

Extraordinary Self-Robbery by Allan Pinkerton

ONE day in December, 1870, the president of one of the Chicago national banks called at my office and desired a private interview with me.

His statement was, that the deputy county treasurer of a county in Iowa, while alone in his office, had been assaulted by some unknown ruffians, nearly murdered, and sixteen thousand dollars taken out of his safe.

It was desired by some correspondent of the bank's, at the county seat where the assault and robbery had occurred, that the bank president should confer with me and secure my assistance.

Having but these bare outlines of the matter, I could do no more than at once dispatch one of my most able men to the point, with such general instructions as at that time could be given. This man—a keen, shrewd Irish American named Hanlon, upon whom had previously devoted the successful working up, under my direction, of several heavy bank and safe robberies—proceeded immediately to the place, and there met a gentleman named Wooster, who had authorized the operation, and who, being on the deputy treasurer's bonds, was naturally very anxious that the burglars and would-be murderers should be apprehended, and the large amount of money taken—or at least a portion of it—recovered.

The result of a careful preliminary examination into the matter was telegraphed me as follows:

On the night of the ninth of December, in the year mentioned, a gentleman named Newcomb, desiring to purchase a county bond for some customer, went to the court-house, where the deputy treasurer, a gentleman named Benton Emery, was accustomed to remain until about nine o'clock—his office being a sort of general rendezvous for a few of the county officials and several business men of the town.

On entering the treasurer's office, Mr. Newcomb was startled to find a prostrate form upon the floor. He immediately procured a light, and found a man covered with blood, and apparently dying. Blood was upon the floor and flowed from several wounds of the presumably murdered man. The room betrayed evidences of a severe struggle; the lamp had been thrown upon the floor, and the odor of the oil showed that it had been broken in the fall. The chairs were thrown about and broken, and, what was more conclusive, and seemed to give some little clue to the mystery, was the circumstance that the door to the safe stood wide open, and papers and parcels were scattered in every direction around it.

Mr. Newcomb took all this in at a single glance, and, half suspecting what was to follow, found the wounded man to be no other than Benton Emery, the deputy treasurer himself. He was immediately taken home, and in few days, though he barely lived through the terrible wounds he had received, was able to give an account of the robbery, as it undoubtedly was.

He stated that just after dark two men in oil-cloth coats called at his office, and stated that they desired to purchase some revenue stamps. They asked for five dollars' worth, and tendered a one

hundred dollar bill in payment. He took up a glass to examine it, and, after scrutinizing it and becoming satisfied of its genuineness, turned to open the safe. No sooner had he done so than one of the men sprang upon him, drawing a dagger, and grasped him violently by the throat. He was unable to utter a sound, but struggled with his assailants, clutching the dagger by the blade. The ruffian drew the dagger through his hand, and inflicted an awful gash, nearly severing the thumb at the ball. Weakened from his struggles with his burly foe and the pressure on his throat, he was compelled to gradually relax his efforts, when he received several stabs in his side. He then fell to the floor insensible.

An examination of the wounds proved that, though they were dangerous, they were not necessarily fatal. There was a gash on the hand, as stated, and four wounds around the heart, which, though deep, were not dangerous. The throat was wounded, and a frightful cut in the head disclosed the skull underneath.

The safe was overhauled, and sixteen thousand dollars, chiefly county funds, with a few small sums placed in the safe by merchants for safe-keeping, had been taken.

Now, these were the outlines of the matter, and it would reasonably be supposed that a bold and outrageous robbery had occurred and a brutal murder almost committed.

In fact, hardly any other theory could account for the terrible wounds which Mr. Emery sustained.

Some delay had ensued before I had been called upon, so that by the time my operative had arrived in the village Mr. Emery had so far recovered from his wounds as to be able to take an active part in the endeavor to detect the perpetrators of the crime. He was a man of wealth, was engaged in no speculations which might have embarrassed him, so that while no possible clue to the robbers could be secured at that time, and with the information I then possessed, the last thought to enter my mind was any possible suspicion that the deputy treasurer himself had the remotest connection with the robbery.

But every other possible theory and clue were finally exhausted.

I reasoned that professional criminals of the sort capable of so daring a crime, in nearly every instance leave some clue by which their character as criminals can be established, and subsequently their identity pretty clearly arrived at. In my thirty years of detective work these things became so marked and fixed that, on reading a telegraphic newspaper report of a large or small robbery, with the aid of my vast records and great personal experience and familiarity with these matters, I can at once tell the *character* of the work, and then, knowing the names, history, habits, and quite frequently the rendezvous of the men doing that class of work, am able to determine, with almost unerring certainty, not only the very parties who committed the robberies, but also what disposition they are likely to make of their plunder, and at what points they may be in hiding.

