

## *A Gigantic Conspiracy Defeated* by Allan Pinkerton

How apt and true are many of the sayings put into the mouths of the marvelous characters created by Charles Dickens!

Notice how much is contained in the eloquent passage spoken by “Obenreizer” to “Vandale” in the Christmas story of “No Thoroughfare,” where the former, when the moral conviction of his great guilt sinks down upon him like a fall, remarks: “What did I always observe when I was on the mountains? We call them vast, but the world is so little. So little is the world that one cannot keep away from persons. There are so few persons in the world, that they continually cross and recross. So very little is the world that one cannot get rid of a person!”

Neither can dishonest men get rid of the consequences of their guilt: and sometimes it seems inexplicable to me that men possessed of good intelligence, surrounded by pleasant associations, which could be held to the sunniest level that life affords, and with the countless examples before them of fatal errors and their most fatal results, will so far forget themselves as to enter a criminal career with the vain hope that some pressing necessity can be relieved and their honor remain unsullied and intact.

But the terrible greed that often overwhelms men to suddenly become possessed of vast wealth, or even a moderate competence, without patiently striving for and earning it, has, and ever will, create criminals, who must be hunted down and punished.

The instance which I am about to relate shows the frustration of one of the most deliberate conspiracies to commit a gigantic robbery of and swindle upon a great business corporation that has ever come under my notice, and illustrates forcibly the truth of the statement that the world *is* very small, in the sense that, when modern detective methods and appliances are thoroughly employed, it is not big enough to permit the criminal to escape, however certain he may be that his schemes are perfect, or whatever way he may turn when the desperation of failure stares him in the face.

Some time in 1866, one James C. Engley was at the head of what was known as the Neptune Express Company, at Providence, Rhode Island. At the time the Merchants’ Union Express Company was organized and started, a proposition was made by the latter to buy up the former, which was accepted, and the Neptune became absorbed in the Merchants’ Union.

In the arrangements for the transfer of business Engley insisted upon the stipulation that he should be the Providence agent. This was objected to, but finally it was agreed that he could have the position as nominal agent.

Among the articles transferred was the office safe, but before the transfer was wholly consummated, Engley, having conceived a plan for swindling the new company on a gigantic scale, had duplicate keys made which fitted most admirably, enabling him to open and shut the

safe quite as easily as with the original keys. These duplicate keys he reserved for use when the proper time should arrive.

Engley moved in the best social circles of Providence, notwithstanding attacks had been made on his character, on account of several questionable transactions of his during the war. He had been charged with defrauding a regiment of colored volunteers out of their bounties; but an examination of the case by the Rhode Island Legislature resulted in his favor, which was said to have been owing to the complicity of some high officials with Engley in the alleged irregular transactions.

Having acquired a large amount of money, he purchased a controlling share of the stock of the Neptune Express Company, already mentioned, and continued apparently to enjoy the confidence of the best men in Providence, occasionally passing his note with them for considerable amounts, but never meeting his engagements except with brilliant promises for the future.

At length his financial condition became so precarious that he was compelled to do something to sustain himself; and it was at this juncture in his affairs that he determined to reveal his plan to some one upon whose ability and secrecy he could rely with unshaken confidence. He visited Boston, and there met an old acquaintance, named C. A. Dean, to whom he related his plan for becoming suddenly wealthy at the expense of others.

Mr. Dean happened to be a man of Engley's ilk, and fell in with the plan rapturously, lauding Engley and his genius most unsparingly.

At Engley's subsequent suggestion, the arrangement first settled on was altered, and I only give my readers the plan finally decided upon.

Engley said he had keys with which he could open the safe in the office of the Merchants' Union Express Company at Providence whenever he so liked; that when the Neptune was sold out to the Merchants' he had conceived the idea of making a little fortune at some future date, for which purpose he had insisted on remaining agent for the new company; that he had carried his point; that he was not held responsible for the contents of the safe; and that, therefore, any depredation he might commit by taking funds from it would cause others to be suspected, and was besides fully protected by his powerful social relations; that his idea was to have three hundred thousand dollars sent from New York to Providence by the Merchants' Union Company; that the said amount should disappear in Providence by his hand; that the company, being responsible, would of course refund the whole amount to the sender; that the money so refunded should be divided into three equal shares between himself (Engley), Dean, and whatever third party they should take into the conspiracy in order to raise the sum to be sent; that the amount should be made up at some bank of good standing before being forwarded, so that there should exist the most undoubted evidence of its having been shipped; that he, in his capacity as agent at Providence, would receive and receipt for it; that he could subsequently make affidavit, if necessary, that he had so received it and receipted for it, that at night, while an evening party should be in full blast at his house, he would slip out for a few moments unobserved by the guests, and return again, so that every guest might, if called upon, prove an

*alibi* in his favor; that in the interval of his absence from the party at his house, he should enter the office of the Express Company, abstract from the safe the three hundred thousand dollar package, and retire unnoticed and unsuspected by any one.

