

Our Thief's Account
A Page from a Merchant's Diary

By Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

Amos Tilden and myself formed a co-partnership for the purpose of doing business in L—. The large, new factories were just commencing operations; and as we had thus taken time by the forelock, and had, moreover, secured an excellent location in the business portion of the town, we anticipated a good run of custom; and I may as well remark here that we were not disappointed. Tilden was forty years of age, over six feet in height, and stout in proportion; but, very fortunately for us weaker vessels, he was one of the best natured fellows that ever lived; though he could, upon a pinch, look very savage. I, then a mere youth, with only my money to recommend me, was very fortunate in this first business association; for my partner was not only the very soul of honor and integrity, but he “knew just exactly how to do it.” Our stock-in-trade consisted of clothing, hats, caps, furs, boots and shoes, and such other articles as might be generally found in a gentleman's furnishing store.

One bright morning in early autumn I had my shawl upon my arm, ready to start for the city, whither I was going to buy goods.

“I think,” said Tilden, “that you had better get a dozen of the finest caps you can find. If you cannot find the very finest quality of beaver, get otter.”

“Why not get collars and gauntlets to match,” I suggested.

It was finally arranged that I should get a dozen full sets of gentleman's furs—half good beaver, and half of the finest otter.

Within a fortnight after I had made the purchase the beaver sets were all sold, and two of the otters had gone. A third otter set was arranged in our show-window, and while Tilden was gone to dinner one day I took the furs out and tried them on. They fitted me exactly, and I made up my mind that if they were not sold before I went to the city again, I would take them for my own use.

“Hallo, Sam., you're furred up for cold weather. Where ye bound?”

“Nowhere, Dick. I was just trying them on—that's all.”

“By gracious, Sam., they're beauties. I wish I could afford such a set. What are they worth?”

“The full set is worth forty dollars.”

“*Wh-e-w!* I guess I'll keep my old beavers awhile longer. But say—have you got some good stout Plymouth gloves that'll fit me?”

I took off the furs and threw them down upon the edge of the low window-seat, and then went to wait upon my customer, who, after repeated trials, succeeded in finding a pair of gloves that suited him. This had just been accomplished when Tilden returned to relieve me for my own dinner; and as Dick was going my way, I hurried to keep him company.

“Who bought those furs?” asked my partner, on my return from dinner.

“What furs?”

“The otters that were in the window,”

“I didn’t sell them.”

“Didn’t!” repeated Tilden, in surprise. “They’re gone.”

I looked upon the window-seat, and no furs were there. Then I remembered how I had carelessly thrown them down, when I went to wait upon Dick, right where they could easily have been reached from the threshold of the street door. We searched until we knew they were not in the store, and then I told my partner that he might charge them to me.

“Why,” said he—“you did not appropriate them.”

“No,” I replied; “but it was through my carelessness that they were lost. It will teach me a good lesson.”

“Well, well, Samuel, the lesson will undoubtedly be useful to you; but there is no need of your paying quite so dearly for it. I guess we’ll open a new account in our ledger.”

“Eh—Profit and Loss.”

“No. We’ll open a THIEF’S ACCOUNT. They say there’s honor among thieves, and if such is the case, the gentleman may be willing to pay up when we present our bill.”

So there was an entry made upon the day-book, and that evening, at Tilden’s direction, I placed the name of MR. THIEF at the head of a page in the ledger, and posted the first item of his account: “*One set of otter furs, \$45.00.*” As it might be a long credit, and as the gentleman might possibly be a little shaky, we charged five dollars above our cash price.

About three weeks after this, as I was taking in some clothing that had been hanging outside the door during the day, I missed a fine overcoat. I asked Tilden if he knew what had become of it. Nothing at all.

A thorough search, and we knew an overcoat worth forty dollars had been stolen.

“Another item for Mr. Thief,” said my partner.

I entered it on the day-book, but I must confess that I had no great faith in the result.

