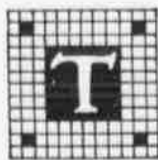


THE MYTH OF THE GENTLEMAN BURGLAR

BY ALPHONSE

Chief of the Identification

Illustrations



THE GENTLEMAN BURGLAR is a myth. When, quite recently, I made this statement and was promptly invited to demonstrate the fact in your columns, I did not suspect how wide-spread was the opinion to the contrary which I should be obliged to rectify. The opportunity is a good one for correcting a few other erroneous but popular beliefs about the world's thieves and crooks, who constitute a very exclusive social group, to which, with rare exceptions, only those are admitted who have proved themselves worthy of the privilege.

Novelists write glibly about this confraternity of rogues, but they know it only on the surface. Either they invent their pretended facts, or they borrow them. When they borrow, it is from the alleged memoirs of famous detectives, which are invariably pure inventions. The honest seeker after the truth does not learn much from occasional visits to the saloons and dens frequented by thieves. His appearance is the signal for a dead silence, followed by a general departure.

The detective is, as a rule, much more communicative. Proud of his rôle as a protector of Society, it flatters his vanity to exaggerate, often to a grotesque degree, the intelligence and multiple capacities of the quarry that he is hunting, of the criminal who is his real partner in this game of hide-and-seek. If by chance, the Chief of the Police is endowed with a romantic temperament, his subordinates naturally follow suit.

The true psychology of the detective has yet to be elucidated. You have little idea how modest they are when they talk amongst themselves. Modern scientific methods help them to unravel certain difficult problems which would have bewildered them some years ago, but what the police all the world over has mainly to rely on is paid information.

In the United States, to judge from the promises of rewards which reach us daily, the system of paying for information is practiced openly. Here in France it is carefully disguised. The famous Secret Funds, of which no public account is rendered by the Government, are secretly drawn on for police purposes.

Now, the detective's chief business

is to provoke talk, and then to control its sincerity. It is in conversations, cleverly and carefully prompted, with a certain class of people that he is most likely to find the clue for which he is searching. When he thinks that he is on the track of a conclusive revelation, he must next test the good faith and the accuracy of his informant. These people, whose loquaciousness is so precious to him, are domestic servants. In whatever stratum of society a crime may have been committed, it is always from the lower order of domestics that the detective will learn most. Invariably they know something, often much, and generally more than they are willing to tell. Give me the detective who has a special talent for worning himself, without exciting suspicion, into the



M. Alphonse Bertillon, whose system of identifying criminals by means of finger prints is used the world over

confidence of a house-janitor, an under-valet, or a little chambermaid, and I will make you a present of Sherlock Holmes.

The detective rarely has anything like the knowledge popularly attributed to him, of the antecedents of the criminal he is tracking down. False names and disguises help to mystify him, and it is only when the arrest has been made, and the prisoner has passed through our Anthropometrie Department, that his true identity and the record of his previous convictions are made clear.

NOW, I have in my department — the Service of Judicial Identity — at the Paris Prefecture of Police, more than half a million identification cards, both of French citizens and foreigners, which have been laboriously collected for twenty years past. And I can certify this: Amongst them there are very few gentlemen by birth — so few indeed that I practically have the history of each one of them at my fingers' ends. And, among these ex-gentlemen, never have I come across *one single professional burglar*.

The reason is simple. When a man of good birth covets his neighbor's goods, his first thoughts do not fly to the use of the "pince-monseigneur," or "jiminy." He takes up shady finance, which is likely to be more profitable than breaking into people's houses, while the risk of punishment, in case of failure, is considerably less. In all countries crimes against property and the person are visited with the severest penalties, which no doubt exercise an intimidating effect. Only desperate men — ex-convicts, or their associates, members of the criminal family, egged on by their needs or their passions, and having nothing more to lose — become professional burglars. There are no amateurs. "Freaks" I do not count. Their ill-conceived assaults upon society are disconcerting,

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from Photographs

but they do not constitute a permanent danger.

To be a burglar you must be a "handy-man," with some technical ability. There is the thief who specializes in false-keys. He is always more or less of a locksmith. The coiner must understand the galvanoplastic casting of metals. The use of the oxyhydric blowpipe for fusing the steelplates of a strong-box, the manipulation of the dynamite cartridge, that "open sesame" to the most complicated of locks, can not be learned in a day. Technical schools for burglars not having yet been established, it is in the metallurgical factory, as a former artisan, that the burglar has, as a rule, acquired his knowledge.

BUT you ask me: What about the degenerate gentlemen, the *déclassé* noblemen who fall from the upper social ranks to which they belong, after losing everything they possess through the triangular influence of gambling, women, and drink? They never become thieves in the professional sense of the term. Either they profit by bitter experience, or are reclaimed by their friends when half-way on the road to ruin, or they go on sinking lower and lower until they reach a depth of degradation which it is almost impossible to conceive.

Never shall I forget the shock that I experienced when my professional duties first brought me into contact with a human shipwreck of this description. Covered with nameless rags, the poor wretch was so infested with vermin that the very color upon the skin of his cheeks was changed. This is what had become in little less than fifteen years of the Baron L. de B., a man of first-class education and brilliant gifts. He had passed with the highest distinction through the Ecole des Beaux Arts, (the Fine Arts School), and had been awarded the most coveted of all prizes open to French art students, the Prix de Rome.

The habitual vagabond, sprung from the people, never sinks so low as this. He maintains a certain mastery over himself. Perhaps the unwonted caprice may seize him to do a day's work. In view of such an eventuality, he is always provided with a little pocket "necessary," containing a piece of soap, a comb and brush, needles and thread, so that if need be he can present a fairly decent appearance before a possible employer. Not so with the hoboos who have once been gentlemen. Misery and abjection have annihilated in them all ambition, all shame and all will-power. They have no resistance left, not



Fransini, the murderer, on the day of his arrest



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