

A Detective's Success: An Indiana Story

Written for the Terre Haute Express

A story is told of the detection of a youth, formerly of this city, who almost succeeded in robbing his employers of thirteen thousand dollars, and the clue that led to his identification was so slight that it seemed that the thought of setting upon it was little short of inspiration. The young man whose name we shall write as Larry Walch, was a nephew of the senior partner of the firm of Brough & Co. He was of a strange disposition, always fretting about his lot in life and wishing he was in Australia, South America, China, or any where else than in the counting room of his uncle's establishment. In time it grew to be understood that as soon as he could leave, he was going to try his fortune in the most distant lands or the sea. No suspicion at any time was had as to his honesty; but his uncle frequently spoke to him in regard to his chimerical ideas, yet the conversations never seemed to result in any good or in any change whatever.

In the early summer of 18— it was noticed that the bank accounts seemed to be small proportionately, and while the house appeared to be doing a good business, yet there was a painful lack of ready means, and the apparent deficit was not traceable to any real cause, or the blame to any individual, still the matter was deemed of sufficient moment to warrant an investigation; accordingly Allan Pinkerton, of Chicago, was written to, to send an expert to assist in unraveling the affair, if there really was anything the matter. A Mr. Bligh, a middle aged man, accordingly presented himself, bearing a letter from Mr. Pinkerton, endorsing him in every sense, and the matter was put into his hands. He explained his presence by saying he wished to purchase the interest of a silent partner of the firm, and a day or two was quietly spent in an ostensible examinations of the finances. Mr. Bligh expressed himself well pleased with the business, offered a few suggestions as to the probable management in the future, and seemed to be a quiet business man who really wished to purchase an interest in a thriving establishment in order that he might have something to keep him in his old days. His references and business recommendations from houses of known stability, all in the East, were left unostentatiously upon the counting room desk, where all who were curious might suspect them. In the meanwhile the detective was very carefully inspecting every individual in the house, from the chief clerk to the porter, but he was entirely at fault; there was no appearance of dishonesty or deception upon the part of any of the employes.

After a few days had elapsed, it was deemed prudent to begin an examination of the books. Mr. Bligh suggested that a cursory examination of the books of the firm would be well now, probably, as a matter of form more than anything else, as he was satisfied that the sales and profits were what had been represented. This was assented to, although the silent partner above referred to, suggested soto voce to young Walch that it would have appeared well if Mr. Bligh had waited until the proposition had come from the house, instead of from him. Walch made no reply, but his eye seemed to wander into vacancy, and he seemed a trifle troubled. Mr. Bligh did not chance to observe him at the time, though his uncle did, yet paid no attention to it just then.

An appointment was made for a meeting at the counting-room, at 8 o'clock p.m., and Harry Walch requested to be present. He begged to be excused, as he had promised to take his cousin Clara to the opera, and so did not appear.

The examination was commenced in earnest, and in a few hours the trouble was found. The books had been tampered with very seriously, the figures had been deftly erased, and several accounts overdrawn, and through the light of Mr. Bligh's searching inspection, it all seemed plain enough, yet the firm had not discovered a single error though the list extending back for three years, systematically, the amounts being quite small at first, but of late the false entries and erasure, had been very serious amounts. Mr. Odin, the second partner, usually had charge of the books, and a Mr. Arnet, an Englishman and an invalid, was employed, when able, to assist on the books. Mr. Odin's dry suggestion that they had not had enough bookkeepers was smiled at very grimly.

Mr. Brough, the senior partner, never for a moment thought of his nephew, and several times felt condemned as his thought reverted to the invalid, Mr. Arnet, and each time he felt that, some way the temptation had proven too strong for his fixed English principles.

