

Subway Sam's Baggage Check

by Johnston McCulley

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HE sat in one corner of the smoking compartment of the Pullman car, next to the window, and watched the flying landscape closely. In one hand he held a railroad time-table, and he glanced at it, and at his watch, as each station was passed. If the limited was on time, very well and good; but, if it happened to be a couple of minutes late at any particular point, he acted as if about to go in search of the conductor and demand an immediate explanation.

For he was going home!

He was a little man, and apparently nervous to a great degree. His nostrils were thin, and his eyes furtive, and it seemed that his fingers were continually moving. Those same fingers were clever, though the other men in the smoking room did not guess it. Those fingers had been trained through the years, to explore foreign pockets quickly and without discovery.

But their owner had no intention of making them do their regular work now. The men in the smoking room with him, even had they been aware of his identity and reputation, could have continued their journeys without fear, and without keeping their hands on their wallets and watches continually. Those fingers, as a usual thing, did their nefarious work only in a certain small section of the vast country—a section toward which the limited now was rushing.

The little man who sat next the window in the smoking room had almost fought at Chicago to get an upper berth in an extra-fare train. He wanted to get to New York as quickly as possible, he had explained, hinting that it was a matter of life and death or something like that and even the extra-fare limited would be too slow. He had obtained the reservation—and now he sat at the window and watched the stations and the time-table, and fumed

and fussed.

He made no attempt to hold a conversation with any of the other passengers in the smoking room, and if a man addressed him he got only a grunt by way of reply. The little man sitting next the window appeared to be occupied with his thoughts—which was exactly the case.

Down the river rushed the train, through city after city, devouring the miles with a speed that was amazing. Now it passed within a short distance of a great gray prison, whereupon the little man sitting next the window seemed to be trying to make himself yet smaller, and he almost closed his eyes. He knew that prison well—he had spent a terrible three years there some time before. He shuddered at the memory of those three years.

He watched the sparkling river through the window. He began to notice things that he recognized and knew. His heart was warming gradually. He was getting home!

He had been away with the exception of one flying visit to the city, for a little more than a year, had been to the Pacific coast, had spent the greater part of the time in southern California, where the warm sunshine and soft sea breezes had done much for him.

He had been glad to make the journey to the Western country, for the state of his health had demanded an instant change of climate—and there had been other important reasons. But recently the great city on the Hudson had been calling him again, and finally he had packed his trunk and had answered the call.

The train was entering the outskirts of the city now, and the little man sat up straighter in his seat and betrayed a sudden interest. This was New York! This was home! She had her faults, but in all the world there was no other city like her! She could be

cruel, and she could be kind. She was vast in some things, and small in others.

The little man left the smoking room and went into the car. He stopped beside his seat, put on his coat and hat and picked up his traveling bag.

"You gettin' off at Hundred an' Twenty-fifth?" the porter asked.

"I am!" the little man grunted.

The porter took the bag and started toward the end of the car, and the little man followed. He did not care to continue downtown to the Grand Central Terminal. He was not eager to have certain persons know that he had returned to the city—at least not until he had had an opportunity to see how things were going and learn any news that might have a peculiar interest for him. And at the Grand Central Terminal, he knew, there might be certain men who would recognize him instantly, and draw their own conclusions.

When the train stopped at the uptown station, he dropped off, hurried to the street; and walked along it rapidly for a distance of a few blocks. He came to a subway station—and stopped.

He dropped the bag to the walk and wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He looked around at the people and the signs and the buildings and at the subway station again. And then he grinned after the manner of a man who is well pleased.

"Thame old thubway!" he exclaimed. "Thame old plathe! It thertainly lookth good to me!"

And so Thubway Tham—

What? You didn't guess that it was Thubway Tham?

You know Thubway Tham, of course, the clever little pickpocket who worked only in the subway during rush hours—so clever that a city detective had been assigned especially to trail him. You remember, perhaps, how Thubway Tham outwitted certain gentlemen with considerable profit to himself—one of the gentlemen being Craddock, the detective mentioned—and then went West for his health?

Now he had returned, benefited in every way, refreshed and more clever than before, his wits on keener edge. He stood before the subway station, and his nostrils opened wide to drink in the breath of the big tube he loved.

Thubway Tham was home!

