

The Left-Handed Thief
Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

“How many young men have been injured and perhaps ruined, by false suspicion,” remarked my mercantile friend, as we were conversing upon the subject of the panic a few evenings since. Suspicion is like an assassin in the dark; it stabs its victim and he knows not whence the blow comes. Or it may be more like a keen frost seizing upon the ears, and driving back the life-blood, and yet the poor man is totally ignorant of his situation till he comes in contact with the heat, and begins to feel the stinging pain. But I believe I never told you of the time that suspicion of evil was fastened upon me. It has nothing to do with the subject under consideration, though it serves to show how merchants lose money.

When I was a mere youth I was placed in the hands of Jacob Wharton, a merchant doing a good business. I was frugal, industrious, and faithful, and at the age of twenty-one I was advanced to the position of bookkeeper with a good salary. I had charge of the books and the safe, and all the money left over banking house was also in my care. I tried to do my duty faithfully and I think I succeeded. Mr. Wharton was a close methodical man, with a quick eye and ready understanding of business, and as I fancied he was satisfied, I felt much pleased.

I had been a book keeper a year, when I thought my employer’s manner towards me seemed changed – he began to treat me more coolly and finally I was sure he watched my movements with distrustful glances; I became nervous and uneasy, for I feared I had offended him. But the thing came to a head at length.

One evening when I was alone in the store engaged in making up my cash account, Mr. Wharton came to me with a troubled look and spoke. His voice was tremulous and I could see that he was deeply affected; he said:

“George, I am sorry for the conviction which has been forced upon me; I fear you have not been treating me as you had ought.”

I managed in spite of my astonishment to ask him what he meant.

“I fear you are not honest,” was his reply.

Had a thunderbolt fallen upon me, I could not have been more startled.

Not honest! And there I had been for years making it my chief aim and study how to serve him faithfully!

I do not remember what I said at first – I only know that tears came to my eyes – that my lips trembled – and that my utterance was choked. How long had he held suspicions? I asked him and he told me two months.

“Heavens! You have suspected me then and still left me in the dark! After serving you for so long – after striving for faith and honor that I might win your esteem – to suspect me in secret! To look upon me as a thief and yet not tell me! Oh, I would not have believed it!”

“Let us talk this matter over calmly,” said he, his old kind tone returning. He was wavering.

I felt at first like telling him that he should have done this before; but as he seemed ready to reason now, I found no fault.

“You have spent considerable money of late,” he began.

“How?” I asked.

“Have you not built a house?”

“Yes, sir – and paid for it, too – and thus have given my dear mother a nice comfortable home.”

Mr. Wharton was staggered for a moment by my frank and feeling reply; but pretty soon he asked:

“What did the house cost you?”

“Just fifteen hundred dollars.”

“My mother owned the land. And I suppose you would like to know where I got the money. You, sir, learned me how to save it. I have been with you for six years. The first year you paid me fifty dollars and I laid up twenty-five of it. —The second and third years you gave me a hundred dollars, and of that I laid up sixty dollars a year. The fourth year you made me a clerk and gave me five hundred dollars. My mother was able to feed me and as out little cot answered for the time, I got along that year upon an expense of seventy-five dollars. The next year you paid me six hundred on condition that I would help you keep your books. I saved five hundred that year. This last year you have paid me one thousand dollars, and I have spent only the interest of what I had previously invested, so that thousand was not touched.

“Of course my mother has worked, but she chooses to do it. I have paid fifteen hundred dollars for my house and have five hundred dollars in the savings bank. This is a plain statement of affairs.”

My employer seemed more puzzled than before.

“Now,” said I, “I have given you an account and will you be equally frank and tell me all that has happened to excite this suspicion?”

“I will,” said he, taking a seat near me.

“Within the last year I must have lost ore than two thousand dollars! It must have been taken from the store. I know the amount of goods that have been sold, and I know how much cash I have received.

“I began to be watchful four months since. Two months ago a man paid me in the afternoon five hundred dollars. I put it in the drawer, and on the next morning before you came in, I looked at your cash account and found only two hundred of that set down. From that time I have been very watchful and have detected a dozen similar cases. I have noted every dollar that came n after the bank account was made and have also taken note of the amount entered into the book, and during that time there has been a leakage of over seven hundred dollars! Now who has access the that drawer and to the safe?”

I was astonished. I could only assure my employer that I knew nothing of it; and as I saw he wanted to believe me I asked him if he had spoken of this to any one else.

“Not a living soul but me,” he replied. I pondered a few moments, and the said:

“Mr. Wharton, could I be made to believe that ignorantly I have wronged you to the value of a dollar, I should not feel the perfect consciousness of honor that I now feel. There must be a thief somewhere. Some of the clerks may find access to the money. But are you willing to let the matter rest a few days? I will strain every nerve to detect the evil doer.”

