

HOW DETECTIVE MARLOW CAUGHT HIS THIEF.

"It's not only the money he has taken," Mr. Ritchie was saying, "but it's the thought that I trusted him and that he has cheated me. I liked him. I liked him the first time I saw him, and I've trusted everything to him almost from the first week he came—and that is over a year ago. Now, it maddens me—the thought that he was a thief, after all! Only catch him and half the £1,000 he has taken shall be yours. Put him in the dock. I don't care what it costs me. Let me see him punished. Let me see him caught. Go for him for all your worth, Mr. Marlow, and the very day he is charged I'll give you a cheque for £500!"

The detective's thin face flushed. He was young and unknown, and so far had never had a chance. Now it had come; and he might not only make his reputation but £600 as well, and that last would give him all that was best in the world to him—the girl he loved for wife; and without it it might be years before he could afford to marry.

He turned eagerly and gathered up his papers and note-book.

"I'll lose no time," he said. "I'll do my best." But all the same it seemed an almost hopeless task. Fred Emberson, the thief, had had a good twelve hours' start. He had gone at four o'clock the day before to the bank to pay money in and to cash a cheque as usual ready for paying the men's wages on the morrow, and he had never returned. The cheque had been cashed, the money never paid in, and Fred Emberson had vanished.

Mr. Ritchie was a hard and bitter man. He had been soured five years before by the disappearance of his only daughter. She had met, at the house of some friends she had been visiting, a man with whom she had fallen in love. He had been ineligible in every way—a poor man with no prospects, with apparently nothing to recommend him, but that made no difference to her.

Mr. Ritchie had stormed and raged, had refused emphatically even to see him, and had forbidden her ever to mention him again. She had refused. She had tried for some months to induce the two men to meet, she had persisted in sticking to the man she loved, and then she had run away and married him.

Mr. Ritchie never forgave her—never would. He returned all her letters unopened. He washed his hands of her and settled down, bitter and soured, to live out the remainder of his life in hard work.

Now, to find that he had been deceived again seemed to make him more bitter than ever. At first he could not believe that his trusted clerk had really done anything wrong—he would turn up and explain, he thought, and he waited until the morning before he sent for a detective. Now, the last doubt seemed removed. Fred Emberson had not been seen at his lodgings since the morning before, and from his desk at his office had gone every paper except those bearing directly on the business of the firm.

Mr. Ritchie looked up at the detective. "He's arranged it all, of course," he said, angrily. "He meant to go. He always goes to the bank on Fridays to draw the money ready to pay the men on Saturday morning, and he thought he'd seize the opportunity, of course. You see he's left nothing behind in his desk—not a scrap of paper to betray him. Not a thing! Everything was arranged."

The detective nodded. "I must see what there is at his lodgings," he said. "A criminal always gives himself away somewhere. He can't help it. If it wasn't for that the world would be a dangerous place for honest men. But they always leave something undone, and very often it is the cleverest thieves who are the easiest to catch in the end. They're too clever sometimes."

Mr. Ritchie nodded. Detective Marlow pocketed his papers and went out from the office into the noisy streets of the busy Midland town.

He sent his men to the sation to make inquiries, and then made his way towards the rooms in which Fred Emberson had lodged during the year he had been with Mr. Ritchie. He went up to them, questioning the landlady as he went, and getting no information except that she had not seen Emberson since he had left for his office the morning before.

Upstairs Marlow found everything in order. The rooms were just as Emberson had left them. He might be coming back in half an hour. The chest of drawers was full of clothes and littered with knick-knacks—pipes and pouches and tobacco. There were boots arranged underneath, carefully polished; brushes and combs lay on the dressing-table, and a writing-desk stood close at hand. But in it Detective Marlow could find not a single scrap of paper, not a letter or an envelope or a bill. Emberson had arranged everything. There was nothing to betray him—not even an ink-mark on the blotting-paper.

