

Circumstantial Evidence

“A hundred-dollar bill has been removed from this pile of money, since I left it half an hour ago,” said the cashier of a well-known bank, as he returned to his desk, after a short absence. “Who has been in here?”

“No one, so far as I have noticed, except Mr. Lyster and myself,” said Launcelot Jennings, the bookkeeper, of whom the inquiry was made.

“Very strange,” said the cashier, in a disturbed tone. “There were certainly nine thousand three hundred and twenty dollars in that pile—eighteen five hundreds and three one hundreds, besides the smaller bills, and I put them under a paper weight just before going out. One of those hundreds has been removed by someone. Where is Mr. Lyster?”

“Gone out on some business, I believe,” answered Jennings. “Here he comes, though.[”]

“I have missed a hundred-dollar bill, Mr. Lyster, from a pile I left here on my desk,” said the cashier, addressing the newcomer.

“Perhaps you made a mistake in counting the money,” suggested Lyster in a quiet and unconcerned tone.

“There was no mistake,” asserted the cashier, positively. “That bill was here when I left, and it is not here now.”

“And who do you suppose has removed it?” said the young men, simultaneously, and with some spirit.

“Are you both certain that no one else has been here?” said the cashier.

“George Rector was in here a few moments while Launcelot was out,” answered Lyster, after a moment’s reflection.

“While I was in the back office, looking for an old ledger, I suppose,” said the bookkeeper. “But Mr. Rector has not interfered with the money?”

“Of course not,” rejoined Lyster. “I would as soon suspect myself.”

George Rector was a son of the president of the bank, and although not enjoying an enviable reputation in all respects, had never been suspected of downright stealing. He spent money freely, and in ways not always honorable; but the money thus wasted was supplied by an over-indulgent father.

“I believe Mr. Rector is now in the back office,” said Lyster, presently.

“Call him,” directed the cashier. “The disappearance of that money causes me an unpleasant feeling.”

“Mr. Rector,” said the cashier, looking the young man in the face, as he sauntered carelessly in, “a hundred-dollar bill has disappeared in some mysterious way from a pile of money left here on my desk a short time ago. It is a very unpleasant matter to speak of; the amount is too small to be of any moment, but it was certainly removed by someone during my absence.[”]

“Do you imagine, sir, that *I* have taken your money?” said young Rector, with a tone and look of defiant scorn.

“I have made no specific charges against anyone,” replied Mr. Sanderson. “One of the hundred-dollar bills, as I noticed particularly at the time, had a blood-stain upon it; and that bill is gone, which shows that I could not have been mistaken in counting the money in the first instance.”

“Open your pockets, boys, and let us see who has the blood-stained bill,” said young Rector, at the same time throwing out the contents of his pockets. Jennings and Lyster followed his example, while the cashier, looking still more confused and bewildered, remarked:

“Well, well, gentlemen, perhaps we may as well say no more about the money; and yet I would freely give a thousand dollars from my own pocket for a solution to the mystery.”

“Hold on!” said Rector, with a dry, careless laugh; “the search has not yet been completed. Here is Jennings’ overcoat,” at the same time removing the garment from the hook on which it hung, “Perhaps we may find it here.”

“If you do,” said the owner of the coat, “I will put five hundred with it.”

“You have risked nothing by that offer,” said Rector, as he opened and shook the pockets. “But hold on! Here is a letter written by you, sealed up, and ready to go. Perhaps the bill is in it.”

“That letter is to my mother,” said Jennings, with a slight start, [“]and was not sealed when I put it in my pocket, for I was intending to enclose one of my photographs. There is no money in it whatever. Open it and see if you can find any there.”

“It is sealed now, at all events, and there is certainly a bill in it,” said Rector, as he opened the envelope and drew out the missing note.

“Pass it to me,” said Mr. Sanderson. “What does this mean, Mr. Jennings?” he asked, confronting the astonished bookkeeper.

“I do not know, sir,” answered the young man, very pale, but with a firm, straightforward look.

“That is no answer,” said Mr. Sanderson, coldly; then, turning to the others, he added: “I take the responsibility of charging Launcelot Jennings with the theft of this hundred-dollar note.”