He stood on the corner for as much as ten minutes, just enjoying the scene. Then he picked up his traveling bag, and hurried forward to purchase a ticket and start downtown.

II.

Thubway Tham did not go to the rooming house where he formerly had lived. He knew that the place was under police surveillance, and he did not care, just at present, to let Craddock, his old enemy, know that he had returned.

He went to a small, respectable place and obtained a room. He ate a meal at an obscure restaurant, purchased the evening newspapers, and returned to his room to investigate the news.

He found something to interest him on the front page of his favorite journal. The article said that a certain broker of prominence, traveling in the subway because of a broken motor car, had been relieved of a wallet containing a large sum of money. The police, the article said, were of the opinion that there was a new subway pickpocket at work. They hinted that formerly there had been a famous pickpocket who worked in the subway, but that he had been out of the city for several months, hence could not be guilty of this latest crime. And there had been minor robberies recently, too, the newspaper said.

"Thome thilly thimp!" Thubway Tham told himself. "Playin' my game, ith he?"

And then a thought came to Thubway Tham. He was believed to be out of the city. The detectives were searching for a new man—they were not looking for Thubway Tham. Why could not Thubway Tham do his work and let this new man, who had invaded a precinct sacred to Tham, take the blame for all the crimes? He could do it, Tham decided, as long as he kept from Craddock and others on the police force the knowledge that he had returned to the city.

Tham considered the matter throughout the evening, remaining in his room. He had told the landlord that he had just arrived from a long journey, was tired, and needed a long sleep. Tham realized that his appearance was not much altered, except that his cheeks were fuller and had a better color, and his hair was longer. His clothes were different, of course, but he couldn't place much faith in that fact. There was a slight risk he would have to run. He arose at an early hour the following morning, and after eating breakfast wandered around the streets, making friends with the great city again. He did not visit any of his old haunts, however, and he was alert for detectives who might recognize him. He wanted to see and talk to his old friends, but he knew that it would not do at present.

Word soon would be spread around town that Thubway Tham had returned, and it would reach the ears of the police, and Craddock.

Tham wondered a great deal about Craddock. There had been quite a fight between them in the old days—a game of wits in which Tham always had emerged the victor. Craddock had sworn to “get him,” but Craddock fought fair, at least.

“The old thilly ath!” Thubway Tham told himself. “Like to get a look at him juth to thee how he ith lookin’.”

The rush hour came, and Thubway Tham descended into the subway at City Hall and started northward. He left the train at Times Square, and he took a fat wallet with him. Tham was glad to find that his fingers had not lost their cunning. He had been away for a year, and he had not worked at his “trade” during that time.

He boarded a train for downtown, and managed to get another wallet. He disposed of the “leathers” quickly, keeping only currency; which is very difficult to identify, especially if the bills are of small denominations.

He went back to Times Square, boarded the shuttle train, journeyed to Grand Central in the midst of the throng, returned, and lifted another wallet. Next he made the trip downtown again, went to his room, and found that the day's work had netted him a profit of about three hundred dollars. It was a far larger profit than usual. Thubway Tham considered it a good omen.

The morning newspapers were filled with articles about the carnival of crime in the subway, and certain detectives received orders that something had to be done or there would be divers and sundry transfers and things like that.

Once more, Thubway Tham worked at rush hour. He worked carefully, yet desperately. In the old days he had been content to lift one wallet, or perhaps two at the most, but that was when Craddock was trailing him most of the time and he was obliged to work beneath the nose of the detective.

Now he lifted wallets as rapidly as possible, for he wanted to maintain the carnival of crime. Reports poured into police headquarters, and a superior officer in the detective department sent for Craddock.

“Something funny about this subway business,” he said.

“It's either a new man—or a gang,” Craddock replied.

“Looks like a gang, the number of reports

we've been getting. How about Thubway Tham?”

“Still out of town,” Craddock said. “I got to thinking about him, too. I've trailed around his old hangouts, but haven't found a trace of him. Been expecting him to come back about this time, and have been watching for him. If he was back, he'd show himself right away. He'd think it was smart to dare me to catch him.”

“Well, get busy!” Craddock's superior warned him. “I don't like this chorus of howls. We've got to land somebody, and do it mighty quick. Get busy!”

