

Britzer His Own Detective

Old Jacob Britzer kept the village store in Bucksport. We say the village store, because it was the largest, and, in fact, the only store of any consequence in the place. Like all country store keepers, Jacob kept for sale dry and moist goods of every description, and both village and suburban gossips made his place the centre and their tilting ground. To this the trader did not object, because he was himself of a social turn and because these hangers-on were all customers. Occasionally Jacob missed certain articles from his shelves and counters which he knew had not been sold, and he could only imagine that they had been stolen. This thing continued for more than a year, and Britzer, with all his careful watching, was unable to detect the thief. There were several whom he deemed capable of the deed, but he could not fix the crime upon either of them.

At length, on Monday morning, Jacob Britzer entered the store, and upon removing the heavy wooden shutters from the front window he discovered that the large glass top showcase near the main entrance had been robbed of nearly all its contents. At least three hundred dollars worth of fancy goods had been stolen, a large amount for the country store keeper to lose. Jacob had locked up the store on Saturday night, and had not visited it since now, nor had the keys been out of his keeping. For a brief space he was thunderstruck, then for another brief space he collected his thoughts and reflected. His course of action was resolved upon. His first decided movement was to lock the door by which he had entered, and draw the curtains over the windows. Next he replenished the showcase from a fresh stock [which] he chanced to have on hand, making it look nearly as it looked on Saturday evening that not even his clerk was likely to detect any change. Thus the matter, so far as he and his store were concerned, was locked in his own breast, and so he meant to keep it. Having ascertained that the thief had gained entrance by a rear cellar window, and having so covered the tracks of the guilty one that his clerk would not observe them, he opened his store and prepared for business. Half an hour later the clerk came, and detected nothing out of the way. (This clerk, we may remark, was Jacob's own son.)

The day passed, customers came and went as usual, the gossips chatted over their beer and cheese, while old Jacob was attentive and affable never betraying by word or sign that anything had happened amiss. In the evening Peter Hawks came in. This Peter Hawks was a farmer, owning quite a place near the outskirts of the village, who had of late been leading a life rather aimless and thriftless. It had been Peter's custom to spend a good part of the day in the store, but on this Monday he had not put in an appearance until after tea, and even when he did come he failed to talk [with] his usual volubility, but remained for the most part silent, watching what others had to say.

At length the hour grew late, and one by one the gossips dropped away until Peter was left alone with Jacob and his son. The solitary auctioneer rose from his chair, and after a little previous hesitation he approached the storekeeper with—

“Ah, Jacob, that was quite a loss you met with. Have you any idea who did it?”

“Who did what?” asked Jacob, dropping the piece of cloth which he was folding and [looking] up.

“Who robbed yer showcase last night?”

“Yes,” answered Jacob with stern promptness. “I know exactly who did it.”

“Eh, who?”

“You did it!”

“Me!” gasped Peter quiveringly.

“Ay—you did it. I know you did it: and thus far the secret is entirely between you and me. You are the only living man beside myself who knows that I have been robbed at all!”

And then Jacob went on to explain to his customer how he had managed to detect the thief. Peter Hawks was forced to own up, and in consideration of his returning the goods last stolen and paying for those stolen on previous occasions, and also promising to steal no more, he was let off. But he did not remain much longer in Bucksport. Having settled with Jacob Britzer, he made all haste to sell his farm and remove to parts where the story of his shortcomings was not known.

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