

The Secret Cipher

A Detective's Story

Obix:— Nvvy ne hzgfiozb mrtsg zg 127 Uriv hgivvg.

Mvw.

There it was, in italics, half way down the “personal” column of the *Herald*, conspicuous only for its most aggravating combination of letters and figures, the sole clue to the whereabouts of the game I had been after for over a week, scarcely resting, eating or sleeping in my anxiety to secure the reward offered in a heavy burglary case—and something else.

That “something else.” Ah! my heart sank within me as I flung aside the enigmatical puzzle before me, and leaned back in my chair, and gave myself up to the gloomy reveries of the past. Edna Dayton—how I loved her! How fair and beautiful as a summer’s idyl had been the weeks in which I had met her, had loved her, and had been told that my affection was returned! How well I remember the bitter parting—a hopeless one, it seemed to me—when I learned my fate from her father’s lips, and passed down the brown stone steps of the Dayton mansion, wondering if the inclination of moneyed men toward stone residences was caused not by the existence of a similar hard material in that part of the human anatomy known as the heart.

I was a poor man, he said, and the profession of a detective was a precarious one. His daughter loved me—he could not deny that—but she was his only child, and her wealth and position demanded a match with some social equal. He would not break her heart by absolutely refusing to sanction our engagement; but if within a year I could secure a fortune of twenty-five thousand dollars, and a lucrative business, and Edna was still of the same mind—well, he would consider it!

Twenty-five thousand dollars. I grew sick at the thought of the conditions imposed upon which I was to purchase my future happiness. Friendless, the recipient of a meager salary, and utterly unknown where was I to raise this amount, and what business capacity had I, the son of parents who had given me every luxury, and neglected a practical education, until a crash came that left us homeless and in penury?

Day and night for over a month I had brooded over my sorrows, and then one day I was aroused into renewed life by the reception of a formal but courteous note from Mr. Dayton requesting my immediate attendance at the mansion.

My feet seemed winged as I hastened to the house of my beloved Edna. What did it mean? Had he relented? Was Edna sick, or did business await me at the pleasure of my hard-hearted censor? I was ushered into the library, where I found the old gentleman in an intense state of [excitement] pacing the floor, the window broken in, papers and boxes scattered about the apartment and a safe in the corner broken open.

I stared at him in amazement.

“You seem agitated, Mr. Dayton,” I ventured to suggest.

“Agitated! agitated, sir, I am wild.—Late last night, or early this morning, burglars entered this apartment by means of yonder window, and broke open the safe. When I came down this morning I found affairs as they are now, and nearly one hundred thousand dollars in money, bonds and jewels gone!”

I stared mutely. The immensity of the robbery petrified me.

“You have informed the police?” I asked, when I could find my voice.

“No!” he thundered, coming to a full stop. “I have no confidence in a police force which fails to protect a house from such an audacious burglary, and expects one-half the booty for his return. Here is the room, and yonder is a list of the stolen property. I believe you are honest, and I leave the entire affair in your hands. Call upon me for whatever money you require in an attempt to recover the property or detect the thieves. If you succeed within the month I will pay you thirty thousand dollars. If you fail I will pay expenses for the month and place the case in other hands. Are you satisfied?”

I gasped spasmodically. Thirty thousand dollars a fortune—more than the price of my happiness! And the pride of my profession came to my aid, and I told him that I should succeed!

I examined the apartment. The burglary had been effected very simply, apparently. Edward, the footman—a tall, lank specimen of humanity—had heard a noise in the night in the library but had paid no attention to it, as Mr. Dayton was in the habit of writing very late, and he thought it was his employer.

What puzzled me most was the means of entrance and egress, adopted by the [burglar] or [burglars]. The library was fully fifteen feet from the ground, had a bay window, and, except the broken glass, there was not the slightest sign to show how the window had been gained. A ladder would have done it, but no marks of a ladder, no signs of footsteps exhibited themselves on the damp ground, wet from recent rains.

I was sorely puzzled. I examined the servants one by one, but could find no clue to justify the remotest suspicion of complicity in the affair on their part. The work had evidently been done by scientific [burglary] and they had worked at their leisure.

I inquired into the antecedents of Edward, the footman; but Mr. Dayton averred that he would allow no suspicion to rest on so faithful a servant to the family. I resolved to inquire more in regard to him, however, but I found nothing against the man, and temporarily dismissed him from my mind as having any connection with my case.

“You heard no noise on the night of robbery?” I inquired of Mr. Dayton.

“None. I slept unusually heavy last night.”

I went away thoughtfully, for I had found in the library an empty bottle, which from the scent I knew to have contained chloroform, and I had noticed the marks of muddy boots leading to the apartment, while around the window none were to be seen. The glass, too, had been broken by a quick blow, not cut out. Altogether, it was a most mysterious piece of business.

