

*The Lost Packet;*

or,

*A Dark Possession*

A Story from Real Life

by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

It was drawing towards Christmas time, and our young friend, Harry Wentworth, was very busy—busy in behalf of his employers, and busy in his own behalf—for it had been arranged that on Christmas day he and Emma Dwight should be made man and wife. O! how ardent and inspiring were their anticipations. They had loved long, and had loved truly and understandingly. They had looked the Problem of Life straight in the face, resolved to lay their plans in accordance with the necessities which might be revealed to them.

Harry Wentworth was a young man of three-and-twenty—one of Nature's noblemen, so those called him who thought they knew him best—active, enterprising, and possessed of intelligence far above the average; and not least of his good qualities was the unswerving, untiring, and heartfelt zeal and faith with which he had appeared to serve his employers; for, be it known, he was employed as head bookkeeper and confidential clerk of a heavy importing house in the city. He was the only child of a widow, who had looked to him for love and care since he had been old enough and strong enough to earn the wherewith for her support, and of that mother's love we will not speak. It was among the things sacred.

Of Emma Dwight we will only say, she was the daughter of a Judge of the Supreme Court of the Commonwealth; a true-hearted, bright-faced, trustful girl, loving her Harry with all her strength of heart and soul. She was her mother's child, in quality of spirit and general disposition—mild, unassuming, gentle and charitable. The father was of sterner stuff—an upright, religious man, but not so apt to smile as were his wife and daughter.

It was near the Christmas time, and in the house where Harry was engaged the hands were very busy. Country traders were buying for the holidays, and a large share of the custom of those who dealt in the class of goods carried by the concern came to that place. One day the regular messenger had been sent upon an important mission to the Custom House, and as it drew near the time for the banks to close, Harry bethought him that if he did not make haste in some other way, he would miss the opportunity of reaching the paying-teller of the bank. He had upon his desk, or in his possession, the company's check for thirty thousand dollars; and this check was to be cashed in bank notes for the use of another firm, the senior partner of which was brother of the senior of Harry's firm. This other firm was engaged in the wool business, and the money was for the use of purchasing agents who were to travel through three or four States of the Union.

The messenger had taken the bank-book and cash for deposit on his way to the Custom House, so that Harry had only the check to attend to. Having looked at the clock, and seen the brief space of time that was his, and having looked towards the street door and seen that no messenger was coming, he prepared to go upon the errand himself. He had on an old office-coat, worn, and ink-stained; but he would not stop to exchange it. The capacious overcoat would cover such imperfection, and having donned the latter garment, he hurried away.

It was past two when Harry reached the bank. The wicket of the receiving-teller was closed, and the paying-teller was just in the act of closing his; but when he saw the new-comer, heated and puffing with exertion, he slid it open again, and asked what was wanted. Harry stated the circumstances, and produced the check. The teller turned to the bookkeeper, at his private desk, and having found that he could enter the new item without trouble, he turned again to the customer, and, with a bland smile, informed him that he could have the money. Said he:

“We don’t make a practice of doing this thing, but I don’t think the officers would care to disappoint such customers as are your folks when it could be avoided.”

Then he smoothed out the check before him, and counted out the money in such denominations of notes as the applicant had suggested would be convenient—fives, tens, and twenties, and fifties, mostly—there were ten one-hundred dollar notes, ten five-hundred, and two notes of one thousand each. Harry ran it over after him, and then asked for an envelope in which to put it. The teller gave him an envelope of strong Manilla paper, such as the bank used for that same purpose. The notes—a goodly packet—were put carefully in, and the envelope sealed, after which Harry returned to his store.

Once more at his post, Harry Wentworth put away his overcoat, and then went to his desk, and put his hand into his pocket for the precious envelope—into the inner breast-pocket of his coat on the left side. The pocket was empty! He felt in other pockets—ran to his overcoat, and went through the pocket of that—but—the packet of bank-notes was gone!

O! he had forgotten his old office-coat—had not once thought that the old working-sacque was upon him, with its breast pocket torn more than half way! Aye—the pocket—or the *hole*—into which he had put his sealed packet was not only minus a bottom seam, but full one half the lower part of the pocket was torn away!

