

THE EIGHTH

A DETECTIVE
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WHILE I am not the man to wink at law-breaking, I have always held that even crime had its code of ethics, and have ever cherished a certain regard for the criminal who conscientiously lives up to its precepts. For the man who kills his adversary in fair fight and is promptly strung up for murder; for the miserable cashier whose love for his sick wife and hungry little ones tempts him to eke out a \$15-a-week salary by borrowing from a grinding millionaire taskmaster a paltry hundred thousand for speculation, but loses the throw and with it twenty years of the best of his life—for such as these I confess an ungovernable sympathy. And though it is my unfortunate profession to bring such as these to the bar of justice I have little heart in the pursuit and have even wished, at times, that before committing their misdeeds they had made less awkward plans of escape. On the other hand, my abhorrence of the sneak-thief, the petty criminal and, above all, the coward who betrays his pals by turning State's evidence, is such that I find genuine delight in their punishment. To my mind, criminal ethics should demand the weightiest sentences for him who kills the defenseless, whose thefts bring greater suffering to the unfortunate, or who needlessly and viciously does crime for crime's sake.

It was for this reason, perhaps, that the official reports of the Covington mystery had awakened in me an interest quite out of proportion to the importance of the case. On May 9, 1899, not long after reporting at headquarters for duty, I, Roger Sleek of the borough of the Bronx, city of New York, first heard of this affair. The chief was at dinner and had left me in temporary charge of the office. The day was one of those prematurely hot periods that sometimes fall toward the end of May, as if to forewarn us of coming tortures and awaken

us to regret that we have so cheaply valued the gentler days of spring. I was sitting at the chief's desk, absorbed in his latest purchase on toxicology. As I was wondering whether this book, disclosing, as it did, a startling and newly combined poison, untraceable as deadly, were not more of a menace in the hands of a criminal than a benefit in those of the scientist, I was startled by a violent ring at the phone.

I hastened to the instrument. "Is this the office of Chief Barker?" The voice at the other end was clearly that of a gentleman, quite lacking in the gruff, almost brutal, quality that usually stamps the man in search of "justice."

"This is his office," I replied.

"Is he there?"

"Chief Barker is at dinner, but I am directed to receive any message."

"Thank you," returned the other courteously; "but as the business is somewhat private and personal perhaps I would better wait until his return."

"Very well, sir; will you leave your number?" I asked.

"No; I'll ring again. But you may say—"

"What is it, Sleek?" came a voice over my shoulder. It was that of the chief himself, so I passed him the earpiece, went out from the telephone closet and closed the door. I confess that the voice on the wire had aroused my curiosity, and I was a trifle vexed that its disclosures had been taken literally from my hands.

It was at least ten minutes before the chief appeared. His face wore a puzzled expression and he seemed utterly oblivious to my presence. A full half-hour went by before he spoke.

"It's a curious fact, Sleek," he said, at length, "that many of the least important and apparently simplest crimes are really the most difficult of solution."

This remark from a man of the taciturn and laconic methods of Chief Barker

caught my attention at once, for not only did I conclude that a speech of such unusual length must have been called forth by the conversation he had just held on the phone, but what to me was of vastly more significance, it seemed to fit in curiously with my own reflections on crime and its ethics. Therefore I was all attention, but held silence, waiting for him to resume in his own way.

"You have heard of my old friend, the Rev. Dr. Jasper, principal of the military school at Covington, on the Delaware—a fellow of infinite refinement and culture, with a ready sympathy that seems to win the hearts of his boys. My own Tom, who was under him for three years, always speaks of him with positive affection."

I replied that I had often heard him refer to Dr. Jasper, and ventured the query whether it was he whose voice had so strangely attracted me.

"Not Jasper, but his assistant, in whose hands my friend has confided the duty of clearing up a rather unpleasant affair that threatens disaster not only to the academy but likewise to poor Jasper himself. To come at once to the point, the students at the Covington military academy have for a long time been the victims of petty theft. In fact, the trouble has extended over a period of four years, and though every effort has been made to unearth the offender the affair is now a darker mystery than before. When I looked into the matter, some three years since, it was at the entreaty of Jasper's assistant, the Rev. Dr. Skerrett, who seemed to feel keenly the shadow that had fallen across the path of his worthy superior. I undertook the case purely out of friendship for Jasper, though, of course, you will understand that in doing this I was acting in a strictly unofficial capacity, since the offenses were committed in a foreign State.

