

The Fellow Clerks

A large and fashionable jewelry store had been invaded and pillaged by burglars. The discovery of the fact in the early morning was the signal, as is so usual in like cases, for a general gathering of neighbors, friends and fellow tradesmen to learn the nature and extent of the misfortune, and to proffer the expression of sympathy. In this instance there was another class of visitors drawn thither by quite a different motive. The merchant had before that “met with losses” of the character incident to traffic, and had creditors whose fears impelled them to the exercise of a close vigil upon his business circumstances. This misfortune summoned them with alacrity.

The loss of a large portion of his most valuable goods, quickly impressed them with the apprehension that the misfortune great as it was to him, would ultimately [xxxxxx] them. The sympathy that under other circumstances might have been extended to the luckless merchant by his creditors was thereby tinctured with that sentiment of chagrin that springs from the realization of losses that uncharitable selfishness supposes might have been averted:

The lust of creditors, added to the efforts of police espionage to which it gave animus and activity, was speedily busy in seeking to obtain some clue to the apparent mystery that surrounded the burglary. During all the progress of the investigation the suspicious eye of the creditors was directed to the unfortunate merchant, and all their opinions and suggestions were jaundiced, by the belief that the crime of theft was his act, and that the apparent fact of burglary was but the means that he had devised to wrong them.

The investigation showed quite clearly that the burglary had been perpetrated by some person attached to the store.—There were certain evidences, perhaps slight and intangible to those not skilled in the intricacies of crime, that addressed themselves with positiveness of conviction to the judgement of the police officers that the work could have been none other than that of a person who could only, by employment or intimacy, have obtained a knowledge of all the facts that should lead to so successful and peculiar a result.

When at any time during the progress of the investigation suspicion failed to find in the conduct of the merchant a ground upon which to rely to anchor itself, it was by a natural direction, easily turned towards the employees. From the one to the other of these that suspicion was directed, till at length it was concentrated upon two of the clerks with that measure of judgement that gave the assurance of their guilt. The method of the preparation, the character of the property taken, and all the circumstances surrounding the case, showed clearly enough at least to the apprehension of official judgement, that one or both of these clerks and none other could have committed the crime.

It became manifest in the progress of the inquiry that these persons apprehended that the finger of suspicion was directed towards them, and that justice was seeking in their condemnation the development of guilt. Still the pursuers were baffled by the uncertainty as to whether both the parties were guilty, and that if but one was thus guilty, which it was. As the sequel showed, this uncertainty and the effort to solve it, impressed itself upon the belief of one of the parties, and that he acted upon such belief with the best skill that he could summon.

At a time and in a manner suggested by an anonymous note addressed to a police officer, a search was made of the premises within the boarding house occupied by one of the clerks. There

within a bad, seemingly hidden from the severest espionage, was found some of the articles of jewelry, of little bulk, but great value. Other circumstances, if any were needed, aided to augment that conviction of his guilt which this discovery forced upon the judgement with such startling energy.

The accused denied his guilt and all knowledge of the crime. He was seemingly overwhelmed by the accusation, and by the developments that resulted from the search of his room. Had there been those who asserted a doubt of his guilt from the vehemency of his declarations, they would quickly have been subdued into silence by the suggestion that the very extravagance of his amazement furnished the highest evidence of the completeness of his dismay. And when his utter inability to account for the possession of the articles found was confessed all cavil was hushed, and all hypotheses of doubt were brushed away.—The merchant was vindicated in his character, the busy tongue of scandal silenced, the police officers had reached the goal of their efforts and received the public plaudits awarded to their success; another crime had been brought to discovery and the victim was pinioned upon the rack of judicial retribution.

Cast off, as thus he was, from the sympathy of the world, with every tie of friendship sundered that might have linked him to the hope of succor, with no influences of family or wealth to summon those agencies to his relief that so often turn away the current of justice; weak, defenseless, and crushed by the proofs of his guilt, his case awaited but the coming of the appointed time to result in his legal condemnation, and the addition of his name to that fearful record of youth that by the temptation of lucre, have wrecked their lives upon the shoals of crime.

But, in all the poverty of his condition, and the terror of his peril, he yet possessed one friend. That friend was of greater wealth to him in the tirelessness of labor, the sharpness of vigil, the fertility of resource, the warmth of sympathy, the earnestness of zeal, and the sanctity of devotion, than would have been an hundred others. It was his sister.

Through all the vicissitudes of the case, in every peril and amid the darkest hour of the storm, she stood by and clung to him with a tenacity of love and a fidelity of zeal that no opprobrium could shake, nor fear appal. Nor did she thus denote her efforts solely from the spur of consanguinity. She believed him to be innocent. And whether that belief possessed a rational foundation or not, it inspired her with that Heaven born devotion that only woman in purity of her own heart and sincerity of her own purpose is capable of bestowing.

The time of trial was fast approaching. When it came it would be brief. The facts were few and simple, the evidence was direct and conclusive, the deduction from it followed surely on to conviction of guilt, and the prison door was opening to receive its inmate, and shut out the world from one more soul lost to it in the [prediction] of crime.

