

KLEPTOMANIAC AND THIEF.

RECOLLECTIONS OF A LADY DETECTIVE.

BY MRS GEORGE CORBETT.



MESSRS WIMPLEY AND CO. wish Messrs Bell and White to send one of their Lady Detectives to assist them in discovering the perpetrator of many audacious robberies, by which they have lately been victimized.

As a result of the above note, I was sent to see in what way I could be of assistance to the proprietors of the great general supply establishment in Jernyn Grove. On presenting my card, I was shown into the manager's office. The latter was a tall spare man, who looked keen and energetic enough to account for the success of the vast commercial undertaking of which he was the guiding spirit.

'Pray sit down, madam,' he said, 'and I will soon explain how matters stand. But first, let me assure you that you have no light task before you. We have kept a keen look-out for the thief, who has baffled us for more than six months now, and are quite sure that she is not to be found among our regular kleptomaniacs.'

'Pray,' I interposed, 'what do you imply, when you speak of "regular kleptomaniacs"?'
'Oh, "regulars" as we term them, are well-to-do people, who cannot resist taking any pretty or valuable article which they may fancy, but are in no need of. We have one kleptomaniac who "lifts" all the lace she can come across. Another has a weakness for jewellery; while still another has an odd fancy to appropriate as many silk handkerchiefs and gloves as possible.'

'And in what way do you punish these thieves?'
'Thieves? I tell you they are kleptomaniacs. They are well to do, and do not need the things they appropriate. It is simply a mania with them. We have more than one titled kleptomaniac on our list.'

'But you surely do not allow them to steal, I mean, take things, without punishment of some kind?'

'My dear madam, business is business, and as all these people are good customers in other departments, it would be very bad policy on our part to offend them. We simply watch them carefully, and enter the appropriated things in their regular bill, which is always paid without comment. If an article is taken which we cannot exactly locate, we charge all our kleptomaniacs with it and they all pay un-murmuringly.'

'So that sometimes it is positively profitable to have things stolen—I mean taken?'

'Just so.'

'Then I gather that some new development of this special branch of business causes you to require my services?'

'Quite right. Our new kleptomaniac's tastes differ from all the others. He or she (most probably the culprit is a lady) seems to have a great fancy for every sort of knock-knack used for domestic decoration. For a time the things missed were charged to all our regulars, as usual. But this plan has seemed a trifle risky, since it became apparent that there was an undetected new regular at work, and we now want you to devote your sole attention to watching our customers, being careful, of course, to pose as a customer yourself, in order to lull those you are watching into fancied security. Our assistants have orders to serve you with anything you may choose to inspect, and order, though of course the sending of the parcels will not follow their ostensible purchase.'

'I presume not. And now, as I have thoroughly grasped your intentions, I will at once go into the store and commence operations.'

'If you please. But you had better pass through here, then through the corridor, whence you can emerge into the street. Then enter the premises through one of the public entrances, so that, if our kleptomaniac happens to be on the spot, she may not at once suspect you to be connected with the firm.'

'One moment. How am I to notify any possible discovery?'

'To be sure! That is well thought of. We have a formula well understood among all our employes. If we wish them to keep a careful watch upon anyone, we remark that the price of something or other is "two-pun-ten," meaning, "Keep your two eyes upon ten fingers." If you spot our delinquent, ask for some articles at about two-pun-ten, and our assistant will at once acquaint me with what is going on. Further proceedings will then be taken as may seem advisable to us.'

Ten minutes after this conversation, I was indulging in all the glory of being privileged to do unlimited shopping in an establishment whose resources and splendours seem to be limitless. I could look upon any lovely thing I liked, ask its price, and order it to be sent to my address by the very next delivery. True, the fact that neither money or goods were really destined to change hands was a slight drawback to my perfect enjoyment of the situation. Still, I was resolved to make the best of it, and felt quite triumphant when I saw the awe with which a pretty girl of about twenty listened to my order for a costly set of sables.

But, of course, I was keeping my two eyes upon other people's ten fingers all the time, and when I had satisfied myself that no kleptomaniac was lurking hereabouts, I moved on to another counter, intent upon satisfying the firm's confidence in my possible ability to discover the — there, I nearly said *thief* again, and I am afraid that I shall never learn to discriminate properly between a vulgar thief and a respectable kleptomaniac.

