

JOHN P. SMITH.

"Do you object to having the window up, sir?"

"No, sir. I like fresh air. Can't live without breathing myself. Shall I help you? This is the way the catch goes. Now we're comfortable."

The two unusually complaisant travellers who addressed each other were companions on a train bound for Albany. One was a small, thin man, with a long, crooked nose, and a wide mouth; the other a fat man, with a generally prosperous and well-to-do air, and a diamond the size of his thumb peeping above the top button of his long travelling coat. On this the eyes of the thin man rested admiringly, and, after a pause, he remarked:

"That's a splendid diamond you've got there. I know one when I see it. I'm a jeweller up in Albany, and it's not often I have the pleasure of admiring such a stone as that."

"How do you like that?" said the other traveller, extending his little finger, and showing another diamond set in a thick gold ring.

"Beautiful," said the jeweller. "Beautiful!"

"My wife has a whole set as handsome," said the fat gentleman. "I am, perhaps, at forty-seven, the richest man in the city, and I give you my word that on my thirtieth birthday I was starving. At least, I did not know where to get dinner, and had had a soda cracker for breakfast. It is not wise for a young clerk to give a piece of his mind to his employers. I'd done that, and had been dismissed, and I could not find another situation. I was very inexperienced, and looked very green. I expect, for I'd only been in the city three months. I wished myself back in Frog Hollow that morning. I tell you, eating griddle cakes and molasses, or bacon and potatoes; drinking water as cool as ice and as bright as this diamond out of the cocoanut dipper that always hung under the peaked shed of our old well. I didn't despise old Uncle Jedediah's remark that 'you might make money in the city, but so long as you kept a farm well, a farm would keep you and your folks,' as I did when he uttered it. If I had the fare in my pocket, I'd have been farming at Frog Hollow now, just as happy as a clam, no doubt; but I hadn't a dollar, and I was ready to break down. Thirsty as I was, hungry, and remembering that at a free reading-room hard by they always had ice-water on tap, I slunk in there, drank a couple of glasses, and took up a morning paper. I was deep in the column 'Help Wanted,' when a hand touched me on the shoulder, and a voice said—

"'Frax, are you Mr. John Smith?'"

"Yes," I answered, turning to look at the speaker.

"A slim boy in a linen jacket stood before me. He held a letter in his hand. 'Mr. John P. Smith?' he asked, referring to it."

"Yes," said I, again.

"I had been christened John Popping-ton, after my great-uncle."

"All right, sir," he said. "This is for you then. They told me I'd find you here, sir—very probably, sir. Here's the letter, sir. Good morning, sir."

"Then he placed the envelope at my elbow, ducked his head, and vanished, while I, wondering who had been at so much trouble that I should get a letter, opened the envelope, and I saw, upon a sheet of paper adorned with the representation of a large hotel with crowds of the most fashionable ladies and gentlemen entering and departing from its portals, the words—

"Mr. John P. Smith.—Sir,—Hearing that you are at present disengaged, we desire to procure your valuable services on your own terms. It is a special case which will require instant attention. Will you call on — & — as above, at your very earliest convenience?"

"This, indeed, was a polite message. Even I, with the usual good opinion young men have of themselves, was startled."

"I had been almost on my knees to employers, who gave a curt 'No' for an answer, and now, this."

"Could it be a trick of some of the other clerks? Yes, it must be. 'It is,' said I, 'I'll show them how we polish off rascals at Frog Hollow,' and slamming my hat on the back of my head, and turning up my cuffs in anticipation of a conflict, I hurried up the street, and marching into the hotel, and up to the clerk at the desk laid my envelope before him, and belatedly—

"Was this sent from here? I'm John P. Smith."

"To my utter astonishment, sir, the clerk bowed politely, smiled, and said: 'Yes, sir. Here waiter—Mr. A.'s private room; he is waiting for this gentleman.'"

"I followed the waiter. After a long hall, a large door and a square passage-way, we came to a door at which he knocked."

"Come in!" cried a voice.

"The waiter opened the door, stepped back, allowed me to pass him, and shut me in."

"I stood in a splendid little room, with a Persian rug on the floor, several wonderful chairs, a library table, an imposing desk and a book-case; two middle-aged gentlemen, of very important aspect, rose to greet me."

"We are greatly obliged to you for your promptitude, Mr. Smith," said the first, shaking hands warmly."

"It relieves me more than you can imagine," added the other offering his hand."

"I bowed and smiled."

"So considerate of you, too, to come in disguise," said the first. "You are so well known to criminals that it might have given alarm had you come in your proper person; but that make-up, now, isn't it perfect, A? Isn't it perfect? I've had the pleasure of meeting you but once before, but I shouldn't know you. A real countryman fresh from the daisies. That linen coat, those clean whiskers, and that wig—"

"Wig?" cried I. "See here, if you're making fun of me I'll—"

"Good—good," said Mr. A., laughing; then, becoming grave again: "But now to the business for which we need you. We were horrified that morning, Mr. Smith, to hear that Lord Lumpkins, an English nobleman, staying here before proceeding to hunt the buffalo on the plains, had been robbed of a tremendous sum—ten thousand pounds, in fact—fifty thousand dollars at least."

"The credit of our house is involved. We are in a terrible dilemma. Servants and employees have been searched; all innocent, I am sure. Our night clerk is the only one who had any opportunity—but we have confidence in him. No guest has left. It was not a burglar. No, sir. We will take you to Lord Lumpkins's room, and he will give you all particulars."

"Of course, Mr. Smith, you'll stay here while you work up the case. I've put room No. 5 at your disposal. Meals a la carte here, you know. Pray complain to us if you are not comfortable. After our interview you will lunch with us while we talk it over."

