THE WRONG KEY

"Talking of ciphers," said the inspector, as we sat drinking our coffee after dinner on the broad, cool stoop of the house, "that wagon down there reminds me of a rather amusing case of how I was once nearly taken in by a cipher, so simple that a child might have invented it. If I hadn't happened to sprain my thumb in a row a day or two before, I'd never have spotted it, and there would have been the deuce to pay in this district."

He broke off to watch a heavily loaded wool wagon, drawn by a fine team of 16 oxen, treaking slowly down the dusty street in charge of a grinning Hottentot voorlooper.

"That wagon of Van Zyl's looks innocent enough, doesn't it?" the inspector went on. "But it's had its noxious youth—a regular night prowler it used to be once, a real bad lot.

"It was in the early part of the Boer war, when we were all wondering whether the Boers from over the border would invade the Colony, and whether the Cape Dutch would rise and join in with them if they did, that I was sent here to Keurstad, to be a sort of all round assistant to the Resident Magistrate in the administration of martial law.

"We hadn't enough troops to spare just then for the patrolling of the disaffected districts, and most of the work had to be left to the civil authorities. Here in Keurstad it was a long time before we had even a military commandant, and the magistrate had to take his place, with me and my four policemen as an intelligence department.

"Part of my work was the censoring of the mails, a thing that had to be done all over the colony under martial law. It's better to prevent people from making fools of themselves than to punish them for it afterward; and there were a lot of hot-headed Dutch Colonists who wanted to make trouble. We used to find signs of it in their letters and quietly deport them before any harm was done.

"One afternoon I went into the chief's office, and found him looking worried.

"'Look at this, Stewart,' he said, handing me an official telegram.

"It was a code message from one of the farm post offices on the outskirts of the district, and underneath it, in pencil, was the chief's translation: 'Rifles and ammunition in large quantities found at Klein Spruit. Stop further importations at all costs.'

"I whistled. It was a serious matter, for we were trusting entirely to the unarmed state of the district to prevent a rising just at present. A sharp watch had been kept on all wagons coming into the town by way of the pass through the mountains, and they had all been searched, either by myself or by one of my four policemen, for we knew that if the farmers once began to get hold of rifles again, they wouldn't be disarmed this time without bloodshed, and in all probability a general rising.

"'Now look here, Stewart,' says the chief very gravely; 'this won't do. It must have been going on for weeks, and the only way those rifles could have got in must have been by the mountain road from the south, the one that leads through the town.'

"'That's rather rough on my men, sir,' I said, 'but the fact is—though it's a nasty thing to say—I don't think much of them. Three out of the four have got relations fighting on the other side, and can't be expected to be over loyal, and the other one is a pretty soft mark at the best.'

"I saw that things must be getting pretty serious. But in the evening, when the bugle of the post-cart sounded down the street, I saw my way to begin the work, at any rate.

"I told young Bartman, the magistrate's clerk, to bring me the mail bags as soon as they were received by the post office, so that I could go over them before they were delivered.

"He came back from the post office about half an hour later with the bags, and as he laid them down on the table he asked casually whether I wanted any assistance.

"'No,' I said shortly, 'I don't. This is a confidential job, so just get out and leave me to get on with it.'

"'All right, Mr. Stewart,' says he, turning a bit red, 'but I suppose I may have my own mail before I go. I am expecting one from a store in Vrijstad that has to be answered tonight. Besides, you won't want to read any of them, will you?'

"'No, you can't,' I told him; 'though you needn't think I want to read all your turtle dove cooings, you young ass! But, for all I know, your correspondent in Vrijstad may be in Cronje's confidence, so I am going to search the letter for seditious matter.'

"I was surprised to see him turn quite white at my silly joke, though he recovered himself in a moment.

"'It's not from her, confound it!' he said, with a blush this time; 'it's from a firm of typewriter agents in Vrijstad about a new set of type that I want to order for the office machine. I want to send off the order tonight, so as to get the new set Friday.'

