

The Schemer's Trap
From the Stray Papers of a Legal Friend
by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

This story is of my first client; and amid all the successes of later years there is not one that has given me more pleasurable satisfaction than did the success which attended this effort,—that is if I may claim it as an effort, when the result was thrown into my hands from a source least expected.

I had finished my preparatory studies, and been admitted to the bar. This was late in June. For five years I had studied hard—in college and in the law-office—and, as I was not entirely without money, I determined to take a trip to the White Mountains, and spend the season in true recreation. I went up the Hudson; stopped for a time on the shores of Lake Champlain; then crossed Vermont; spent the season at the mountains; and came home by the Atlantic board. Of a boy, in the cars, on the way from Boston to Fall River, I bought a New York paper, in which among the legal items, I read that B. Frank Weaver had been apprehended and indicted for theft—the grand jury having returned a true bill against him—and he was now held for trial.

I was thunderstruck—for a time almost paralyzed.—But—was it *my* Frank Weaver?—Yes. “B. Frank Weaver, a young man lately in the employ of Selden Travers as book-keeper.”—It was my Frank,—my school-mate; my college-mate; my chum; my dearest friend,—an orphan, who had spent his last dollar for his education, and had accepted a place with the merchant as the only opening then available.

My steam-boat ride to New York was not a happy one. I got my breakfast in Courtland street, and then went to the prison. I had tried to hope that there might be some mistake. But no.—I found my own Frank in the felon's cell—pale, wan, and comfortless.

“Tom!” he cried, when he saw and knew me, at the same time grasping my hand with a fervor almost insane,—“Thank God! I have one friend left! You will be my friend, Tom, won't you?”

“To the end,” I said. “Frank, you are not guilty of this thing?”

“Before God—No! Have you thought it possible?”

I assured him I had not. And as I sat down upon the wooden form, and looked upon my friend, I knew that no stain of crime was upon him. And yet, when he had told me his story, I trembled,—not lest he might be guilty; but with fear that he might not be able to prove himself innocent.

“Here it is, in a very few words,” he commenced. “I have been in Mr. Travers' employ almost a year and a half; and you know that my steady aim and purpose has been to save money, that I might be enabled, in time, to study for a profession.”

I knew all this; for Frank and I had boarded at the same house on Charles street, ever since I had begun to read Law in the city,—and I kept my room there still.

“About three months ago Mr. Travers missed a hundred dollars from the safe. This safe is double, built into the rear wall of the private office, and to which only Mr. Travers, his treasurer, and myself have rightful access. There is no need that I should tell you of all the sums missed, nor of the vain searches that were made. Week after week money was taken, and I was the last one upon whom the suspicions of my employer rested. He had reposed great confidence in me; and had more than once hinted that, if I stuck to my post, I might at some time own an interest in his business. I had come to love him, and I know that he regarded me with much esteem.

“Mr. Travers put private marks upon banknotes which were lodged in the safe, and the first few packages thus marked were prepared in my presence. They were notes with printed backs, with a medallion in the centre; and about this medallion, at equal distances, he made four little arrows, with red ink, the barbed heads pointing inward, and just touching the outer circle. Those notes were held in reserve two weeks, at the end of which time they were missing. At length the crash came. One day I found a ten dollar bill in my vest pocket. It was a linen vest which I had not worn for several weeks, and which I had that morning taken from my wardrobe. I could only suppose that I had, at some former time, carelessly put the bill there, and forgotten it. That day, when ready for dinner, I found that I had no small change; so I went to the treasurer’s desk, and got him to give me small bills for the ten dollar note. When I returned from dinner there was commotion in the office. Mr. Travers and his treasurer were there, and with them was the detective who had been employed to hunt up the thief. The ten-dollar note which I had given up for smaller bills *bore upon its back those four red arrows!* Had I been guilty, I might have boldly faced this dark thing; but as it was—coming upon me like a thunder-clap from a clear sky—it utterly bewildered me. I told how I had found the note in my vest-pocket; but my hearers looked dubious.

