

Thubway Tham's Perfect Day



*Oh, what is
so rare as a dip
who cries "pickpocket!"*

By Johnston McCulley

ON A glorious June morning Thubway Tham, the little pickpocket, having partaken of a substantial breakfast, sauntered into Madison Square Park and sought his favorite bench. Finding it unoccupied, Tham seated himself, inhaled deeply and surveyed the vicinity.

Sparrows were twittering and pigeons cooed as they fought for scraps of food tossed around by bench-lunchers. Traffic

was flowing gently along the avenues, newsboys were yelling their wares raucously, and thousands of windows in office buildings looked down upon the Square and caused thought that behind them men and women toiled to serve the great god, Business.

New York in June! A gentle breeze that seemed to waft from sylvan glades drifting through man-made canyons lined with lofty buildings, and all that sort of

thing.

“Give me New York in June,” Thubway Tham muttered, “and you can have the retht of the world includin’ Ruthia, Thiberia and pointh eatht. Ath the poet wrote, ‘What ith tho rare ath a day in June?’ Thith ith perfect!”

At that instant he realized the truth of the oft-quoted remark that there is nothing perfect in this world except perfection, and not much of that. For he glanced up as a shadow suddenly came between him and the sun—and beheld Detective Craddock, the minion of the Law who had sworn frequently to catch Tham “with the goods” and send him “to the Big House up the river for a long stretch.”

“Good morning, Tham,” Craddock greeted.

“It wath a good mornin’ until jutht now,” Tham admitted. “Tho I thee your ugly fath again!”

“It’ll seem much uglier to you, Tham, on the day the judge gives you the bad news—three to five years.”

“How you do carry on!” Tham complained. “And what are you doin’ thith thplendid day to earn your wageth, if I may athk? How much longer are you goin’ to fool the Polithe Department into payin’ you a thalary? Do you alwayth jutht thtroll through the Thquare and eye the pretty girlth and all that thort of thing? Or, can it be that you have your eyeth on me for thome reathon?”

CRADDOCK bestowed a slight smile upon the pickpocket.

“It could be that,” he said. “As long as you have the urge, Tham, to dip your clever fingers into pockets other than your own, you may expect to have the eyes of the Law upon you.”

“Craddock, do you dare inthinate—”

“Let’s not go into that old routine, Tham, and ruin such a splendid day.

You’re a dip and I’m a cop. I really like you, lad. You’re so refreshing after listening to the verbal gas down at Headquarters. But I’m out to nab you, Tham! We have certain laws. Strange though it may seem to you, there are persons who dislike having their wallets stolen. Some folks like to spend their own money.”

“Why not write a letter to your Congrethman about it?” Tham suggested. “I do not feel like arguin’ today. I have the June fever. I feel like takin’ a thubway train out to Bronkth Park and layin’ on the grath and watchin’ the driftin’ cloudth.”

“The subway part I can understand,” Craddock retorted. “In the subway no doubt you would contrive to lift a leather and get enough currency to defray the expenses of your wild debauch, so to speak.”

“Yeth, I think I’ll go out to the Bronkth zoo,” Tham decided. “The animalth there them tho intelligent after lithtenin’ to thertain human bein’th.”

“Possibly I’ll trail you, Tham, and watch from the near distance, to be of aid should you encounter peril in the wilds,” Craddock said. “Shall we start?”

“On thecond thoughtth, thomehow I them to find mythelf unable to get goin’,” Tham reported. “Thith attack of June fever ith thomethin’ terrible. If I am able to gather enough thtrength, pothibly I will try to make it aft far ath Timeth Thquare later in the day.”

“You mean during the rush hour, of course,” Craddock hinted. “Ah, what a time that is—for a pickpocket! Thousands of human beings rushing hither and yon, bumping and jostling, jamming against one another, careless of nimble fingers that work contrary to the laws made and provided—!”

“You talk like a politithian,” Tham told him. “You mutht have thwallowed a

dictionery. No doubt you are tryin' to impreth me with your gift of gab."

"Only handcuffs to impress you."

"Now, Craddock, you are almotht inthultin'. I wath hopin' to meet you here in Madithon Thquare thith mornin' and path the time of day with you. But I do not like the way you talk, Craddock. Ath far ath I am concerned, you may betake yourthelf elthwhere."

"But I like it here, Tham," Craddock protested. "There is something so soothing about your presence. And I enjoy this fine June day as much as you do."

Craddock grinned and sat on another bench almost directly across the walk from Tham. He extracted a fat cigar from a vest pocket, touched flaming match to the end of it, and puffed in obvious content.