"I opened the mail bags and set to work. There was nothing beyond the usual sort of thing that one would expect to find in a c antry mail bag. There was a letter addressed to Bartman among them, in an envelope with the name of a Vrijstad firm printed on it, and, as a matter of form, I opened it. Here it is:

"'Dear Sir,—With reference to your esteemed communication of the 12th inst., we beg to submit for your approval a specimen reprint from the numeral type you mention, pattern No. 15:

"7¼ ⅞ ½ 4 (⅝ '718¼")9(⅝ '08¼ ($7
1⅝ 7" 0¼ $⅞ 84 £ ⅝)) ⅞ ¼88
2⅝ ("8'7"⅞ '81.

"'Trusting that it will fulfil the conditions for which you require it, we are, yours obediently,

"'P. E. Bosman & Co.,
"'Typewriter Agency, Vrijstad.'"

"There was nothing of any interest in this; but for some reason or other—it must have been that the look on Bartman's face when he asked for his mail came into my mind—I hesitated for a moment before putting it back into its envelope.

"Then I noticed that the clerk who had typed the letter had been careless in the way he'd arranged the sample print. He had repeated the same figure in several places, and the whole letter, figures and all, and then the typing. Yet Bartman had seemed very anxious about that letter. I'm a bit of a dab at ciphers. I can generally puzzle out the meaning of the ordinary run of them. But if this was a cipher, it wasn't like any that I'd come across before.

"All the same, just to satisfy myself, I made a careful copy of the whole letter, figuers and all, and then sealed it up with the usual gummed slip marked 'Passed Press Censor' that we had to use, and called for Bartman.

He took it easily enough, but I was watching him, and I noticed his hand shake, and as he opened it he glanced sideways at me, as if to see what I thought of his precious letter.

"'Seems a decent sort of type,' he said, "better than what we've got on the office machine at present. I think I'd better order a set. If you're not in a hurry, Mr. Stewart, I'll just go and type off the order at once, so as to save another journey to the post office.'

"He went into the inner office, where I heard him tapping away on the machine, rather slowly, it seemed to me, and then he came back to take away the sealed bags.

"When he had gone I unfolded my copy of the letter, and settled down to find out whether it had any meaning other than the obvious one. I tried all the little dodges that I knew for solving ciphers, but it was no good; I couldn't get the least glimmer of meaning out of it. After about an hour I saw that I'd been making a fool of myself; the message was just what it pretended to be, a plain business letter.

"I got out the official letters that I had to answer, and started to work on them, so as to be able to leave the office early; but after a little while I found my sprained thumb so painful and awkward that I gave it up as a bad job. Then it occurred to me to have a shot at using the typewriter to finish the job; so I went into the inner office and began to examine the thing.

"After spoiling a few sheets of paper with experiments, I began to pick up the idea of it. Each key would print three signs, according to whether you pressed down one or other of two keys in the centre of the keyboard marked 'Cap' and 'Fig.' and each had a letter and a number marked on it.

"But where I got stuck was in holding the key down with my sore thumb while I worked the other keys; it was very awkward. So I hunted round until I found a catch that was meant to keep it down when one was writing in capitals only, and jammed it down with that each time I began a sentence.

"Presently I forgot to lift it up, and went on typing away without looking at the paper, until, on shifting the line, I saw that instead of 'It has been' I had on the paper '9"7 (⅛887⅞.'

"I saw what had happened. I'd forgotten to release the key, and had carlessly used the wrong key, the one marked 'Fig.' instead of the one marked 'Cap.'

"Then I saw what anyone who'd ever used a typewriter would have spotted at once. Bartman's letter had been typed with the figure key held down, but otherwise just as one would write an ordinary sentence.

"I copied it out, sign by sign, on the typewriter, picking out the keys that had the right signs on them. When the whole row of figures had been typed out in this way I had:

VANXZYLS QWAGENHUIS QWOENS DAGQAVONDX ELFQ UURXNE EMQS TEWAETXWEG.