The whole of that morning and the greater part of the afternoon passed away before I made any discovery worth mentioning. About four o'clock I was inspecting some valuable Honiton lace which was displayed on a counter, when I was attracted by the peculiar behaviour of a very stylishly-dressed lady who stood near me. She asked the assistant to show her some Brussels net, and while his back was turned, she deliberately popped some beautiful ruffles into a little bag that she carried. She then calmly inspected the Brussels, looking as innocent and unconcerned as an unwashed baby, for whom the possible vicinity of soap and water offers no terrors.

It was otherwise with me, though. I felt myself glow with the shame of discovering so contemptible a trait in the character of one whose whole appearance bespoke wealth and position. But of course I must do my duty, and lifting my eyebrows and a piece of lace simultaneously, inquired of the assistant if he thought it would cost—

But my query was anticipated by the dapper assistant, who promptly intercepted 'Two-pun-ten, madam. Yes, it is quite right. We have plenty more at the same price.'

From this reply, and the assistant's unconcerned demeanour, I conjectured instantly that this was one of the profitable 'regulars' or whom the manager had spoken, and that it was not my business to watch her further. Nevertheless, I had taken such careful note of her appearance, that I was subsequently enabled to recognize her again, in the person of the wife of a wealthy and prominent M.P.

The next day saw me on active duty again, and my work proved sufficiently interesting, though I was terribly afraid



I MET ADAM HENNIKER FACE TO FACE.

of allowing the individual I was expected to detect to perpetrate another theft, perhaps under my very nose. I could not well hang about one counter all day. But, acting upon the hint received, I paid more attention to the fancy goods department than any other, and was eventually successful in landing my fish.

It was near closing time, and was rapidly becoming dusk. On one counter there was a beautiful collection of fans, photograph frames, card cases, Dresden china ornaments and Bohemian crackle glasses, besides many other dainty devices for luring money out of the pockets of an art-loving clientele. It is a remarkable fact that, though business may have been comparatively slack for hours, customers will often crowd to make their purchases just when the tired shop assistants are wanting to pack their goods out of the dust and go home. So it was on this occasion, and it was next to impossible to watch all the people who thronged this particular department. This made me all the more anxious, but as there was no need for me to pretend to be in a hurry to purchase anything, I was able to concentrate my undivided attention upon the people around me.

By-and-bye it seemed to me that one lady displayed a peculiarly secretive method of conducting her business, and upon her my suspicions were promptly centred. She was handsomely dressed, but was so addicted to spreading the wide sleeve openings of her costly mantle about the counter at which she sat that a less suspicious individual than myself would have given her credit for wishing to conceal something under it. Indeed she fidgetted and spread

herself so much as to seriously inconvenience a tall, distinguished looking man who was patiently waiting his turn to be served, and who politely yielded to her several times, when, having spied some fresh attraction, she wished to inspect it. She made several purchases, but my anxious eyes could not discover that she concealed anything. Fussy she was, and tiresome, withal, to an assistant who longed to get out into the fresh air. But at last she was ready to go, and, having paid cash for her purchases, was putting the change into her purse when a half crown rolled out to the floor.

Instantly the gentleman of such distinguished appearance stooped to pick it up for her, and, could I believe my eyes! as he stooped, he dexterously removed a silver paper-knife from the counter, slipping it under his coat before he rose and politely tendered the half-crown to the fussy lady who had dropped it. I had evidently discovered the cunning th— I mean *Kleptomaniac*, whose depredations had baffled Messrs Wimpey and Co. so long.

But how to make known my discovery, without making a fuss?

My gentleman seemed to lose the patience he had displayed so long, and began to edge away from the counter, as if tired of waiting his turn to be served. I knew by the whole style of the man that he was not one whom the firm would wish to expose publicly. But all the nearest assistants were too busy to notice me, so I turned and quietly followed Mr Kleptomaniac, trusting to the chance of seeing the manager or shop-walker before the outer door was reached. It seems, however, that I had myself not been quite so unobserved as I had supposed for I was speedily joined by the manager himself, who hurriedly inquired: 'Have you discovered anything?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'that tall gentleman, just going out, is one of our kleptomaniacs. He has a silver paper-knife under his coat.'