“The bill was not in that letter when I put it in my pocket, nor was it placed there through any agency of mine!” protested Jennings, pale with anger, and trembling with excitement.

“It was in the letter when opened by me,” said George Rector. “To that I am ready to swear!”

A messenger, having been called by the cashier, was about to be sent for an officer, when Mr. James Rector, president of the bank, came in. He was one of those men who never take a step in any direction until they have considered the consequences likely to result.

Having heard all the facts, so far as known, he said quietly:

“I am glad I came in at this moment. The bank has lost nothing thus far by that singular occurrence, while ten such notes, or even fifty, would not atone for the mischief that would result from permitting one of our employes to be arrested on the charge of theft.”

Then, after consulting for a few moments privately with the cashier, he added:

“It seems best, young gentlemen, that nothing more should be said in regard to this matter until after the meeting of the board, to be called tomorrow. With regard to you, Mr. Jennings, we shall hope to see you at your desk as usual tomorrow morning.” tomorrow

“I shall be here tomorrow, Mr. Rector,” said the young man, with dignity, “but shall not remain unless relieved from suspicion of any wrong act in connection with this affair.”

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“I do not think, young man, that you can afford to be too confident of coming out of this trouble so easily. There is a mystery in regard to the matter, the explanation of which would seem to devolve upon you. You have not thus far suggested how the bill could have got into a letter that was into your pocket without any agency of yours,” remarked Mr. Rector.

“I can only declare my innocence, and that I am the unfortunate victim of circumstantial evidence,” said Jennings, in a firm but despondent tone.

The cashier and the young man were privately and separately called before the board of trustees, and rigidly questioned; but no information was elicited beyond what had already been given.

The president declined to express any opinion as to what ought to be done in the case; and a delicate regard for his feelings, aided by the consideration that he owned more than half the stock, prompted the other members of the board to refrain from pressing him to say more than he felt disposed to.

“You have leave to resign at your earliest convenience,” was the notice that Launcelot Jennings found on his desk the morning after the meeting of the board.

To vindicate his reputation was impossible, for no vindication was demanded.

He sat for a few moments, feeling as if a death-stroke had fallen upon him, with his head resting on his hand; th[e]n passing the note to the cashier, he said in a choking voice:

“My absence from the bank from this moment and forever will, I suppose, be all the resignation required.”

The cashier detained him for a moment to hand him what salary remained due, and then bidding his companions an earnest and agitated farewell, passed out of the office and building.

Of his mother’s belief in his innocence he felt assured, but there was another for whose opinion he cared even more, and to whom he paid his accustomed visit that evening.

But his unknown evil genius had been there before him, and his sentence was already pronounced. Proud, sensitive and rigidly conscientious, Clara Hawkins could not brook any want or betrayal of those qualities in the man who stood before her as her plighted lover.

“Launcelot,” she said, with tears in her eyes, “I would rather have died than to have heard this of you. Uncle has told me everything; and we must part now and forever—and in parting from you I feel that I part with the last hope that I shall ever find in anyone in whom I can repose full confidence.”

The uncle to whom Clara referred was Mr. James Rector, who was a step-brother of her father.

Mr. Rector had known that Jennings was attached to his niece, and had not been disposed to interfere with the sentiment, although he would rather have seen her married to his son George, over whom he thought she would be likely to exert the restraining influence of which he was in great need. He, moreover, had the satisfaction of knowing that his son would consent to the match, if certain pecuniary considerations were made agreeable.

And he seemed now in a fair way of having his wish, seeing that his rival was satisfactorily and permanently disposed of, for within the next thirty days the discharged bookkeeper was in the front ranks of the army that had gone down to settle some old scores with Mexico.

But the war was soon over, the salaries paid off and the men at liberty to go where they pleased—among whom was our friend, Launcelot Jennings, who had gone to the front, cherishing a willingness to lose in battle a life which he did not wish to terminate in any wrong or cowardly way, but which he did not feel much interest in saving.

Men are thus drifted by the force of circumstances into the places to which they are best adapted; and in fulfillment of that law young Jennings soon found himself in the position of quartermaster’s clerk.