Such was the plan, its only other details being as to who might be suspected. The tradesman who kept the store adjoining the Express Office, which was only separated by a very shaky wooden partition, a fruit-seller, who occupied a basement adjacent to the office; Mr. Charles R. Dennis, responsible and acting agent for the Merchants' Union Express Company and the cashier—these were the parties whose reputations were to be ruined for the benefit of Mr. Engley and his co-conspirators, should his plans work as smoothly as he calculated.

The next step in this nice little game was to find some party who was the possessor of three hundred thousand dollars, or who could secure the possession of so large a sum of money temporarily, and who would permit himself and his money to be used in this manner even for the possible great benefit to accrue from the same. This, of course, caused another canvass and search. Speculators in New York and Boston, known to both parties, were named, and the probabilities of their being willing to enter into any such feasible plan as they had plotted were discussed.

A Mr. C. W. Fitch, of New York, was finally selected as a possible party to the enterprise. He is a respectable man, so far as I know, but was understood by these fellows to be "available." He is a man of means and a genuine speculator, but, as subsequently transpired, was not in the habit of speculating in just this kind of a way.

But a letter was written to him by Dean, who had conveniently assumed the *alias* of Drew, and whom I will hereafter call by that name. Mr. Fitch was informed by Mr. Drew that the latter had some business proposition of great importance to communicate to him, and was also requested on the strength of this to make an appointment for an interview.

Mr. Fitch, who was naturally open for any chance to increase his fortune, replied, inviting Mr. Drew to proceed to New York. Drew went there, and a preliminary talk occurred, during which Mr. Fitch had some trouble to understand just what the Boston gentleman's plan was as he only spoke of it in general terms, apparently to test Mr. Fitch's fitness for the particular work before the party. This meeting not proving altogether satisfactory, an appointment was made for another to be held in Boston.

Mr. Fitch went to Boston, and met Drew at the Parker House, where, being a gentleman of an inquiring turn of mind, he soon discovered that a certain Mr. Engley occupied a room, to which apartment his friend Mr. Drew seemed to have a peculiar fondness for frequently retiring; and, on further finding that Engley's name corresponded on the hotel register with that of an Engley he knew considerable about, he felt rather chary of coming to anything definite in a scheme which promised extra perilous results.

On returning to New York, he therefore laid the matter before a legal friend, informing him of Engley's connection with the scheme, which he already suspected to be one of robbery of the express company, from certain supposed operations which had been submitted to him for his

consideration. The lawyer properly advised him to go on and ascertain all he could of the plan, as though he were acting in good faith, and, if he discovered that the matter looked to the injury of the express company, it would then be his immediate duty to communicate all the particulars of the matter to the officers of the company in New York.

Mr. Fitch readily agreed to this, and again met the conspirators in Boston, when they unfolded the whole plan to him. He apparently accorded his hearty support to it, and returned to New York ostensibly for the purpose of preparing himself for his part of the enterprise; but instead of doing this, he immediately communicated the entire facts obtained to Mr. J. D. Andrews, then agent of the company in New York.

Mr. Andrews at once submitted all the information to me, at my New York offices, and I at once arranged a counter-plan, which, though Engley had repeatedly boasted that he had “thought his scheme over and over, and found that there was not a flaw in it,” I felt certain would eventually rather astonish the two embryo swindlers.

Several subsequent meetings were held by Drew, Engley, and Fitch.

On one of these occasions, in order to test the ability of Engley to carry out his design, should he remain unmolested, I directed Mr. Fitch to inquire of him how he intended to account for the shipment of so large a sum as three hundred thousand dollars to Providence.

“Why, I have arranged for that already. I tell you we can’t be beaten. You know we need a hotel at Providence, a big hotel—one worth at least half a million. Well, it has, some way, got into the papers,” continued Engley, with a knowing wink, “that we *are* going to have one. So the minds of our Providence people are amply prepared for the reception of even a million dollars through the banks, through the express company, or any other way it can get there!”

Another circumstance also occurred, which proved beyond doubt Engley’s intentions to become both a robber and a swindler.

One day Engley, while transacting some business in the express office, thoughtlessly laid his pocketbook down upon the desk. As he turned away to some other part of the office, Mr. Dennis, the responsible agent, noticed that a small paper package slipped down the inclined surface of the desk away from the pocketbook. Mr. Dennis, who did not, for some reason, have the highest possible confidence in his superior, opened the package quickly, ascertained that it contained a set of safe keys the perfect duplicate of his own, and, applying them to the safe, found that they also worked quite as well as his.

With commendable presence of mind he took a file and reduced such portions of both keys as would destroy them from operating on the combination of the safe.

After this very sensible precaution was done, he returned the keys to their place in the paper package, and laid the latter on the desk beside the pocketbook. He had hardly accomplished this when Engley returned, picked up the pocketbook and piece of paper, not suspecting that either had been molested, put them in his pocket, and went out.

When this was first reported to me, it flashed into my mind that perhaps this was a clever ruse on Engley's part to ascertain definitely whether he was suspected; but from other moves made by the man, and the conviction that this might prove too daring a risk for a man of his calibre, I satisfied myself that he was serenely awaiting the realization of his fond hopes.

