

The Man Who Stole Shakespeare

by Louis L'Amour, 1908-1988

Published: 1941



When I had been in Shanghai but a few days, I rented an apartment in a narrow street off Avenue Edward VII where the rent was surprisingly low. The door at the foot of the stairs opened on the street beside a moneychanger's stall, an inconspicuous place that one might pass a dozen times a day and never notice.

At night I would go down into the streets and wander about or sit by my window and watch people going about their varied business. From my corner windows I could watch a street intersection and an alleyway, and there were many curious things to see, and for one who finds his fellow man interesting, there was much to learn.

Late one afternoon when a drizzle of despondent rain had blown in from the sea, I decided to go out for coffee. Before reaching my destination, it began to pour, so I stepped into a bookstore for shelter.

This store dealt in secondhand books published in several languages and was a jumble of stacks, piles, and racks filled with books one never saw elsewhere and was unlikely to see again. I was hitch reading from Sterne when I saw him.

He was a small man and faded. His face had the scholarly expression that seems to come from familiarity with books, and he handled them tenderly. One could see at a glance that here was a man who knew a good book when he saw one, with a feeling for attractive format as well as content.

Yet when I glanced up, he was slipping a book into his pocket. Quickly, with almost a sense of personal guilt, I looked toward the clerk, but he was watching the rain. The theft had passed unobserved.

Now there is a sort of sympathy among those who love books, an understanding that knows no bounds of race, creed, or financial rating. If a man steals a necktie, he is a thief of the worst stripe. If he steals a car, nothing is too bad for him. But a man who steals a book is something else—unless it is my book.

My first thought when he slipped the book into his pocket was to wonder what book he wanted badly enough to steal. Not that there are only a few books worth stealing, for there are many. Yet I was curious. What, at the moment, had captured his interest? This small, gentle-seeming man with the frayed shirt collar and the worn topcoat?

When he left, I walked over to the place where the book had been and tried to recall what it might have been, for I had only just checked that shelf myself. Then I remembered.

It had been a slim, one-play-to-the-volume edition of Shakespeare. He had also examined Hakluyt's *Voyages*, or at least one volume of the set, Huysmans's *Against the Grain*, and Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

This was definitely a man I wished to know. Also, I was curious. Which play had he stolen? Was it the play itself he wished to read? Or was it for some particular passage in the play? Or to complete a set?

Turning quickly, I went to the door, and barely in time. My man was just disappearing in the direction of Thibet Road, and I started after him, hurrying.

At that, I almost missed him. He was just rounding a corner a block away, so he had been running, too. Was it the rain or a feeling of guilt?

The rain had faded into a drizzle once more. My man kept on, walking rapidly, but fortunately for me, he was both older than I, and his legs were not as long.

Whether he saw me, I do not know, but he led me a lively chase. It seemed scarcely possible for a man to go up and down so many streets, and he obviously knew Shanghai better than I. Yet suddenly he turned into an alley and dodged down a basement stairway. Following him, I got my foot in the door before he could close it.

He was frightened, and I could understand why. In those wilder years they found several thousand bodies on the street every year, and he perhaps had visions of adding his own to the list. Being slightly over six feet and broad in the shoulder, I must have looked dangerous in that dark passageway. Possibly he had visions of being found in the cold light of dawn with a slit throat, for such things were a common occurrence in Shanghai.

"Here!" he protested. "You can't do this!" That I was doing it must have been obvious. "I'll call an officer!"

"And have to explain that volume of Shakespeare in your pocket?" I suggested.

That took the wind out of him, and he backed into the room, a neat enough place, sparsely furnished except for the books. The walls were lined with them.

“Now see here,” I said, “you’ve nothing to worry about. I don’t intend to report you, and I’m not going to rob you. I’m simply interested in books and in the books people want enough to steal.”

“You’re not from the bookstore?”

“Nothing of the kind. I saw you slip the book into your pocket, and although I did not approve, I was curious as to what you had stolen and why.” I held out my hand. “May I see?”

He shook his head, then stood back and watched me, finally taking off his coat. He handed me the book from his pocket, which was a copy of *Henry IV*, bound in gray cloth with a thin gold line around the edges. The book was almost new and felt good to the hands. I turned the pages, reading a line or two. “You’ve a lot of books,” I said, glancing at the shelves. “May I look?”

He nodded, then stepped back and sat down. He certainly was not at ease, and I didn’t blame him.

The first book I saw was Wells’s *Outline of History*. “Everybody has that one,” I commented.

“Yes,” he said hesitantly.

Ibsen was there, and Strindberg, Chekhov, and Tolstoi. A couple of volumes by Thomas Hardy were wedged alongside three by Dostoevsky. There were books by Voltaire, Cervantes, Carlyle, Goldoni, Byron, Verlaine, Baudelaire, Cabell, and Hume.

The next book stopped me short, and I had to look again to make sure the bookshelf wasn’t kidding. It was a quaint, old-fashioned, long-out-of-date Home Medical Advisor by some Dr. Felix Peabody, published by some long-extinct publisher whose state of mind must have been curious, indeed.

