

## XXXIII.

## POLICEMEN ON TRIAL.

NEED OF DISCIPLINE. — MR. ACTON AS A JUDGE. — TRIALS IN THE COURT-ROOM. — HUMOR AND WIT. — TRYING THE COMPLAINANT. — A PANEL-THIEF.

## NEED OF DISCIPLINE.

To enforce discipline, a court is held every Wednesday at headquarters. Here from fifty to a hundred patrolmen are arraigned and tried every week. The trial is conducted, in some respects, with the formality of a court. The defendant is duly cited to appear; he is served with a copy of the charges against him, and the names of witnesses to be examined. Most of the charges are very frivolous — such as sitting down when on duty; reading a paper; standing in doorways; stopping on the streets to talk; off his beat; going into a house, a bar-room, or a dram-shop; appearing without gloves; neglecting to try the doors to see if they are unfastened; not responding to the sergeant's rap; being too long in patrolling his post. It is the duty of the inspectors to follow up the men, watch them, detect them in little errors, and report them for trial. The efficiency of the force demands this.

## MR. ACTON AS A JUDGE.

In the third story of the building used as the headquarters, the court-room is located. It is a large, well-lighted, well-ventilated room, with seats for about a hundred, a bench for the court, with ample accommodations for the press and for visitors. At ten o'clock court opens. The trials are held by Mr. Acton, the president of the police commission. The other members occasionally attend and look on, but Mr. Acton has the labor of the trial upon himself. He is judge, jury, district attorney, and counsel for the defence. He is a small man, wiry and nervous, with hair prematurely gray, which he wears cut close to his head like a prize-fighter. He is prompt and rapid in the despatch of business, and can try and dispose of a hundred cases during the day. Lawyers are seldom employed, as policemen find they can get along much better by telling their own story in a simple and direct manner. When lawyers attend, no hair-splitting is allowed; no quibbles, no legal subterfuges, no objection to this testimony or that because it does not conform to legal rules. The court is one of equity. The officer who arraigns the patrolman tells his story in his own way; and the defendant tells his story, brings up his witnesses, and the case is disposed of at once. A shorthand reporter takes down every word of the testimony, and this is submitted to the full board before a decision is rendered. Mr. Acton has been in the force eight years. He prepared himself for his present duties by a close attendance on the police trials at the Tombs, especially on Sunday morning. He is very shrewd



and talented. He is very adroit in putting questions. He can break a nice-laid scheme, expose a well-told story, and bring the truth out by two or three sharp questions; and the work he does in a day would take an ordinary court a week to discharge. Out of two thousand men on the police, all are not saints; and to do fairly by the city, and justly by the men arraigned, a judge must have a cool head, ready wit, be prompt and decided, be a good judge of human nature, and have strong common sense.

#### TRIALS IN THE COURT-ROOM.

Half an hour before the court opens, the room is all alive. Officers and men and witnesses fill it full. The captains, in full uniform, take the seat of honor within the iron railing. The sergeants have chairs outside the railing, and the men huddle together on the benches. The clerk comes in with an armful of yellow envelopes, which contain the sworn complaints. Promptly on time Mr. Acton takes his seat, and, without any formality, calls out the names of the defendant, the complainant, and the witnesses. The defendant steps forward, the charge is read in two or three lines: "Off duty for two or three hours." The testimony is taken. "How is that?" is put to the defendant. He makes his statement, brings up his witnesses if he has any, and the next case is called before the witness has really done speaking. During the trial Mr. Acton gives sound advice, words of caution, admonitions and threats. To turbulent men he has a loud, harsh, sharp tone, that rasps like a file. Generally he is tender and candid, and has much patience. If he thinks the officers are

hard on the men, he defends the men. Conspiracies are often formed to break men; but such plans are not only frustrated, but are usually exposed, by the keen dissecting-knife that lays bare the motives.