Craddock and his associates got busy. They haunted the subway from one end of it to the other. They rode back and forth until they began to hate the underground railroad, yet they caught no pickpockets, either male or female.

Thubway Tham, reading the newspapers carefully, knew that he was not the only man working in the subway. There were reported robberies of which he had not been guilty. Wherefore rage was born within him.

In the old days, before he had gone west, it had been understood in the underworld that Thubway Tham's district was the big tube, and other dips refrained from working there. Once a man had tried it, and Thubway Tham had punished him. Here was somebody trying it now.

But Tham was honest in his way. He had not let it be known in the underworld that he had returned, and so he could not exactly blame the man who was working in his district. He was not ready yet to let anybody know he was in the city.

For a week, he worked during the rush hours. He obtained many wallets, and at the same time he watched for the other man, but never located him. Tham was piling up money, but he knew that it could not go on. Half a dozen times he had narrowly escaped being seen by an officer who knew him. And, if he was recognized, the people at headquarters might blame all the recent subway work on him!

“I thuppothe I'll have to let 'em know that I am in the thity thoon,” Tham told himself one evening. “Then that ath of a Craddock will be on my trail. He'll pethter the life out of me! There ith no uthe talkin'—thometimeth that man maketh me thick!”

The following day, he saw Craddock at a distance, but managed to prevent himself being observed by the detective. And, half an hour later, on an express train approaching Fourteenth Street, Thubway Tham found his rival.

He saw the man do his work—take a wallet

from a fat individual who carried it in his hip pocket. When the dip left the train, Tham followed. The other man was tall and broad-shouldered, and did not look at all like the ordinary pickpocket, a fact that probably had saved him from arrest, he had the appearance of an ordinary business man.

"Thilly ath!" Tham said. "Workin' my game, ith he? I'll get thquare with him!"

He followed his rival into the subway again at another station, watched him lift another leather, and edge forward. Tham waited his chance, until the other was about to leave the train at a crowded platform. His hand made a lightning-like movement—and Tham had the wallet the other man had stolen. He remained on the train as his rival left, and he was smiling.

That night, as he sat in his room, he began considering that it perhaps would be better, now, to visit his old haunts. If Craddock met him, and learned that he had been in the city for some days, the detective would believe he had been hard at work. Tham wanted Craddock to keep on looking for a criminal who was a stranger. He even wanted Craddock to take that stranger into custody after a time, for Tham felt sure that the other man was an outsider who had no business robbing the people of New York.

On the following day, Tham went forth as usual, alert for officers of the law, ready to dodge any old friend he might see, eager to make a last haul before announcing his presence in the city.

He boarded a train at Union Square and started uptown. At the next station, he saw his rival get aboard.

Thubway Tham had noticed a prosperous-looking gentleman standing near one end of the car, and had speculated on removing valuables from the gentleman's pocket. But now he watched his rival.

The tall man glanced at the others in the car, and he, too, saw the prosperous-looking individual. Thubway Tham realized that the other had picked this man for a victim, and he felt his anger gathering again. With all the subway trains, and with all the persons riding on them, was it at all necessary for this interloper to pick the man that Tham himself had decided to rob?

"Maketh me thick!" Tham growled low down in his throat.

He decided to allow the tall man to work his will. Something like a hunch had come to Thubway Tham. He had a feeling of uneasiness. There seemed to be disaster in the air. He made his way toward the other end of the car, but got into a

position from which he could watch the other.

The train was approaching a station. Tham saw the other man's hand make a familiar move, and turned away. Instantly he turned back again—for to his ears had come a screech of rage.

The rival pickpocket had bungled. His victim had caught him in the act. Now they were scuffling at the other end of the car. Thubway Tham saw that the tall man could not get rid of the wallet he had taken. And then another man took a hand in the game—a broad-shouldered, black-mustached man Tham knew instantly for an officer working in plain clothes.

The train stopped at the station, and officer, prisoner and victim got off. Tham rode to the next station and then returned downtown by means of the back streets. The thing had unnerved him to a degree.

III.

Thubway Tham did no work for the following week, and he spent a great deal of time in his room. The papers announced the capture of the pickpocket, and that the carnival of crime in the subway apparently had come to an end. That was what Thubway Tham wanted. He grinned when he read that the prisoner disclaimed knowledge of more than half the recent robberies. The police did not believe him, of course, especially since the crimes had ceased with his arrest.

