

The Imprint of a Thumb

Which Caused the Confession of a Thief and
Puzzled a Detective

A Strange Story of the Pennsylvania
Oil Region—An Occurrence
Hard to Account For

Since the organization of the society for Psychological Research, in London, England, and similar associations in America, more attention is being paid than in many years to occurrences which were formerly classed as mere coincidences unworthy of more than a passing notice. Thoughtful people are trying to explain upon scientific theories which but a few years ago were dismissed with the remark that they were “very singular,” or that they were “those things which no one can account for.” The phenomena of thought transference which have resulted from numerous carefully conducted experiments have done more, perhaps, to arouse interest in matters of this sort than any other known cause. This thought, says the St. Louis Republican, was suggested by a conversation which occurred Tuesday in the office of Mr. Thomas Furlong. Mr. Furlong related the following incident, which has at least one peculiar feature.

“It was in 1870, I think,” said he, “that an event occurred which was one of the first things that made me think that perhaps I would make a detective, and yet, as you will see, I was entitled to no credit in the transaction, for it was a mere ‘scratch.’ I had just been appointed chief of police of Oil City, Pa. I am not quite certain about the year, but it was somewhere between 1868 and 1870. There was a farm known as the ‘Blood farm,’ situated on the bank of Oil creek, about five miles from Oil City, and it was one of the finest and most productive farms in the oil country between 1864 and 1868. It had a number of fine producing wells, and was well known all over that section of the country. A company from Ohio had a lease of several of the producing wells and was drilling new wells in 1868. A young man named Barnes, who lived somewhere near Columbus, O, where the company was formed, was employed by the superintendent of the lease and the charge of all the men on the lease, perhaps twenty-five or thirty all told. At that time in the oil country boarding houses were scarce, owing to the large number of men at work there, and as a natural result a great many were compelled to ‘shanty.’ That is, three, four, or five would build a shanty and sleep and do all their cooking in it; keep bachelors’ hall, as it were. Barnes had a shanty that himself and three or four of the men had built, and his room-mate was a young man named Jones, who was born and raised in the same neighborhood in Ohio that Barnes was. He was also an employee on the lease, and Barnes had a great deal of confidence in him.

“Barnes was getting a good salary, and in fact all the men were; none getting less than \$4 a day. Wages were high and the men lived cheaply and saved a good deal. Barnes had bought a farm in Ohio, for which he was paying in semi-annual installments. He saved his money and at the end of six months sent it to Ohio. One of the installments was about due; he had the money ready to send, and kept it in his trunk in the shanty. One day he went to the trunk to get a little money for something, when he discovered that he had been robbed. The trunk was an ordinary cheap affair and underneath the till he had laid his pocket-book. The pocket-book was there, but the contents were gone.

“As soon as Barnes found that he had been robbed he immediately hitched up his horse, drove down to Oil City, and reported the case to me. His room-mate, Jones, who had become very much interested in the case, was with him. He had won his confidence completely, and they were great friends. Barnes described the room in which the trunk was situated, told me who had access to the building, etc. After hearing his statement I knew very little more about the matter than I did before. I, being very busy at the time, hadn’t time to go up to the farm, but I asked him to drive back, put the trunk in his buggy, and bring it to me, as I wanted to see it. And here is the singular part of it. I didn’t know what I wanted to see the trunk for, and had no reason for asking to see it. The idea came to me all of a sudden and without my giving it any thought. After they had gone I wondered what good it was going to do for me to see that trunk, and why I had told Barnes to bring it to me.

“He drove back, however, and when he returned he had the trunk, and Jones was still with him. They brought it into my office, set it on the floor, and opened it. I stood up in front of it and went to take out the tray and I saw that one of the loops was gone. It was one of those cheap trunks, and the loops or handles that were on the tray to lift it out by wire put in with common tacks. The loop on the right hand side was there, but the left hand was gone. I called Barnes’ attention to the fact, and he said both loops were on the last time he went to the trunk before the money was stolen. I looked at the place where the left loop had been and saw that in pulling it off the head of one of the tacks had come off, leaving a sharp point just where the ball of a man’s thumb had passed. On looking closer I saw the print of a thumb on the paper lining of the tray; that it had been cut by the sharp end of the tack, making a long cut clear across the ball of the thumb. I also saw that there were streaks of soot or coal dust on the thumb point, and I said to Barnes:

“The man who pulled the handle off was evidently a ‘tool-dresser.’

“You know a tool-dresser gets his hands like those of some blacksmiths. He is constantly working with heavy drills, gets his hands hot, plunges them into cold water, and the skin of the inside of the fingers get calloused and full of deep creases. These creases fill up with soot, coal-dust, and dirt, and it is hard to get out. Consequently, when the thumb or finger is pressed on a clean surface it will leave a mark that anyone can tell who knows anything about mechanics. A tool-dresser, therefore, was really a marked man. I looked again at the thumb-print and saw that there was about as much soot and coal in it as there was blood. As I raised my head, Jones had walked around the trunk, and I caught a glimpse of the thumb of his left hand; I saw in an instant that he had a cut across the left ball.

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘a tool-dresser lifted that tray out,’ and taking up Jones’ left hand, I said, ‘and here’s the scar.’”

“I put his thumb against the print and found that it corresponded exactly. Jones was as white as a sheet and seemed as if he was going to sink into his boots.

“‘Yes, I took the money,’ he said, and he went back to the farm and showed where he had concealed it. Barnes got back every dollar of it and refused to prosecute Jones.

“‘Furlong,’ he said, ‘I’m sorry I brought that matter to you. I’d rather lost the money any day than to have found out that Jones stole it. I had the most perfect confidence in him, and I never had anything shake my faith in human nature as this has done.’

“One of the city officials was in my office at the time the trunk was opened and he told me afterward that when I discovered the thumb print on the tray he noticed that Jones turned pale and seemed uneasy and nervous. He thought it was a great piece of detective work and it created considerable talk in the locality for a time, but to tell you the truth, I was not entitled to any credit for it. Something told me to send for that trunk, but why I did it I never could tell; if I hadn’t done so I never would have found out who took that money. No, I don’t believe in spiritualism or anything of the kind, but I never could account for that occurrence.”

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