“What Mr. Travers would have done, had he been left alone, I cannot tell; but the matter had been placed in the hands of the detective, and he proceeded at once to my boarding place, and searched my room; and in the small trunk in which I kept my papers, and trinkets, and other things of a private character, he found not only the greater part of the marked money, but almost four thousand dollars besides!

“If I was bewildered before, I was utterly crushed now. Eight hundred dollars of that money, found by itself, in a pocket-book, was the result of my own saving. Of the five thousand, and over, found hidden away among some old letters, I could only tell that I knew nothing. God knows I had never seen them there before! [”]

“You can guess the rest, Tom. I was arrested; arraigned before the grand jury; a bill of indictment found against me; and—here I am!”

A short pause, and then he told me that that was not the worst. Another was suffering with him. He had loved Elise Travers, the only child of his employer; and they had been

affianced; and her father had not objected to their love. He had not seen her since this dreadful blow, but he was sure she could not believe him guilty.

I asked many questions, and among others,—Did he know of any enemy who could wish to harm him.

“I know of but one person in the world,” he said, “who has shown dislike to me; and that is Mrs. Travers, my employer’s wife.”

“And Elsie’s mother?” I suggested.

“No,” he replied. “Elsie’s mother is dead. This is Mr. Travers’ second wife.”

But still Frank could not think that the woman wished him harm. She had only shown that she did not like the idea of his union with Elsie; she had treated him coolly, but had not been really unkind.

Frank had engaged no lawyer; and he now asked me to help him. He left it with me to secure for him such legal service as I might think necessary.

I left the prison with the faith that Frank Weaver was entirely innocent; and that faith gave me courage. My first move was to see Elsie Travers, and for that purpose I called at her father’s house, on Eleventh street. As fortune would have it, the young lady was alone, and when she had seen my name upon the card, she came into the hall to meet me.

“Mr. McIntosh,” she said, when we had entered the parlor, “you are Frank’s friend? You are the one he had told me of so much?”

I said that I was.

“O! and you will help him! You know he never did it! You know he could not!” And she began to weep.

No wonder Frank had loved that girl. Hers was the true stamp of beauty—the beauty of purity and love—the very soul of truth and sympathy.

I may here confess that I had fixed a suspicion upon Elsie’s step-mother,—perhaps because I could find no other possible lodgment for suspicion,—and in a very guarded manner I led the conversation in that direction, and I finally learned from Elsie that that her step-mother was particularly opposed to her marriage with Frank, because she wished her to marry with a son of her own by a former marriage.

I asked her if her step-mother’s son was in business.

“No,” she said. “He has no business, and no property. His mother lets him have money which she gets from papa. She was poor when papa married her. She once had money, left her by her other husband, but she spent it all.”

Before I could ask any further question, a carriage stopped at the door.

“It is my step-mother,” said Elsie, with a shudder which did not escape me. “Do not tell her that you have seen Frank.—You have come here to seek information.”

In a moment more Mrs. Travers was before me, and Elsie performed the ceremony of introduction. I told her that I had been Mr. Weaver’s friend—that I had on that very morning returned from a visit to the White Mountains—that I had read in the papers of Weaver’s arrest—and that I had come thither to learn the particulars.

Mrs. Travers was all sympathy and condescension. She told me the story of Frank’s crime—how he had been detected—and how shocked she had been. It had been a terrible blow to her.

My soul! how I shuddered in that woman’s presence, and how the sound of her icy voice chilled me! Her face was like white, damp clay,—no heart, no soul, no sympathy within. Never mind what more she said to me. Her tears were such treacherous drops as the crocodile sheds, and her words of sympathy were those of the hypocrite who had had long practice.

When I arose to take my leave, she asked me if I should see Mr. Weaver, to give him her love, and to tell him that he had her prayers.

This was the speech that gave me to know that she could be cruel as well as heartless.

Elsie spoke not in words, but she gave me a look that contained volumes of earnest prayer and supplication.

I might have made a longer story of this; but fate had decided that my work should be very quickly done. Good fortune, luckily, was this time hand-in-hand with the Right.