“Where in the world did you get this?” I asked. “It seems out of place stuck in between Hegel and Hudson.”

He smiled oddly, his eyes flickering to mine and then away. He looked nervous, and since then I have often wondered what he must have been thinking and what went through his mind at that moment.

Scanning the shelves to take stock of what his interests were, I came upon another queer one. It was between Laurence Sterne’s *Sentimental Journey* and George Gissing’s *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*. It was *Elsie’s Girlhood*.

After that I had to sit down. This man was definitely some kind of a nut. I glanced at him, and he squirmed a little. Evidently he had seen my surprise at the placement of some of the books or the fact that he had them at all.

“You must read a lot,” I suggested. “You’ve a lot of good books here.”

“Yes,” he said; then he leaned forward, suddenly eager to talk. “It’s nice to have them. I just like to own them, to take them in my hands and turn them over and to know that so much that these men felt, saw, thought, and understood is here. It is almost like knowing the men themselves.”

“It might be better,” I said. “Some of these men were pretty miserable in themselves, but their work is magnificent.”

He started to rise, then sat down again suddenly as though he expected me to order him to stay where he was.

“Do you read a lot?” he asked.

"All the time," I said. "Maybe even too much. At least when I have books or access to them."

"My eyes"—he passed a hand over them—"I'm having trouble with my glasses. I wonder if you'd read to me sometime? That is," he added hastily, "if you have the time."

"That's the one thing I've plenty of," I said. "At least until I catch a ship. Sure I'll read to you."

As a matter of fact, he had books here to which I'd heard all my life but had found no chance to read. "If you want, I'll read some right now."

It was raining outside, and I was blocks from my small apartment. He made coffee, and I read to him, starting with *The Return of the Native* for no reason other than that I'd not read it and it was close at hand. Then I read a bit from *Tales of Mean Streets* and some from Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Nearly every day after that I went to see Mr. Meacham. How he made his living, I never knew. He had some connection, I believe, with one of the old trading companies, for he seemed very familiar with the interior of China and with people there.

The oddity of it appealed to some irony in my sense of humor. A few weeks before I'd been coiling wet lines on the forecastle head of a tramp steamer, and now here I was, reading to this quaint old gentleman in his ill-fitting suit.

He possessed an insatiable curiosity about the lives of the authors and questioned me about them by the hour. That puzzled me, for a reader just naturally acquires some such knowledge just by reading the bookjackets, and in the natural course of events a man can learn a good deal about the personal lives of authors. However, he seemed to know nothing about them and was avid for detail.

There was much about him that disturbed me. He was so obviously alone, seemingly cut off from everything. He wasn't bold enough to make friends, and there seemed to be no reason why anybody should take the trouble to know him. He talked very little, and I never did know where he had come from or how he happened to be in such a place as Shanghai, for he was a contradiction to everything one thinks of when one considers Shanghai. You could imagine him in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, or London, in Glasgow or Peoria, but never in such a place as this.

One day when I came in, I said, "Well, you name it. What shall I read today?"

He hesitated, flushed, then took a book from the shelf and handed it to me. It was *Elsie's Girlhood*, a book of advice to a young girl about to become a woman.

For a minute I thought he was kidding, and then I was sure it couldn't be anything else. "Not today," I said. "I'll try Leacock."

When I remembered it afterward, I remembered he had not seemed to be kidding. He had been perfectly serious and obviously embarrassed when I put him off so abruptly. He hesitated, then put the book away, and when I returned the next day, the book was no longer on the shelf. It had disappeared.

It was that day that I guessed his secret. I was reading at the time, and it just hit me all of a sudden. It left me completely flabbergasted, and for a moment I stared at the printed page from which I was reading, my mouth open for words that would not come.

Yes, I told myself, that had to be it. There was no other solution. All the pieces suddenly fell into place, the books scattered together without plan or style, with here and there books that seemed so totally out of place and unrelated.

That night I read later than ever before.

Then I got a job. Dou Yu-seng offered to keep the rent paid on my apartment (I always suspected he owned the building) while I took care of a little job up the river. I knew but little about him but enough to know of affiliations with various war lords and at least one secret society. However, what I was to do was legitimate.

Yet when I left, I kept thinking of old Mr. Meacham. He would be alone again, with nobody to read to him.

Alone? Remembering those walls lined with books, I knew he would never actually be alone. They were books bought here and there, books given him by people moving away, books taken from junk heaps, but each one of them represented a life, somebody's dream, somebody's hope or idea, and all were there where he could touch them, feel them, know their presence.

No, he would not be alone, for he would remember *Ivan Karamazov*, who did not want millions but an answer to his questions. He would remember those others who would people his memories and walk through the shadows of his rooms: *Jean Valjean*, *Julien Sorel*, Mr. *John Oakhurst*, gambler, and, of course, the little man who was the friend of *Napoleon*.

He knew line after line from the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare and a lot of Keats, Kipling, Li Po, and *Kasidah*. He would never really be alone now.

He never guessed that I knew, and probably for years he had hidden his secret, ashamed to let anyone know that he, who was nearly seventy and who so loved knowledge, had never learned to read.