I hardly believed this robbery to have been committed by professional bank robbers. This conviction was verified by the fact that the closest inquiries failed to show that any strangers who

could not be accounted for had been seen in the village for weeks before. The town, though the county seat, did not contain at that time a population of over five hundred, and in a place of that size the face of a stranger is always closely scanned, and he cannot remain in the place without being quizzed and questioned.

I could not believe the robbery had been done by any of the class of outlaws who generally commit depredations upon express companies, isolated banks, and the like, in the more sparsely settled portions of the West; for a scouring of the country, in every direction, failed to discover the slightest clue to any persons having ridden to or from the place, or reached or departed from it on foot or by any manner of conveyance.

This consequently narrowed the investigation to the townspeople of the place itself. So here I directed my operative to dig away persistently, and leave no stone unturned toward the solving of the mystery. But it was of no use. The history, antecedents, occupation, habits, and financial condition of every male person in the village was secured, and where any person was found who might have, by the remotest possibility, been connected with the affair, he was made to give a thorough account of himself. But at last this course utterly failed to develop anything material to the case, and I found myself balked in every direction.

One day, while sitting in my private office, puzzling my brain over the matter, and going through and through my operative's reports from beginning to end, with the vain hope of picking out of it all some slight thread upon which to hang even a theory of the robbery, I came to this sentence in one of the reports:

“Mr. Emery is ceaseless in his efforts to assist me, but seems to be very much opposed to my going so hard upon some of the people of the village, as he constantly insists that it was done by professional robbers from a distance.”

In the mood I then was, my mind continually reverted to this. Why was Mr. Emery so solicitous about his fellow-townsmen while there remained the barest chance of the robbers being found among them? And why did Mr. Emery desire to constantly impress my operative with the idea that the robbery was done by professional robbers from a distance?

Pass this paragraph as often as I might, I always came around to it, stopped at it, and began asking myself these questions about it. I could not rid myself of the feeling, the longer I studied over it, that the impression was gradually but surely becoming fixed in my mind that there was behind all this a motive,

Now what was that motive?

I felt that the suspicion which was gradually creeping into my mind was unjust to Mr. Emery; but the line of investigation it suggested, and which I now determined upon, was the *dernier ressort*.

I therefore immediately instructed my operative to continue his investigations as zealously as ever, but to at once devote more attention to noting every act and expression, as well as the

manner and bearing of Mr. Emery, without in the slightest degree betraying to the deputy treasurer his double duty.

The result of this was, that in a few days I had before me reports which fully justified the course taken.

Emery seemed to be worried and anxious, and to relax his interest in endeavoring to track the robbers. There was a great load of some kind upon his mind. He appeared to have relapsed into a listless condition, from which any newly-proposed plan by my operative would awaken him into a state of genuine nervousness and excitement, and it soon came to be his half-expressed desire that the operation should be abandoned.

At this point I decided to further test my new theory of the robbery.

I arranged that an anonymous communication should be forwarded to the place from Dubuque, intimating that two suspicious characters could be found at a certain designated place in that city, whom the writer had reason to believe were the two persons that had committed the robbery. The descriptions sent tallied exactly with those given of the robbers by the deputy treasurer himself; and accordingly my operative and Mr. Emery set out for Dubuque to endeavor to secure an identification of the suspected parties.

But my operative found it hard work to even get him away from home. He protested that he had no faith in anonymous letters, and would wager any amount that it would all prove a fool's errand; and although he finally consented to make the trip, nearly every remark made by him concerning the matter tended to show that Mr. Emery knew as well as I did that no robbers of his treasury were to be found in Dubuque.

I had instructed operative Hanlon to *insist* both that the parties were to be found, and that, if there was anything like an excuse for doing so, he should arrest the men and take them back with him. When this was said pretty forcibly and decidedly, Emery seemed to be utterly at a loss for an opinion; but finally, as if overwhelmed by the possible complications which such a course might involve, very hotly urged the injustice of such a step; and finally, just before reaching the city, came out flatly, and said that he had been thinking the matter over, and had come to the conclusion that, if the real robbers were brought before him, it was very doubtful whether he would be able to identify them at all!

All of this and much other, tending to show a *guilty knowledge* of the robbery on Emery's part, and a great anxiety to be rid of the whole matter, was telegraphed me from Dubuque; and I instantly decided to arrange a ruse by which Emery could be brought right into my office, where I could watch him, converse with him, perhaps play upon him a little, but, at all events, where I might be able to form a better judgment of the man, and conclude whether he was in any way connected with this affair, which, in looking at it from any standpoint, I could not but regard as very mysterious.