That very evening I dropped into the store of a friend on Bleeker street; and after he had heard the story of my adventures among the mountains, he went to the desk to help his clerk make up the cash-account. Presently I heard my friend say,—

“I wonder if that was printed on the bill, or done with a pen.”

The clerk replied in favor of the pen; but the other thought the press had done it. I went to the desk, and matter was referred to me. It was a new twenty-dollar bank-note, with a medallion upon the back, around which were *four barbed arrows, in red ink!*

I gave my decision, and then wished to know where the note came from. The clerk laughed as he replied.—

“I can tell you exactly where it came from. It came from your boarding-house.”

I felt a suffocating sensation; but the next words relieved me:

“A servant girl—one Catharine Hickey—passed it here this forenoon.”

I knew of no such girl in our house.

“She came there while you were away,” explained the clerk. And thereupon he gave me a description of the girl.

I gave my friend another bill, and put the one with the four red arrows upon it into my pocket. How came the servant girl in possession of that bill?

When I reached home I summoned my landlady to the parlor, and asked her concerning Catharine Hickey.

“She left me today,” said the lady. “She came very shortly after you went away.”

“Where did she come from?” I asked.

“I think, from Mrs. Travers’.”

“Mrs. Sheldon Travers?”

“Yes. She had a very excellent recommendation from that lady.”

“And she left you of her own accord?”

“Yes.”

“Can you tell me where she is now?”

“She bought a ticket for Albany; and I think she went in the boat this afternoon.”

I told my hostess I would explain when I came back. I could not stop then. But hold! I stopped at the door. My excitement was carrying me away.

“You paid this girl money?”

“Yes.”

“Did you give her a twenty-dollar bill?”

“No, sir,—nothing larger than a five. But Mr. McIntosh—”

I did not stop to hear the rest. I hurried to the railroad station, and at half-past ten was on my way to Albany, upon the express freight-train, where I was safely landed on the following morning. I went to the pier of the New York boats, and found the one last in ready for her return freight. I sought the stewardess, and described to her the person I wished to find. She went with me to see the deck-hands. She remembered the girl very well, but could not tell me more. One of the men, however, who had attended the gang-plank, remembered her, and took me to the baggage-master. This latter individual not only remembered delivering the girl her trunk, but he knew the hackman who had come and taken it away. The hackman was easily found, and he carried me to the house where he had left the trunk and its owner. I judged, from the locality, that the girl was with her friends. I rapped upon the door, and a middle-aged woman answered the summons.

I asked if Miss Hickey was in.

“That’s my name, sir.”

“Miss Catharine Hickey,” I said.

“O, ye mane me cousin, from New York. Indade, sir, an’ she’s jist afther getting’ here.”

She led me to the front room,—a poorly furnished, dirty place—and there sat the object of my search. I knew her the moment I saw her.

“A gintleman as wants to see ye, Kate,” and with this the hostess left,—an act of politeness for which I inwardly thanked her.

“I have just come up from New York,” I said, after I had seated myself.

The girl turned pale as death, and trembled from head to foot. I at once saw with whom I had to deal. Like all of her class she was deeply superstitious, emotional, and easily terrified. I did not allow her to speak, but immediately proceeded.—

“Now look ye, Catharine,—there is no need of trouble—no need of fear on your part—if you only tell me the truth.

“You are Mr. McIntosh?” she said, quiveringly.

“Yes. What made you think so?”

“I saw your picture in the house, and heard Mr. Weaver say so much—”

She stopped, and broke down. The name of my friend had evidently been too much for her.

I saw my course very plainly. I took the marked bank-note from my pocket-book, and showed it to her.

“Catharine Hickey, with the eyes of the Almighty God and the Blessed Savior upon you, tell me where you got that twenty-dollar bill! It was yours,—you paid it away in Bleeker street yesterday forenoon.”

The poor girl gasped and choked.

“Mrs. Travers gave it to you!” I said, “If you would be spared the shame of a prison, tell me the truth.”