He finally consented to let me try my hand at detecting the thief. He promised not to lisp a word upon the subject to any one else, and also the leave the matter wholly in my hands for a week. He gave me a warm grasp when we separated, and said he hoped I would succeed.

On the following morning all my energies of mind entered upon the work before me.

There were four clerks or salesmen, the one a boy, in constant attendance besides myself, and all the money received had to pass through my hands.

Sometimes I made up my cash account at night and sometimes not until the next morning.

In the later case, I generally put the money drawer into the safe and locked it up. The key to this safe was kept in a small drawer to which there were two keys, one of which I kept, while Mr. Wharton kept the other.

The only other one who ever helped us in the store was Henry Wharton, my employer’s only son, a youth of twenty years. He was preparing for college under a private tutor, but found time to help us when business was driving; was a kind-hearted, generous fallow, and a strong mutual attachment had sprung up between us. Wharton had promised to speak to no one on the subject. I concluded to do the same.

That night I counted the money, but made no entry on the account. There were three hundred and forty odd dollars. I put it in a new calf-skin pocket-book – placed that in the money-drawer, and locked the whole up in the safe.

On the following morning there were fifty dollars missing. I counted the money over carefully and I was not mistaken. I began to feel unpleasant. My suspicions took an unpleasant turn.

During that day I pondered upon the subject, and finally hit upon the following experiment.

When I locked up the safe for the night, I spread upon the knob of the door and upon the money drawer, some pale red lead, being careful not to get enough on to be easily noticed. I had left the cash account open, to be closed up in the morning. When I next opened the safe all was as I had left it.

The next night I fined the knob in the same manner, and on the following morning I found forty dollars gone!

Upon the pocket books were finger marks of red lead and when I came to open the cash book, I found the same kind of marks there.

So I learned one thing, the thief knew enough to see whether any account had been made of the money before he took it. I felt more unpleasant than before, for my unwelcome suspicions were being confirmed.

I had gained new light. There was a peculiarity in the red finger-marks which told a sad story. Still I wished to try yet further.

For two nights after this, the safe remained undisturbed, but on the third night I missed seventy-five dollars, and I had now set my trap more carefully. The red pigment was not only used, but a private mark upon every bill in the drawer. The pocket-book and the cash-book were fingered as before, and the marks were clear and distinct.

When the week was up, Mr. Wharton came and asked what I had found.

“Ah!” said he, as he noticed the sorrowful expression on my countenance, “you have failed to discover anything?”

“Alas! I wish I could say so,” I replied. “I have discovered too much. In the first place, the money has been taken from the safe, and the key left in the proper drawer, and locked up as usual. – Also the cash-book has been examined each time to see if any entry has been made of the money. There have been one hundred and sixty-five dollars taken in all.”

“But how do you know the cash book has been examined?”

“I will show you,” I said, producing the cash-book and the pocket-book: “you see those finder-marks?”

“Yes.”

“And now,” I continued, “just examine them carefully. Observe how the leaves of the cash-book were turned over, and also see how the strap of the pocket-book was tucked into its place. Do you see anything peculiar about it?”

“Only that the finger-marks are very plain.”

“But can you not distinguish thumb-marks from those made by the fingers?”

“Yes.”

“Then tell me this,” I returned: -- “Which hand did the thief use most dexterously?”

Wharton gazed upon the marks and finally gasped – “*The left!*”

“So he did,” I returned, “and all the marks have been made the same. The thief is a left-handed one, and is acquainted with the store and the books and can gain easy access here. But I have yet another mark. The last bills that were taken were all marked with a small red cross upon the numerical in the right hand and upper corner. You can follow these up, for I have neither the courage nor the heart to do it.”

The merchant sunk back as pale as death itself. “Henry is the only left-handed person on the premises,” he groaned, gazing on me as though he wished I would deny the statement. But I could not. I knew that his son was the guilty party.

“Ask no more,” I said, with tears in my eyes, for his agony deeply moved me. “The secret is locked up in my own breast, and neither to you nor to any living being will I ever call the name of the one whom I suspect.”

The stricken man grasped my hand, then, and with sobs and tears, he begged my pardon for the wrong he had done me, and thanked me for the assistance I had given him.

On the following morning he brought me two different bills both marked with the red cross. “I know all now,” he whispered, in broken accents: “be kind to him, and let not this go to the world.”

I kept my promise, and lived to see the old man smile again; for when Henry saw the deep agony of his father, his heart was touched, and he not only acknowledged all his wild sins and humbly begged for pardon, but became a true and good man, and an honor and ornament to society.

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