#### HUMOR AND WIT.

There is a great deal of humor in these trials, and half a day can be spent very pleasantly in seeing how justice is administered to the guardians of the city. A witness is called upon. "State what you know." The policeman asks a question, but dislikes the answer. Mr. Acton says, "You asked the question: you must take the answer he gives you." Four witnesses testify that a policeman took ten dollars, and let a prisoner go. The policeman denies it. "They all lie, do they?" Mr. Acton says. A man is arraigned for talking twenty minutes. "Too long, Brown, too long. You must learn to tell shorter stories, or police business won't agree with you." To one who is charged with coming out of a brewery, this admonition is given: "You must keep out of breweries, or keep out of the station-house." One man was off duty catching a goat. "Let the goats alone, and attend to your business," is the rebuke. In answer to the charge of being off duty, a policeman said he went into a house to look after a drunken man. "Let drunken men remain in the house when they are in it; you have no business with them there." Two officers were brought up for quarrelling: one pulled the other's nose. "Pretty business," he says, "for policemen! The city pays you twelve hundred dollars a year to keep the peace, and the first thing you do is to go and break it." But some one said, "They shook



hands afterwards." "Well," said Mr. Acton, "that is an improvement on prize-fighting. Prize-fighters shake hands before they go into the fight, but seldom when they come out of it. What shall I do to the man who pulled your nose?" "Don't break him, sir," the complainant says. A policeman is accused of coming out of a bakery. He went there to get some coffee. "Did you get it?" "Yes, sir." "Well, two days' pay off for that." Another is accused of not trying the doors on his beat, to see if they were fastened. He denies the charge of neglect, but undertakes to split hairs on the charge that he neglected to try *all* his doors. In sharp tones the president says, "Don't play any of your fine points; don't try any of your dodges here. You confessed your neglect of duty, and I shall punish you for what you do neglect, not for what you don't." One is seen coming out of a dram-shop. He makes some frivolous excuse. He knows that it will go hard with him, as the president shakes his head, and says, "You will learn to keep out of rum-shops by and by." "Keep on your post, Mr. Brown," is said to another. "Off your post, eh? Went to get some coffee? That's the dearest cup of coffee you've drank this year. No coffee on duty." "Couldn't be found on your post for two hours! You might as well be in Harlem. You had better seek some other business." "Don't know the limit of your post? Go and find out: don't bring that excuse here again for being off duty." "Jones, you must get a new coat before you come here again. It will do for me to wear such a coat as that, not you." A man comes up and whispers to Mr. Acton. In a loud tone Mr. Acton says, "This man requests that the

name of some ladies who have brought charges against policemen may be kept out of the papers. I tell him I don't run newspapers, and have no control over them. I have been trying these eight years to keep my own name out of the paper, but I haven't succeeded." "You're a nice young gentleman," Mr. Acton says to another; "you desert your post without leave. This is the third time you have been before me lately. You had better take your buttons off, and carry them to the station. Police business don't agree with your constitution." No member of the force is allowed to be in debt. To one against whom this charge is preferred, Mr. Acton says, "Go home, settle that matter before you sleep, and report to me to-morrow morning." And so the trial proceeds till the yellow envelopes are exhausted, and every one has had a hearing.

#### TRYING THE COMPLAINANT.

The humorous part of the trial usually takes place in the afternoon. The morning trials are for breaches of discipline, preferred by inspectors, captains, or sergeants. But the trials in the afternoon are on complaints preferred by citizens who consider themselves aggrieved, abused, or wronged by the police. In nine cases out of ten the investigation proves that the complainants were in the wrong, and the policemen right. The members of the force humorously call the afternoon trials, "Trying the complainant." The charge is usually based on alleged abuse of citizens; refusing to make arrests; beating with the club; assaulting women; levying black-mail; allowing stores to be broken open on their beat, and other charges. After



the complainant has told his story, the officer tells his; and usually, if a man has been beaten, it was because he resisted the officer. Women make complaints of brutal treatment, bring ten or twenty witnesses to show how excellent their character is, cry in court over the wrongs done their feelings by arrest, and get the sympathy of the crowd. But when the captain comes up, and testifies that they were both drunk and disorderly in the station-house the night before, and filled the room with profanity and obscenity, the women find themselves exposed, often shout out imprecations, and flaunt out of the room.