Once more Harry sprang into his overcoat, and away over the route by which he had come from the bank—his eyes fixed upon the sidewalk, and in the gutter—every possible space, nook corner, and gully, looked upon—but no packet such as he had lost. Up the stairs of the bank—the banking-rooms were on the second floor—he went slowly peering into every corner—and thus he reached the bank counter empty-handed. The people of the bank were just coming out of the Directors’ room, where they had been making up the accounts [o]f the day, when Harry entered. He saw the paying-teller, and told him of his loss.

“In mercy’s name! Can you give me comfort?”

The teller was at first like a man thunder-struck; then he shook his head sorrowfully. He could give no comfort. And if he could not, of course none of the others could; for he had been the last one in the banking-house.

With a heart heavy and sad—a heart sunken into an agony such as he had never before even dreamed of—Harry returned to his store, looking again on the way, and inquiring of men whose faces encouraged him—but his looking and his inquiries were in vain. At the store he went into the private office of the senior, and to that individual told the story of his mishap. The first effect upon the merchant, who was a man of quick and tender sympathies, was made by the outbursting grief and agony of his favorite clerk; and when he had heard the whole story, and had been shown the tattered fragment of a pocket, he said cheerily:

“Well, well, my boy, don’t be broken-hearted. We’ll make a general movement for the missing packet at once, and I guess we’ll find it. Do you go directly to the Chief of Police, and set him at work first. I will see the printer. Ah! I have great faith in Printer’s Ink, Harry! It is one of the seven mighty powers of the age in which we live.”

And so the search commenced; and it was continued until Christmas Day, without effect. Not a clew—not a sign—not a thing of any description had been discovered. It was as though the money never had been, or else—

Ah! poor Harry Wentworth was to know, soon enough, *what else* people thought *might have been!* He discovered the cloud first at the home of his beloved. He found her, on the evening of the second day before Christmas, with red and swollen eyes, and sobbing as though her heart would break. In terror he asked her what had happened.

“O, Harry! Harry! Ask papa! Ask papa! I cannot speak!”

The youth was thunderstruck. The truth burst upon him in that moment for the first time. The thought that it could ever enter into the mind of one who had been his true friend that HE—Harry Wentworth—could do so wicked a thing had never come to him, even by so much as a shadow. He did not see Judge Dwight on that evening.

On the following morning—the morning of the day before Christmas—when Harry entered the counting-room, his senior employer called him into the private office, and pointed him to a seat. The old man’s face was not hard, but sad and stern, as though he had put on the sternness for the occasion.

“Harry, I want you to tell me the truth—the simple, straightforward truth—and nothing else. Have you, within the last two or three months, purchased, and *paid for*, a house in the upper part of the city?”

The young man started, and gasped for breath. The accusation was plainly made in those words! He had bought the house, and paid for it. In a moment he had turned pale as death, and for that single moment every atom of strength seemed to forsake him.

“Harry Wentworth!” pursued the merchant, with a terrible look, “where did you get the seven thousand dollars you paid, in cash, for that house?”

Poor Harry! He must tell the only thing he had ever done of which he could feel in any degree ashamed—must tell of the only dollar he had ever gained which he had not legitimately earned. During the summer last past he had been induced by a friend, who was then just ready to start for Cuba, to invest ten dollars for a package of tickets in one of the Havana lotteries. He had bought the tickets, and had drawn a prize of six thousand dollars. The other thousand—and considerably more than that—he had saved from his salary. He had never spoken of the lottery tickets, nor of the prize, because he had felt that the operation was not such as he would wish to recommend. Still, he had tried to flatter himself that a great portion of the wealth of the day was gained in a way no better,—that the thousand-and-one bargains of almost every day, on the street, and at the Brokers’ Board, were of the same character. He had told himself this, and had used the money.

And this story he told to his employer—the story of the lottery-ticket, the prize, and of the travail of his spirit.

“Where is the man who bought the tickets for you?”

Harry thought he had gone from Havana to Brazil.

