

A Detective's Story

How He was Convicted and Sent to State Prison

In my profession as a detective I have often been asked if I believed in the virtue of circumstantial evidence. In every instance I have replied in the affirmative. While the profession may make a man hard-hearted and anxious to convict, it is nevertheless a certain fact that a complete chain of circumstantial evidence against a criminal will settle his case sooner than half a dozen respectable witnesses. Lawyers can browbeat and confuse, and the veracity of a witness can be slurred or impeached, but when you strike against a circumstance it is not so easy to step over it or explain it away.

Many years ago, when I was a young man of eighteen, I ran away from my uncle, to whom I was apprenticed. He had a farm near Liverpool, Medina County, O., and he was a man who had not one jot of pity for or mercy on man and animal. His wife lived in mortal fear of him, and a look from him would make children tremble. Our family lived a hundred miles away, and we knew little or nothing of Uncle Jabez. He came out on a visit, seemed to take a liking to me, and gave my father one hundred dollars to apprentice me for three years. I liked farm work, and as Uncle Jabez was on his good behavior while visiting us, I was by no means opposed to the arrangement. No sooner had we arrived at his home than he became a tyrant and slave-driver. I was over-worked, half-fed, scolded and maltreated, and one night, after the promise of a "good licking" in the morning, I tied up my few personal effects, dropped from my chamber window and set out for Cleveland. Uncle Jabez was a man who would demand his pound of flesh and more. If I returned home he would follow on and make me a captive. As soon as he missed me he would raise a great hue and cry over the county, and I felt that my only safe course was to reach some large city and lose myself in the mass.

The farm was twenty-five miles from Cleveland. I could have walked the distance in seven hours, as it was a cool autumn night and the roads were good, but for the first ten miles I did not dare use the highway. Teams were coming and going, and farmers moving about, and I wanted to cover my tracks from Uncle Jabez. With the difficulties in my path, I did not enter Cleveland until about nine o'clock next morning. I had not yet reached the business portion and I was walking in the middle of the street, country fashion, when I made a rich find. In the dust lay three diamond rings, two ladies' watch chains and several charms and locketts. They were scattered about as if they had fallen from some vehicle passing over the road. I picked them up, of course, and there being no one near me I continued on my way. I had never found any thing of value in my life, and I did not know exactly how to proceed. I knew, of course, that I had no right to the property, nor did I have the remotest intention of converting it to my use. The trouble was that I did not know exactly what course to take, being but a young, green boy. At home I would have gone to my father or a neighbor, but under present circumstances I was puzzled. I had heard of policemen, but never saw one. I finally made up my mind to accost the first one I met and ask him what to do.

About four squares beyond where I had found the jewelry I stopped at a German grocery to ask for a drink of water. There was a boy about fourteen years old in the store and he told me to go

around the side way to a pen stock. I was drinking when a dog rushed at me and was so determined to bite me that I had to keep him off with my feet. The German and his wife rushed out and attacked me and as I got out of the gate a policeman came up and seized me. There had been row enough to attract quite a crowd, and all were against me. The officer asked who I was, where I came from, and where I was going. If I had returned him prompt answers he might have let me go, but I did not dare tell him I was a runaway for fear he would return me to Uncle Jabez. I therefore refused to answer him, and he naturally concluded I was a suspicious character, and took me to the station. As I was registered they searched me, and when the jewelry came to light there was great astonishment and rejoicing, and the charge of grand larceny was at once entered against me.

On the night previous a jewelry store on Superior street had been robbed of a large amount of jewelry and the robbers had got away, leaving no clue for the detectives. This was some of the plunder. I told them where I found it, but as I would not tell them who I was, or any thing about myself, my find was declared too thin. Under the same circumstances to-day I would do just as the officers did then. They regarded my greenness as assumed for the occasion, and the newspapers put me down as one of the sharpest and shrewdest thieves in the country. Every inducement was held out to me to give away my confederates, who were supposed to be older men and tougher characters, and my inability to do it was laid to shrewdness and nerve. The only lame point with the detectives was the fact that I was on my way into the city when captured, and that I was showing myself openly and boldly. It was hard to believe that a robber would hang about town with his pockets full of plunder, but they got over this by saying it was a shrewd move on my part to throw them off the scent.

Had I acknowledged my identity, Uncle Jabez would have come on to defend and clear me, but would have also taken me back and thrashed me within an inch of my life. I dreaded him more than State prison, and, therefore, when the trial came on, I had nothing to say, and was sentenced to State prison for three years. I was glad of it. I would be of age when I came out, and as no one would hear of me in the interval, I would have nothing to fear from my tyrant of and uncle.

The fact that I served only four months of my sentence was due to the efforts of one old detective in another case. I had forgotten to tell you that the jeweler and two of the clerks had "fully identified" me as "a person who had been in the store several times just previous to the robbery." The proprietor swore that he sold me a ring for two dollars, and one of the clerks testified on the stand that I stood for half an hour and bartered with him about a silver watch.

"Then you positively swear he is the person?" asked my counsel in each case.

"I do," was the decided answer.

I could have sworn that I was twenty-five miles away at the time, and that I had never stepped foot in Cleveland before the morning of my arrest, but, for reasons I have stated, I made no effort in my own defense. I went off to prison with a comparatively light heart, knowing my own innocence. I had been a convict for four months when, one day, I was called into the warden's office. There were several gentlemen present, and among them I recognized the Cuyahoga County prosecuting attorney and two Cleveland detectives. The prosecutor began by declaring

that I was an innocent man and then asked for my story. Under promise that they would not betray me I gave it to them. It seems that the detective, in working up another case, had fallen upon the jewel robbers and secured most of the plunder. There were three of them, all old hands, and the stuff I found had been lost by them as they drove out of the city. Robbers though they were, they did me a good turn by denying that I had any hand in the affair. Indeed, after the case was opened, the detectives saw that a blunder had been made in arresting me. The gentlemen had come with a pardon from the governor and I returned to Cleveland with them on the promise of employment. To test the value of the people at the jewelry store as witnesses, the detectives took me in there and asked if they had ever seen me before. Four months could not have changed me much, and yet those who have sworn so boldly against me on the stand now denied ever having seen me before.

I have been a detective for years, but that circumstance has been uppermost in my mind when I had a case where the identity of a prisoner was to be sworn to. I have always cautioned my witnesses not to testify unless satisfied beyond all doubt. My caution has several times operated to let a bad man escape the clutches of the law, but that was better than to swear an innocent man's life or liberty away. — *N.Y. Sun*.

Decatur [IL] Daily Republican, December 2, 1887

The Grenada [MS] Gazette, December 3, 1887

Sedalia [MO] Weekly Bazaar, December 27, 1887

The Abbeville [SC] Press and Banner, October 17, 1888