At the end of the week, Tham considered that it now would be safe for him to enter the city officially and make his presence known. That would be the best way, he knew. He could not hope to hide, and if caught doing it, he merely would cause Craddock and the others to suspect him and watch him more than usual.

He went far uptown one morning, and for a time walked around Central Park. It was his last chance for some time, he knew. Craddock had told him more than a year and a half before that his presence in that section of the city would mean instant arrest on a vagrancy charge. Men of Thubway Tham's ilk knew better than to invade certain parts of the metropolis.

He sat down on a bench behind a clump of brush, in a secluded part of the park, and gave himself up to meditation. After a time, voices reached his ears, and he realized that two men were on the other side of the clump of brush, and that they were speaking in low tones.

Thubway Tham parted the bushes and observed them. They were well dressed and appeared to be persons of prominence, but Tham knew instantly that they were not honest men.

"Amateur crookth," he told himself.

Tham hated an amateur crook. The underworld hated them. Genuine crooks, who knew the ethics of their calling, were all right. They played the game, and if they were caught they paid the penalty. Either a crook or an honest man, but not an attempt to be both, said the underworld.

Thubway Tham grew interested in the conversation he heard, and in what he saw. One of the men opened a traveling bag he had, took several packages of bills from his pocket and put them into the bag. The other watched for anybody to approach.

"Now we'll go to the Grand Central and check this bag," one of the men was saying. "That's the safest thing in the world. We'll leave it there until the investigation is over at the office. When we are sure that they do not suspect us, we'll merely take down the check, pay the storage bill, and catch a train."

There was considerable more talk, and Thubway Tham drank it in. It appeared that these men had robbed an employer who believed them to be faithful. They had worked for him for years; and had decided to take all they could at one time and depart for other scenes.

"Why, the dirty crookth!" Thubway Tham told himself.

The men walked on through the park, and Tham followed them at a distance. Had these been genuine, professional crooks, he would have turned away from them, but an amateur crook was to be despised and taught the error of his ways when possible.

Tham followed them to the nearest subway entrance, and got on a train behind them. He was alert for sight of an officer, glad that he saw none. The Grand Central was dangerous territory, he knew. There always were detectives prowling around the big station.

The men went to the check stand, and one of them checked the bag and put the pasteboard into a pocket of his waistcoat. Then they left the station and started walking along Forty-second Street.

Thubway Tham trailed them through the crowds, trying to keep them in sight constantly and dodge officers at the same time. Now and then he got near enough to realize that they were maintaining a conversation, but he could not

distinguish their words.

He followed them to Times Square and down into the subway. They boarded an express for downtown, and Thubway Tham got into the same car with them.

Tham wanted that check, but taking a thing like that from a waistcoat pocket is dangerous and requires a maximum of skill. Assured that no officer he knew was in the car, he worked near the two men, who were standing, and finally was pressing against the one who had the check.

Thubway Tham began to despair. He watched for an opportunity, but none presented itself. Then accident came to his aid.

At one end of the car, one man stepped upon the foot of another. The apology was not accepted, and hot words followed. There was a sudden commotion as fisticuffs started, and the man who had the check in his pocket stretched his neck and bent his head to see the row. Thubway Tham's hand did its work, and the check was in his possession.

He left the train at the next station, and immediately caught another uptown. He reached Times Square, took the shuttle to Grand Central, and hurried toward the parcel check stand. And then he saw his old enemy, Detective Craddock.

Tham dodged behind half a dozen persons who were crowding forward to the stand, He saw another detective, and dodged back. Craddock caught sight of him, hurried toward him.

"Well, well, if it isn't my old friend Tham!" Craddock said.

Tham regarded him with scorn. "By heaventh!" said Tham. "I no thooner get back to town than I am pethtered with the thight of your homely fathe! I went away and thtayed a whole year jutht to forget your ugly mug, and here you are waitin' when I come back."

"Just in from the Golden West, eh?"

"The Wetht may be golden, but little old New York ith good enough for me," Tham said.