Marlow looked round in some dismay when he had finished. He could not find a single

clue—not a thread to start a search, not a thing to go upon, and he made a close search, too, for the thought of the £500 reward made him strain every nerve.

He was almost giving it up at last when suddenly a tiny scrap of cardboard fallen between the mantelpiece and the wall caught his eye. He took his penknife and began forcing it up. It might be nothing, of course, but he had turned over every scrap of paper and every book in the room, and he would miss no chance.

The cardboard came up slowly. It was wedged in firmly between the mantelpiece and the wall, but he loosened it at last and held it up to the light.

When he saw it he gave a little gesture of disappointment. It was the photograph of a child. That it belonged to Emberson seemed the last thing likely.

He called up the landlady and held it out to her. She shook her head over it. She had never seen it before, but it must have belonged to Mr. Emberson, she said, for her own daughter had occupied the room before he had had it, and the photograph was of no child they knew.

Marlow looked at it again and made a note of the photographer's name, which was printed on the back. It bore the address of a small town, and he frowned a little when he looked at it. What had Fred Emberson, a thief, to do with a little child?

He shut up his pocket-book with a snap and gave a final look round.

He was just turning away when his man came back from the station with the information that Emberson had been seen taking a ticket—not to London, as they had expected, but to a little place called Staybridge, half-way down the line. It was a trick, of course.

He would go on to Euston and pay excess fare, and be lost at once in the London crowd.

Still, Marlow sent his man to telegraph to the station at Staybridge, and waited, still impatiently searching the room, for the reply.

It came promptly. Only one person had come by that train on the day before, and that was a mechanic in a working suit apparently on the look-out for work. Evidently it was not Emberson, and Marlow decided that his only chance now was to go on to Topping, where the photograph had been taken.

He started immediately sending his man on to London to try and get some information there, and meaning to wait for him at Topping. He got out at a little, quiet country station. The town lay behind it—a sleepy market town full of sheep and cattle and farmers' gigs, and bright with the spring sunshine.

He found the photographer easily enough, and there a copy of the photograph he had brought from Emberson's room. It had been taken just about a year ago. The photographer remarked it distinctly, because the woman who brought the child broke down crying at the finish for no reason at all that he could make out.

"I suppose you know nothing of her, do you?" asked the detective, and the photographer shook his head.

"No, but she came from a place not far from here," he said; "at any rate, I sent the proofs there—to a place called Staybridge, about five miles away."

Detective Marlow started a little. Staybridge! He was on the road at last, surely! Staybridge was the place to whom Fred Emberson had booked—the place at which the working man had gone out! Detective Marlow's pulse quickened, and ten minutes later he was walking away from Topping towards the distant village.

It was a hot walk that day. The roads were dusty, and he was tired when he reached it at last. He made his way slowly through the straggling houses and quiet shops towards an inn. He would have to stop, of course; perhaps for some day, certainly for one night.

He went in and had some tea, and then set out to look round. He was all impatience. The thought of the £500 stirred him.

He was remembering with a beating heart the girl he meant to marry—thinking that it would not be long now—when a bend in the road brought him suddenly upon a small cottage.

It lay close to the road, a low wall hemming in its little square patch of garden, and a little wooden gate leading to a flagged path, bordered with wallflowers and lupins and lavender.

He looked up half carelessly, wondering if Emberson was living in a cottage like that—if he was in Staybridge at all—when the sight of a little child sitting on the wall brought him to a standstill.

Something about her was familiar. At first he could not tell what, and then he remembered the braid on her frock and the braid on the child in the photograph. It was the same dress, the same child, only now she was older—and prettier.

He stopped and went towards her. She was such a little thin child, and her face was pale and delicate in spite of the country air. She looked up at him with bright eyes and smiled and somehow he felt oddly uncomfortable before her.

He hesitated before he spoke, and then his

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question came with a gruff, sharp jerk. "What is your name?" he asked.

Her round eyes searched his face. It looked stern enough just then, but it did not frighten her. She slipped down from the wall and held out her hand.