I watched the drivers frequented by the crackmen in the city, and worked like a beaver. I could not obtain a clue to the [perpetrators] of the daring burglary, and after three days of unremitting toil, I was considering if it would not be as well to call in professional assistance, when the advertisement in the *Herald*, at the head of this story, attracted my attention. Instinctively I divined some connection with crooked business, and, whether it referred to my case or not, I resolved to ascertain its meaning. I went down to the *Herald* office that morn, and introducing myself, attempted to obtain some description of the person who had handed in the advertisement. The clerk stated that it had been received by mail, in a letter inclosing the amount requisite for its insertion in the paper. Could I see the original copy? He would see; and a message was sent to the composing room. Luckily, the copy had been preserved. It was written in a disguised hand, on a little scrap of paper. I asked leave to retain it, and permission being granted me, I returned to my room at once.

I [pored] over the cipher for a long time, and discouraged at my inability to make out a word of it, I was finally about to abandon it, when I chanced to look at the reverse side of the paper. I read “U.S. bonds, \$10,000,” and other memorandas, indicating that it had been a loose wrapper for valuable papers.

Then I knew that the advertisement bore an important relation to the robbery. And so until the day upon which the story opens I was unable to make head or tail of the secret enigma.

So wearied was I that I fell asleep with my head upon my desk, and I did not awaken until noontime. It is wonderful how a brief repose will clear the mind. I took up the paper with renewed energy, and a bright idea flashed over me.

Simple as it was I had not thought of it before.

The entire message was written on the substitution of letters, based on the reversal of the alphabet.

Thus instead of writing a, the first letter of the alphabet, z, the last one was substituted; instead of b, y was used—the alphabet reversed was the key to the solution of the puzzle.

I gave utterance to a shout of joy, for, following out the theory, it read:

“Larr: meet me Saturday night at 127 Fire street. NED.”

And “Ned” or Edward was the name of Mr. Dayton’s footman. I began to see a very large mice [sic]. But Fire street—there was no such thoroughfare in the city, and I was “floored” again.

Gradually, however, the thought occurred to me on the basis of reversal and opposite adopted by the sender of the message, why should not “fire” mean “water,” its direct reverse?

I dashed down the stairs, and, hailing a cab (for I did not forget that it was Saturday, and that evening was the appointed time for the meeting of the two burglars, as such they were), I had soon reached Water street.

Vacant! Number 126 was an empty lot.

I paused disappointed and dismissed the vehicle, again having recourse to the puzzled enigma! So near the solution, and yet doomed to be balked at the last, and—

A sudden inspiration of renewal energy, and I had forged the last link in the chain of evidence! There had been reversal in the order of the numbers, from 1 to 10, as in the letters of the alphabet, and 127 meant 1094.

I looked at my watch: it was three o’clock. I went to the nearest telegraph office, and sent the following dispatch to the chief of police:

“Send to this office three efficient men in citizen’s clothes.”

I signed my name, lit a cigar and awaited the arrival of evening and my companion officers.

It was dark when we reached the place for the meeting appointed by the two men. It was a vile groggery kept by a woman, and a resort for the very lowest class of ruffians. I had put on a felt hat and a pair of false whiskers, and I entered the barroom, having first placed my men in advantageous positions on the outside.

Within half an hour there entered a woman veiled, bearing some bulky object under her cloak. She made a sign to the woman behind the bar, and went into the next room, I caught sight of her feet as she passed through the door; they were [encased], not in shoes, but in men’s boots. I went quietly to the bar, and made a sign to the woman.

“Is Larry there?” I inquired in a loud voice, pointing to the other apartment.

She looked at me sharply, and then replied in the affirmative.

“Keep anybody that comes out,” I said, significantly. “We are going to divide the swag.”

And I opened the door.

There was no one in the first room, but in the second, by a table, on which lay a large tin box, was my game—Larry, the burglar, and a tall, spare form in female attire, with a veil thrown back, and terrified face, and the footman, Edward.

“You can drop on my little dodge, gentlemen,” I said, quietly whipping out a brace of revolvers. “The house is surrounded, and by any resistance will only make it worse for you. Larry, open that door.”

He unbolted the rear door under the silent, persuasive eloquence of my revolver, and there officers then entered.

Need I tell the rest? Edward, the footman, had admitted his accomplice into the house, and had chloroformed his employer. He had kept the booty hidden in his room, not daring to go out to communicate with his pal, except as has been seen, for fear he was watched.

The property had not been distributed; but justice was cheated for both the men escaped before conviction, and were never heard of again. As for me, I quietly handed the five thousand dollars to the department, resigned, engaged in business, and married Edna.

The Weekly Oskaloosa [IA] *Herald*, August 15, 1878

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