

## CHAPTER XX

### *ERDLEIGH GETS HIS CHANCE*

IT was when he gave his supper-party for the entire cast of the "She Stoops" production that Barrow first noticed his loss. At first he would not believe it. He must have been mistaken. Only he himself carried a key to the closet. Perhaps he had counted incorrectly. And yet . . . he was certain he had a goodly stock of champagne in what he termed, laughingly, his "cellar," against the tyranny of prohibition.

He said nothing to anybody. He had disliked exceedingly the detectives who had come into the corridors of the Splendide during Mary's trouble. Such incidents gave a hotel a bad tone, a poor name, and he was afl for silence and dignity. He made up his mind, however, that he must whisper his trouble to some one, and so he took Oliver Silver into his confidence several days later.

"It's astonishing," he told him. "I know



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that several bottles of my best vintage wine have been removed. Yet how this was possible beats me."

"Do you still use that closet on the seventh floor?" asked the old actor.

"Yes. Of course."

"There are no drunkards—or at least no heavy drinkers—on your staff?"

"None that I know of. But it is obvious that it must be what they call 'an inside job.'"

"Then why don't you put Erdleigh on the case? He would revel in it."

"Bob Erdleigh? What on earth do you mean, Oliver?"

And then it was that Silver told him of Erdleigh's intense interest in crime.

"My cashier interested in crime and criminals and forgeries?" Barrow gasped, and looked his surprise. "Good Lord! I never had an inkling of that. A curious business for a man who handles my money all day long."

"I should say that his interest protected you. He's a clever scout. Talk to him. But it's awful, isn't it? to think that some one under your roof should have taken your champagne. You, who are so good to all your staff, from the highest to the lowest. Maybe you've had more parties than you remember. Maybe it——"



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"Impossible. I count those bottles as a hen would count her chicks. Three bottles of that Amontillado sherry are gone, too."

There was always something to worry a hotel proprietor, it would seem. If it wasn't gospel-singers, it was petty thieves. Only, the former nuisance could be discovered at once and done away with, whereas the latter . . .

Bob Erdleigh was all excitement when he heard Barrow's story. Here was something after his own heart. He promised to keep his mouth shut and his eyes open. "Leave things to me, Mr. Barrow," he said in a whisper. "I'll report my findings daily. Of course, it's an inside job. No doubt of that." And all the rest of the day, as he counted out money, moving the greenbacks through his hands, he thought of the robbery of the precious wine—doubly precious in these days—and pondered on possible suspects. At his lunch hour he went to the seventh floor, and casually passed the sacred portal of Barrow's "wine cellar." Then he chatted easily and gracefully with the floor clerk there—a spinster of most beautiful character, with grey hair and sad eyes, vague behind thick lenses. He found that she abominated liquor. She would never even taste plum pudding that contained an ounce of brandy!



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“But you never can tell,” thought Erdleigh, who imagined he had been very clever to get from floor clerk details to plum pudding in a conversation that lasted but three minutes. He went away, certain that poor Miss Dorchester had no inkling as to the reason of his call upon her.

He began to look at every one with a new interest. He tabulated in his mind the possibilities of a criminal tendency in every occupant of every room. He fingered those cards behind the desk in his leisure moments, and as he would study the names, most of which he knew by heart, he would smile at the thought that little did No. 246 suspect that he had her in his mind as a potential thief—she, the white-haired wife of a bald-headed man, doomed to respectability all her days!

But it was these who dwelt on the seventh floor who were most under suspicion. Did they not pass the “wine cellar”, every day of their lives? Some of them may have seen Barrow when he visited his hole in the wall to take from it a bottle of imprisoned joy, and grown envious. In a time of drought, anyone—even those with a high ethical sense—might long suddenly for the ocean.

He began, as most detectives do, by eliminating his suspects. It would be impossible, for



instance, to think of the invalid lady in 739 rising from her bed of pain and going secretly to that door behind which the rare vintages were stored. Night-workers were more apt to be involved in the burglary. Strong, healthy night-workers—they might easily crave a little liquid refreshment now and then. But so might day-workers, too. Was he not one of them? And he knew his own human desire for a taste of the sparkling stuff. It had been months—yes, years—since he had touched a filled goblet to his parched lips.

Weeks went by, and there was nothing of moment for him to report to Barrow. Then one day the latter came to him and said:

“I don’t think you’re much of a detective, after all, Erdleigh, for one bottle of champagne has been replaced. Not the same brand, it’s true; but there it was this morning, back in one of the empty spaces.”

Bob Erdleigh looked his chagrin.

“Really?” he said, with a lift of the eyebrows.

“Yes; gospel truth.”