Mr. Bligh was intently studying how to entrap the guilty one, but he was, as he expressed himself, utterly at sea. As he mechanically turned the pages of the blotter, a scrap of paper fell out on which were some important figures. The date "17th" was left on an upper torn corner and elsewhere were the sums \$983.05, and \$603.05. This was a clue at last, though it might lead but very little distance. On turning to the bank account for the 17th, of the current month, the above amounts were noted. The latter amount had been deposited at the National, and the first amount checked off the books. There was a deficit, and a very bungling one, but \$80.60 was in somebody's pocket. Investigating the matter further, a small piece of cedar clipped from the end of a pencil was found adhering to the scrap of paper, by the merest portion of mucilage. On the chip was the tiny circular stamp of the American graphite company's pencil, and the letters "Dixie."

Mr. Bligh thought a moment, and said, abruptly, "gentlemen, we can do no more tonight; tomorrow let us each quietly borrow a lead pencil from the persons who have probably had access to the books." This was readily assented to, and it fell to Mr. Bligh's lot to request the loan of Mr. Walch. The gentlemen separated, and apportion of the staunch, honest firm slept but little that night, for there was crime about to be unearthed, and they knew not where the blow would fall.

The detective, well used to such things, having a clue that promised him an outlet, threw the matter off his mind, wrote a letter to his wife, and retired to a sound and dreamless sleep.

The next morning he appeared among his employers and carelessly attracted young Walch to a position near the hatch-way, let his pencil, upon which he had been whittling, fall to the basement. Presently taking his memorandum out he asked Harry for him, which was readily handed to him. He excused himself to write a moment, and Walch, being called away, he quietly put the pencil in his pocket, and walking to the counting

room, said, “gentlemen, I have the pencil, and you see the piece fits to a “T.” You see after commencing to sharpen it, he probably decided to sharpen the other end, as I believe we all do. Though why we should leave the stamped end, as I believe we all do. At any rate the suspicion may now be said to be resting on its present owner, Mr. Walch. Still, he may not have chipped this tell-tale little piece off, or if he did, it may not have been on the seventeenth. It might perhaps be well to speak to him about it. You will please call him.”

This was done, and on entering, Mr. Bligh remarked,

“Mr. Walch I rather like this pencil, a new brand to me. Where do you get them?”

“We have them in stock,” he replied, “there are plenty in the desk just behind you. Permit me uncle,” said he as he stepped to the desk and reaching around him, drew forth a package of pencils, all having the mark “Dixon’s American Graphite S.M.” “I got mine out of this bunch,” he continued.

“AH! How long since? You don’t seem to wear them very fast?” said the detective.

“Why, I got this the evening—I mean a—the—let me see, Monday the seventeenth, but I have several shorter pieces in my pants pockets for use. I always use pencils pretty close up, but I like to have a longer one in my vest pocket.”

“Certainly,” said Mr. Bligh, “a good idea. Much obliged, I am sure. I shall after this prefer the graphite, for I do a great deal of writing and a prefer a moderately soft pencil.”

The conversation then drifted off to other subjects and Harry excused himself and withdrew. The countenances of the partners would have been a study then.. Mr. Brough was sorely troubled. He had never dreamed that his nephew could be dishonest. He had taken him a helpless orphan, from his widowed sister’s arms as she lay dying, in a house now obliterated but formerly well-known to many of our older citizens, and had reared him as his own son, and though he had heard murmurings he never thought that he really intended to go to the antipodes or had any suspicion of dealing falsely with any one, especially with his own kindred to whom he owed his earthly all; and the stroke came heavily, for his daughter Clara was only an adopted daughter, and he had been for thirteen years childless, save these two, and he had hoped to have them united, and had determined to leave them the bulk of his fortune, a very comfortable one, but the dream faded and while a feeling of pity pervaded his breast, he felt that he must be honest with his own soul and assist in discovering the guilty one although it be his nephew; if after finding he was the wrong doer he could do aught to shield him or protect his own honor he felt that he would probably do so. That evening as the time drew nigh for closing the house for the day, he requested Harry to remain as important business was to be transacted. He did so and as they were all in the counting room together, Mr. Bligh told Harry of the chain of circumstances that was indicative of guilt and asked an explanation of the discrepancy of entries on the seventeenth, his presence there that evening and his

use of the pencils in that particular drawer in his own papers and private memoranda were kept.

