

The British Thieves Society

By

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It didn't take a brilliant detective to deduce that someone - or ones - had broken into the house, and I had a pretty good idea who it was. They were fairly quiet but the intense rancid smell was a giveaway. I secreted myself behind the doorway of the Great Hall, fire poker in my hand, and waited. Sure enough, three figures with dimly glowing lanterns crept in. Ferociously, I leapt out.

“Arms up, y'bloody thieves!” I yelled. “State yer business or y'll not see the light of - ”

“*Dodge! Dodge!*” they cried, arms above their heads. “It's us!”

And so it was. Three of the roughest, toughest, nastiest lads from my previous delinquent days: Lips, Toof, and Stench.

“Boys!” I said, joyfully. “You'd've given me a scare, if I hadn't smelled Stench three miles off! Lord, Stench, you're worse than ever!”

“Really?” said Stench. “I never notice.”

“We do,” said Toof. “Wouldn't've brought 'im, if' we weren't comin' to see you specific, Dodge.”

It was then that I noticed one boy's absence.

“Where's Bobbsey?” I asked.

“Stuck in bed,” said Lips. “Won't move an inch.”

“Is he sick?”

“Not deafly,” said Toof.

“Sick in the 'ead,” said Lips.

“Won't eat,” said Stench. “E's wasting away, Dodger.”

“At's why we come to you, Dodge,” said Toof. “Can't go on wifout one o' yis.”

I brought the boys into the master's kitchen and fed them. They ate like they hadn't had a meal in weeks.

“Where'sa master?” asked Lips.

“On holiday,” I said.

It was true. Sir Roderick - the brilliant detective, known across London as *The Rottweiler* had gone on a Mediterranean cruise - likely his own little burglary spree - leaving me in charge of the manor.

“At any rate,” said Stench, “this'll do us the *Breaking & Entering Badge!*”

“Not hardly,” I said. “You broke nothing and I caught you the second you came in the room!”

“Aw – give us a break, Dodge,” said Toof.

“I couldn't if I wanted to, Toof. When I left the pack, I gave up the right to give badges. Who gives 'em out, now?”

The boys looked at each other, quietly.

“Bobbsey?”

“It don't matter that you left, Dodge,” said Toof. “You know what they say: *Once a fief, always a fief!*”

Stench, Lips, Toof and Bobbsey were roustabouts from my days in what was known as the Flood Street pack of the *British Thieves Society*. We were one of the rowdier packs at one time claiming over 30 members. Packs were typically run by ever-changing, middle-aged thieves to whom we were apprenticed until such time as they retired or were nabbed. At eleven years, I was second oldest boy after Bobbsey, when our pack went suddenly leaderless. Bobbsey and I, as oldest and ones with the most meritorious badges, took leadership of the pack while we waited for a more senior thief to come along. But that day never came. I hesitated to leave Bobbsey, when I'd discovered my relationship to The Rottweiler a year ago. But realizing a blood relation always held the strongest pull for our kind.

These lieutenants - Lips, Toof, and Stench - along with Bobbsey - were my best pals in the Flood Street pack. And Stench's stench, aside, it was a thrill to see them again.

Lips - lanky and thin, with thick spectacles was a fragile son of a demolitions expert who had met an early, untimely death. No shock, it had been the result of an explosives miscalculation, with Lips close enough that the blast had taken most of his hearing. Keenly resilient, he quickly mastered the art of lip-reading - an ability which easily earned him the "*Spying Badge*."

Toof was one of our toughest boys - yet with a kind, gentle side. Abandoned at birth, Toof fought his way from youth home to youth home, before turning finally to the streets. A victim of extremely poor orthodontia, Toof's upper left, superior canine hung long and low, giving him at times a crazed, snaggletooth look, and leaving him with the

sad habit of pronouncing all “th” words as “f”s; hence, baf, wraf, fink, fought, healf, deaf, feaory, fanks, bof, boof, and Toof.