"I stared at this, and scratched my head again. It didn't seem to be much use after all, until I saw, near the end of the message, the letters of my name—you know how they will always catch your eye anywhere.

"Then I remembered that the letrs X and Q are never used in Dutch—that is, in pure Dutch; and the whole thing was plain. I wrote it out again, leaving a space wherever there was an X or a Q. This gave me (when it was touched up a bit: 'Van Zyls wagenhuit, Woensdag avond, elf uur. Neem Stewart weg.' Translated into English, this meant: "Van Zyl's wagonshed, Wednesday evening, 11 o'clock. Take Stewart away."

"So some one was going to 'take Stewart away,' was he? I doubted it! Then I remembered that I had been 'taken away' several times, without my having known it at the moment. There had been false alarms of various kinds—and in each case there had been evidence to back up the report when I arrived at the spot—a handful of Mauser cartridges split on the road; a stripped farmhouse and crying women; or a gang of excited armed Kaffirs.

"The meaning of this message was plain nough; the agent in Vrijstad—and the Trades Directory showed that there was a storekeeper called P. J. Bosman in that town—had arranged that a consignment of arms should reach Keursetad at about 11 o'clock that evening, and wanted me taken out of the way while it was being unloaded in Van Zyl's big wagonshed, where he kept his wool bales.

"It was as plain as daylight now that my own four policemen must have been in the game all along, or the rifles could never get through. Good Heavens! there wasn't a soul that I didn't suspect now. I was in a pretty ugly temper, I can tell you, by the time I'd made up my mind what to do.

"I went into my own office and took out of my desk a long Mauser pistol that I kept for my own use. It was a lovely thing, any amount better than the regulation revolver that I kept hanging from a peg in the other office; but of course I wasn't supposed to have it. As I was stowing it away in my coat, there came a sound of feet running along the road outside. Then I heard Bartman's voice explaining to the sentry that he wanted to see me urgently.

"'Mr. Stewart. Mr. Stewart- where are you? You're wanted.'

"'Here I am!' I called back, going into the room, quietly. 'What is it this time?'

"He was standing in the corner of the room near the door, next to the table where I had been using the typewriter; and on a peg just behind him hung my revolver in a holster.

"'By Jove, sir, he began, breathlessly. "I'm glad I managed to find you before you'd left the office. There's been most awful trouble out at Klassen's farm. Three of the—of the—I mean to say, three—'

"He stuck fast in the middle of the sentence, and then I saw that he wasn't looking at me, but at the paper lying on the table—my copy of his cipher. He suddenly let out a yelp like a strangled puppy, and made a grab for the revolver behind me.

"'Hands up!' he called out in a very shaky voice that wouldn't have scared a rabbit. 'If you don't let me leave this room, and swear not to say anything about that letter, I'll shoot you on the spot!'

"'Do it, then you rat!' I cried and ran at him. He yelled with fright and dropped the gun, but it was too late to prevent my fist smashing into his jaw.

"I called the sentry outside, and told him to see that Bartman didn't get away until I came back. I was in a murderous sort of temper by this time, but I hated the idea of having a row with Van Zyl. He was a decent old chap and rather a pal of mine.

"It was a little after 11 by the time I reached the shed, as far as I could see without striking a light; and against the sky that showed between the black masses of the trees on each side of the street I could make out the top of a big wool wagon showing over the line of the mountain. Several men were talking as they stood round the wagon, and not with any air of secrecy either; they evidently felt quite secure, confound them!

"It wasn't easy to decide what to do. It was just in my mind to rush the door and loose off into the thick of them, when an idea struck me. I'd pay them out in kind, and at the same time do something better for the old Colony than any scrap in the dark could be.

"I waited there in the darkness under the trees until I was certain that they had all gone into the shed, and then I crept up to the door, with my pistols handy and loose in my pockets.

"'Good evening, kerels!' I called out cheerfully from just outside, with both pistols and one eye across the doorpost.