Tham's face was a mask, but inwardly he seethed. He had hoped he would not run into Craddock today. He had believed that this fine June day would be one of good fortune for him; Tham was superstitious about good and bad days.

"'What ith tho rare ath a day in June!' " he scoffed to himself now.

As Craddock smoked and watched him, Tham looked up at the cloudless blue sky, glanced over those who passed along the walks, yawned frequently, and observed with only a city man's small amount of interest the mad dash of fire department apparatus up the Avenue.

It was in Tham's mind that Craddock would not sit there and keep watch indefinitely. No doubt he had duties that would call him elsewhere before long. But the detective gave no indication of having the fidgets, of being eager to get away. He, too, seemed half asleep under the influence of the benevolent June morning.

Tham began thinking, "I mutht get away from Craddock and lift a leather and get me thome dough. Thith thing ith gettin' to be monotonouth."

THAM was down to less than five dollars, and he knew of only one way to get money quickly. Not wine nor women nor playing the ponies had caused his financial deficit. Tham was known as a "soft touch." A hard luck tale always made him reach for the pocket in which he kept his money, if he happened to have any.

Yesterday's hard luck tale had been legitimate, however. It sounded like the usual hard luck yarn, but Tham knew it was the real thing. And he had a personal interest in it.



THUBWAY THAM

He had accidentally met on the street a girl of fourteen, Annie Morse, whose father had been Tham's close friend. He had died in the Big House a year and a half before. His wife, with Annie and a boy of eight to support, had gone to work heroically.

He hadn't seen Annie for some time until this meeting. She was reticent about discussing family troubles, but Tham knew something was wrong and got the truth out of her. Her mother had been ill for months, too ill to work. The small heap of savings had dwindled to nothing. Annie was trying to earn a few dollars.

Tham guessed it was the old story of arrears in rent, of little food and all that. A very common story, but one which struck home with force when the family of an old friend was involved.

Tham lied to Annie—and it was an old lie, too. He told her that years ago he had borrowed a hundred dollars from her father and never had returned it. He took forty-five dollars out of his pocket and gave it to Annie.

“That will pay up the rent and give you a few dollarth for grub and medithine,” Tham had said. “I’ll get the retht to you tomorrow or next day, tho you won’t have to worry about thingth. You tell your mother that.”

And that was why Tham was now down to less than five dollars and had to make Annie’s mother another payment to keep his word. The Morse family would be expecting it. And Tham wanted to find a man with a stuffed wallet who could afford to lose whatever it contained. He never stole from a man who looked as if he could not spare the money.

And there was Craddock, by his presence and watchfulness preventing Tham from carrying out his program of help. Tham glanced at him again, and Craddock grinned. Craddock evidently had a roving commission today; he did not have to leave Tham to pursue some duty.

On impulse, Tham got up from the bench and began walking slowly to the Avenue. Craddock arose immediately and followed. Tham did not head for a subway station, but cut across to Broadway and started up that like a man taking a leisurely promenade.

Two blocks up the street, Tham crossed it. That gave him a chance to glance back. And he saw Craddock still following him at a distance of about a quarter of a block.

“The thilly ath!” Tham grumbled.

A little later he was walking where the walks were congested with humanity. Tham had been headed that way. Craddock would have to get closer to him or run the chance of losing him in the crowd. He paid the detective the credit of not being easily lost. But in thick crowds there was always the chance of something happening that would be to Tham’s benefit.

He worked the old dodge of getting across an intersection the last instant before the traffic lights changed and a rush of motor vehicles flowed between him and Craddock. Tham walked faster while it was impossible for Craddock to pursue. He gained a little on the detective.

He glanced ahead, and growled again. This rare day in June was certainly turning into an unsatisfactory day for Tham. Now he saw, standing on a corner and watching the passing crowd, a man known as Gus Anderson.

Gus was a pickpocket who had arrived from Chicago a few days before. He had obtained a room in the lodging house conducted by “Nosey” Moore, retired burglar, where Tham had made his home for several years. Gus had brought Nosey a letter of introduction which had vouched for Gus Anderson as being a professional dip known to the Chicago police—which was his passport to a room in Nosey’s hostelry.

GUS was a braggart and Tham had become disgusted with Gus at their first meeting. Moreover, he scoffed at New York. And he infuriated Tham by scorning the subway.

“Who wants to lift leathers in a hole in the ground?” Gus had said. “It’s like bein’ a confounded mole. There’s more money in moll buzzin’. Jewels are the things, if you know a good fence.”