“Then,” said Erdleigh solemnly, trying to look like his conception of a Sherlock Holmes, “this thieving has been done by some one with a conscience.”



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"Obviously," smiled Barrow. "A child might have deduced that."

Erdleigh was hurt. His professional—or amateur—pride was cut to the quick. And cut all the deeper as Barrow turned away with the last word and left him to his bills and greenbacks.

To think that he should have lost a chance to prove his genius for detecting crime! Poor Bob Erdleigh winced. But then, he eased his conscience by remembering that he continued at his usual tasks the while he pondered on the strange case. After all, a professional detective could have done better because he would have devoted all his time to the matter in hand. He, Erdleigh, couldn't be in his cashier's cage and also near the wine-closet upstairs!

That night, in his snug room, he took down all the crime literature which he had collected through the years and read into the late hours. As a lawyer studies Blackstone, he studied these tomes, trying to find a corresponding case. But there was none.

One deduction he made; there must be a human element in this event, since before prohibition such a robbery would not have been heard of. Was some member of the staff eager to increase his income by becoming a boot-



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legger? But no; that could not be, since one bottle of the champagne had been returned. No bootlegger was ever known to return anything—even small change! Therefore, a sensitive person had been the thief! Ah! a woman. That reduced things to some scientific basis. He might have known—a woman had committed the crime. He must concentrate on the female of the species. When dawn came up he was haggard and pale, and he smiled grimly. He had accomplished something, anyhow. Barrow should not have another opportunity to laugh at him.

From his cage, he could watch the dial over the elevator. Whenever the car stopped at the seventh floor his heart lost a beat. Perhaps the guilty person was stepping off there, planning to return another bottle. But how? Miss Dorchester was directly in front of the lift, and while it was true that the wine-closet was not visible to her from where she sat, Erdleigh had of course placed a confederate within a short distance of the door—invisible, ready to pounce upon anyone who tried the lock.

He suspected an Irish chambermaid on another floor. She had been known to indulge in the cup that cheers. But wouldn't she have been more satisfied with whisky? Champagne is



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not a tippler's toddy. Neither is an old Amon-tillado. Now, if it had been whisky, or gin, or even brandy, that had been stolen . . .

And then he thought: the thief would work at night. How about the old Captain? He had kept an eye on him from the beginning; but the Captain assured him that he was now a teetotaller, having consumed all that was good for him in his youth. True, after his wife's death, he had sought oblivion from his grief in the merry bowl; but once sobered up, he remained sober ever afterward. Unless the Captain was a fellow-conspirator he was out of the running.

It was a coincidence that the drummer from the Middle West returned to the Splendide the night before the return of the bottle to the closet. Aha! thought Erdleigh. And yet . . . Rough though the fellow was, he didn't seem capable of such a crime. Yet he must be watched. He had a room on the sixth floor this time. Easy enough to walk up the stairs, sneak around with a skeleton key and accomplish his purpose—if guilty he was.

“Another bottle has been brought back,” Barrow informed Erdleigh a couple of weeks later. “Guess I'll have to hire a regular detec-



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tive, after all. Or why not wait until all that has been taken is restored, and let it go at that? It isn't the thief I want so much as the goods!" And he laughed.

"Has it never occurred to you to have the lock changed?" Bob Erdleigh wanted to know.

Barrow stared at him, and his mouth broke into a broad grin.

"Now, that's the first decent suggestion you've made!" he said. "Good for you, Bob!"

Erdleigh was happy all day because of that faint praise. He was improving.

A week later he made an excuse to remain overtime, pretending that he had work to do on his accounts, business being exceedingly brisk. As a matter of fact, he had come to the conclusion that whoever was guilty was working at night. The room next to the wine-closet happened to be vacant. He would say nothing to anybody: he would simply occupy it himself, making believe he had gone home when his work was done. He would even put on his hat and coat, say good-bye to the night clerk, go out into the street, and then return by a back way and sneak up to 743. He trembled with excitement. He, whose life ran in a groove, was living an adventure for



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the first time! No spy in Gaboriau felt a greater thrill than he that evening. No detective in Anna Katherine Green's tales was ever filled with a greater sense of importance.

Miss Dorchester had gone, of course. A quiet night clerk was in her place—one whom he had questioned, too, adroitly, he thought. It was simple enough for him to get to No. 743 without being discovered. The chambermaid in the morning would not come to that room, knowing it was unoccupied. He could tidy it up himself—that is, if he ever went to bed at all. His intention was to sit up and smoke, and drink coffee out of a thermos flask which he had brought along, in order to keep awake. He must prove to Barrow that he was not a complete failure as a detective. Also, he had brought along a pack of cards, to indulge in solitaire.