Everything being ready, the package of three hundred thousand dollars was made up at the company's offices in New York, under my direction, but it did not contain that large sum of money. It was *marked* "\$300,000," but really contained only three thousand five hundred and ninety-four dollars, so arranged with five hundred dollar bills at top and bottom as to deceive a nervous, hasty, and adventurous observer. I arranged matters so as to have the package arrive in Providence on Thursday evening, December 19; but one of the heaviest snowstorms of the year suddenly set in, and delayed all the trains, so that the package and other goods did not reach that place until Friday evening, and the reception at Engley's residence, which could not be postponed, and which proved a very fashionable affair, could not be very well used as planned, for *alibi* purposes.

I very well knew the high standing of the man we had to deal with, and consequently realized the impossibility of showing him in his true light in Providence unless what was about to occur was participated in to some extent and actually witnessed by some of the best people of the place; and I accordingly secured the co-operation of a few of the most reputable business men of Providence, who were detailed to quietly watch Engley at the time of the arrival of the package as well as his subsequent movements, and also to occupy the store-room adjoining the express office, through the partition of which all movements of Engley might be observed.

The package had arrived at about eight o'clock. Mr. Dennis suggested, in the hearing of Engley and one or two respectable gentlemen, that, as a package so valuable was in their safe, it would be well to have a watch placed upon it; but Engley nervously pooh-poohed the suggestion, saying that the safe was a solid institution, had ever defied burglars, and could never be opened. Dennis seemed to fall in with the idea that the safe could be trusted, and at nine o'clock closed the office and went home.

It was a bitterly cold night, and my operatives on duty had a slight taste of the actual hardships which are often meted out to the honestly faithful and persistent detective; while the gentlemen stationed at different points throughout the city, and particularly those in the store next to the express office, on account of the rigor of the night, came near deserting their posts. Nothing but inordinate curiosity held them.

At about ten o'clock a phantom-like object left Engley's residence, and could have been observed moving cautiously toward the express office, followed at a little distance by a very faithful attendant, who never permitted the distance between them to grow less or become greater. There were also several unobserved observers, silent watchers of the night, who never made a useless movement, but every one of whom did what they had been detailed to do mechanically and noiselessly.

The leading figure, passing down the now deserted streets, was none other than Engley, who had left “the best society of Providence” for a few minutes, to take a quiet stroll on one of the coldest nights of the winter of 1867 and 1868.

Arriving in front of the express office, he stopped, quickly and searchingly looked up and down the street, and then peered long and anxiously within. The usual lights were burning, and the window-blinds were sufficiently low to permit everything inside to be seen.

In a moment more Engley walked past, suddenly turned a corner, came back, crossed over in the snow, went up an alley; after being out of sight for a while, appeared at an unexpected point, turned another corner, dodged a policeman who was just emerging from the cheery glow of a saloon, and at length returned swiftly to the express office. It was a singular fact, too, that the party before referred to would have reminded one, who could have observed all, of “Mary’s little lamb,” at least in one particular, for everywhere that Engley went that man was sure to go. He had a happy faculty of almost understanding what Engley’s next cutting of corners, dodging up alleys or doubling his route, would be, and seemed to be on hand, but always invisible to Engley, wherever that gentleman’s peculiar movements led him.

Engley entered the office, locked the door behind him, and, in another instant, had raised the window-blinds so that no person could look into the place from the street. The parties in the adjoining room were all agog now, and a half-dozen pairs of eyes were applied to a half-dozen crevices in the thin partition.

After thoroughly searching the place, as if to ascertain that no person could be hidden in the office, Engley took the keys from a vest-pocket, stepped quickly to the safe, and applied them. The lock refused to respond. Again he tried, and again failed. With an oath he stepped to a gas-jet, and carefully examined the keys. In his haste, excitement, and nervousness he could see nothing wrong about them.

Again he tried the safe. No, it could not be opened. The work of Mr. Dennis upon them a month previous had been effectual.

“My God! it can’t be got!” he muttered; stood looking at the safe a moment, as if half tempted to try some desperate method of breaking the great iron receptacle open, and then swiftly left the place.

He had scarcely finished locking the door, when a heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, and the voice of the mysterious follower of the robber sternly said:

“Engley, you’re my prisoner!”

A moment more and the door of the store had opened, and a crowd of the best business men of Providence had surrounded the officer and his prisoner; and Engley, looking into the faces of his old friends, only said, with a kind of moan:

“Gentlemen, I’m ruined! Be as merciful as you can to me!”

Dean, *alias* Drew, was arrested the next day in Boston, and though the two men never received the just deserts for their infamous attempt at robbery and their more infamous and heartless scheme to ruin for life the characters of honest men in order to shield their guilt, had not its consummation been prevented, they were given such penitentiary sentences as undoubtedly impressed, irrevocably, upon their minds the principle laid down by Dickens, that, “So little is the world that one cannot get rid of persons,” and, I would add, especially if those persons happen to be honest detectives.

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