

Mystery on the District Railway

I have remarked upon this perversity before, but the most trying of cases may originate with the most ordinary of criminal minds. On this occasion, two wholly unremarkable villains had virtually stymied us. They had run down Fate's hourglass and now scant hours remained before the pair, together with their ill-gotten gains, were to sail beyond our reach forever. Our last recourse was both elaborate and uncertain. My part in it was to linger at Earl's Court station until I sighted our quarry, upon which I was to board the same train as them, without exciting their suspicions.

It is not my custom to travel upon the 'tuppenny tube' or its competitors, but when my old friend asks something of me, I do not refuse. And while he himself is an acknowledged master of disguise, I had shown myself an able apprentice today in the appearance I presented to the world: tweeds soon destined for the rag man, shoes recalled from gardening duty and buffed to a mirror shine, and a faded regimental tie borrowed from a friend. In short, I was the picture of a retired military man down upon his luck. As we waited for the train, I was scrupulously oblivious to my fellow travellers, my gaze distant as though still fixed upon some hostile Afghan horizon.

Of course I know what my friend would say, because he told me later, once the matter was settled. "Romantic nonsense. I grant that you have captured exactly the look of a former military man now in his autumn years, but it is hardly a disguise!"

Hard words perhaps, and if our acquaintance were a few decades younger I might have been offended, but I knew this was simply what passed for wit and high spirits with him.

I chuckled and said, "I suppose I cannot accuse you of the same today. But I should like to point out that not every one of your wrinkles was applied with a brush; quite some number of them were acquired in the ordinary way." That said, I could not fault him on his deception. When I took my seat in that carriage, I half suspected he would be present too, in some fiendishly unfamiliar guise, but I could not at first uncover his charade. I

was the first to be seated and as others boarded I surreptitiously appraised each of them. Like the biblical story of the ark, they came in two by two.

First came the pair I was interested in. Next were two young ladies, perhaps shop girls. Behind them were two gentlemen clearly able to afford more agreeable transportation but no doubt finding 'the tube' more of 'a lark'. And lastly an elderly man and woman - not apparently travelling together. A final pair, two men in poor quality suits, chose instead the next carriage along. I was pleased, as I didn't much care for the look of them; for an unpleasant moment I had feared that our two felons were really four - a proper criminal gang - but then the rogues turned aside and chose the next carriage and my fear was allayed.

The young ladies sat to one side of me, the well-to-do gentlemen to the other. On the opposite bench, the two felons were joined first by the old woman, and then on the far side of her, by the old gentlemen - a gentleman I now fancied I recognised! He clutched a handkerchief to his face - conveniently obscuring his features - and coughed a little, in what I suspected was a feigned manner. I watched him closely, but without giving myself away, and at last I was sure. Over the years my friend had taught me well - sufficiently well that he could no longer fool me. With my tutored eye, I noted a putty-coloured smudge on the old man's pocket handkerchief which I was certain had been unmarked a moment before. It was, I was sure, theatrical make-up which had rubbed off upon the cloth. I had uncovered my friend's identity! Turning now to business, I strained my ears to hear the murmurings of the two criminals.

Two weeks into the case, they were each as familiar to me as the man I saw in the mirror. Penford - short, hollow-eyed and twitchy - a night-watchman by trade, was on the left. Close by him was Allinson, of average height with pink fleshy cheeks and sandy hair. They were of similar age, perhaps thirty, but incongruous as a pair in all other ways. And yet somehow they had formed an alliance; Allinson with his access to the stock ledgers and delivery books knew exactly which items of inventory could most easily be removed from the great

department store where they both worked. Penford, having concealed his criminal past, had secured a job watching over the store's warehouse at night. He was the proverbial fox in the hens' coop when it came to minding the stock. What had brought them to our attention was a most singular theft and one far above their previous petty form. The owner of the store had placed in the company safe a necklace, intended as a gift for his wife, on the upcoming occasion of their thirtieth wedding anniversary. In keeping with tradition, the necklace was fashioned of pearls, but of such lustre and opulent size that its value was tremendous.

Though the criminals suspected nothing, my friend and I had already confirmed their guilt and penetrated their plan to board a boat to New York later that very day. Their previous thefts had paid for their passage, with a little spending money left over; the necklace would set them up for the rest of their days. According to their travel papers, they were to stay initially with Allinson's uncle in New York. He was, we had learned, a jeweller - which was no doubt what had inspired them to steal the necklace in the first place. In short, we had learned everything about their scheme save one vital detail: the whereabouts of the necklace. It still eluded us completely. It was not concealed at their lodgings, or hidden in their luggage (which they had sent ahead the previous day and which the police had intercepted at our request). Our searches had revealed nothing and now, with scarcely two hours before their train left Victoria Station for Dover, we were still in the dark. My private fear was that the necklace was even now on its way to America by post, or via an accomplice, and had already passed beyond our reach.

As nonchalantly as possible, I turned my head to catch the scoundrels' conspiratorial whispers. I thought I made out a remark about boots - or under the circumstances it may very well have been boats - and then the train started up. Since electrification had supplanted steam, the cacophony of the Underground was greatly reduced, but still it was far from conducive. The clatter and din as we picked up speed obliterated any hope I had of overhearing their exchange. Worse still, the other occupants of the carriage raised their voices to

make themselves heard, further drowning out anything of interest.

"He's lovely manners and never tries nothing on," one of the shopgirls was saying to her friend, "and I'll tell you I don't mind lookin' at him, not one bit. But there's something not right and it's got me in a proper lather. Mum says there's no half ways with marriage proposals. If it ain't all right then it's all wrong and I should get shot of him."

From a different quarter, one of the gentlemen spoke next, addressing his comrade. "Good lord! My wristwatch! I had it before we left the house and now it's gone." He held up his bare wrist in disbelief.