It was after nine o'clock when he entered the room. He turned on one dim light over the bed, moved a table beneath it, and sat down to his solitary vigil. He listened to every sound. He could hear the traffic in the street below. It grew fainter as the night wore on. By midnight there was scarcely a sound, and, because of the coffee and the cigars, he felt no impulse to sleep. He got Canfield once,



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much to his joy. That was a good sign, perhaps.

Midnight. He heard a tower-clock chime somewhere out in the vast city. Then silence again. An aching silence. He didn't know how many hours had passed, as he must have dozed off for a while sitting in the chair. But when he awakened he could see faint streaks of light coming through the windows.

His first feeling was one of wrath against himself. If Barrow could have seen him then! A nice detective, indeed, literally asleep on his job.

He glanced at his watch. It was almost six o'clock. Anything might have happened in those hours when he had fallen into slumber. He tiptoed to the door and listened, one hand at his ear. Silence. The silence of a big hotel at this early hour. No one was on duty yet. The Splendide was like a great mausoleum; but a few hours later it would be a honeycomb of activity.

A radiator pounded and caused Erdleigh to jump. He must make a note to have the thing fixed. He always had the good of the hotel at heart. Lots of little things one could do for Barrow without his knowing it. And the windows shook in this room. He must



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remember. . . . He ventured to open the door just a crack, for the wine-closet was within view.

He almost fainted when he saw a shadow on the carpet, thrown from an invisible figure that must have been just around the corner of the corridor.

It was a man's shadow, he saw at the first glance. One of the porters? A guest checking out, perhaps, even at this unseemly hour; for trains had to be caught. Yes, the usual bustle would soon begin. But he was certain that the figure zigzagged backward. Maybe the person had heard his door open. He must be careful.

He closed the door gently. No noise at all. Then he got a chair, and stood upon it and peered out of the open transom.

Steady! He must not fall or lose his balance.

His heart throbbed when he saw the shadow emerge again. Only the head of it was visible to his eye. No porter, this! It was some one bent on unseemly business. Now a hand appeared, and because the dawn peered through the window back of the figure, there was a distortion of the arm and the fingers. He plainly saw a monstrous key clutched in the



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latter, as things are either exaggerated or minimized in their reflection.

He scarcely breathed.

The shadow moved—moved toward the closet. Erdleigh could see the key being lifted before the figure itself appeared. The whole torso came into sight. There was a cap on the man's head. One of the employees! He gazed, fascinated. A mere lad, he saw now—not a full-grown man.

The key went into the lock. There was the slightest click. It did not work. Ah, good! He had been of some service, after all, when he had suggested that the lock be changed. There would be a delay—plenty of time for Erdleigh to step quickly into the hall and apprehend the person.

His back was toward him now. The fellow was working desperately. Bob heard a low moan from him as the key did not fit. He was sure there came the word "damn" from those unseen lips. It was time to open the door and grab him.

Quietly he slipped from his perch and flung wide the portal of his room.

"You thief!" he said under his breath, and his hand was on the other's shoulder.

The fellow turned like a startled deer.



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Clearly, in the ghostly light, he saw his features.

It was Peter.

“My God!” exclaimed Bob Erdleigh. He wished, in that blinding moment, he had not taken upon himself this job of being a detective.

There must be no noise in the still corridor. With a clever twist, Erdleigh had pushed the boy back into the room, closed the door behind them, and locked it.

He noticed now that Peter had something bulky concealed beneath his uniform.

“You!” Bob Erdleigh said. “Oh, Peter!”

The lad was white with fear.

“What are *you* doing here?” the elevator boy said.

“I might ask *you* that,” the amateur Sherlock Holmes replied. “Wouldn’t that be more sensible? To think it’s you! What have you got there? We tricked you. We changed the lock. So it’s your work! And Mr. Barrow—all of us—have always been so good to you, you, scamp!”

Peter’s white face took on some colour as Bob Erdleigh spoke.

“I can explain. I didn’t come here to steal the stuff—I came to put it back.”



"A likely yarn!" said Erdleigh unbelievably.

"Believe me or not, it's true!" And the boy produced a bottle of champagne. "Listen! You've got to hear me, and you've got to believe me."

Erdleigh surveyed him from top to toe. A crafty smile, as he imagined all detectives employed, came over his face.

"You're a clever actor, my lad, but you're not going to get away with this. You're acting now—you're always acting. But you can't fool me!"

"I'm not acting," Peter protested. "I was never more serious in my life. Listen: I did it for her—for her husband; and she made me bring it back when she found out. I'd have done it anyhow—'course I would, Bob Erdleigh, and you know it." Tears came into his eyes.