Stench, a cheerful, outgoing boy, had spent most of his childhood in the complex sewers of London. It was his playground, and he preferred its dismal tunnels over London's sunniest parks. If he hadn't gotten exceedingly lonely, it's likely Stench would've spent the rest of his life underground. The moment he rose to the surface he joined with the thieves. It wasn't easy at first. He made most of the boys sick. And even when we tried to clean him up, it was impossible to completely remove the smell and grime. Still, he loved the pack and was loyal to a fault.

Each lieutenant in the Pack was responsible for mastering and administering at least one *Society* badge unique to his individual tastes or experience. You didn't have to get the badges in any particular order; merely obtain enough of the correct ones to progress - in our case from *Rogue's Apprentice* to *Thief - Second Class* - a highly sought-after transition mostly because it was the first rank that actually had the word “*Thief*” in its title.

While I was with the Pack, I administered the *Breaking & Entering Badge* as well as the *Lock-Picking Badge*. The *B&E Badge* was, as it sounds, for *effectively* breaking and entering. Getting caught was an immediate disqualifier.

Lips handed out the *Spy Badge*; Toof, the *Bully Badge*; and Stench, of course, the pack's *Uncleanliness Badge*. All the boys maintained high standards, and delivering a high enough level of uncleanliness to appease Stench was especially difficult, with some boys rolling around in manure for hours just to be told to try again next week.

As we made our way out of Sir Roderick's manor, I caught Stench drizzling petroleum from a can in front of the gate.

“Stench!” I called. “What are you on with?”

“Just thought I'd try for me *Arson Badge!*”

“I live here, you git! Are you mad?!”

“Oh! Sorry, Dodge! Right! Musta lost me 'ead!”

I was reluctant to leave the manor, but the horses and dogs were fed, and Colonel Woolsey and Mrs. Hoover were off for the weekend. Further, I was alone and bored and had been thinking about the boys, especially Bobbsey.

As proud as I was of having obtained such difficult medals as the *Arson Badge*, *Burglary Badge*, *Bad Citizen Badge*, *Unwarranted Jeopardy Badge*, *Putting Your Friends in Danger Badge*, *Unnecessary Risk Badge*, *Be Rude to Elders Badge*, *Dirty Fighting Badge*, *Knife-Throwing Badge*, *Kidnapping Badge*, *Forgery Badge*, and *Disrupting the Peace and General Rudeness Badge*, I had left the pack before obtaining the crucial *Lying Badge*, *Assault with a Deadly Weapons Badge*, and *Uncleanliness Badge*. And though my adventures with The Rottweiler were greatly distracting, I had regretted never making the full transition to *Thief - Second Class*. So perhaps, I thought, this could be an opportunity.

“You never were much good at lying, Dodge,” said Lips.

“No,” I replied, “I'll have to work on that.”

The Pack lived in an abandoned firehouse on Flood Street in the gritty Chelsea

area of London. The firehouse itself had mostly burned down years ago while the department fought another blaze across town. The upper third of the building had been completely destroyed, with enough smoke and fire damage to proclaim the entire building uninhabitable. But with its large rooms, deep cellars and still working electrical connections, it was a perfect headquarters for the pack.

It was in the furthest room on the second floor that I found him.

“*Bobbsey*,” I said. “It’s me.”

Curled up on his cot, clothes matted, Bobbsey stared numbly at the wall. Bobbsey had always been the strong, true leader of the gang. It’d been easy enough for me to leave knowing they were in his stalwart hands. Looking mortal and beaten was a side of him I’d never seen.

“Dodge?” he uttered. “Is it really you?”

“It’s me, Bobbsey. What’s happened?”

“It was *him*, Dodge. I saw him. *My father*.”

“Bob,” I said. “That can’t be. Your father’s long gone. Killed in the same - ”

“No,” he said. “*That* was the man who raised me. But this - *this* was my true father.”

“How can you - ”

“The mark,” said Bobbsey. “He saw it and he knew.”

Bobbsey turned and sat up, well as he could and told us the story.