“I was not here that evening,” said Harry, with flushed face.

“You said you were, then corrected yourself, I remember,” said Mr. Brough. “You had better make a clean breast of it. Did you not abstract that \$80.00 on that date, answer plainly,” said he, with an agonized firmness that made the young man quiver irresolutely; but, in lieu of reply, he turned with fierceness upon Mr. Bligh and said bitterly:

“So you are a detective, are you? Paid to dog my steps and track me like a felon? Well I’ll know after this.”

“Come, Harry,” said Mr. Brough, “that will do no good, Do you admit that you took that money?”

A painful pause ensued; so still was everything that the ticking of the clock above the desk was almost distracting. All eyes were turned upon the unfortunate youth, who after standing a minute with downcast eyes, sank into a seat and burst into tears.

Mr. Bligh finally said: “Mr. Walch, it is true I am here as an expert, and I find that some one has practiced upon the unsuspecting members of this firm the present frauds; just how much I have not taken time to fathom; it was more important to find out who it was than to realize the true sum taken, for it was not enough to seemingly affect the standing of the firm. Events go to prove that you are at least connected with the matter, if you are not wholly responsible. My duty is clear. I have but to find the guilty party, and, if possible, secure the ill-gotten wealth again. You readily see I have no other motive, no other interest in hounding you, when a few days ago I had never heard of you. You see the condition of affairs, and you will allow me to remind you of what you may not have thought of; you are in my charge, under arrest, in fact; and I submit whether or not it were not better to make a statement of your complicity with this unfortunate affair.

Thus addressed the guilty youth confessed the abstraction above referred to, and finally admitted that he alone was responsible for the entire loss, running back for several years; he offered no explanation save that he had always intended to go to India and become a nabob, and was not going there empty handed. He went through the books with them, and explained the general principles upon which he acted, and gave up some receipts and certificates of deposit, amounting to several thousand dollars, and promised to furnish some more on the morrow, but added that a former school-mate, now on board a merchantman bound for China, had nearly three thousand dollars in gold which he was to use in making purchases in the celestial empire and the go with them to India and trade upon them, leaving his grandfather’s ship at Canton.

The statement was received with astonishment and the sincerest regrets, for the young man had obtained the entire confidence of the firm.

No action was taken further than that Mr. Bligh required that Harry should go to his room at the — hotel, and stay with him ostensibly as his companion, really as his prisoner.

No remarks were to be made on the subject, and the next day the young culprit secured and covered into the hands of his employers all the amount abducted except some four thousand dollars which he had expended and lost in a stock speculation. This amount Mr. Brough immediately made up from his private account, and his nephew was relieved from custody.

Mr. Bright was paid a good round sum, and departed the same evening.

Young Walch was permitted to go free, but he resigned his position in the house, and subsequently went into heavy land speculations aided by his uncle, who, though a stern lover of justice, was not willing to prosecute his only sister's orphan boy, and though he would not permit him to remain in his house any longer, he furnished ample means to live upon, and his shrewd business disposition soon enabled him to become wealthy.

He never acted dishonestly again. His conduct from that day forth was scrupulously upright, and he obtained the confidence of all who knew him. He was in the city last week, a tall, grave, thoughtful man, with a keen black eye, his hair once black as a raven's wing, now plentifully sprinkled with grey. His reticent manners made him attractive, and though he remained but a single day in the city he made several friends. He spent an afternoon in the cemetery, beside a lone, neglected grave, and when he returned his eyes were red with weeping. He never asked after any of the former citizens of this place, though he recognized a few of them; and only mentioned the names of a few who had been kind to his mother in her lonely widowhood. He told the Express representative this story, who knew for many years that a shadow rested over his life. It is lifted, in a measure, and he is a free man, only in the sense that a crime can never be undone, and the scar once left upon the white soul of innocence, the soil upon purity, can never be effaced; the little wavelet of time, unto the borders of eternity.

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