"Tell me from the beginning," commanded Erdleigh. "Who's *she*—and her husband? What are you talking about? I'll get Mr. Barrow up here. He's got to listen to your string of lies." He was jubilant now. He could prove to Barrow that he was not a fool, after all, and the feeling of pity for Peter was blotted out in the sense of his sudden importance and triumph.



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He started to the telephone. He would call Barrow's room.

"Don't do that, please," Peter begged. "Let me talk to you first, alone. That's little enough to ask, Bob Erdleigh."

"Don't call me 'Bob' Erdleigh now," the self-constituted detective said.

"Be human," said Peter. "I think I can convince you of my innocence." He sat on the edge of the unused bed.

"Well, spit it out," ordered the other. "Go ahead. I'm ready to listen." And he too sat down—in a chair. The pack of cards still lay on the table in front of him, and there were the ends of four strong cigars in a dish beside them.

"She lives in our house," Peter began.

"Who's *she*?" asked Erdleigh.

"Mrs. Pinchbeck."

"You mean *Miss* Pinchbeck, the room clerk on the eighteenth floor?"

"Yes, sir; but she's married. To a sick soldier. My mother looks after him while she's away. It's a sad case—*Mr.* Erdleigh. He has fainting spells, and he's—getting blind and terrible—er—anæmic—a hang-over from the War, the doctor says. Well, one day the doctor said he'd have to have some champagne



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and sherry. Not whisky. Just those two things. How could we get 'em?"

"And you thought of Mr. Barrow's wine-closet?"

"Exactly. Just what you'd have thought of, I see," answered Peter in a jiffy. "So I did it. Oh, I meant always to return the stuff. I never told Mrs. Pinchbeck how I got it. And then I began saving out of my wages that Mr. Silver gives me, and out of what I get here; and I did odd jobs around the theatre for other actors, so's to earn extra money, until I had enough to give back one bottle at a time. When there was so much talk about the 'robbery'—but it wasn't a real robbery, was it?—I knew I'd have to begin in a hurry to give back what I'd taken. So I just began."

"Where'd you get the stuff you returned?" Erdleigh wanted to know. "If you could get it now you could have got it then."

"Mr. O'Neill, the 'drummer, told me the address of a bootlegger when he came back here last month. 'If I'd have known his bootlegger at first I wouldn't have had to do this. He made a special rate for me when he knew why I wanted it. And it's good stuff—it's been analysed. You don't think I'd put poison back in Mr. Barrow's closet, do you? Say,



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even if you do think I'm a thief, I ain't as bad as all that! There's honour here!" And young Peter rose and placed his hand over his heart dramatically. He couldn't help acting for a second.

Erdleigh was a little nonplussed. The wind had been taken out of his sails. He questioned Peter; he tried to break down some point in his story; but it held. There was no doubt that the boy was telling the truth.

"Does your mother know all this?" he finally said.

"Of course not. Ma wouldn't approve. I did lie to her when she asked me where I got it. I said it came from Mr. Barrow—which was partly true. I didn't say that I took it."

"How did you get into the closet?"

Peter hung his head. "That's the worst thing I did," he admitted. "I got hold of the key and had one made like it."

"Aha!" said Erdleigh. He was quick to catch upon a really guilty admission.

"Oh, I'll confess up to Mr. Barrow. I don't feel I've done anything wrong, for you ought to see how Captain Pinchbeck has improved! Gee! it's wonderful. The doctor said we saved his life, maybe. But Mrs. Pinchbeck, she got suspicious, and she made me tell



her 'everything. A woman can do that, you know."

Erdleigh couldn't restrain a smile.

"Peter," he said, rising, and going over and patting him on the back, "I think you're all to the good, even if I did think a few minutes ago that you were all to the bad. Damn it all, I like you better than ever for this. But I must get Mr. Barrow up here, or take you down to him. You see, I was put on this case, and I've got to show him that I've made good."

"So you're a detective as well as a cashier?" Peter asked, amazed. "Well, well! you never can tell, as Bernard Shaw says." And he burst into a roar of laughter.

"Come along," said Bob Erdleigh. "I guess everything'll be all right. But never do a thing like this again, young man. You *might* have gone to jail. It *was* a crime, you know, even if it was done in a good cause. But I hope you've learned your little lesson?" he couldn't help adding. It wouldn't do to exonerate Peter without some sort of moral lesson. There was a bit of the prude in Bob Erdleigh, though otherwise he was a human being.

And he couldn't help patting himself on the back as they went down the corridor.



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“You must admit, Peter, that I was pretty clever to catch you, eh? It was me that had the lock changed. And no one knows yet that I stayed in that room last night. Pretty slick work, what?”

“You said it,” admitted Peter. After all, he could afford to praise his captor. Nothing like being generous in the circumstances.