Tham had gagged at that. A moll

buzzer, a man who robbed women, was the lowest of the low in Tham's estimation. He had no use for such, and he told Gus so. Nosey Moore had prevented the fisticuffs that seemed imminent and had made the men shake hands. His tenants did not fight each other, but combined to fight the cops, Mr. Moore had pointed out.

Now, glancing ahead and seeing Gus Anderson, Tham guessed the man would speak to him. Being a stranger in town, Gus might want information. Tham knew he needed money; he had told the others at the lodging house that a robbing mouthpiece had left him little more than the price of a ticket to New York.

Tham saw Gus Anderson's face light up as their glances met. Tham frowned quickly and tossed his chin slightly in the direction of his left shoulder, which was an underworld warning that trouble was on his trail. He dodged around a couple of hurrying girls and brushed past Gus.

"Careful—I'm tailed—fat man, brown thuit, big thigar," Tham whispered. "Headquarters man."

He brushed on and stopped at the curb as if to cross Broadway. From an eye corner he saw that Craddock had got past the blocked street intersection and had gained on him. Determination was stamped in Craddock's face. Today, he was bent on shadowing Tham clear to the end.

Tham's warning to Gus Anderson, a man he had disliked at first sight, had nothing of friendship in it. It was the approved thing for the situation, following one of the unwritten rules of such as tread on the fringe of the Law. If Gus Anderson had engaged Tham in conversation, Craddock would have spotted him, and thereafter Gus Anderson would have been a suspect on Craddock's personal list.

At the next corner, Tham turned into a tobacco shop and bought a pack of cigarettes. Through the window, he watched Craddock pass and eye him, then saunter to the curb and stand there waiting. And he also saw Gus Anderson, who plainly enough had been following both Tham and Craddock.

"I've got to have thome dough to give to Annie Morthe," Tham was thinking. "I've got to lift a leather! Craddock and thith Guth Anderthon gangin' up on me and botherin'! 'Oh, what ith tho rare ath a day in June!'"

Tham glared at Gus when he emerged from the tobacco shop. And he glared at Craddock. He crossed the street just then as the traffic lights changed—and so came to within a few feet of an entrance to the Times Square subway station.

It was nearing the rush hour. Soon the broad subway platforms would be jammed with jostling humanity elbowing to get into and out of crowded cars. In a jam like that, it would not be difficult for Tham to lift a leather, ordinarily. But not with Craddock watching him from only a few feet away.

Anyhow, Tham had to locate a prospective victim first of all. He did not make a practise of going around and feeling in a haphazard fashion in other men's pockets. When he started to get a wallet, he wanted to know there was one to get and just where to find it.

He watched as Craddock stopped a short distance away and eyed him. He watched as Gus Anderson approached, and frowned at him again. But Gus was clever. He stopped a couple of feet from Tham to ignite a match and light a cigarette, and whispered:

"Gotcha, boy! While the dick's busy watchin' you, maybe I can go into the subway and hist a fat one."

Gus walked on. Tham's blood boiled. That was a dirty trick, though it often had been used before. To make a haul while an officer watched another suspect was nothing new. What irked Tham most was that Gus would do it in the subway. Tham felt that the subway was his own particular working ground, and the police knew it to such an extent that Tham often got the blame for a feat of pocket-picking of which he was not guilty.

IDLY Gus Anderson stood at the curb and smoked half his cigarette, then tossed the stub into the street and swung down the stairs to the subway like a man who had made a sudden decision. Tham remained standing where he was. Men and women were thronging to the stairs and down them now. Craddock still watched from the near distance.

Six feet from Tham there stopped a couple that did not call for any great attempt at analysis on Tham's part. The man was perhaps forty, tall and sleek, with a flashing smile, and his attire was strictly up to the moment.

"Wolf!" Tham thought.

The girl was perhaps twenty-five, and she wore too much makeup and was dressed on the flamboyant side. "Lady wolf!" Tham judged. "One ith ath bad ath the other."

He heard the man speaking: "It's okay, lovely. I've got to hurry downtown on a little business. But I'll meet you here at five this evening. Be sure to meet me right here."

"And if you shouldn't meet me?" the flashy girl asked, suspicion in her eyes.

"Don't worry about that. Everything's okay, like I said. Meet me at five and we'll have time to get that little pretty you want before the jewelry shop closes."

"Oh? You mean you have to go down town and get the money—that it? And if

your business doesn't work out, you won't be able to make it back here by five?"

