

THE BAMBOO ROD.

On a certain morning I had just set my people their allotted tasks for the day when the telephone bell in my private room sounded. Placing my ear to the instrument I received the usual query: "Are you Zambra's?"

"Yes," I replied. "Who are you?" "Burt's, Queen Victoria street," the answer came. "Mr. Burt wants to see Mr. Zambra at once if he is disengaged."

"You are speaking to Mr. Zambra," I replied. "I will come on immediately." In ten minutes a quick hansom deposited me at the door of the millionaire financier. The short, pursy, warm looking individual who rose to greet me when I entered the private office was familiar enough. "Sit down, Mr. Zambra; sit down," he said, in a voice which trembled with nervous excitement. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, apart from the matter in hand. Tell me," he went on with startling abruptness, "do you believe in thought reading?"

"If your question has any bearing on the business upon which you wish me to advise you it would be better if you gave me the particulars first," I said.

"Perhaps you are right," he replied. "Well, it is like this: As you are aware, I am largely interested in a number of oil companies carrying on operations in Asiatic Turkey. I make a good deal of money by buying and selling the shares of these companies in a speculative way for the rise or fall. For instance, I get a cable from one of our local managers to the effect that a good output may be expected for a certain month from the wells of a certain company, I buy those shares on the Stock Exchange. If, on the other hand, I hear that a poor return is to follow by next mail, I sell the shares instead. You follow me so far?"

"Perfectly." "Well the trouble about which I want to consult you is this: For the last two months my private information has been got at and made use of to such an extent that its value to myself has been largely discounted—in some cases nullified altogether. One of the keenest cliques in Capel court is either regularly forestalling every move I contemplate or is acting simultaneously on identical lines in such large amounts that the cream of my market is stolen, and in fact, it goes on I may as well shut up shop for good and all."

"Am I to understand that you confide this information to no one?" I asked. "Not a living soul," replied Mr. Burt. "What is to hinder some person in the telegraph office from using the cabled news for his own purposes?"

"The messages are received in cipher. I alone possess the key," said the troubled millionaire. "I don't even use one of the ordinary commercial codes. My daughter who is clever at that sort of thing, made a special one for me, and I keep it secret from every one—even from my trusted confidential manager in the next room there."

"So far there appears to be only one solution," I replied. "Some one must be getting access both to the code and to the cipher messages. Where do you keep them?"

"That is the strange part of it," said Mr. Burt. "The cipher code is always kept in the top drawer of this writing table, but since this mystery has been going on I have varied the whereabouts of the messages. Originally I used to keep them in the drawer here with the code, but when I found that the contents were being acted on I took to carrying them about my person, only to divest myself of them in my own bedroom at my place at Sydenham at night. This made no difference—my secrets leaked out just the same—so I have during the last few days gone back to the old plan of keeping them in this drawer, which as you see, has a patent lock."

"And you have reason to believe that since going back to the old plan your papers have again been tampered with?" I asked.

"Only two days ago a cable reached me from the wells at Taku about noon, advising me of a bad month's takings. I could not go round to my broker's at once, as I was due at a meeting, and I went the moment I was free. It was too late. The clique I told you of had been beforehand with me, and the shares were down to such a price that it wouldn't pay me to sell. It's sickening—that's what it is," sighed the financier, passing his hand through his scanty auburn hair.

"About this manager of yours," I said, "has he access to the room while you are out?" "No," was the answer, "I lock the communicating door on leaving, also with a patent key, and he has instructions to remain there always during my absence. Besides, I trust Johnson thoroughly."

"Well," I said, "you can't expect a detective to believe in the supernatural, and it is a certainty that if not Mr. Johnson, some person has obtained a glimpse of those telegrams, either before or after delivery to you. By the way, you mentioned 'thought reading.' What put that into your head?"

"My daughter is a great believer in it," began Mr. Burt. "She is a fanatic on the subject, though there is perhaps a reason. You see, she is almost a child—has no mother, poor thing—and about six months

ago she met a young fellow who gives thought reading entertainments; Bertram Solvyn is his name; I dare say you have heard of him. Well, Trixie and this man got very thick. He was after her money, no doubt, and I had to nip it in the bud. She took it quietly enough, but she is always telling me that Solvyn revealed a lot about thought reading, and that there are plenty of people about who can spot what one is thinking just by looking at one. I don't really imagine any one is getting at me that way, do you?"

"Indeed I don't," I said. "Miss Burt, then, knows nothing of your present trouble, but merely talks about thought reading casually, and so inspired the passing fear?" "Well," I went on, as Mr. Burt nodded, "I think I can manage this matter for you. It is now 12 o'clock. I will just run back to my office for something I require if you will kindly wait till I return. I will release you in plenty of time for your meeting."

When I re-entered the private room, after half an hour's absence, I brought with me a small photographic camera of my own invention. It was fashioned in the form of a carriage clock, for which any ordinary observer would have taken it, but it was fitted with a powerful lens and an instantaneous shutter, which could be worked automatically from a distance by means of an electric wire. I don't always let my clients into my secrets at the outset of a case, and I thought it best for the camera to remain a clock in Mr. Burt's eyes.

Placing the apparatus on the mantelpiece, I made a connection between the shutter and the drawer where the "cables" lay, running the wire along the wall and under the floor cloth in such a way that it could not attract attention. If any one opened the drawer I knew that the lens would do its work, and that I should be in possession of a portrait of the opener.