"It's May" she said. "And—what is your father's name?" In spite of himself Marlow hesitated. "Father's called 'F'ed darling'" she replied. "Cos mother said so. An' he's been away such a long time, and I didn't fink he'd ever come back."

The detective looked down at her. Fred darling! "When did he come back?" he asked abruptly.

The child, all unconscious, took her father another step nearer prison.

"Only the day before this day," she said, "and I was s'prised. I just couldn't fink who it was. But mother knew, and she cried, and it made her iller, and the doctor was very ang'y."

"Where is your father?" asked Marlow. The child's eyes dilated a little.

"He mustn't be 'sturbed," she said. "He's wif mother and mother's drefful ill. That's why he came back all in such a hurry."

She stopped, looking up at the detective with eyes that almost unnerved him. Perhaps something in his face began at last to impress itself upon her baby mind, for a sudden droop came to her lip.

"I 'spects father's very bovered," she said, slowly.

At that instant the cottage door was flung open and a man looked out. When he saw Marlow he made a half movement backwards and then altered his mind and stood still.

Marlow looked at him and recognized his man. This was Fred Emberson—the thief; this was the man he had come to catch—this was the man whose capture meant £500!

And between them stood a child whose mother was very ill.

She turned delightedly. "Why, there's father," she cried.

Detective Marlow took a step forward and Emberson, suddenly making up his mind, came down the little flagged path.

"I know who you are," he said, hoarsely, "and I know why you've come. I suppose it's all up; but I couldn't help it, and perhaps—afterwards—the old man will forgive her!"

He jerked his head backwards.

"Have you guessed who she is?" he asked. "Did Mr. Ritchie guess? Perhaps he'll take care of her when—I'm shut up. But I never meant to take the money—I shouldn't have dreamt of it if she hadn't been so ill. They say she—she's almost dying, and we had hard work to live on the salary Mr. Ritchie gave me—and I couldn't" (Concluded on 2nd page.)

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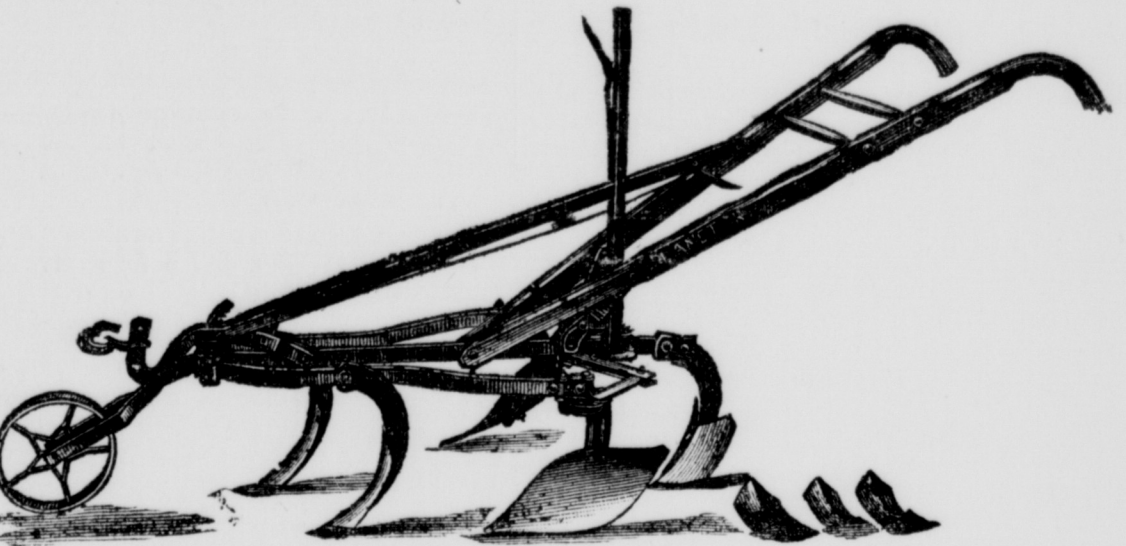
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