Just after the snow came, we lost a nice buffalo robe from one of the hooks outside. It was taken just at dusk, while I was gone a little longer than usual for my supper. During the winter various small articles were stolen, so that before the snow was gone in the spring, Mr. Thief’s account footed up the pretty little sum of \$175.00.

“We’d better turn that account over to Profit and Loss, and keep a little sharper lookout for these troublesome customers,” suggested I.

“Hold on a while,” said Tilden. “We’ll find one of the worthy gentry one of these days, never fear. But your suggestion of keeping a sharper lookout is a good one, and I have thought of a little plan that may help us towards that end.”

Our counting-room was in a rear corner of the store, and entirely partitioned off, the whole of the upper part of said partition being of glass, with green curtains so arranged that we could shut off all view from the store if we pleased. Tilden went over to a neighboring furniture establishment and borrowed three good sized mirrors, which he so arranged in our counting-room that they reflected from their surfaces all the exposed places in the outer apartment from which goods could be easily stolen.

A few days after this, while we had half a dozen customers in the store, my partner tapped me upon the shoulder, and in a tone of voice loud enough for all to hear, informed me that I must attend to business a little while, as he was obliged to get off some letters for the next mail. Then he whispered softly into my ear—*“I think there’s a thief here, but don’t trouble yourself. I’ll watch him from the counting-room.”*

I looked around after my partner had gone, but could see no one who had any particularly villainous expression. I noticed one man—a man of middle age, and very respectably dressed—leaning up against one of the clothing shelves, and it struck me that he dropped his eyes rather suddenly as he met my gaze. He had been looking at some fine beaver caps that were arranged upon one of the shelves back of him, and after I had disposed of the rest of the customers, I approached him and asked him if I could serve him.

He wanted a pair of thick pegged boots.

I told him we kept nothing of the kind. We had a few pairs of light boots, but nothing such as he wanted. He would find heavy boots a few doors below, on the opposite side of the street.

As he left the store Tilden bounded out from the counting-room.

“That’s our thief!” he cried. “He has one of our best beaver caps buttoned up under his overcoat. Let us see if he crosses over after the boots.”

We went to the door, and saw our man walking rather hurriedly down the street, with no sign of going after the heavy boots, and in a few seconds Tilden was on his track. Straight on he went, and as he reached the bridge of the canal, the pursuer's hand was upon his shoulder.

"Don't be alarmed, my dear friend," said Tilden, with quite a good-natured look upon his broad face, but with a wondrous grip of his strong hand. "I want you to come back to our store with me."

"Back—to your store!" gasped the man, trembling at every joint.

"Just a few moments, sir."

"But—a—what d'ye want?"

"Just a little settlement," said Tilden, with a queer smile.

"Settlement? What for?"

"Come with me and I'll tell you!"

The man seemed to be trying to get back his courage and composure, and with quite a show of indignation he informed Tilden that he didn't like to be insulted.

"You'd better take yer hand off'n me," he added.

"O, my dear friend, you and I ain't going to have any words here. The police office is not far away, and if you wish it I can take you there, and let the officers settle with you. But I guess you'd better go back to the store. We'll just slip quietly into my counting-room, and take an inventory of the goods that are buttoned up under your over-coat, and then we can settle our little account at our leisure."

The wretch turned pale again. He stammered out something about having justice, and about seeing who could accuse him of stealing with impunity; but finally, when he was made to understand that he could go to the police office or back to the store, as he pleased, he concluded to go back, and from the manner in which he took a survey of his interlocutor, it was quite evident that the muscular proportions which met his gaze had something to do with the docile manner in which he trudged back to the store.

"Now sir," said Mr. Tilden, after he had conducted the man into the counting-room, "if you will just open your coat."

The fellow hesitated, but finally, with a faint gasp, the coat was unbuttoned, and the cap was revealed.

“Mr. Sanders,” said my partner to me, “do you recognize this cap?”

I told him that I did.

