

How Our Bank Was Robbed

One bright morning, a few years ago, great excitement prevailed in the London office of the City and Provincial bank (limited.) Yet the bank had just declared a fat dividend of fifteen per cent for the half year. Shareholders were contented, and the god Mammon seemed to cast a favorable eye on the welfare of the old and thriving corporation. However, a mutinous feeling of discontent was plainly visible on the faces of the thirty odd employees who swarmed like bees into the hive every week day morning for the purpose of manufacturing the golden produce that delighteth the souls of distributing directors and radiant proprietors. The shoe pinched somewhere. Where was it?

The following notice, circulated for the perusal of each clerk, contained the secret of the unwonted gloom:

“Every gentleman will be required to remain at the banking house two Sundays in the year, to assist in guarding the premises.

“By order, J. SPOFFORTH, Secretary.”

Here was a revolution—a *coup d’etat* indeed! Six days we should labor, but the seventh certainly did not belong to the City and Provincial bank. The gilding of a little extra pay might have made the pill easier to swallow, but on this point the notice was discreetly reticent. In the end, after a few days of conjecture and excitement, every one quietly resigned himself to his fate, as black and white slaves are bound to do all the world over.

I had been ten years in the bank, and received a salary which, though not magnificent, was sufficient to support in comfort a young wife; and very happy we were in our snug retreat at Wood Green. Of course, we both thought it extremely hard to be separated even for two Sundays in a year; still, we soon saw there was nothing for it but submission.

Now, though I, in common with others, rebelled against the forcible seizure of Sunday’s rest, yet it must be owned there was some reason for the extraordinary innovation. The strong rooms of two neighboring establishments had been attempted within a fortnight, and a boy carrying bonds in Broad street had been decoyed away and the securities stolen. But, worst of all, some pilfering had been going on for months in our own bank. Stamps had disappeared to an alarming extent. Clerks had missed money from their coats, and now and then the garments themselves were spirited away. Traps had been carefully laid, and a detective spoken with; but as yet the rogue was not discovered, and an uneasy feeling was rife among us all.

The bank boasted of four porters or messengers, one of whom—the chief—lived rent free in premises that nearly adjoined the building. He was a long, lean man named Bennett, with a parchment face and a goatee beard. Some people said he was civil, others servile; at all events he was quiet, well up to his work, and high in favor with the authorities. Of the remaining three, one had been a grocer’s boy, and the other was a country lout put into a green coat and brass buttons, both honest creatures, but of no importance in this narrative. The fourth was an ex-policeman named Lance, a blunt, pleasant man, much given to relating queer stories of his former life, and not averse to a pot of beer for his trouble.

After eight weeks had passed since the official notification, it came round to my turn to keep guard. During the week preceding the mystery had become still more intensified by the unaccountable disappearance of a £20 note, and matters began to assume a very grave aspect.

On arriving at the bank, the door was opened by the night watchman, an old, pensioned soldier, who, for one pound a week, remained in the building all night, and vanished with the early morning on the arrival of the porters to open the doors. A few minutes afterwards Bennett walked in, accompanied, to my joy, by the honest old Lance, whose wonderful stories I fondly hoped would help to relieve the tedium of a long, dull day; then, without more ado, I proceeded to make my first round.

Preceded by Bennett, with a lighted taper, I marched up stairs, through every room and office, across perilous planks and up dangerous ladders, till we gained the trap-door which opened on the roof; then down again to the lowest abysses of the coal cellar and the strong room, looking in vain for some concealed Guy Fawkes, who, however, was conspicuous for his absence.

Very minutely did I examine and try the drawer, which had already been tampered with, as I knew it contained, besides stamps, a large sum in gold and notes. No—it seemed firm and safe, and would take “a deal o’ work,” as Bennett remarked, holding his taper close to the lock. Lance, too, had a good look at it and expressed the same sagacious opinion as his colleague.

Our first visit ended—and I was expected to patrol at least three times in the day—the two porters went to breakfast, and I adjoined to the manager’s room, leaving the door partly open, so as to be able to see all round the bank. I lit a cigar, and ensconcing myself comfortably in the managerial arm chair, prepared to stay the two hours which intervened between the cessation of the church bells and luncheon time. Suddenly old Lance appeared again at the half-opened door, and spoke in this wise:

“Scuse me, sir, but I’ve been a pleaceman, and I don’t think that lock’s all right.”