In vain had the sister attempted to impress any others with even the glimmer of that belief of her brother's innocence, whose perfect fullness had awakened her to such untiring efforts in his behalf. Amid the overshadowing cloud of proof they gave to her appeals only the valueless recognition of sympathy for her misguided zeal. But just upon the eve of the impending trial and extorted from the reluctant magistrate, [xxx] promise of a small measure of aid, [xxxxxxx] darkness, she directed his vision to a gleam of light that fitfully glimmered like an *[ignis] fatuus* in the night. To her it seemed a glowing phantasy that needed but to be watched with the eye of

faith and hope till it should shine forth in the fulness of perfect light. Charity rather than faith responded to her appeal. The favor of the aid she sought was granted. The issue of the first effort made startled the magistrate from the listlessness into which he had fallen. To him it seemed like an hallucination into which his fancy beguiled his judgement. But the more intently he looked at this new and startling feature of the case, the more vividly did his reason invest it with attributes of probability.—Efforts were made to seek farther light upon this discovery, and to those efforts the tireless champion of the accused contributed all her ingenuity and zeal. Step by step was the progress made in their pursuit. Atom was added to atom of the proof that was thus unfolded.—“Trifles light as air” were seized upon to furnish, if possible, any clue that should be of measurable weight. Reason, skill, industry and strategy were all invoked to aid the purpose. Finally the end came. The efforts culminated in success. That small, faint glimmer of light, “no larger than a man’s hand,” upon the broad horizon of speculation, first seen by the watchful sister of the accused, and to which she directed the vision of the others, had now risen to the zenith of the firmament and thence shone forth with the brightness of a noonday sun to shed a flood of light upon the case, and to illumine the pathway of the prisoner from the dungeon of shame to a world of freedom and re-established innocence. All attempts had hitherto failed to support by any circumstance of proof the asseveration of the accused that he was wholly ignorant of the presence of the stolen articles within his bed, or to show how by any other agency than his own they could have been placed there. It seems that if he was innocent, the person most likely to be possessed of any information upon the subject was the domestic female servant of the household. But though she had never been examined as a witness in the case, she had at all times when spoken to upon the subject declared that she knew nothing of it. Her assumed ignorance, coupled with the declarations of all others of the household, had seemed to shut the door against all hope of acquiring any knowledge upon this most vital point. But the vigil eye and the keen seated scrutiny of the prisoner’s sister had ceaselessly been directed to the subject, till at length her watchfulness was rewarded with the recompense of success. She became assured in her conviction that the servant knew much more of the matter than she had thus far disclosed, and that her knowledge possessed the very highest value to the prisoner.

It would perhaps be tiresome in the narrative to recite by what processes and from what sources was first obtained the relief of the domestic’s knowledge in the matter. That relief, based at first upon that shadow evidence that would have addressed itself to such a busy imagination as possessed the sister of the accused, was speedily to be supported by such irrefragable proof that none could deny its force.

The effort made to obtain that proof was successful. A note was addressed to the servant, but without signature, inviting her to meet the writer of it at a designated place in the public street. A covert allusion was made in the note to the subject of a promised reward for her secrecy in the matter of the hidden stolen property. The stratagem succeeded in its purpose. She visited the place at the appointed time, though there was none to meet her there, and though no eyes saw her but that of a wary police officer.

The success of this exploit left but one more, though the most important thing, to be done; that was to extort from her the confession as to who it was that had placed the stolen property within the prisoner’s room, and of which knowledge she had by some means become possessed. The effort to consummate this result was equally successful.

Upon the next morning the servant was startled from her busy household labors by the summons of a police officer. He desired her speedy presence in her sleeping chamber. Thither they went, her anxious inquiry to learn the motive of this sudden irruption, failing to receive an answer till her presence there should have developed the fitting occasion. Then the purpose of the official visit was made known. She denied all knowledge of the matter of the stolen property. The officer demanded the key of her trunk. That depository was quickly opened. And within it was found hidden some articles of jewelry that the officer triumphantly declared to be part of those stolen upon the night of the burglary from the store! Had the sagacity of the servant not been blunted by the amazement and affright of the scene, she might have conjectured that the speed and precision with which the officer directed his discovery of the articles could only have been accounted for upon the hypothesis that he had thus placed them there where he could quickly find them. But no such thought fluttered across the imagination of the servant.

Quickly upon the production of the alleged stolen articles, and before even an exclamation of wonder or ignorance could be uttered, the officer followed up his advantage by making known his con[flat]ion with her appointment and visit on the evening before.

The bolt thus driven by the pursuing avenger, and directed by sagacious boldness, struck its object with its fullest force. The girl, environed by what in her thoughtless affright, seemed to be overwhelming proofs of guilt, and started into the confession of the truth by her fears, avowed her readiness to disclose what she knew.

Her story was brief, pregnant though it was with mighty consequences to him who was waiting the issue in [person], and to that other who superadded to the crime of burglary the greater infamy of having sought to shield his own guilt behind the punishment of an innocent fellow.

The stolen jewelry had been secreted within the bed by the fellow clerk of the prisoner. He had been prompted to this deed of wrong when he saw the gathering conundrum threatening his destruction. [xxx] easy access to the house he had [xxx] observed in passing out by the servant. He had purchased her silence until now, at the last act of the drama that silence had been broken, and by it innocence had been freed from the toils of calumny and danger, and guilt had been summoned to the bar of avenging justice.

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