A year thus spent did the young man no harm, and in the meantime the fickle Goddess Fortune had been keeping her eye on him, and had a few crumbs of comfort in store for him.

His enlistment in the army had been carefully concealed from her who once held his heart in her own, and still kept it there by some strange magic spell.

He could not forget her or drive her from his thoughts for an hour. He seemed doomed thus to carry her with him to the end of his life, while probably her heart and her hand with it had already been given to another.

“My dear Launcelot, are you still living anywhere on this earth? More than a hundred letters have already gone out, each one carrying with it my earnest prayer that by some good fortune it might reach you.”

This was what Launcelot Jennings read one day in a letter that did reach him, in the handwriting he knew so well, and closed with the name so dear to him.

The letter reached him in New Orleans, where he had gone on business for the quartermaster’s department. His answer was brief, although his heart wanted to say a good deal more.

“My dear Clara, I am here and well, and very glad to hear from you. What about that blood-stained hundred-dollar bill?”

Another letter from Clara was in his hand as soon as it could get there, and half the words were blurred and stained as if drops of rain had fallen on them.

That letter was one of deep contrition, but with it was mingled, woman-like, an intimation that he ought to take to himself a small share of the blame.

A few days after the dismissal of Jennings from the bank, young Rector began to intimate to Clara that the devoted attention he was preparing to bestow upon her would be more than a substitute for those of her discarded lover.

After hearing the intimation half a dozen times, each time more plainly and distinctly given, the young lady began to be conscious of intense loathing, which it almost impossible for her to endure his presence.

She felt whenever he came near her, as if a fascinating but deadly serpent was trying to coil itself around her.

This experience became at last unendurable, coming as it did in connection with her sad disappointment at the loss of him whom she had so suddenly and perhaps unjustly discarded.

“Mr. Rector,” she said one day, as the young man was about to claim a cousin’s kiss, to be followed soon by a lover’s, “Mr. Rector, you must permit me to decline any further advances from you. Henceforth you will please consider me engaged, or not at home, as I certainly am not to you.”

“Why, my girl,” said George, who had been drinking a little, “you do not seem to appreciate my gracious condescension.”

This insolent remark was answered with a look that should have annihilated the braggart; but it might as well have struck a hedgehog. Clara rose and touched a bell.

“John,” she said to the servant who answered it, “remain here with this person until he is ready to go, and then show him out.”

John turned an appreciative glance at the retreating form of his young mistress, and was about seating himself to entertain Mr. Rector, when that individual showed his willingness to go, by going.

A few weeks later George Rector told his indulgent father that he would like to take a run over and around the continent of Europe, and, as America was not large enough to hold him safely, his father thought he had better go.

The day before he sailed for Europe he sent a card to Clara Hawkins, in which he solicited an interview, on the plea of imparting something of importance for her to know.

She would have declined the proffered visit but for a strong impression that the proposed communication related in some way to Launcelot Jennings, and she accordingly replied that she was willing to see him.

“I do not know, Miss Hawkins,” said George Rector, “where Jennings has gone to; but this much I will tell you: An evil spirit prompted me that day to take that hundred-dollar bill and put it in the letter in his overcoat pocket. I then saw I had him down, and the devil told me to keep him there, for your sake and my own.”

So ended the mystery.

Clara Hawkins has been the wife of Launcelot Jennings for the last twenty years. They have a happy home and a happy family, and if some of them should read this story they may discover for the first time how near that blood-stained hundred-dollar bill came to destroying their chance of being born.

The Middletown [NY] Daily Press, April 9, 1879

The Morning Democrat [Davenport, IA], April 30, 1879
The Moline [IL] *Review-Dispatch*, May 3, 1879
Mattoon [IL] *Gazette*, June 6, 1879
The Fair Haven [VT] *Era*, July 18, 1879

This work was also reprinted as “Circumstantial Evidence” in
The Middletown [NY] *Daily Press*, April 10, 1879
Carbondale [PA] *Advance*, April 26, 1879
Carbondale [PA] *Daily News*, April 26, 1879