“Which lock, Lance?” said I.

“That there drawer with the stamps sir.”

“Well, let us look again.”

So saying, we both went to the counter which contained the drawer, and Lance pointed out some small scratches on the lock, and a slight indentation in the woodwork surrounding it.

“That’s a chisel if I die for it!” said the ex-policeman.

“By Jove! You don’t mean it?”

“Sure of it, sir.”

“Well, let’s have Bennett up stairs and hear what he thinks of it.”

Angry at being disturbed at his breakfast, the head porter came grumbling to the place where I stood, and bending down to the lock, impatiently inquired if it was not a deal more likely that the cashier had scratched it in the course of business. After a few minutes’ further inspection, he looked up with a knowing smile.

“I believe Lance is right now; it looks so fresh, I shouldn’t wonder if the watchman knew something about this.”

“Perhaps so,” said I; “What do you think, Lance?”

“Well, he looks honest enough—but looks ain’t always a guide,” said the man quietly.

“Then I’ll stop in the bank to-night and see if I can trap my gentleman,” exclaimed Bennett, “if you’ll leave me the key.”

“I can’t do that,” I replied, “but I shall report the fact to the manager the first thing in the morning.”

“As you like, sir,” he assented reluctantly, and they both returned to their long neglected meal.

Again I retreated to my den, this time with the proud consciousness of having something important to relate when Monday morning should see the stream of busy workers once more settling with books and papers and filthy lucre generally. One—nay, two cigars did I consume down to the last half inch, read *Byles on Bills* nearly through, in default of more cheerful literature, and I am afraid a tiny doze must have ensued, as I was awakened by Bennett’s voice close to me asking what I would take for luncheon. Mechanically I fixed upon the hackneyed chop, and with it a pint of stout, to be fetched from the only eating house that deigned to be opened for a couple of hours on Sunday. While he was gone I took the opportunity of making my second round, and found nothing but peace everywhere, with the slight exception of being startled by the sudden appearance of the bank cat from the cavernous depths of the enormous coal cellar. Eventually I returned to my room and found a succulent chop smoking upon the table, flanked by a pewter pot of foaming stout, which, on tasting, I found unusually soft and creamy—indeed I fancied I could detect a peculiar aroma in the grateful beverage which seemed to make it more than ordinary palatable; anyhow, I thoroughly enjoyed the repast, and when an intensely slumberous sensation crept through all my veins, my strongest effort of will proved insufficient to keep me awake. While I was still struggling against the impulse, Lance came to inform me that he was going out to dine at his home close by, while Bennett was left on guard below. As he closed the door behind him my eyes shut, and I fell asleep, but only for a few moments to be re-awakened by his voice again addressing me.

“I don’t think I’ll go out to dinner, sir,” said he, gazing at me with a strange expression.

“Why not?” quoth I drowsily.

“Well, sir, I don’t feel very bright today, and I’d rather stop indoors; and if you’d be so kind not to mention to Bennett as I’ve come back. But you don’t look very well yourself, sir. Just now?”

“Lance, that stout has made me most confoundedly sleepy!”

“Well, have a bit of a nap, sir. I’ll see the place is all right—only I don’t want Bennett to know I’m here.”

“All right, all right,” I replied, rather shortly, for I wanted to be left to myself; yet I was somewhat surprised at his wish for concealment in so trivial a matter.

Again I saw the man pass out and partly close the door, and once more I drifted into a heavy but pleasant slumber. Soon I was a denizen of dreamland, and a sharer in its grotesque and fantastic imaginings. I thought I was clinging to the telegraph wires that stretch like webs over London, and performing thereon athletic feats in impossible positions; then I flew through the air toward my home at Wood Green, spinning, as I went, a thread of wire by which to return—a useless precaution, as I was at once transported to the Desert of Sahara, where I found myself on a camel’s back careening across the burning plain. But in my dreams the face of the camel was the face of ex-policeman Lance, and ever and anon a strange grating noises seemed to be borne past us on the wind. The pace began to slacken; and as I spurred on my steed to fresh exertions, I seemed to feel the prick of the rowel in my own flesh. It became sharper and more painful; and gradually camel, desert, chase, faded from my vision, and the bank once again dawned on my awakening senses. But though my aerial steed and his surroundings had all disappeared, the spur unaccountably enough remained, as my nether limbs were painfully reminding me.