I could scarcely imagine *what* connection Emery had with the matter. I confess that I *suspected* he had robbed himself. But how were the horrible wounds that had nearly caused his death to be accounted for?

Surely no sane man in Emery's position in life would cut his hand nearly off, stab himself a half dozen times most desperately over and about the heart, and lay open his skull as a fearful sabre stroke would do!

I could hardly imagine any solution to the mystery. Possibly he had not been guilty of the actual robbery, but perhaps it had been done by persons who had since approached him, and represented to him that they were too shrewd to be punished, and, having convinced him of this, for a liberal share of the stolen funds, secured from him a pledge that he would prevent, as far as possible, the efforts which were being made for their capture.

In any event, I had decided that Mr. Emery *was guilty of something!*

I therefore at once telegraphed operative Hanlon, at Dubuque, that the parties he had expected there had got an inkling that their whereabouts had been discovered, had fled to this city; that I had had them arrested, and was now detaining them; and directing him to leave there at once for Chicago with Mr. Emery, whose presence would be absolutely required.

This done, I set about preparing matters at my office so as to give color to the genuineness of the arrest when Mr. Emery arrived.

I selected two stalwart men from among my force, and, by change in dress and sundry other little manoeuvres, made them answer the description of the supposed burglars who had robbed and nearly murdered Mr. Emery. They were heavily ironed and strongly guarded, and certainly, under the circumstances, presented a very hard and desperate appearance.

The next morning operative Hanlon and Mr. Emery arrived in Chicago.

The very moment I set my eyes upon the man I knew him to be guilty.

He was a gentleman of fine appearance naturally, but in every movement of his person, in every feature of his face, in every changing tone of his voice, in every startled look from his downcast eyes as they met my own, there was as strong an evidence of guilt as I ever looked upon, and as true a proof that Emery was the criminal as though he had been a robber, had robbed and half-murdered another man, and come into my office under arrest rather than as a guest.

I saw all this at once, and endeavored to reassure him with the belief that we had at last captured the right parties.

He hoped so, he said; and this was all that could be got out of him.

Soon we proceeded to the apartment where the pretended desperate criminals were guarded.

They played their parts well, and made every possible apparent effort, without overdoing the matter, to prevent recognition. Emery was white as a ghost when he was brought before them. He seemed at an utter loss of knowledge how to act, but finally ventured to say that, while he might have seen them, he could not swear to their being the parties.

Returning to my private office, I invited Mr. Emery to a seat, directed the door to be closed, and, seating myself before him, remarked pleasantly:

“Mr. Emery, we are having pretty hard luck in this matter?”

“Very!” he replied, with a dry throat and a good deal of huskiness in it.

“What would you say, Mr. Emery,” I remarked, with a meaning smile, “if I should tell you that, although you fail to identify the parties under arrest here, I now have the perpetrator of this crime within my office.”

His face grew livid and white by turns, and his eyes seemed starting from their sockets.

“Yes,” I continued, with great severity; “and what would you say if I would show you the man in this very room?”

“Where? where?” he gasped, giving a startled look in every direction.

“There! there! See him! Look at him!” I almost shouted, turning him at one motion in the revolving chair where he sat, and bringing the poor fellow squarely in front of a huge pier-glass, and then forced him squarely upon his feet against it by main strength.

I never saw a more ghastly face than that of this self-robber’s.

He sank into his seat and gasped:

“For God’s sake, Mr. Pinkerton, you don’t mean—”

“You *know* what I mean, Emery. You *know* it! Now out with the truth, like a man!”

There is but little more to tell. Emery now *knew* that I *knew* he committed the robbery, and the poor man went right at it, confessing the whole matter in a few minutes.

It was to the effect that he had no need for the money, was wealthy and beyond any possible want for life, but, being there in the office, shut up with so large a sum of money so long, he had first thought of the ease with which *he* might be robbed; then, revolving this in his mind so frequently, he finally conceived the idea of robbing himself. At last this became a sort of all-absorbing idea with him, which he could not by any possibility shake off, until actually, to give himself relief from it, he stole the money, hid it under the side-walk in front of the office, broke up the office furniture, and scattered papers and things, so as to give an evidence of a struggle,

and at last inflicted upon himself the terrible wounds from which he had nearly died in order to give color to the story he was obliged to tell of being assaulted.

But the saddest part remains to be told. Emery was put in charge of the same operative, and returned to Iowa a prisoner, where he had left three days before a respectable citizen and a trusted officer. The money was all found just where Emery had said it was hidden. But the shame and disgrace of it all was more than the deluded man could sustain, and the second day after his arrival home he ended all his troubles by committing suicide; this tragedy terminating one of the strangest incidents of my detective career.

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