“He sent to me by mail, sir, and wrote that he should go to South America before returning home.”

“Ah!” said the old man, sadly, and solemnly shaking his head, “I should not blame you for having bought a lottery-ticket. I am sorry to say, that much of the business of the day is done upon a basis no better. Only yesterday I purchased six tickets in six different lotteries to be drawn by religious and benevolent societies tomorrow evening. It is not that, Harry. I wish you could prove to me that it had been no worse!”

Harry Wentworth arose to his feet, and laid his hand upon the merchant’s shoulder.

“Mr. Lempierre, do you mean to tell me—that—that you believe I could have kept for myself that packet of money which I said I had lost?”

The merchant was certainly staggered by the youth's look, and by the heart-sent, fervent, honest speech. But the cloud returned upon his face, and with another shake of the head, he said:

“Harry, I am not alone. The people at the bank declare it must have been so. Look at it for yourself: Think of the time of day—”

“Aye,” cried Harry, breaking in upon him, “*think of that thing!—the time of the day!* Just the time when business men were almost entirely alone on the street, and when they were hurrying homeward, or office-ward, as swiftly as possible,—their banking-business done, and their thoughts given to dinner and luncheon. None were going *to* the banks, but all were going the other way; and how many of them were messengers—long used to feasting their eyes upon wealth which they could not possess, but which they *would* possess if the opportunity should ever offer. Think of it, sir, and say if there might not have been many ways in which that packet could have been picked up and kept. And think of another thing: The very character of the packet—the way in which it was made up—so large a sum, in notes of such small denominations—would convince any person, at all versed in bank affairs, that the numbers of those notes had not been registered; so the money might be used at any time, and in any place, without fear of detection. Why, sir,—one half that money might have been deposited in that same bank on the very next day, and the receiving teller could not have sworn that a note of it had been paid out on your check.”

Still the merchant was not convinced. A story of excuse was very easy to frame, he said; and no reliance could be placed upon unsupported testimony of that description.

On the evening of that day Harry saw Judge Dwight, and that man sternly forbade the youth to visit his daughter more. He could not listen.—He had seen and heard too much of excuse and special pleading by guilty parties to be influenced by anything which did not clearly *disprove* the thing alleged. No, no,—he would not listen. He was stern and harsh, and Harry Wentworth must consider the door of his house as closed to him thenceforth.

But Harry met Emma in the hall as he went out. She fell upon his bosom, and wept and moaned piteously. Her faith in her lover was not shaken; and when he had told her that he would not rest until the cloud had been lifted from his name and fame, she told him she would wait for the time.

“O, Harry! take my love with you, and let my faith in your goodness give you strength!”

“It shall, darling! I know the truth will appear by and by. I feel it, deep down in my heart of heart, that the cloud shall not always rest upon me. Pray for me, dear one! and I will both pray and work!”

Then Harry Wentworth went home to the one being on earth who KNEW him innocent and good—his MOTHER! and there he found rest!

Christmas Day dawned—the day which had been set for his wedding! His new house, bought and paid for, and mostly furnished, he could not move into, and he let a friend have it for a season, at a nominal rent. He did not wait to be discharged from the employment of those whom he had served so long; he went to the store on the morning after Christmas, and calling the three partners into the office, he told them that he would take himself out of their way.

“I do not think,” he said, “that you intend to prosecute me, because, first,—you are not assured in your own minds that I did the dreadful wrong of which I have been suspected; and, second, the crime would be difficult to prove against me. But, sirs, know that I will not rest until this thing is made clear; for I am firm in the faith that I am not to go to my grave with the stain upon me.”

It is doubtful if they would have turned him away of their own accord; and yet his presence would have been a source of annoyance, from the fact that the second member of the firm absolutely believed in his guilt, and would have pushed him to the law had not the other two objected.

A remark made by Mr. Lempierre dwelt upon Harry’s mind: “*The power of Printer’s ink,*” and he did not fail to make use of it. He drew up a statement of his case, giving all the particulars—the date—the streets through which he passed, to and from the bank, on that day of misfortune,—and, in short, every point that could tell,—and at the end he begged the publishers who could feel for him, and who would help a suffering fellow-creature—helping the right at the same time—should copy. Even English or French papers might help him, if they would. This he carried to the publisher of his own favorite daily, and the man took the article as a favor, and would listen to no mention of payment.