It was no dream this time—I was wide awake. Quickly glancing around, I discovered Lance crouching down beside my chair, and vigorously applying a pin to the calf of my leg. To this proceeding I was about to enter an indignant protest, when a significant gesture warned me to remain mute. His face was white with unwonted excitement, as he rose to his feet, and beckoning me to a small aperture in the wall used for the transmission of books and papers between managers and clerks, bade me look upon a spectacle that made each individual hair upon my head stand erect. The drawer containing the stamps and gold was being tampered with before my very eyes in broad daylight. Stooping down with his back toward us was a man softly but swiftly forcing the lock with a chisel. But the man—the thief—who was he? I knew at a glance that long, lean form. It was Bennett. We both shrank back.

“Take off your boots, sir,” he whispered in a low voice. I noticed that his own feet were shoeless. “Creep round outside the counter, and wait till I give the word—then over and help me.”

I nodded assent; and as I saw Lance crawl out upon his hands and knees into the office, behind the shelter of a long high desk, at the end of which he would be within a few feet of Bennett. I crept away to the other entrance of the manager’s room, which led into a large space appropriated to the public, and gliding noiselessly along, I arrived where I knew I must be opposite the thief at his work. Click, click, went the chisel against the brass lock. It was apparently a work of time and difficulty, though the sound of crushing wood-work betokened the

near accomplishment of the deed. How long the time seemed! Had Lance been able to get close to him undiscovered?

I judged so, as the chisel still continued its grating work. Sometimes it stopped for a moment, and then I knew that the man was watching the door of the manager's room, to see that I was safe under the influence of the narcotic administered in my pint of stout. Click, click, crunch! and the whole lock appeared to come away, the drawer being at the same time drawn softly open.

"Now," thought I, "here goes."

Not yet! I could hear the mellow clink of the small bags of gold as they were hurriedly transferred to the man's pockets; then the stiff rustle of many sheets of stamps told me of a like destination. I listened breathlessly. Suddenly there was a yell of mingled fright and rage, and, vaulting at one bound across the counter, I saw Bennett falling backward, his throat clutched by the practiced hand of the ex-policeman, who held on with a will, having sprung upon him silently from behind. The half-strangled man struggled like a fiend, dealing me several ugly kicks with his long legs as I attacked him from the front. But the odds were too many, and furthermore he had been taken by surprise. In a few moments he was overpowered, and his hands and feet were securely fastened. Not a word had been uttered since the commencement of the conflict, but now Lance looked up and said in a stern voice:

"Got the scoundrel at last—next thing's a pleaceman. Will you go, sir, or shall I?"

Here there was a fierce attempt to free himself by the prostrate thief.

"Perhaps I'd better stop with him," continued Lance; "you'll get a constable in a minute at the station in Old Jury."

Seizing my hat, I was off in a twinkling, and returned in double-quick time to the bank, accompanied by a stalwart member of the city police. A few moments saw the policeman, myself and our chopfallen prisoner marching quietly to the station, where I made the charge and left him to the solitude of a cell till Monday morning. On my return to the bank, the night watchman had arrived, and I prepared to go home.

"Why, Isaac, you must have suspected the beggar before this," I exclaimed.

"I've thought it sometimes, sir," he laughed. "Knew I should cop him some day." Then with a frown: "Mean, sneaking skunk! I believe he meant to try to put it on me or the other watchman here."

"Well, all's well that ends well, Lance, and it was a clever catch of yours. We have a nice story for Mr. Spofforth tomorrow. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

When I walked into the bank next morning, I found the story was already known. Little knots of men were eagerly discussing the event, and I as well as Lance soon became the center of an animated crowd. At eleven o'clock I was summoned to the board room, to the committee of directors, who complimented me upon the capture, as if I, and not Lance, had been the hero of the day. In the morning newspapers there was a graphic account of the "Great Bank Robbery," concocted by some ubiquitous penny-a-liner, which my wife read and reread with mingled pleasure and alarm. Bennett was eventually sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment, which we all considered far too lenient a judgment. The ex-policeman came in for the head messenger's berth, with a house rent free and a present of fifty pounds. In addition to very unmerited praise, I received a bonus of a hundred pounds, which contributed in no small degree to the satisfaction of the household at Wood Green.

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