Bob and Toof had been up to a big job at the Bank of London during the four o’clock rush hour. It was a daring job, rustling among dozens of clerks, customers and administrators, nicking all they could get their hands on, when suddenly two well-armed

guards were on top of them. Toof escaped. But Bob fought fiercely against his captors, ripping his pants leg in the process, and got dragged off to the office of the President, to be held there until the authorities arrived.

But when the Bank President came into the office and got a look at the queer mark on Bobbsey's right leg just above the ankle - a mark in the shape of a dark, red crown - he froze dead.

"It was *him*, Dodge. I've had that mark since birth. He'd seen it. You could see it in his face."

"Bob - maybe he was startled? Or maybe - I dunno - he was a friend of your father's - or someone in hospital - "

"No," said Bob. "It was *him*."

"So, then what?" asked Stench.

"He panicked. We both did. He fell into his own guards, and that's when I made my break. I jumped cross desks, crashed through the doors, and down and out. And I heard 'im calling after me, yelling - *take 'im, grab 'im, shoot 'im - that scum, that parasite!*"

And he fell back against the bed, morose.

"Bobs," I said. "There's more here than you've seen. Give me a bit. We'll work it out."

He smiled, tiredly.

"It's true then, eh? What they say? You're with that Rottweiler, now?"

"Not tonight, I'm not," I said. "Tonight, I'm with you lot."

I spent the next hour making plans and catching up with the remaining boys: Pox, Stout, Maps, Snitch, Rowdy and Roughhouse. They brought me up to date on recent events, including the *Outlaw Derby*, and the *Day of Poor Behavior*. We recited the *Thief's Oath*: “*You Find It! You Keep It!*” and practiced the official *Society* salute: standing at attention and proudly waving our right fists, with middle finger extended. It was a gesture the *BTS* had successfully imported from cab drivers in the states.

With Lips and Toof in tow, I went in search of a poorly tied-down carriage.

We reached the estate of the Bank President – one Richard Morgan – sometime after midnight. It was a palace off Kensington High Street, much bigger than Sir Roddy's place, with high gates, Grecian sculptures, and a well-manicured lawn. Still, it was easily entered, poorly guarded and practically deserted for a place so lush. I left Toof out front to keep watch and took Lips round the back of the house. A solitary room on the third floor was well-lit with a large man frantically pacing. Lips and I hiked up a sturdy tree near the window. Lips withdrew his field glasses and went to work.

“At's 'im,” said Lips. “E's not alone, neither. There's another in there, 'e's talking to.”

I tapped Lips, so he could see my own lips in the dim light.

“Who's the other?” I asked. Lips looked back at the window.

“Can't tell. But 'e's taller'n Morgan. They're arguin'. Dodge - take a look.”

I took the glasses and got my first glimpse of Morgan. It was true. What I saw was nothing if not an older, aged copy of Bobbsey himself. I saw Morgan take a large

navy man's duffel and dump thousands - perhaps millions - of bundled pound notes onto the bed. Morgan gestured wildly to the hidden man. I gave the glasses back to Lips.

"'e's sayin' - *this is it. It's all there is. This'll ruin me - ruin the bank - ruin* - looks like he says, '*London.*' Now he - *Dodge!*"

Morgan, desperate, had pulled a gun on the hidden man. But he was frightened, shaking. Before he could fire, the hidden man whipped out a sparkling, diamond-headed cane knocking Morgan across the head. Morgan staggered, bleeding.

"*Alright,*" mouthed Lips. "*Alright, I'll do it - I'll do it -*"

And then, it happened, a glint of moonlight flashed from the field glasses, catching the eye of Morgan, himself. Suddenly, *he* was looking at *us*. He and the hidden man rushed to the window. But we were already down the tree and running frantically through the yard. Across the house, lights popped on, doors opened, servants were woken, and dogs were loosed. We raced to the front and picked up Toof, nursing a swollen jaw. From the bushes, we spied another man lying face down.

"'E's okay," said Toof. "Just resting."

"'C'mon!" I said. And we tore down the lane towards the waiting carriage.

Twenty minutes later, we were back at the firehouse.

"'He's y'father alright, Bobbsey," I said. "'He's nicking from the Bank, himself. Millions, looks like."