The article was printed, and very soon Harry knew that it had been extensively copied. At the end of the month, or little more, Harry met one of the reporters of his daily paper, who informed him that at least two London dailies, and one of Liverpool, had copied his article.

The winter passed—a cold, cheerless winter without, and, to Harry Wentworth, cold and very near to cheerless within! It was very hard thus to live. He could not fail to see that the finger of suspicion was pointed at him; and more than once he heard, as he passed certain people who had once been proud to be classed among his friends, such words as these:—“Poor fellow! I pity him, anyhow!” or,—“Ah! see: It wears one him, don’t it? Well, I don’t wonder!” And once he heard,—“Bah! if I was in his place, I’d either clear out and make my money do me some good, or else I’d own up.”

During these dark months he did not see Emma once; but he had a precious line from her that gave him courage and strength. She was as true as refined gold.

The spring opened, and one day in early May Harry met Loren Barnett, the paying-teller of the M—— Bank—met him on the street—looking pale, thin, and wretched. He had at first seemed

inclined to avoid the youth, but when he found he could not, he met him with seeming frankness and pleasure.

“You are looking poorly, Mr. Barnett. Have you been sick?”

So spoke Harry, after the opening salutations, and a few casual remarks.

“I’ve had a bad turn,” answered the teller, languidly. “In fact, I’ve got sort of run down. The confinement of the bank is too much for me. I think of going into the country—on to a farm—in the course of a few months. Come up this summer, and I’ll give you some trouting. There are splendid streams in the neighborhood of my farm.”

“O,—you own a farm?”

“Yes,—I’ve owned one for some time.” And with this he turned away.

Two things surprised Harry: First,—That any man holding the office of paying-teller should talk of the *confinement* of the business. And second,—That a man possessing such health and vigor as Loren Barnett had possessed six months before, could have become so reduced by any amount of legitimate labor. And these thoughts were not quick to leave the mind that had conceived them.

It was on Monday that Harry met Barnett on the street. On the following Wednesday he received a note from Mr. Lempierre, the chief sentence of which was,—“Be at my private room at nine o’clock to-morrow morning. Fail not!”

And Harry went. On entering the little private sanctum he found there the three members of the firm, and with them a man whom he at first took for an utter stranger, but whose countenance became familiar when he had been introduced, as Mr. George Sefton, of London, England; and our hero then remembered of having met him, and spoken with him, at a large city carpet-store, a year or so previously. He was the son of a heavy carpet manufacturer of England, and acting as American agent.

“Come, come,” cried Lempierre, as soon as Harry had taken the only spare seat at hand; “we have no time to waste. Harry, my boy, your PRINTER’S INK has served you, after all. But I won’t anticipate. Let Sefton tell his story. We had heard it, Hal, so he may tell it to you as he pleases.”

“It is very simple,” said the young Englishman, turning to Harry. “Some time in February last—towards the last of the month—I took up a copy of a daily newspaper, and found therein the article which you had written, and caused to be printed; and you may imagine my feelings when the fact came home to me that I, very likely, was the one man in the world—*and the only one*—for whose eye it had been written. Ah! you start. Let me tell you—it is very simple, and can be told in few words:

“On the twentieth day of last December, in the afternoon, I was on my way, on foot, to the steamer in which I was to take passage for England. I had only an hour of my own, and you can imagine that time for me to waste was not then. I was walking rapidly, with my coat collar turned up, and my hat pulled down, because a strong east wind set up the street, and struck me in the face. Still, I kept my eyes open before me, and by and by I saw you come out upon the sidewalk from the M—— Bank, and as I looked, I thought I saw something drop at your feet—something of a bright yellow color, and glistening in the light. You turned down a street to the left—your own left—before I met you, and when I had reached the spot where I had seen the object fall, I found an envelope, of bright Manilla paper, evidently filled with bank-notes, and upon the face of the envelope was the imprint of the bank. Had my time been my own, I should have followed you, but as I had none to spare, I ran up into the bank and found the paying-teller alone at his desk, *and alone in the room!* I showed him the envelope, and asked him if he recognized it. ‘Certainly,’ he said, ‘I gave it not five minutes ago, to Mr. Wentworth, for Lempierre and Company.’