#### A PANEL-THIEF.

The panel-thieving business is almost entirely in the hands of black women. They carry on their trade so adroitly that it is difficult to discover their whereabouts, or to detect them at their business. They make frequent complaints against the police. One of them appeared before the commissioner the other day — a very good-looking and intelligent mulatto woman. She was a poor washerwoman, she said, and quietly maintained herself and family. While she was washing, one day, a policeman came and took her to the station-house, without giving her time to lock her doors. The policeman afterwards searched her house, and carried away some keys which a gentleman left there. She also asserted that her house was robbed in consequence of the doors being left unlocked. The evidence showed that she was one of the most notorious panel-thieves in New York. The "keys which the gentleman left" proved to be keys and tools of

burglars, which the policeman exhibited, together with the locks and bolts used in panel-thieving, at the sight of which the complainant set up a howl, went off into a nicely-arranged hysteric fit, and was dragged by the inexorable policeman out of the court-room, to recover at her leisure.

For neglect of duty, breaches of discipline, improper behavior, insulting or discourteous conduct, all rudeness or unnecessary severity, the policemen are promptly arrested, tried, and punished. The penalty varies from the deduction of a day's pay to suspension or dismissal. So far as the court is concerned, this trial is final. There is no appeal, there is no rehearing, there is no review. If a man is unjustly cut off, he can only be reinstated by being readmitted, as if he had never been on the force. The commissioners sustain the men in an honest and fearless discharge of their duty, even though sometimes they make mistakes. If they arrest a man wrongfully, or in the zealous discharge of duty go unintentionally beyond the law, the commissioners step in and shield the policeman, taking the blame upon themselves. Every encouragement is held out to the men to become efficient members of the force. Their behavior, their dress, their attention to orders, sobriety and promptness in the discharge of duty, surely lead to promotion. The rigid discipline of the force after a time ceases to be an annoyance. The general superintendent, in his late report, in speaking of discipline, says, —

"It produces a feeling of pride when allusion is made to the efficiency of the force, and to the high degree of discipline it has attained. Officers and men alike



are entitled to the highest commendation. There seems to be among them a general anxiety to excel in personal deportment, neatness of attire, and proficiency in military acquirement. The fidelity with which the various duties that devolve upon them are performed entitles the members of the force, with inconsiderable exceptions, to our special approbation."

## XXXIV.

GENERAL CHARLES STETSON AND  
THE ASTOR HOUSE.

ORIGIN OF THE ASTOR HOUSE. — NEW YORK AROUND THE ASTOR. — GENERAL STETSON AND THE ASTOR. — THIRTY YEARS OF HOTEL LIFE. — MR. JONES THE BAGGAGE MAN. — ROOM NUMBER ELEVEN THURLOW WEED'S NEW YORK HOME. — MR. WEED'S EARLY CAREER. — SECRET OF HIS POWER. — HUMANE. — AN INCIDENT. — PERSONAL. — MR. WEBSTER AT THE ASTOR HOUSE. — AN INCIDENT. — MR. WEBSTER'S BIRTHDAY. — BALTIMORE NOMINATION. — MR. WEBSTER AND GENERAL TAYLOR.

## ORIGIN OF THE ASTOR HOUSE.

This celebrated hotel stands on the site where its founder lived during the greater part of his active business life. In the year 1824 John Jacob Astor surrendered his house to his son, William B. John G. Costar resided on the block, and his house formed the corner of Barclay Street and Broadway. David Suydam, the famous flour merchant, resided on the block. Michael Paff, who was a companion of Mr. Astor across the Atlantic, kept his celebrated picture gallery on the corner of Vesey Street and Broadway. The resolution to build a hotel that should bear his name Mr. Astor kept a secret. He quietly purchased lot after lot until he owned the whole block, Mr. Costar's house alone excepted. Mr. Costar was rich, liked the location, and refused to sell.