"There," I said as I completed my arrangements, while Mr. Burt looked wondering on, "if any one pays a visit to your drawer while you are at the meeting I shall know it by means of this machine. I shall look in about 4 o'clock and examine it before you have occasion to touch the drawer yourself."

As we left the room together I noticed that the window was opened, and I called Mr. Burt's attention to the fact. "Oh, yes," he said. "I like fresh air. I always keep the window open. I see what you are thinking about, but it is a moral impossibility for any one to enter unseen that way. It could only be done by means of a ladder eighty feet long placed in the centre of a crowded alley below. See for yourself."

It was true enough. The wall of the lofty building ran sheer down into a sort of alley or courtyard, through which was a public thoroughfare teeming with business men taking advantage of the "short cut." A ladder placed there would have created an obstruction that would have been promptly resented. So we went our several ways firm in the conviction that the room was unassailable except through the doorway.

At 4 o'clock I returned to Queen Victoria street and found Mr. Burt waiting for me in the outer office. On passing through the anteroom, on our way to the private sanctum, I noticed that Mr. Johnson was absent, and learned that he had gone out to the bank on his principal's return from the meeting. In the private room everything was as we had left it, and there was no apparent trace of any intrusion. But one glance at the shutter of my camera told me a different story. Turning to Mr. Burt I said:

"Your drawer has been opened during your absence. It is only a question of time now. You will know all about it in a day or two."

The financier wanted to write me a big check on account, so overjoyed was he to find that he was not the victim of supernatural agency. But I bade him wait till the morning, I would report to him further in the morning. Taking the camera I went back to my office and repaired to my dark room. I will not say that I felt any positive certainty as to whose face I should discover on the negative, but I will confess that I should not have been surprised at seeing certain features present themselves in the process of development.

What was my astonishment then to note as soon as the detail of the picture began to show up that no living figure had been present in Mr. Burt's room at all. The desk came gradually into view, the outline of the chair showed itself, and, yes, the drawer was undoubtedly open, but the tamperer was not there. Yet, stay! As development progressed minute objects began to be visible, and a faint line running from the drawer out through the open window caught my eye. Clearer and clearer it grew till at any rate the method of the mystery was revealed. The drawer had been opened from the outside with the aid of a long bamboo rod. Whose hand had guided it and where had the unknown found foothold?

The next morning I was early at the offices of Burt & Co. The financier greeted me effusively, the more so when I informed him that we were on the eve of discovery. All I asked was to be allowed to give my "clock" another trial that afternoon. Permission accorded, I set the apparatus so as to focus a small window high up in the building which formed a right angle with

the wall of Mr. Burt's private room. Judging by the direction that the rod took in the photograph, this was the position whence it had been manipulated, and I had already ascertained that there was something "queer" about the firm which occupied the one room office next door.

From the hall porter I gathered that the people were seldom there and were supposed to use it as a business address. That afternoon the camera again told me that the mysterious inquirer had been at work, and knowing this time from certain observations I had kept, that I should have something definite to show him, I promised Mr. Burt to call in the evening at his house at Sydenham. This would give me time to develop the fresh negative, get a print from it and so arm myself with proof of the assertion—a very disagreeable one—which I should have to make to my employer.

It was 9 o'clock when I reached Sydenham. Instead of finding the millionaire seated comfortably at dessert, as I had expected, he met me, looking flushed and angry, in the hall.

"Come in here, Zambra," he said, leading me into the dining room. "You may as well tell me all about it, though I have a worse worry on my mind now. Stay, though; before you tell me about that little business, just read that. I may want to put you on the track of the villain."

He placed a letter in my hands and I read as follows, after noting that the date was of the same day:

DEAR PAPA:—Mr. Solvyn and I were married this afternoon. You see, he has made so much money lately he can afford it. I told you there was a lot in thought reading. Hoping you will forgive us I am your affectionate daughter.

TRIXIE SOLVYN. "Money!" exclaimed the enraged father as I finished. "The penniless loafer! I don't believe a word of it. How can he have made money?"

"Perhaps these two pictures will help you to form an opinion," I said, throwing down two photographs on the table. "They show how and by whom your private information has been pilfered."

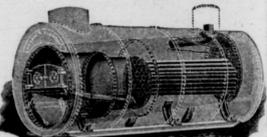
The first picture I have already described. The second portrayed Miss Trixie Burt at the other end of the rod, apparently engaged in fishing from a top-floor window. For a moment I did not know how he was going to take it. His face worked and twitched so that it was impossible to say whether he would laugh or cry. It was evident, however, that the whole situation was clear to him. Finally he threw the pictures on one side with a laugh that shook the room.

"Hanged if I don't forgive them!" he shouted, "the young monkey deserves it for being clever! Smartness runs in the family, you see, and it's better like this, than if some outsider had been getting at me."

So the millionaire's daughter was forgiven and had an opportunity of explaining "how it was done." She had no difficulty in borrowing her father's keys and in thus getting a duplicate of the drawer key—a plan also pursued with the key of the bedroom during the time Mr. Burt had carried his papers home. When once the drawer was opened a pair of forceps was substituted for the key and the documents were borrowed for purusal, to be replaced afterward in the same position as before.

Having herself devised the code, she was well able to read the cipher. Bertram Solvyn had made his own terms with the Stock Exchange clique for the information, and had really waxed rich at his prospective father-in-law's expense. When Mr. Burt paid me for my services he was very exuberant over the "smartness of the family," and even quoted the proverb, "What is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh," without seeing that the quotation was not exactly a compliment to his daughter.

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