"Presently a voice, it sounded like that of Conradie, one of my four policemen—called out from the back of the shed, in an undertone, 'Who's daar?'

"'Is that you, Conradie' I called back. 'Yoo're just the man I'm looking for. Thre's a job on tonight that you'll have to give a hand in—catching a lot of gun runners.'

"'Hemel! It's that —— ——' Stewart! came another voice, with a gasp of dismay; then, 'Rush him, kerels! Knock him out!'

"'Go softly; I've got a revolver in my hand, and it might go off if you fluster me. I'm nervous in the dark.'

"'That's all right, kerels; it's not loaded!' shouted Conradie. 'Bartman took all the powder out of the cartridges.'

"'Sorry to disappoint you friends,' I returned; 'but I also have a Mauser pistol in the other hand. But why all this talk of pistols and knocking out? Isn't it a bit foolish, seeing that I am here to give you a hand?'

"'What d' you mean?' asked several voices excitedly. 'Are you in the game, too, after all?'

"'I don't know what "game" you're talking about,' I said. 'But if you want to know, I came down to tell you that this consignment is really to be stored up at the Court House, and not down here; it's more convenient to have the rifles in the centre of the town, where they can't be got at by any possible rebels.'

"'What are you driving at, curse you?' asked a deep voice in English that I recognized at Van Zyl's, and pretty savage it sounded in the darkness of the shed.

"'That you, Mr. Van Zyl?' I asked. 'Ah, a sensible man at last! Well, Mr. Van Zyl, I want you and your friends just to take all this stuff up to the Court House, and help me to store it there under lock and key, with all the other guns that were handed in. I'm sure you won't mind that?'

"Van Zyl wasn't a fool, and he saw that the game was up. He thought for a bit, sucking in his breath through his teeth; then he laughed in a sick sort of way and threw out his hands.

"'All right, Stewart,' he said; 'you've got us fairly this time. Shove those boxes back on the wagon, boys, and pray for better luck next time.'

"When it was all done we started off the oxen, and the whole procession rolled solmenly up the street, with me behind as chief mourner, though I wasn't over mournful; it was the others in the lampiight that fitted the part better.

"'Look here,' I said, 'It's no use looking so glum about this job; you've got to do a bit of forced labor for once, but for my sake try to look a bit cheerful about it!'

"'It's all very well for you,' broke in the heavy voice of old Van Zyl; 'but you needn't expect us to laugh at your silly jokes. You take my Mausers and my cartridges, and you get me sent to prison—and more, possibly—and then you try to be funny like and—Hotentot!'

"'Who's talking about prisons?' I asked, for the old boy was really upset, and no wonder. 'Not I. There's nothing criminal in helping the government to collect a lot of arms that may have been meant for a crowd of rebels, as any other loyal Colonist would have done. I've got nothing to do with your reasons for taking them to the woodshed first, but there's no harm done, anyway. So I'll just take your names in case the magistrate wants to thank you personally, 'and then we'll get to work.'

"The idea took some time to soak into their minds, and they woudn't believe at first that there wasn't going to be a court-martial. Then we unloaded the wagon and carried the rifles (200 of them) and the ammunition boxes into a little cell at the back of the lockup, where all the other fire. arms were stored. After that we adjourned to the court room for coffee, supplied by the jailer's wife.

"As we sat on the benches facing the magistrate's seat, drinking our coffee, I noticed that my guests seemed much interested in the fitting of the room. Then I heard a grunt from old Van Zyl, who was sitting next to me.

"'Dat's der dock, niet waar?' said he, jerking his head toward the other end of the room.

"'Ah, that's it, Mr. Van Zyl!'

"He considered it for awhile, nodding his head thoughtfully. 'Zoo, ja!' he said slowly. Zoo! it looks nicer from this part of the room, Mr. Stewart—much nicer!'"

* * * * *

The inspector knocked the ashes out of his pipe. "They did try to take the town a few months later," he added; "but Van Zyl and his crowd wouldn't let them."

Will Know What to Do.

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