"However, I procured a necessary

leave of absence for Heenan, one of my best men, and assigned him to the case, first explaining that it would demand the utmost secrecy and discretion, as any public knowledge of theft in an institution renowned as well for its moral as its military training might cause its utter ruin. Indeed, as I have said, it was my regard for Jasper which caused me to investigate this mysterious affair, and, as it proved, I started none too soon.

"The number of pupils had diminished perceptibly during the year, so that Jasper's income, which had been generously good hitherto, left a bare \$3000 of profit. The lads had written home, complaining of repeated outrages, until finally, on one pretext or another, the fathers of many had withdrawn their sons for the remainder of the term.

"Under Heenan everybody and everything was subjected to the most rigid observation, but though during his residence at the academy the thefts wholly ceased it proved impossible to locate the culprit or even to arouse a tangible suspicion. No sooner had Heenan given up the search as hopeless and returned to New York than the complaints broke out afresh. Boys who had lately received money from home were the usual victims, and their losses ranged all the way from 60 cents to \$85. In spite of the fact that their belongings were securely locked in their trunks it was no uncommon occurrence for a lad to return from recitation or drill or the ball field to find his desk pried open and his money gone. Then there was more excitement, another urgent summons from Skerrett and another failure on the part of Heenan.

"Three separate times did he undertake the task, each time with greater reluctance, and three separate times did he return without so much as a clue. It can be imagined that by this time my confidence in Heenan was beginning to wane. Already that year I had unearthed a robbery in which one of my own trusted detectives, a man named Dreicer, proved to be a confederate, and naturally I could not but fear that—well, never mind what I thought. I have no wish to be unjust; moreover, there was nothing as yet to give proof to my opinions.

"However, I could not be blind to the fact that Heenan had been on terms of friendship with Jasper since the year he spent three weeks in Covington on a successful arson case. I also happened to know that he still ran down occasionally for a Sunday's dinner. In addition, he should have found much assistance in the advice and unselfish activity of Dr. Skerrett, who was regarded by the boys rather as champion and friend than as preceptor, and whose daily occupation, as required by Jasper, was merely to preside at morning prayers, teach one hour of Latin and one of Biblical history. The remainder of his time he was to place at the disposal of my man, Heenan. However, as the thefts always ceased during Heenan's official residence at the academy, as he invariably returned empty-handed, and as, after periodical investigations, the thievery and his social visits were resumed almost simultaneously, I may as well confess that, in my opinion, Heenan knew more about the matter than he had cared to disclose.

"I was not prepared to make accusation to that effect, for I was loth to believe that, after the summary manner in which I had dealt with Dreicer, another of my force could have the hardihood to tempt a similar fate. Dreicer, you remember, got fifteen years.

"All these suspicions I put aside for further reference and awaited developments, though holding firmly to the same opinion that the active figure in this mystery, whoever he might be, was, if not one of the boys (which I doubted), at least some one familiar with the workings and habits of the school.

"Meanwhile three academic years had passed. The enrollment of students had dwindled to such a degree, and the financial returns showed such increase of loss, that it was only a question of time when Jasper would have to close up his career and become in his declining years a miserable bankrupt. My heart bled for my poor friend who did so much to make my own boy the fine, manly fellow he is. Yet I could do nothing but turn the problem over in my mind and wait for something to happen.

"Something did happen, and in a quarter that gave me little surprise. About six months ago the sum of \$85 was stolen one Sunday while the boys were at tea. The news was brought the following day by Heenan himself, who had spent the entire Sunday and night as Jasper's guest. When I thereupon suggested to Heenan that he return for a further investigation of the affair he not only flatly refused but went directly to his desk and wrote his resignation.

He handed me the paper and, taking his hat, walked out the door.

"My first impulse was to detain him, but on second reflection I chose another course. I felt keenly for poor Jasper. Ought I not, as his friend, take a personal hand in this dastardly business, which was bringing swift ruin to a good and upright man? The more I thought of it the more I felt convinced that such was the only course. In less than an hour I boarded a train for Covington.

"Events transpired after my arrival in rapid and startling succession. At tea that evening I sat at the right of my friend Jasper, and never have I seen a man so changed by misfortune. Skerrett, in turn, was at my right, and then, after he had said grace, you can imagine my surprise to see Heenan enter the hall and take a seat at Jasper's left. He bowed to me pleasantly, and the meal ended without further incident.

"As we left the dining hall Jasper indicated that he desired to see me in his private office. We were closeted alone for perhaps forty minutes, examining diagrams, reading records and discussing in all its bearings this dark and most extraordinary affair, when a sharp knock arrested our attention. The door opened without further ceremony, and there stood Dr. Skerrett, his face the picture of consternation and alarm. At that moment I turned to Jasper. His cheeks were the color of this ash from my cigar. His lips were trembling under the pressure of sudden shock.