"You're a suspicious little goose," he told her. "I'm as anxious as you are to make it at five. And you're wrong, dumpling. I've got a stuffed billfold in my pocket right now, more than enough for the pretty and a good time tonight afterward. Hit a heavy poker game with both fists last night. I've got to hustle. See you at five!"

The man patted her on the shoulder, gave her a reassuring smile, and turned to get into the crowd that was fighting its way down the subway stairs.

Tham's heart was hammering at his ribs. What a perfect setup! Tham knew the man's type, and the girl's. He would not think it much of a crime to lift ill-gotten gains from the man. Helping Annie Morse and her mother would be a better deed than to allow the money to be spent for a "pretty" for that girl.

And there was Tham's logical victim getting away from him. And Craddock was still watching. And Tham did not know in which pocket his prospective victim carried the billfold. This day was not so good!

Tham turned quickly and started down the stairs. From the corner of his eye he saw Craddock toss away his cigar and follow.

Tham was fortunate in one thing—a jam on the stairs had prevented the man with the billfold getting on down to the platform quickly. Edging along the wall, Tham got close to him.

The platform was thronged. A downtown express was at the station, and men and women were fighting to get off it and into it. The man Tham was watching started toward the express, but a sudden press of hurrying humanity obstructed him. The car doors rolled shut and the express dashed away through the tunnel.

The man Tham was watching made a gesture that expressed disgust, then stood quietly near the edge of the platform waiting for the next downtown express.

Tham yawned and stifled the yawn with the back of his hand. He could see Craddock about twenty feet away standing between him and the stairway, a little out of the crowd. Tham's blood was boiling again. What a chance this was! Here was an opportunity to get a fat wallet from a man who deserved to lose it, a chance to help the Morse family and perhaps have a little over for his own needs.

But there was Detective Craddock, his arch enemy, only a few feet away, watching carefully, ready to pounce upon Tham if he made a move!

THAM knew a trick and decided to work it, though it would be a little risky. As a good pickpocket must, Tham knew the usual reactions of human beings to a sudden situation. The trick he had in mind would cause a commotion during which Tham might be able to do his work and dodge Craddock. And also it might make his prospective victim reveal in which pocket he carried his fat billfold.

Tham waited a moment, until there was a fresh surge of human beings, and moved slightly nearer the man with the fat billfold. And suddenly his voice sounded in a shrill yell which rang above the din of the platform's tumult:

"Pickpocket! Pickpocket! There he goth!"

The shrill call had the effect Tham expected it to have, and something more. All around him, men felt quickly of pockets wherein they kept wallets, and Tham saw the one he was watching feel quickly of his left hip pocket and then straighten up.

But, as Tham moved toward him swiftly, he saw something more. His wild

yell had started something less than thirty feet away. There, a man suddenly started to break through the crowd with violence, knocking aside screaming women and yelling men. Tham's wild yell had flushed a pickpocket in his act of crime. And Tham saw that the man trying frantically to escape was Gus Anderson!

And Detective Craddock had whirled around to start after his quarry, shouting: "Stop! I'm an officer! Stop or I'll shoot!"

In that instant, Tham crowded against the man who was intending to buy his girl a pretty. He got the wallet in the crush and slipped back through the jostling crowd. A downtown local was preparing to pull out, and Tham dodged into a car just as the door was closing.

The billfold was in his pocket. His fingers grasped it, and without removing it from his pocket Tham extracted the currency it contained, and stuffed the bills into a pocket of his vest. At Penn Station, Tham mingled with others getting off the train—and dropped the incriminating billfold underfoot.

He ascended to the street, his face a mask though he was feeling jubilant. He examined his loot as he walked past the shops. He had almost five hundred dollars.

"That wath a cheap wolf," he thought. "A girl like the one he wath talkin' to wantth a pretty that cotht more'n five hundred."

But it was a windfall for Tham at the moment. He could take care of Mrs. Morse and Annie until they could get along better. And he would have a little for himself—for a man had to eat, wear clothes and pay room rent.

Nor was that all.

Tham summed up: He had got the billfold right under Craddock's nose. He had the money he needed so sorely. And Gus Anderson, the dip who had forsaken the ethics of the profession by pulling a

trick in another man's territory, was either caught by now or had been almost caught and the life half scared out of him.

All in all, it was a good day.

A sudden thought came to Tham. He grinned as he hurried along the street, and muttered:

“The poet wath right. ‘Oh, what ith tho rare ath a day in June!’ ”