"*More, probably,*" said Maps, tossing down a stack of papers. "*Times says Bank of London's on the verge of collapse due to mismanagement from Mr. Morgan. And embezzlement.*"

“We know ‘at’s the truf!” said Toof, holding a wet rag across his cheek.

“Says Bank of London’s frozen assets for the past week because of his bad investments. Says if they collapse it’ll cause a run that could bankrupt all England.”

“*Good job, Dad!*” said Stench.

“*Stench!*”

“This is serious,” said Lips. “There could be rioting, murder, martial law – ”

“Says here, George Galworthy – ‘at’s the Queen’s Director of Public Prosecutions - ”

“We know who. Get on wif it.”

“ - intends to expose Morgan and bring him to justice by week’s end.”

“Galworthy’s doin’ the job for us, eh?” said Stench.

The boys watched Bobbsey who looked even more miserable.

George Galworthy was the prim, upper-crust, compulsively immaculate public prosecutor. He was known for perfect gray gloves that he wore so as to never get his hands dirty. And he loved the press. The Times regularly quoted him; how he despised criminals and wouldn’t rest till London’s streets were gleaming. It was all posturing. But he was a terror to even the mildest miscreants (*Sir Roddy hated him*) and he had public opinion on his side. If Galworthy was after Morgan, Morgan was out of time.

“We could help him,” said Lips.

“Which one?” said Stench. “Morgan or Galworthy?”

“*Morgan,*” I said.

“*E sicced dogs on us,*” said Toof. “E’s not lookin fer ‘elp.”

“What about the hidden man,” said Maps.

“Didn’t get a look,” said Lips. “Whoever he was – they seem to be in cahoots.”

Suddenly, there was the sound of frantic movement, yelling, and footsteps rushing up the stairs. Pox burst into the room.

“*Raid!*” he yelled, bursting into the room. “*It’s the cops!*”

Before anyone could move, a battering ram blew the doors open, spewing half a dozen cops armed with billy clubs and rifles. A couple boys made to run, but the cops were fast and forced them to the ground.

And then, the most pristine, genteel, prestigious man I’d ever seen – with gray spats and gloves – stepped into the room and everyone went silent. It was George Galworthy.

“*Dis-gusting,*” the man snorted. “*What a filthy rats nest! What a stench!*”

The boys looked at Stench. Stench shrugged.

“What a service we’re doing,” he continued, “eliminating degenerate pests like you.”

Galworthy looked over Toof, held firmly by a cop.

“Where’d you get this cheek, boy?”

“Had a row with the Queen,” said Toof.

Galworthy caught a whiff of Stench and recoiled.

“*Good God!*” he cried.

Stench grinned, and the boys laughed.

“Lock him outside with the other mongrels,” said Galworthy. He continued around and eyed me suspiciously. “*You look familiar.*”

“We’re *all* world famous, Guvna,” I said.

Galworthy sneered and moved to Bobbsey, then stopped cold. He looked close at Bobbsey and his eyes lit up.

“*It's true, then,*” he whispered, and turned to one of his cops. “Take him. He comes with me.”

“The rest, sir?”

“Lock 'em up. Until we determine a more *permanent* solution.”

With that Toof broke from his guard and rushed at the prosecutor. But like lightning, Galworthy whipped out a diamond-head cane, and slapped Toof to the ground. *Galworthy was the hidden man.*

“*Toof!*” I cried.

“You've smudged my cane, you mutt,” said Galworthy polishing his diamond.

“Fink you chipped my toof,” moaned Toof.

Galworthy took a cuffed Bobbsey - weak as he was - into his personal cab, leaving the rest of us to be loaded up, chained by hands and legs, into an armored wagon. When Galworthy was far enough ahead, I set to work on the locks. Within minutes the whole pack was free.

“Lads,” I said, “when we stop the wagon I need the whole team to scatter. Collect as many boys as you can. *Don't fight the cops.* It's not worth it. I need everyone to meet me where we first met Stench - *in one hour.* If the cops see you, fine. Just don't let 'em *catch* you.”

“Where're you going?” said Lips.

