

Caught

From the day that I first came into our house, as a partner, I have always attended to the cash and banking business myself, all moneys, checks, &c., passing through my hands are accounted for to me. In three and twenty years, experience, I never had an error but which, on careful revision, could be rectified, nor had any moneys ever been lost or stolen.

You may judge, therefore, of my surprise when, one day—it had been a very heavy cash day—on making up my account, I found myself two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven dollars short. There was no such amount entered in any way that I could possibly have nothing in my transactions upon which to base my deficit. I had but one place in which to put my money during the day, and that was in a drawer of my desk, a solid, old-fashioned structure attached to the building, and put up when the office was built, forty years before. Had the desk been one of the modern, flimsy affairs, I might have thought that somebody could have spirited the money out in some way, but even the idea of a false key did not harmonize with the old-fashioned lock of solid wood. I always locked the drawer, and carried the key in my pocket, and was rarely out of the office during the day, except half an hour for lunch, and then there were never fewer than three or four persons in the same room. At night I invariably removed every dollar to the safe, so that any appropriation of funds must be made in the daytime.

This was the state of the case the day that I was two thousand three hundred and fifty-seven dollars short. I went through every pocket and available place on my person, though I knew I never put any money about me, and closed my account with the deficit, making up my mind not to speak of it that day, but to consider it until the morrow, before I asked advice. The morrow came, and, utterly decomposed, I admitted to myself my inability to straighten it, and called in for advice Mr. Conway, our old confidential bookkeeper, in whose judgment I had great reliance. Mr. Conway did not, like the famous Dutch squire, weigh the two accounts, and give judgment in favor of the heaviest; but he did almost as well; he footed up the column of figures three [or] four times, counted my cash balance as often, looking at me over his spectacles, and told me the account was wrong—two thousand seven hundred and fifty-seven dollars short. That's all the satisfaction there was from Mr. Conway. After this, pledging him to secrecy, I thought it better to consult nobody else, but watchfully await events, charging the amount as I was bound to do to myself personally.

How much, for days, this matter troubled me, I cannot state; but, like all things else, after two weeks had gone by, and no elucidation had come to me, it began to wear away, when one day I was amazed and horrified to find another deficit of nine hundred and eighty-four dollars. This time I remembered some of the very missing bills, and knew that they had been taken from my drawer, and yet I had not left the key in it one moment while I was absent from the room, and all day there had been present at least two persons besides myself; and there had been also people coming all the time, but these were separated from me and the clerks by a railing so that it was impossible for any person calling on business to approach nearer to my desk than fifteen feet. This time I consulted with my partners, and after numerous theories—all of which fell to the ground—we concluded to call in the aid of some reputed, able, detective officer; and having applied in the proper quarter for such a person, we were recommended to Mr. Peter Schlidog, a gentleman who by the wink he gave me after I had told him the whole story and the assertion

that “We’ll fix this job up in half an hour,” convinced me that he would achieve nothing. Mr. Schlidog commenced his operations by gloing upon my employees, one by one, and looking into my money drawer, and handling the money lovingly, so that I somewhat feared that he meant to confiscate it as part of the evidence; and ended by settling upon poor old Conway, who, he mysteriously informed me, was the guilty man, but could give me no reason for it save that Mr. Conway could not look him in the eye; for which I did not blame Conway, for a more rascally, unpleasant eye I never beheld in mortal man. I had some trouble in getting rid of Mr. Schlidog, which was only accomplished by bribing him off, and submitting to his hints that there must be something wrong in myself, inasmuch as I was not willing that the investigation should proceed.

I then thought I would play my own detective, and having put my money in the drawer as I always did, watched the movements of every one with the closest circumspection, although appearing not so careful as usual. Before going to lunch each day I counted the money and again when I returned; but no result until one day, on making up my daily accounts a little before three o’clock, I found myself one thousand one hundred and thirty-two dollars short—I almost jumped in astonishment from my seat, for the abstraction must have occurred within three-quarters of an hour, and with myself in the room all the time. This was staggering and serious, and I at once lost faith in myself. Here were four thousand four hundred and seventy-three dollars gone, and not the shadow of a clue. After another consultation with my partners, it flashed across my mind to hunt up one B—, who in his day had been celebrated as a detective, but of whom I had not heard of for years, and, if he were still alive, to submit the matter to his judgment. The directory gave me his address, and in an hour I was with him. B— was interested, but he had retired from business; rheumatism was the only thing he detected, and that to his sorrow. He, however, would recommend me to a gentleman, who, if he would take the job, could unravel it, if it were to be unraveled by human skill, and he gave me a letter to the Doctor, or Robert Blaisdell, M.D., as he strangely directed the envelope. Before I went to bed that night I found Blaisdell, and not only engaged him, but as I could see, interested him, and he agreed to meet me the next morning at the office, and so conduct himself that there would be no suspicion of his business.

