Steel Trap

The following story was told to me by my old friend, the venerable Dr. L——g:

I sat one evening on the verandah of the principle hotel of a city on the N.Y. and E.R.R., smoking and watching the persons loitering about the entrance.

Among these was a strange-looking man who had excited my curiosity at dinner by his peculiar dress and appearance.

He was very tall and strongly built, had large, fierce black eyes, a dark, pale complexion, a huge, carefully waxed jetty mustache, and he wore his thick, coarse, black hair, somewhat long. His dress was striking, although of fine black material and fashionable make. But, doubtlessly, the “loud” effect was produced by the long cape, the flaunting red necktie and the broad-brimmed, picturesque hat he always wore. He exhibited also his prodigious diamonds too profusely for good taste. The cane he carried was unique, its gold head being shaped precisely like a small pistol.

Altogether, the *tout ensemble* of this pretentious person was decidedly “stagey.”

As I watched him, one of the under waiters of the hotel came whistling into the small reception room behind me. This waiter was called Matthew Sparks, and I especially disliked him. He was as cunning as an Indian, talkative and grotesquely polite, and loved money like a miser, while he was as full of pranks and funny jests as a court fool or the clown of a circus.

“Matthew!” I called to this undersized buffoon of sixteen.

He reared his heels in the air, attempted a waltz on his hands, turned a somersault and landed on his feet by my side.

“What can I do for you, sir?” he inquired, with a courtesy that was laughably like that of a trained monkey.

“Who is the gentleman yonder, with the red necktie and the broad-brimmed hat?”

“Where, sir,” he asked, innocently, looking everywhere except in the direction I indicated vainly, until I had cleared his vision by the magical touch of silver, when he became as communicative as I could wish.

“O, that fellow!—looks like one of the pictures on the billpost yonder, don’t he?” and my comic and sordid informant grinned and looked wise.

“Is he an actor?” I demanded impatiently.

“Bless me, no. He’s the Count—count Pedro Columbo. He’s a feller who does nuthin’ but travel and spend money. And his diamonds! O lor! worth thirty thousand dollars—I heard him say so.”

This was all the information I could obtain from the promising young waiter, and it seemed without a doubt correct, as I soon discovered that the Count's magnificent diamonds, his apparent extravagance with money, and his evident ignorance of American customs, made the gossip of the hotel.

"Why," said the clerk to me one morning, "the Count is probably the richest man [in] the country. He has a large estate in Mexico and mines in South America. He lives high, too. He has the best rooms, the best wines, and most costly dinners. He makes odd mistakes occasionally, gets on the wrong floors and into the wrong rooms, and scarcely can speak nor understand a word of English. He came on from New York, and by some mistake his trunks were sent the wrong way. He is kept here waiting for them."

Just then the subject of his remarks came into the office.

His hair was in disorder, he wore neither coat nor vest, and his suspenders were flying behind his heels.

"I have been robbed. See!" he cried in his broken English, exhibiting his wristband and shirt-front, from which his studs and buttons had seemingly been roughly torn away.

And then gesticulating violently and muttering Spanish curses, he demanded to see the proprietor, who at once came in to hear the complaint of the distinguished and unfortunate guest.

The count's complaint was something like this: He was sure he was in the land of thieves; his trunks probably had been stolen, and all the money he had in them, as well as the letters of credit. He was in a strange place and he couldn't pay his board, and now he was robbed of all he had that was worth security, and he would be put in the streets or perhaps in prison. But he would go to Washington, he would see the Minister of Spain or somebody, and the scoundrels who had taken advantage of his ignorance should hang—very high indeed!

In vain the landlord assured him that he should be kindly treated until his missing property should be recovered, which likely would be soon—the count only rolled out big Spanish oaths, and frantically waved his arms and pointed to the places his lost diamonds had adorned, and groaned, and muttered that "they would kill him if he stayed in the diabolical country—the beasts, the villains, the assassin."

The proprietor was greatly disturbed, and finally persuaded the high-minded count to accept fifty dollars as a loan and not to hesitate to ask for more if he should need it, and somewhat appeased, the guest went out of the office.

"I am sorry [for] the count," observed the landlord to me; "and doubt if he ever recovers anything he has lost. For some time a gang of thieves has been working between here and New York and scarcely any hotel has escaped. In several instances checks for baggage have been taken with other things, and of course when the checks were presented at the proper place the baggage has been given to the thief. And, doctor, I don't mind telling you, that the count was not

the only loser last night. At least five of my transient guests were robbed of money and jewelry.["]]

"A detective would be a good fellow to have around," I ventured to say.

"I shall telegraph to New York for one immediately," he answered.

For hours in succession that day Count Pedro Columbo sat near the telegraph operator's desk, now watching the instrument with his fierce black eyes and the people who passed constantly to and fro past him into the hotel office.

But no news of his missing trunks, and his pale face seemed to grow paler than ever.

"I shall be killed if I stay here," was his constant prediction.

The next morning the landlord came to me. He looked grave and troubled.

"Doctor," he said, "a half dozen more of my guests were robbed last night. If this thing goes on I shall be ruined. What shall I do?"

I could not advise him. It was impossible always to escape misfortunes of this kind in a hotel situated at the junction of several great railroads, where hundreds of guests were coming and going every day.

"It is a case for a shrewd detective," I answered, and went up to the reading room.

This room was on the second floor, close to the ladies' parlor, and directly across the hall was a very small apartment fitted up with immovable desks, inkstands, etc., for the accommodation of those who wished to write in quiet.