“Then I told the teller how I had seen you drop it, and how my need to reach the steamer prevented me from following you. Ah! I can remember now how eagerly—how heartlessly—he asked me if I was going to Europe! and then how earnestly he protested his gratitude to me in your behalf; and how he offered to give me any sum which I might be pleased to claim for my trouble, feeling warranted in the assurance that either you or your employers would cheerfully make it up. But you can imagine how I treated that. I only got the man’s name—Loren Barnett—and then, having been assured that the packet should be faithfully delivered, I went my way.

“And that was the last, until I saw your appeal in the paper. You can imagine my surprise. I saw it all in an instant: The temptation had been too strong for the teller’s honesty. He had said to himself—‘That man is going to Europe. That may be the last of him in this country. Here are thirty thousand dollars—to me a fortune! Ah! how easily I can hold on to it!’ So he thought, and so he did; and—so he might have done to the end, but for your appeal in the paper. I have not put myself out at all in anything that I have done. I was arranging for another visit to the United States when I saw the article, and the most I did was to expedite matters a little. And now, gentlemen, you have the matter in your hands. Call upon me as you may feel to need my assistance.”

Mr. Lempierre looked at his watch. It was just half-past nine. The bank would open at ten for business; and if they should go thither at once they would be likely to find the working force at their posts.

Only three went to the bank—Mr. Lempierre, Mr. Sefton, and Harry Wentworth. Arrived at the outer room of the institution they knocked at the door of the private room of the cashier, whom they found in. Mr. Lempierre was at once welcome, as were any whom he might bring; so the three entered and were seated.



“Is Mr. Barnett in?” asked the merchant.

The cashier, with a swift glance at Harry, and another at the stranger, seemed to comprehend. A tremor shook his frame, and his breathe came with evident labor.

“Yes,” he said, in a whisper. “And this is his last day with us. He is instructing his successor.”

“Will you call him in?”

The cashier arose and opened the door communicating with the banking-room, and called Mr. Barnett’s name, and added,—“Will you step this way?”

Barnett came quickly. He had entered the room before looking to see whom he was to meet. He saw the old merchant, and then saw Harry Wentworth, and then he saw another face. There was a moment’s hesitation—a start—a flash of light upon his countenance as the recognition came to him, and then, with a gasping groan, he tottered back against the wall, and stared upon the Englishman with deadly terror and affright.

“Oh, Loren Barnett,” spoke Mr. Lempierre, “what have you done? I would not have believed it possible. The taking of my money was as nothing compared with the deadly sin of murder! Aye,—the murder of a young and hopeful reputation! Loren Barnett, what reparation can you make?”

Let us not attempt to picture the scene. It was dreadful. The wretch went down upon his knees and begged for mercy. The money he had withheld—stolen—aye, ten thousand times worse than stolen—had been a curse to him, and only a curse. From the moment that he had put that packet away next to his bosom, resolved to keep it as his own, and to allow another to suffer for the crime—from that moment he had known no such thing as peace—had known no joy, no gladness—and not a natural smile had appeared upon his waning, fading face! Those who saw and understood would not punish him more. He had not spent the money—or, he was able to make up the amount, and when that had been done, he was suffered to depart to his far-away country home, there to drag out a weary existence, burdened by the memory of one deed that was sufficient to make dark and cheerless his pathway to the silent shore.

Need we tell of the result to Harry Wentworth? Need we tell how the old friends came flocking back, and how they all declared they had never believed him guilty?

But what cared he so long as the stern judge, of his own free will, sought him out, and, with warm and generous impulse of love and good-will, asked his forgiveness, and led him, like a son of his choice, back to the side of his once more smiling and happy daughter?

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