"I would I lunch? Little they knew the emptiness of my stomach. I would have lunched, I am afraid, with any imp of darkness who had invited me."

"I understood nothing that was required of me, but as I had done a great deal of copying, and had a reputation for writing rapidly and well—I had been clerk in a real estate office, and had a dim idea of law business and legal papers—I supposed it was something of that sort for which they needed me."

"At all events, whatever happened, I would live well while it lasted. I followed them to his lordship's room, and took careful notes of all he told me he had lost. The form of the money, the names on the cheques, and a description of certain jewellery also vanished—a rare watch and some rings that were heirlooms."

"Minutiae of a young lady, set in diamonds. In point of fact, a likeness of Lady Catherine," said the young lord, with a blush, so that I understood what he thought of Lady Catherine."

"The miniature will probably be the clue," said Mr. A."

"I remarked, 'Naturally,' and noticed that my taking down a description of the miniature was approved of. 'It's to be given to the police, of course,' I said to myself."

"I will find paper, pens, and ink in my room, I suppose?" I said."

"They answered that I would; and Mr. B. suggested that I could not be supposed—that is, of course—I could not give them any idea of the time I—"

"I shall have finished by tomorrow morning," said I. "I shall hand it to you then."

"Good gracious! with what absolute certainty you speak!" cried Mr. A. "A case like this! Well, you are a marvel."

"We had a glorious lunch after that, and I was not used to champagne then; cider had been quite good enough for me. I went to my room in a very queer condition, and saw four pens and as many inkstands."

"This was not a condition in which to do any copying. I thought me that a shower bath might sober me, and, being guided to a bath-room by a waiter, came out refreshed by the soaking, re-entered my room, as I supposed, and laid down on a lounge in a dark alcove to take a short nap. I came to myself at some very late hour. The gas was lit in the room, and two ladies sat at a table at some distance from the nook in which I lay—showy women, who did not look, I thought, too respectable. One was old, the other young. They had spread upon the table papers, money, and other things, were arranging the former. The young woman spoke first."

"No wonder they are at a loss," she said. "I went across the balcony, and slipped in at the window while the boy was asleep. I took the things from under his very nose. Everything was well fashioned when he left the room. They are off the scent they think it happened last night. I suppose you telegraphed to me? What did you telegraph?"

"Child dying," tittered the old woman. "Come at once."

"Very well. That makes the best excuse," said the younger one. "We'll order a carriage to go the Park, keep it waiting until the telegram comes, then off. Here, give me your petticoat."

"Peeping from behind the curtain that draped alcove, I saw the old woman hand a black-silk-quilted skirt to the young one, who began to patch it on the wrong side, laying notes and papers in the black silk squares."

"After awhile she said: 'That girl's miniature set in diamonds must go in, too; give me that and the emeralds. They say they have sent for Smith to work up the case. He's not here, for I know him and he knows me. Well, I'm generally lucky.'"

"These words were the open sesame that revealed the truth. I understood it now."

"There was another John P. Smith, and he was a detective. I had been mistaken for him. Thence the conduct of the proprietors of this hotel. Under the influence of champagne I had entered the wrong room—by chance that of the woman who had robbed the young nobleman."

"A turn of the shaded light would reveal my presence to the thieves who were concealing their booty. My life would be in danger if that desperate young woman were armed."

"I had only one chance of concealing myself—to roll off behind the lounge, which had no back."

"Being slim as an eel at the time, I contrived to do this silently, and waited the result. At that moment, sir, I understood what was in me. I developed the cuteness which is now my principal characteristic."

"Take advantage of your opportunity," says I to myself. "Don't give yourself away. Play detective, take your pay, your reward. It's honestly earned, and manage to acquit yourself with credit."

"My heart beat, my head spun; but I watched and listened like a mouse."

"I saw how everything was packed. I saw the old woman take the skirt and put it on, and come and lie down on the lounge above me, with a cloak over her. I saw the light lowered, and heard the other woman lie down on the bedstead."

"The thief above me groaned first and snored afterwards. Then the young woman was as quiet as if she was dead."

"I crept out, crawled on my knees and elbows to the door, found the key in the lock, opened the door, and was safe, though I had heard the young woman start and cry—"

"Jane, are you up? Who is there?"

"I found the night-watchman walking the house in his slippers, and signaling him to silence, said:—"

"Call the proprietors. Tell them Mr. John P. Smith wants them instantly, and bring them here."

"Meanwhile I watched the door I had just left."

"Mr. A. came first, in a dressing-gown. Mr. B. in an ulster."

"Gentlemen," I said, with an air they had not yet seen, "my mission is accomplished. The thieves occupy that room. They are a lady and a woman who passes for her elderly servant. They are professional thieves. The young woman crossed the balcony and committed the robbery while Lord Lumpkins slept. The booty is stitched in a quilted petticoat on the old woman's person. Tomorrow they will receive a telegram, which will summon them away. You need not fear insulting reputable guests. These people will be easily dealt with. Set a watch on the door and arrest them quietly tomorrow."

"I see we are coming to the station, so I'll make haste and finish."

"The women were arrested. Lord Lumpkins got his property back—Lady Catherine, and all—and was very generous. The hotel men paid me splendidly; and, after another dinner, I went away with a little fortune in my pocket. I read of the bright work of John P. Smith in all the papers, and the other fellow was welcome to the reputation. I took my little pile to Montana, bought a ranch and made my fortune. All through about as complete a stroke of pure luck as ever happened to a man. Well, good-bye, sir. Haven't a minute."

"The little jeweller stuck his head out of the window to look after him, but he was gone, with a flash from his collar button and a flash from his finger."

"He looked lucky, and perhaps his story was true," thought the jeweller. "Who can tell?"—*Tid-Bits.*

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