My footsteps made no sound on the thick velvet carpet of the hall, and I reached the reading room door unseen by two persons whose voices I heard in the [apartment] opposite.

"A doctor, eh?" it was the count's tones, and it was Matthew Sparks who answered.

"A doctor and a good feller," Matthew said. "Come out here to a fun'ral of an old aunt with greenbacks this ere place wouldn't hold. She give 'um all to him, and he's got 'um in his pill bags—and suthin' else, too."

"What do you tell me for?" asked the count in his queer English.

The boy shuffled his feet and winked to keep time.

"We are paid for givin' gents information in this country," was the reply.

The distinguished guest grumbled something about “robbers,” “murder,” his “trunk,” and “jewels,” and then tossed the young clown a coin.

I disliked Matthew Sparks then more than I had before. All he had told the count about my visit to that place was utterly false. I had been to no funeral, and I never had an aunt in that part of the country. I never had carried “pill bags” in my life, nor did I ever carry greenbacks in my valise, nor very many in my pocket.

“The miserable idiot! What did he want to lie like that for?” I mused.

And then I turned to my paper and thought no more about it.

That evening when I went up to my room what was my surprise when I unlocked the door and entered to see Matthew Sparks sitting unconcernedly on the floor in the middle of the chamber with my valise between his knees and in his hands a curious looking implement of rusty steel.

With significant grav[i]ty he put his fingers on his lips and motioned for me to lock the door. I did so.

“Now tell me,” I said, sternly: “why are you in here, and what are you doing?”

“You’ll be mad, mister,” he answered, audaciously.

“If you do not tell me I will send for the police and have you locked up, Mat[t]hew.”

“Whew,” he whistled softly, still wearing that provokingly grave expression that I saw for once was not assumed. “Dew you know what this be?”

He held up that queer thing of rusty steel.

“Well, it is a steel trap,” he went on: “you jest let me fix this ’ere thing in your pill bags, and when that ar thief comes to get the greenbacks tonight it will hold him tight. See.”

He opened the sharp teeth of the steel jaws and suggested, to illustrate his proposed experiment I should put my hand inside.

I declined the offer of this voluntary detective, and wondered if he were fool, knave, or a very cunning and keenwitted boy.

“What makes you think the thief will come in here tonight?” I asked him.

“Well, you see, I told a fellar you had lots of money and other things in ’ere.”

“And you knew I did not.”

“I reckon,” he returned with a grin, “we’ll fix your thief-trap.”

I said: "I only hope you may catch him."

And he did fix it in a way I could not comprehend and cannot explain; and then he turned to me for what, as he had informed the count, "gents always give for information."

I gave it cheerfully.

"You shall have more than that, Matthew," I said, "if you trap the th[ie]f."

"I told him—the fellar, you know—that you would be out tonight," he said.

"You did? For what?"

"So you could wait in the closet here and watch him," answered Matthew, jingling his coin, appealingly.

And Matthew got another ten cents.

"I shall act on the boy's suggestion," I thought to myself. "There may be something in his suspicions, and his absurd plan may not be so bad after all."

So I turned the gas very low, prepared everything carefully, and made myself comfortable in my hiding place.

I had not long to wait—not more than an hour—when I fancied that my room had an occupant.

Cautiously I peered through the crack I had left as I closed the closet door, and I distinctly saw a dark form between me and the gaslight.

Still, for a moment, I fancied that I might be the dupe of one of Matthew Sparks's practical jokes, but as the intruder bent over the valise, I saw from his movement that he me[a]nt robbery and nothing else.

Breathless I waited for the result of Matthew's stratagem.

The tiny key clicked in the small locks. The man thrust in his hand.

There was a snap of ste[e]l, the crunching of flesh and bone, and then a full, round curse in unmistakable English followed by a long-drawn gasp of pain.

I sprang into the [room] and turned up the gas, and the bright light streamed upon our foreign count.

Count Pedro Colombo, dressed as if he had just come in from the street, wearing the cape, flaunting red necktie and broad-rimmed hat, and carrying his cane with a pistol-shaped golden head, stood before me, fierce and desperate.

“You are caught, imposter.” I cried, springing for the bell beside the door.

As I did so, he lifted his cane in his left hand, twirled it suddenly, and I saw that which I had supposed to be the semblance of a pistol was a real weapon, ingeniously serving as a walking-stick.

Like lightning he flashed the gilded muzzle towards me.

“Touch that bell and you are a dead man. Release me from this accursed trap.”

I faced him cool[ly].

“Fire if you like,” I said; “if you do you will be convicted of murder as well as robbery, for you can’t get away unless you leave your hand behind you or take the steel trap with you.”

That speech threw him off his guard, and I darted through the door into the hall, locking it behind me.

In five minutes more the room was filled with strong men, and although the thief resisted desperately, he was overpowered and taken to prison.

He proved to be an old offender, and was born in New York and had never been out of the United States.

The story of his trunks was of course false, and his wonderful diamonds, that were found in his room with much of the property stolen from the guests, were not worth the gold plate of the setting.

“If you suspected the fellow, Matthew,” said the landlord, “why did you not tell us before?”

“Well, you see,” answered the honest youth, jingling his nickels, “I thought I could catch him myself and perhaps I would get more for my information.”

“You are quite smart enough, Matthew, and quite honest enough to deserve and get a good share of prosperity as long as you live,” answered his employer; “but I do not approve of your being paid for information.”

But Matthew got his reward and was highly satisfied therewith, and he thinks he made the best practical joke when he caught a thief in a steel trap.

Freeborn County [Albert Lea, MN] Standard, June 20, 1878