His companion tutted and patted his waistcoat pocket. "Wear a proper watch, not a lady's bauble. I'm sorry you've lost it, but let that be a lesson. Mine always needed a new strap or if it wasn't that then the lugs were coming loose. I paid more to keep it repaired than it cost me in the first place, and I still never knew the blessed time."

"That was an inferior piece, Richard old man, and you know it. If I might remind you, the very reason you bought yours was envy for mine. Four years on the North West Frontier and it never gave me a bit of trouble."

They lapsed into silence, and for a moment I thought I might be able to hear our villains conversing but then the young lady who'd spoken earlier started up again. "I'll tell you exactly what I mean. Last month I bumped into Tommy of a Tuesday morning. I was on my way in and there he was in the street. The start of the day and he was a sight. He hadn't shaved properly; he wasn't dressed for work; I couldn't believe it. 'You better not go into the bank looking like that', I says. 'Taking today off' he tells me. So I says, 'Maybe you should take tonight off and all.' By the look of him, he hadn't even been to bed."

I couldn't hear her friend's response, only the original speaker's reply. "Yeah, but it weren't just the once. I met him last week on The Strand. I was on an errand, it was hardly gone nine in the morning, and I bumped into him strolling along without a

care. 'Bankers' hours,' he said, but it weren't funny. I could smell drink on him and perfume on top of that – lots of it. He made a promise to me: a pint after work, two at the outside, and no other women. So what am I to think now? But the rest of the time he's good as gold. I wonder if it's not working in a bank that does it. He isn't made for that sort of work. He should get outside, work with his hands." I didn't hear her friend's comment, but they both laughed intemperately for a while because of it.

We had passed Gloucester Road, with only two stops to go before Victoria, and I had yet to overhear anything of value. I was beginning to despair when I noticed the old woman adjacent to Penford and Allinson scribbling on a scrap of paper. She was crooning to herself and clutching a stub of pencil. What was she writing? Then I recalled that Penford had an elderly aunt, his only living relative. She owned a confectioner's shop near Sloane Street which was not that far from our current position; might this be her? Was she accompanying them? If we looked, would we find a berth in her name on the boat to New York? Was the necklace already aboard, concealed in her luggage?

The more I thought about it, the more likely it seemed; but what was I to do about it? I wondered if I dare try to communicate with my friend. As subtly as I could, I caught his eye and threw a glance towards the old woman to his right. He looked positively alarmed and I wondered if he had understood me at all.

The train was slowing for Sloane Street station and time was running out. And then, just before we came to a stop, I finally heard Penford's voice. "Mustn't forget my uncle has a sweet tooth," he said, and then a number of events took place in a short time.

First, our quarry rose from their seats as though they meant to get off here, one stop early. Second, the old woman pulled a whistle from her sleeve and gave a shrill blast upon it. And finally, a moment later, the two rough-looking men from the next carriage appeared at the door, vigorously pushing their way towards us.

I had no idea what to make of this. I felt that I must act, but I could not arrange the events I had seen into anything approaching a comprehensible order. And then the old woman pulled the wig from her head and stood up, seeming suddenly much taller than she had before, and I realised that I had once again been fooled. Here was my old friend after all – not the elderly cove in the next seat.

"Constables!" my friend commanded, addressing the two rough-looking men approaching, "take these two into custody." He indicated Penford and Allinson. "And arrest this man for the theft of a gentleman's wristwatch," he said, pointing at the old fellow opposite me.

For a second I wondered if one or other of those just named would contest their capture, so I stood up to make my presence known, and asked, "Need any help?"

"My dear fellow, everything is in hand," he replied. He addressed the carriage in general, saying, "Now, let us not delay these good people." The policemen escorted Penford and Allinson from the train, and I led the watch thief, who no longer moved as though infirm.

Before disembarking, my friend passed the scrap of paper upon which he had been scribbling to the surprised young woman whose conversation we'd overheard and then he asked the gentleman who had lost his wristwatch to alight with us. Once on the platform, the missing timepiece was quickly retrieved from the pocket of the trickster to the obvious pleasure of its rightful owner. "The elderly are often overlooked," my friend explained to him. "Two of us made use of that knowledge today. My suspicions were aroused by the imprint of your watch strap still visible upon your wrist. Clearly you had lost it only a minute or two before, and probability suggested the culprit was the only other passenger, besides myself, travelling in disguise. Did he approach you?"

"Damn fellow coughed on me," the gentleman said.

The watch thief was led away and our attention turned to Penford and Allinson. Discreetly I asked my friend, "Do you have some plan to make them talk?"

"Why, they've already talked. Surely you heard them; you could hardly fail to," he said.

"Some remark about the uncle's sweet tooth, that was all I heard. I don't see how it helps us."

"And it didn't bring to mind at once Allinson's aunt with her confectioner's shop?"

I was loath to admit that I had thought *he* was Allinson's aunt.

All I could do was mutter, "I still don't see..."

"It's really very inventive," he said. "Do you recall the shop window? I'm disappointed with myself that I didn't see it at once. Nuts, raisins, ginger - all dipped in chocolate."

"Good lord!" I exclaimed, "The pearls too?"

"I believe so. Why leave two hours for so short a trip unless they planned a stop along the way? The remark confirmed it: a visit to a certain confectioners to pick up a very special gift for Allinson's uncle."

Impressed, I asked him, "And your note? What was written upon it?"

My friend laughed and said, "I felt it only fair to explain that the young woman's fiancé obviously worked in Covent Garden Market. The start of her working day was the end of his. The nearby public houses are opened especially for the departing workers and the scent of flowers is like perfume. The young man had obviously told her he worked in a bank thinking to impress her."

"Marvellous, Holmes," I said. "Simply marvellous."