He was there promptly, and opened matters in the hearing of the clerks by taking coffee, and proposing to sell a cargo of Rio to arrive. He never appeared to look at any of my people, but with his pencil, as he was supposed to be computing quantity and price, asked several questions, and in a few moments communicated to me his belief that the clerks were all right. That was a relief. I opened the drawer, freely handling the money, and giving him every opportunity to see its working. He was bothered. I saw that by his face. He asked me if the clerks could be sent out, and we could be alone for half an hour. Yes, at lunch-time, in an hour, all would go but Mr. Conway, and I would contrive an errand for him. Blaisdell went away, and returned at that time, and we were alone.

“This thing is done by somebody outside of your clerks, sir, but by whom or how, puzzles me. Let me examine that drawer,” said Blaisdell. “Have you mice about?”

There had been a stray one seen once in a while.

“Because you know such things have been as mice using the soft paper of bank notes to make their nests.” “No,” he continued, after close examination of the drawer, “no mice,” and he drew

the door completely out, and peered back into the opening. "It seems to go chock up against the wall, and to fit too close for even a mouse to get in."

I examined, and found he was right; but in a moment I saw his face lighten up, though I could not see at what. Again he peered into the depth that the drawer was taken from, and slipped it back quietly to its place. Then he got up absently, took a survey of the room, looked out of the window, and saying, "I will be back in a few minutes," walked into the streets, and, returning in less than five, said:

"You had better go on to-day the same as usual, and, after business hours, I shall want to come in here, with a friend of mine, and be entirely alone with him for a couple of hours."

This, of course, I agreed to, and went on using my drawer the rest of the day, but all came right. At five o'clock I myself admitted Blaisdell and his friend, who looked to me like a locksmith, and left them. The next morning at ten o'clock, Blaisdell handed me the key of my drawer, which I had left with him the night before, and, opening the drawer, said, pointing to a piece of white paper pasted in the bottom:

"You will please not disturb or touch that, but lay your money carefully upon it. I shall be in and out here every half hour or so, to see how the thing comes out."

"How the thing comes out," rather puzzled me, but, as I was in the Doctor's hands, I obeyed orders and said nothing.

Blaisdell came in and out, and talked coffee closely and knowingly, and I had some trouble, once or twice to persuade myself that I was only going through the motions, and not really buying a cargo of Rio of him. All was quiet and my accounts right, Blaisdell declining to lunch with me, saying, in an off-hand way, "that he would foot up his freight accounts, in my absence, if I would permit him to sit at my desk."

In half an hour I was back, and the moment I entered I saw a peculiar expression on Blaisdell's face, an expression of intense listening. He did not get up from my chair, but put his finger on his lip. The office was perfectly silent, with the exception of the scratching of Conway's pen—he always would use quills—when, suddenly, there was a sharp noise and a struggling within my desk. Blaisdell jumped to his feet, excitedly, and called:

"The key! Quick! quick! By George, we've got him!"

I handed him the key in an instant, completely astonished, as was old Conway, for he tumbled right [off] his stool, and Blaisdell unlocked the drawer. It was not so easy to open it, for it took our combined strength. The first sight that met my eye, when that was done, was a human hand, which Blaisdell seized with a grip like a vice, and in an instant had a handcuff on it. I saw at a glance it was a hand without a thumb, and, at the same time, heard Blaisdell say:

"Why, it's Thumbby! I thought he was up the river."

I was so dazed that I could hardly understand the thing, and stood looking like an idiot, while Blaisdell took up a heavy poker, clasped the other hand-cuff on it, and, placing it across the drawer, said composedly:

“There’s your man, sir—Thumbby Dick, one of the most accomplished burglars in this country. Shall we go round and see him?”

We went round and saw him, and, the moment I laid eyes on his face, I recognized him as a man who had been several times to see me in reference to a schooner with fruit we expected from the West Indies, professing that he wished to buy all the pineapples. This was the greeting between the Doctor and Thumbby Dick:

“This was a well-put-up job, Dick,” says the Doctor; “but it’s played.”

“If I’d known you was on it, Doc, I’d ‘ay struck the heap, and gone.”

“Yes,” scratching his chin, “but you didn’t want to kill the goose that laid the golden eggs, eh?”

“Come, take us out of this, Doc; I’ve got nothing to say.”

And so Mr. Thumbby Dick was taken out, and accommodated with bracelets on the same side of the house, and told us the whole story. He had noticed the money drawer when he first came to see me, his intention at that time being to tap the safe some pleasant evening. He knew the next building well, it was a small drinking place in front, with a back room, and offices up stairs. This back room he managed to hire, and with the nice eye of a mechanic—for the job showed skill—through the wall he went, right behind my desk. At night he had skillfully removed the rear of my money drawer, and refitted it with four wooden pegs (which was Blaisdell’s first clue, as he was examining the drawer,) and so could noiselessly help himself during the day, for, even though I might open the drawer when he was in the act, I could not detect him unless I bent down and looked back to see the rear part out. Blaisdell and his friend, the locksmith looking man, had skillfully fitted a spring trap at the bottom of the drawer, under the white paper, so that the crowding of the hand, in the act of grasping the money, sprung the trap, and took Mr. Thumbby prisoner—a mishap that he is not expatiating at his old residence on the Hudson.

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