The manager gazed for a moment in astonishment at the culprit. Then he rubbed his hands and smiled, saying: 'You have done us great service, madam, and our firm will be pleased to acknowledge your ability substantially. Kindly call at my office to-morrow morning. Here, Grey,' he called, 'I want you.'

At this summons a young fellow promptly came forward, while I, feeling that I had no longer any business to remain, took my leave, for the present, of Messrs Wimpey's huge establishment.

As I passed down the street on my home, someone brushed hurriedly by, and I noted that the young man called Grey was following the purloiner of the paper-knife, who was sauntering along quite leisurely, not dreaming that he had been detected. I concluded that Grey's mission was simply to discover the name and address of the man he was chasing, and it struck me that there was no reason why Messrs Bell and White should not procure the same information; for it is astonishing how much apparently irrelevant matter comes in useful to us at times.

I was just about to charter a hansom, when, to my delight, I met Adam Henniker face to face.

'Where away, Dora?' he asked smilingly, being, I verily believe, just as pleased to see me as I was to see him.

'Do you see that young man in the checked tweed suit? I recognised him hurriedly.'

'Yes, he answered, 'what of him?'

'Do you see a tall, gentlemanly man, about ten yards ahead of him, who seems to take great interest in all the shop windows? See, he has stopped to look at Messrs Gallon's bric-a-brac.'

'Yes, I see him.'

'Then keep him in sight until you discover his name and address, and all about him. The other man is bound on the same errand, but you must not let him suspect your game. Now go, or you will miss him, Adam.'

'Well, now I do call that a shame. Here was I, all duties finished for the day, and expecting to have your company for a while, and you actually order me away the minute you see me. I don't think I'll go. It's too much to expect of human nature.'

'Now don't be silly, Adam. You do what I have asked you to do, and then come straight to our house. We will wait tea for you, and, if you are very good, we will have ever such a pleasant evening.'

Without another word, Adam raised his hat, and strode up the street, while I retraced my steps in the direction in which my home lay. My widowed mother, my sister Elinor, and I lived very comfortably together, the mother having a small income of her own, which would always suffice for her personal necessities. Elinor had only lately left school, and had not quite decided which line of livelihood to adopt. We tried to persuade her to stay at home, and take all the housekeeping duties upon herself, seeing that we could well afford to do without a further augmentation of our income. But to this plan Nellie objected vigorously.

'No,' she said, 'I mean to be quite as independent as Dora is. If I cannot be a detective, I will try something else, and we will have another servant to take my place, if more assistance than Barbara's is needed. I should look well, if I were to depend upon Dora's earnings, and find myself stranded on one of these fine days.'

'Why, Nellie, what do you mean?' I asked in astonishment. 'Surely you know that what I earn belongs to us all!'

'Oh, yes, I know all that. But present arrangements may not last for ever. Mr Adam Henniker may have something to say on the subject by-and-by.'

'Nonsense!' I interjected, blushing furiously, first with confusion, and then with vexation at the knowledge that I was blushing. 'Adam Henniker is nothing to me, except that he is my friend.'

'Oh yes you are very good friends!' laughed tiresome Nellie. 'I've felt pretty sure of it for a long while. Let me see, he was here to tea last Monday, then again on Thursday, then again on Sunday, and last night he took us all to the Drury Lane Pantomime, and to night—'

'To night he is coming to tea again, you little tease,' I admitted reluctantly.

'I knew it!' cried Nellie triumphantly, 'and that is why I bought such a lot of mullins, for I have learnt to gauge Mr Adam's appetite by this time.'

I saw it was no use trying to repress a being who was virtually irresistible, so I went to my own room, to change my dress, and in other ways to make myself look as pleasant as possible. In about an hour Adam came, not was he at all dismayed at sight of Nellie's pile of mullins.

I always knew my mother and sister to be very discreet, but I hardly gave them credit for the exceedingly retiring