“I’ve got an errand,” I said. “We’re out of our league on this one. We need help from folks who haven’t been apprentices in a *long* time. After that, I’ll make a stop back at Morgan’s. Let’s hope he’s ready to listen.”

My errand took all of ten minutes. With some coaxing, I was able to convince a couple acquaintances I’d made with The Rottweiler to lend their skills to our efforts. I then found myself, for the second time this evening, at the home of Richard Morgan.

Easily slipping into the house, I made my way up to the bedroom. From the coupe outside the garage and the numerous steamer trunks, it was clear Morgan wasn’t intending to stay. But after a thorough search, I couldn’t find him anywhere in the house. It was my miscalculation. As I stepped into the bedroom’s clear light a hemp noose went round my neck, block and tackle weights dropped, and I was hauled into the air like a fish out of water. And then out stepped Morgan.

“*You little -*”

“Wait - !” I choked. “Here to help!”

“Too late,” he grumbled. “No help for anyone, now.”

“*He has your son,*” I croaked. “The mark. You saw it! He’s like you! *BTS!*”

Morgan’s eyes went wide.

“*BTS?*”

“*Yes!*”

In a flash, Morgan withdrew a blade and severed the rope. I fell to the ground hard, but he gave no assistance. He fell onto the bed, grasping the truth.

“*British Thieves Society,*” he said. “How did you - ”

“I - ” I gasped for breath. “I suspected when I first saw you. But this trap - the knots, the pulleys - its all *Thief - First Class*.”

“Yes,” said Morgan. “I was *the best*. I was Head Boy of the *Butcher Street Assaulters* - the finest pack in London. But we - ”

He looked at me.

“*We grew up*. We were the smartest, sneakiest thieves in London. I put myself through Cambridge on *Thieves’* loot - ”

“But you never gave it up?”

“I never thought it would go this far.”

“*Once a thief*,” I said. “And now you've bankrupt London.”

He buried his face in his hands.

“*Give it back*,” I said. “Tell everyone. There's still - “

“There's *no time!*” he said. “*It's over!*”

“He's got your son.”

“My - ?”

“You *know* it's true. You *saw the mark*. He's got Bobbsey. He'll kill him.”

“I – Bobbsey?”

“He's spent his life on the streets,” I said. “You're all he ever wanted.”

I glanced out the window. Even now, Galworthy's cops were amassing at the front gate.

“Bobbsey?” he said again. “That's his name?”

“It is,” I said.

A look of fire came into Morgan's eyes. He stood up.

“Well, what’re you yammering for, boy! Take me to him!”

Quickly, we made our way out the manor, to Morgan's Coupe, and took off.

We’d had a solid lead, but I convinced Morgan to spin round the house, knowing it was crucial that Galworthy’s men gave chase. I may have gotten more than I bargained for, as they trailed close, blew sirens, and took shots at us. Driving feverishly, Morgan thrust a revolver into my hand - something not even The Rottweiler had ever done.

“You've got yer *Assault with a Deadly Weapons Badge*, have you?!” he called.

“*No, sir!*” I said.

“Ye'll have it tonight, boy!” he said and spurred the horses on.

Soon after, we arrived at our destination: Regent Street and Brewer in the center of London. Most of the boys were waiting for us. In the distance, Galworthy and his men came closer.

“Ye've cornered us, boy!” said Morgan. “Where're we supposed to go now?”

“*Down,*” I said. “*Stench?*”

“Right this way, Cap'n!”

Morgan shrank from the odor, but girded himself. The boys had the manhole cover up and Stench herded everyone into the pit. Morgan and I were last and saw Galworthy leaping off of his cab.

“Pox, Roughhouse, Toof - you have your teams. We’ll make sure Galworthy stays on us!”

Maps handed intricate underground maps to the leaders, who quickly led their teams away. Above us, we heard shrill sounds of Galworthy compelling himself to go underground.

“Who let them get down there?!” he barked. “Get me torches! Lights! A gasmask! *EEUUGH!*”

And down he came after us.

“How much farther?” called Morgan. We'd led Galworthy on for what seemed hours. Everyone was filthy and exhausted.