"Do not hesitate, Skerrett," said my friend, as if to ease the embarrassment of his assistant. "Chief Barker is one of my oldest acquaintances, come to our aid. You may speak freely."

"Dr. Skerrett looked first at me, then at Jasper; a shad of pain passed over his kindly countenance. 'It is my duty, doctor'—and his voice trembled with emotion—to report another—"

"Who? How much?" Jasper's interruption showed only too clearly the awful presentment that tortured him.

"Young Bevis of the junior grade. He reports having received \$100 from home last Tuesday, of which he spent \$7. To-night his room was entered, probably while he was at tea, and the remaining \$90 taken from the trunk."

"Jasper turned toward me with a face in which fear and despair produced a picture that will haunt me to my grave. As a rule I steel my sympathies against

the emotions of my clients. But it was different with Jasper. He was my friend, and I liked him.

"You see," he said, "the ghost walks again, and, as usual, before our very eyes. His boldness seems his best safeguard."

"For the moment I was dumfounded that the villain should flaunt such defiance in my face, for I flatter myself few chiefs have better deserved the distinction than I. Yet here was the problem freshly presented. My duty was to solve it.

"I glanced at Skerrett. 'Request Heenan to come here,' I said quietly.

"Within five minutes Skerrett returned; he was nervous and pale. 'Mr. Heenan is not to be found, Chief. Barney, the watchman, says he took the road to the village less than half an hour ago.'

"There's a train back to town at this hour?"

"I believe so, Chief."

"Hurry to the station, Skerrett," I said. "You are in Jasper's confidence, and I too must rely on your help. Say to Heenan when you reach him that I desire his counsel at once."

"Skerrett went out of the door as if shot from a gun. He should have returned in twenty minutes, for it was a short quarter of a mile to the station. A half-hour passed, and no tidings. Forty minutes, fifty minutes, an hour; still no sign of either. The clock was striking 10 before Skerrett burst open the door and stood there, as white as a specter.

"Jasper and I jumped to our feet in an instant. 'Heenan!' I exclaimed. 'Did you miss him?'

"Skerrett could scarcely speak. 'Come,' he said hoarsely. Knowing that only the most extraordinary occurrence could have so unnerved him, Jasper and I, without further parley, followed him out of the door and up the road, away from the station.

"We had hardly turned a corner in the path when Jasper stumbled over a prostrate form lying face downward. A dark stain, just discernible in the moonlight, marked the presence of pools of blood. The right hand, outstretched, had tightened its death grip on a revolver.

"There," said Skerrett, the tears rolling in floods down his whitened cheeks, "there is Heenan!"

"I turned over the body, and, sure

enough, his words were too true. 'Yes, it is Heenan,' I replied; 'he has chosen wisely.'

"What do you mean?" said Jasper and Skerrett in a breath.

"That the poor fellow preferred suicide to disgrace. There is the man responsible for your wrongs."

"For a full minute none of us spoke. Then Jasper, with a half-sob, said: 'I've been a blind fool, but I would have forgiven him. Heenan, my poor friend! And he knelt over the prostrate body and wept like the great, noble, big-hearted child he was.'

"Skerrett was equally distressed. 'I am grieved,' he said gently. 'Heenan was one of your own men, Chief; and, seeing you here to-night, he felt the sure hand of destiny.'

"Yes," I answered, appearing to ignore the compliment, however it might be deserved.

"The death was so clearly suicidal that after a prompt inquest by the coroner the matter was hushed up without any shadow falling on the school. Indeed, from that day the thefts ceased, and the academic year, the fourth since the trouble began, closed without further sensation—the best evidence that justice had bestowed her righteous punishment in her own good way."

The chief ceased to speak, and I waited for the sequel. Presently I said, by way of suggestion: "And your message just now? That was from the school?"

"To be sure! Pardon my abstraction. In my advancing experience I observe more and more the great value of reputation and success. In younger years I could not have settled poor Heenan so easily. But that is neither here nor there. There's been another theft at Covington, quite different in its aspects from the others, and involving only a small amount—\$3, I believe. Skerrett very properly believes that one of the new students may be trying to emulate poor Heenan, and on his advice Jasper, who is quite upset over the affair, is determined to nip it in the bud. Skerrett said the money was abstracted from one of the boys' coats during a football match—undoubtedly the act of one of his schoolmates."

"And, if so, a most contemptible one," I remarked, "that deserves to be punished."

"I am glad you think so," returned



I turned over the body, and, sure enough, his words were too true. "Yes, it is Heenan," I replied; "he has chosen wisely."