"Well, I suppose you'll be up to your old tricks again, Tham," Craddock told him. "I suppose I'll have to trail you as I did before, to keep you from bothering gentlemen with wallets."

"Thay! Jutht becauth I onthe wath thent up—"

"Now, please don't begin that, Tham. Don't start any of that 'give a dog a bad name' stuff on me. I'm wise to you, Tham, all right, and don't you forget it!"

"Withe? You?" Thubway Tham sneered. "If you are withe, I mutht be King Tholomon himthelf. If you are withe I am a college profethor. If you are

withe—”

“Pray, cease!” Craddock said. “When did you get in?”

“Thith morning,” Tham replied, remembering that there was a morning train from Chicago that was a favorite with the traveling public.

“Sure of that?”

“Of courthe. Why?”

“Tham, somebody has been working your beat.”

“What do you mean by that?” Tham demanded.

“I mean that, up to a week or so ago, some gent has been bothering persons in the old subway. He picked pockets right and left and center, Tham. But we got him.”

“Tho?”

“Caught him with the goods, Tham; and that’s what we’re going to do to you one of these days if you don’t change your mode of life. And this particular crook declares he didn’t commit half those crimes Tham. Some of them seemed a lot like your work. If I thought you had been in town any length of time, I’d just take you up to talk to the captain about it.”

“Well, my grathiouth!” Tham exclaimed. “I don’t any more than get off the train before I am accuthed of thomething! Before I get a chance to rent me a room—”

“You’re quite sure you just got in this morning, Tham?”

“Of courthe!”

“And you haven’t rented a room yet?”

“No. I am going to my old plathe, if you want to know.”

“Then, where is your bag?” Craddock demanded, pointing a finger at him.

Thubway Tham gulped. He had been afraid of that question, but he was ready for it.

“In the check thtand,” he replied. “Here ith the check. Thee? You make me thick, Craddock!”

Thubway Tham turned his back, went to the stand, and handed in the check. To say that he felt no fear would be to write a falsehood. He was desperately afraid that Craddock would insist that he open the bag. And how could he, when he had no key for it? If it was opened, how could he explain those packages of money and the other articles?

He was glad that his back was turned toward Craddock, for it gave him time to compose himself. The bag was handed to him, and he whirled around again, a smile on his face.

“It ith good to be back, even if your ugly fathe ith the firth I thee,” Thubway Tham said. “Will you hold thith bag, Craddock, while I light a thigarette?”

Detective Craddock would, and did. He carried the bag, moreover, as they walked to the main entrance, for it seemed that Thubway Tham had trouble with his matches.

“Going to use the subway?” Craddock asked.

“Of courthe!”

“Um! I guess I’ll just ride a part of the way with you, Tham.”

“Go ath far ath you like,” Tham told him. “We thrive to pleathe. I am goin’ to get my old room if I can, and then—”

“And then you’ll be up to your old tricks, eh?”

“Maybe you had better wait,” Tham said angrily. “Maybe you had better wait until I do thomething to give you cauthe to talk that way to me. You make me thick, Craddock! Give me that bag!”

Tham took it from him and led the way down the street.

“Why not take the subway from Grand Central?” Craddock asked.

“Well, by heaventh! I have been away for more than a year, and I want to thee the old town!” Tham replied. “I am going to walk to Timeth Thquare and take a train there.”

“Well, I’ll not pester you just now, Tham,” Craddock said. “But I’ll be watching you, old boy. And one of these days I’ll nab you, and get you right. Then it will be up the river for yours.”

“Tho? When that day cometh, it will mean that I am thlowin’ up,” Tham said. “You couldn’t catch a cold, Craddock. Thankth, however, for not pethterin’ me to-day.”

“Don’t mention it, Tham.”

“And thankth, altho, for carryin’ my bag,” Thubway Tham added. “You are very kind. Thith ith a good bag.”

“And you’ve probably got one shirt, a couple of collars and a pair of socks in it, even if you do happen to have a good front,” Craddock said, laughing.

“Perhaph,” said Tham. “A man muth run a bluff onthe in a while, muthn’t he? He muth!”

And Thubway Tham, now in the city officially, and safe for the present, hurried on up the street. When he had gone half a block and was sure that Craddock was not following, he began, to chuckle.

“The thilly ath!” he said. “Right under hith nothe!”