“This is futile!” he said. “We're going in circles!”

“One big circle!” corrected Stench.

Since coming underground most of my boys had diverted Galworthy's cops down side pathways and tunnels. Now, my team consisted only of me, Morgan and Stench. Galworthy, left with only two cops and Bobbsey dragged behind, were almost on top of us.

“That's far enough!” called Galworthy. “Stop where you are or he's done!”

“And why should I care about that one?” called Morgan.

“I know your secret! This urchin is your blood!” He held a gun to Bobbsey's head.

“Don't!” called Morgan. “You've got the money! What more do you want?”

Galworthy pulled an envelope out of his breast pocket and waved it.

“A confession!”

He crumpled it up and threw it to Morgan.

“Sign!” he said, and cocked the gun against Bobbsey's head.

And then, from the shadows, came the sound of a second gun - but this one aimed at Galworthy. Out of the dark lumbered two of the nastiest, filthiest thugs London's underworld had ever seen.

“Drop it, Guv,” said the first thug.

Galworthy's cops turned on them, but the second thug shot the pistols from their hands.

“Oh, you're supposed to frighten me?!” laughed Galworthy. “I've got the entire London police above me! No one cares about you filthy low-lifes! If you died down here *they'd give me a medal!*”

“Admit it!” I said. “You're not better than us! You've been blackmailing Morgan from the beginning!”

“*What of it?!*” snarled Galworthy.

“And even after he gave you the bank's money - it wasn't enough!”

“I promised to clean up this city!” said Galworthy. “Not only will I have my confession - I'll have the *dead body* of the thief responsible!”

The first thug sneered.

“That's enough,” he said.

“Is it?” said Galworthy. “Do you know who I am, sir? Do you know what I'm worth!? I know what trash like you care about! Drop your weapon, and whatever the boy's paying, *I'll triple!*”

“Then you admit,” said the thug, “to coercion, fraud, blackmail?”

“And accessory to embezzlement,” added Morgan.

“Might as well thrown in treason, then,” added Stench.

“Call it whatever you like,” said Galworthy. “It hardly matters now!”

“I think you’ll see it does,” said the first thug. And he tore off his beard and hat, and shook off his shambled cloak and scarf. And there, suddenly, was Chief Inspector Daniels of Scotland Yard. Galworthy and Morgan both stared in disbelief.

“*What – wait -*” cried Galworthy.

The second thug removed his beard and hat, and Simon Maxwell, Publisher of the London Times was suddenly before us.

“*It can't be!*” said Galworthy, horrified.

“Put it down,” said Daniels.

“*Boys!*” Galworthy called to the cops. But Daniels growled and they remained still. He turned back to Galworthy.

“*Now,*” he ordered.

And Galworthy lowered his gun.

Within moments we were all above ground right where I’d intended us to be, at the central headquarters of Scotland Yard. The constables escorted Galworthy off. They cuffed Morgan as well, but gave him a chance to speak to Bobbsey.

“I’ll get to tell my side of it, now. Maybe they’ll go easier. Maybe not.”

“Anything I can do, I will,” said Bobbsey.

Morgan stared at him, flush.

“Thank you, boy. And all of you,” he said to the rest of us. The constables led him away.

“*Wait,*” he said, and turned to address us.

“Lips, Maps, Toof, Pox, Snitch, Stout, Rowdy, Roughhouse, Stench, Bobbsey, Dodge - as senior-most member present of the *British Thieves Society* - for your service on behalf of the Bank of London, the country, and the Queen of England herself - I hereby bestow upon each of you the rank of *Thief - First Class!*”

The boys stared stunned, honored.

“Skipping *Fief - Second Class* entirely?” said Toof.

“You earned it,” said Morgan, firmly. “*Salute!*”

We stood proudly and saluted. And we were *so* thrilled that we saluted the cops, the Chief Inspector, the Publisher of the London Times, and a dozen reporters standing nearby. And *they* were so thrilled, they saluted us right back.

We’d made it after all. We were perfect thieves at last.

The End