“All right. And now, my good friend,” pursued Tilden, turning again to the unhappy man, “I may as well inform you that I saw you when you took the cap; I saw you put it away in your bosom, and button your coat over it.”

“Then,” muttered the thief, with an oath, “You’ve got eyes in the back part of your head.”

“Not at all, my dear sir. Just cast your eyes upon that mirror, if you please.”

The fellow looked, and as he saw very plainly reflected the identical pile of caps from which he made his selection, he must have understood how it all came about. A few moments he seemed to reflect upon his situation, and then he “caved in.”

“For God’s sake,” he cried, with his hands clasped, “don’t expose me! Don’t put me in prison! Don’t—”

“Easy, my dear sir,” interrupted Tilden. “I didn’t call you back to harm you. We have a little account against you, and we would like to have you settle it. Why, we have no earthly desire to harm you. We have done business with you too long. We don’t make a practice of harming our regular customers.”

“Done business with *me!* A regular customer?” repeated the light-fingered gentleman, a little curiously. “I guess you must be mistaken in the man.”

“O, no, there can be no mistake. We have a regular account against you on our books.”

“You must be mistaken, sir. I was never in this town but once before; and I know I never set foot in this store till this afternoon.”

“It is not impossible, sir, that it may have been your agent.”

“Good gracious! I never had any agent. Why, who do you take me to be? What d’ye think my name is?”

“We have your name here,” replied Tilden, opening the ledger. “Let us see; here it is: MR. THIEF. The first articles charged were a set of furs, which you had last October, worth forty-five dollars. Next, you had a coat, worth forty dollars. Next I charged a buffalo robe, at fifteen dollars. Next, a fine muffler; and so on till the bill amounts to one hundred and seventy-five dollars; and the cap which you took today will make it ten dollars more. It may be that your memory is not good; but you may depend upon our ledger; for I give you my word that MR. THIEF has had every article therein set down.”

The poor fellow began to understand it, and prefacing his remark with an oath, he declared:

“—! You mean to rob me!”

“My dear sir,” said Tilden, in the smoothest and most agreeable manner, at the same time closing the ledger and putting it back in the rack, “you entirely mistake me, or it may be possible that I am myself mistaken. Perhaps you are not the Mr. Thief who had these other articles.”

“No, sir,” answered the man, eagerly, while a beam of hope was perceptible upon his face. “This one cap is all that I have ever taken.”

“Very well,” pursued my partner. “If that is the case, I am sorry I took the trouble to bring you here. The cap is a mere trifle. I will let you settle that in court.—Mr. Sanders, will you look out for the store while I accompany our friend to the office of the chief of police?”

“Eh!” gasped the poor wretch, the beam of hope fleeing away, and a cloud of terror coming in its place. “My God! You won’t take me to court! They’ll put me in prison! My folks’ll know all about it! You said you wouldn’t do it!”

“Ah, my dear sir, when I said that I supposed you were our old friend, but it seems that I was mistaken.”

Once more the culprit began to understand it—this time a little more clearly than before. Another oath, and then he went on:

“You’ve got me. If I pay that bill, will you let me go?”

“On one farther condition,” said Tilden, solemnly: “You shall never take goods in that manner again.”

The thief had no hesitation in giving the promise, and when the bill had been made out he paid it promptly, and without further murmur. At first, however, he objected to taking the beaver cap away with him, but Tilden would not listen to that.

“The cap is yours,” he said, as he folded it neatly in a white paper and tied it up, “and you have got it at a bargain. At all events, whenever you feel dissatisfied with your trade you may bring it back, and we will refund the money. There, sir. I wouldn’t button it up under my coat again—you might jam it.”

The man left as suddenly as possible after he had been thus dismissed, and when he had gone my partner turned to me.

“There, Sam., we’ve got our pay for all the goods that have been stolen from us, and at the same time I verily [believe] that the fellow who has just left us has been punished severely enough. Be sure he will never forget this day’s lesson.”

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