“She did, sir!—she did!” And then came tears and sobs, with all sorts of declarations and protestations. Her own safety was now at stake, and the claims of Mrs. Travers were as nothing.

The ice was broken, and the way was clear; and as soon as the girl, under my solemn assurance of personal safety, could sufficiently compose herself, she told her story, which, in brief, amounted to simply this:

She had formerly lived with Mrs. Travers. That lady had hired her to go to the house of Mr. Vandervier, on Charles street, there to help her in a scheme for the separation of Mr. Weaver and Elsie. She had no difficulty in getting work at the new place, and was soon ready to help her old mistress. First she gained entrance to Weaver’s chamber, and then obtained keys that would unlock his trunks and wardrobe. Then Mrs. Travers gave her the money, and told her to hide it in Weaver’s trunk; and she also directed that some should be put into the pockets of garments that he was likely to wear. This money was given to Catharine in various sums, and at different times; but she was directed not to put it into the young man’s trunk until she knew he had worn away a vest in the pocket of which a bank-note had been placed. For her part in the business, if she succeeded in the purpose, the girl was to receive three hundred dollars, and was to leave New York as soon as she had been paid, and go away, at least a hundred miles.

“Can you imagine,” I asked, when she had concluded, “why Mrs. Travers should wish to ruin Frank Weaver?”

“I can guess, sir,” she answered, “that she wished Miss Elsie to marry with her own son.”

I informed Catharine that she must go back to New York with me. She would have refused had she dared; but she knew that her only choice lay between going of her own will, and a pair of handcuffs. However, when I had assured her that she should not be taken into the presence of Mrs. Travers against her wishes, she seemed reconciled to her fate.

We reached New York in the evening, and I drove directly to the Tombs, where I obtained for my companion a very prettily furnished room, in which was a clean and comfortable bed, with a dressing-table and wash-stand. I could not well keep her with me, and I dared not leave her at liberty. She did not dream that she was in prison until after I was gone.

On the following morning I waited upon Mr. Travers, at his house—I preferred to see him there,—and told to him my story. From first to last there was not a shade of doubt in his look. He was horrified—convulsed,—and then rigid as marble. When I concluded he arose and took my hand.

“It is dreadful! dreadful!” he said. He walked away a few steps; then he turned and added, “But it is not so dreadful as that thing would have been which she would have made to appear. Come back here in one hour. You will keep the secret during that time?”

I promised and left.

At the time appointed I returned, and found Mr. Travers calm and collected. I did not know then, but I knew afterwards, that he had passed from a sea of turmoil and unmitigated anxiety to a haven of promised rest. He told me that he did not wish to see Catharine Hickey. His wife had confessed everything. She had herself, during her visits to the store, taken the money from the safe.

“Go,” said he, “and send Catharine back to Albany. Pay her expenses, and bind her to silence through her fears, if you can. I will see the proper officers, and meet you at the prison on the stroke of twelve.”

Catharine Hickey was glad enough to go free; and I so impressed it upon her that a single word of revelation from her lips would lay her open to arrest for the crime she had committed, that I felt sure of secrecy on her part.

At noon I met Mr. Travers, who held an order for Frank Weaver’s release. My chum’s joy and gratitude, when he knew all, it were useless to describe. The merchant said I must accompany them to his house, and receive the thanks of one other who was deeply indebted to me.

“But,” I suggested, “after what has happened, my presence may not be acceptable to—”

“Hush!” he interposed, while a dark shadow swept over his face. “You speak of my wife. She is not there. She is on her way to a small homestead which I own in Essex, and will come back no more.”

So I went with them, and witnessed a scene of joy and bliss that lent a blessing to my spirit for all the coming years.

Ere long Frank and Elsie were married; and immediately thereafter Mr. Travers gave his son-in-law a half interest in his extensive business.

As for your humble servant, he had made a grand opening. Though he could not then make public his professional success in behalf of his first client, he had gained the warm and enduring friendship of Selden Travers, through whose influence he very soon won his way to public favor and confidence. And when a lawyer has gained that much, he must be unworthy the professional name if he cannot win all the rest.

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