

A Strange Misfortune

WRITTEN FOR THE ADVERTISER
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John Bennet was a footman. His ambition never soared higher. It seemed to him that to do his duty, even if it consisted only in such menial offices as blacking boots and carrying trays, was sufficient for a man. John smoked a little in a mild way, he avoided public-houses, desired a bicycle but could not afford it, went to church on Sundays when he had leisure and inclination, and, in short, conducted himself like a respectable fellow.

If his ambitions were few, his wants were less. He cleaned his plate in the morning with a light heart, whistling the latest music-hall ditty, and read a halfpenny newspaper when work permitted him, with that easy-going indifference which is the principal characteristic of the thoughtless domestic servant.

John's employer, an elderly gentleman of means, troubled his head but little about his dependants. Provided they served him well he was satisfied. He disliked to find fault or interfere. John arrived with a good recommendation. John suited, John stayed. Whether he had a soul, or a mind, or an ambition beyond his humble estate, never occurred to Mr. Surtees, the type of person who always finds a good servant because he rests content with no other, and who, minor self-centered, soars above all such minor questions as the duty of altruism and the care of his neighbor's soul.

Mr. Surtees paid good wages, he expected devoted service, and by some strange law of social economics he got it. Whether their names were John, William, or Thomas, a supply of young men were always to be found willing, sober, well-looking and anxious to carry coals and wait at table. They stayed a certain time, rarely more than two years, then departed to better themselves, and left the fields for others. John had only occupied the situation a few months, but had hitherto managed to afford no cause for complaint. He was an early riser, hard worker and respectful in manner. The butler conceived that he might allow himself an extra airing in the afternoon, secure that John in the pantry could start up alert at the faintest sound of his master's bell.

Thus all went well until a certain Tuesday in December (John had good reason to remember the date), when Mr. Surtees entered the library chilled with the frost, blue at the nose, his arms full of letters and papers. Some of these he now laid carelessly on the table, together with four crisp ten-pound notes just obtained from the bank. Then, feeling still cold and rather hungry, he threw off his coat, left the ordering of his papers till afterwards, and proceeded to luncheon.

Having finished his cutlet and drank a glass of sherry, Mr. Surtees, now warmed and comforted, returned to the library. There lay his letters, but not a trace of the bank-notes. He frowned, fidgeted, swore, pulled open the drawers, roughly looked inside, found nothing. He searched high and low, emptied his pockets, finally rang the bell.

"Has anyone been in this room since my return?" he inquired of the butler. "No one, sir," answered that functionary, scenting danger, and quickly running over in his mind the ways it might affect him.

"No one—you are sure?" The master's tone was harsh and irascible. The butler reflected under his impressive mask of polite servitude. "No one but John, sir, who made up the fire according to orders half-an-hour ago."

"Send John here." The butler departed, anxious to afford the scape-goat a taste of the fright he had just endured. "Here, John," he said, authoritatively to the young man whom he found busy polishing silver. "Master's in a rage, and wants you. What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," said John, frankly, quickly wiping his hands on a towel and drawing on his livery coat. His conscience accused him of nothing, and in his very unconcerned way he feared no evil.

Mr. Surtees stood on the hearthrug, legs planted wide apart in the time-honored attitude of the British paternalist. The position gave him dignity. John was manifestly at a disadvantage.

"John," Mr. Surtees spoke in a hard, judicial tone, "I understand you were in the library during the lunch hour."

"Yes, sir," said John, cheerfully. "I made up the fire as usual."

"Did you see four ten-pound notes on the writing-table?"

"No, sir, I never looked."

"Think well, John. They have been removed by somebody. You are the only person who has access to the room."

"I never saw them, sir," persisted John, stoutly.

Mr. Surtees again rang the bell. The butler's face appeared promptly in the doorway, perturbed, yet passionately interested.

"John says he has seen nothing of the notes. Call the housemaid."

The housemaid, a pretty, confident girl, and finally all the household, were in-

terrogated in turn. All denied entering the room. John alone fearlessly confessed his presence. At first respectful and indifferent, gradually bewildered and wondering, at last decidedly anxious, John asked in tones of evident emotion: "Do I understand, sir, you accuse me of taking the notes?"

"I accuse no one," said his master, sternly, "but appearances are against you."

"You don't surely mean—to prosecute me?" stammered John, looking vainly for sympathy to the stolid faces around him. "I do not know what I may do. Clearly my present course is to send for the police. You can see how it is. Therewith the dispenser of justice waved away his doleful crowd of servants."

John returned to his plate-polishing, yet with little zest. The butler sought his room, the cook her kitchen, in silence. No one as yet dared to breathe a word about the missing money. A cloud hung over all at that moment.

Nobody addressed John. He sat down, rested, his head on his hands, and reflected. Could it be true? He, John Bennet, hitherto above suspicion, was believed to be a thief. No, of course it was not true; the notes would be found and the culprit discovered. Perhaps it was all a mistake, and they were not really lost at all. Still, his master had seemed very persistent. There was no likely thief, and John became the victim of circumstances. He jumped up quickly. He must not sit down; no, he must not give up the game, he must search.

Just then the door opened and a burly policeman entered. He had a good-humored face and a kindly light in his eye, but John's first movement was that of terror.

"Don't be frightened, my boy," said the policeman. "I've come to search your box. I've looked over the other servants, now it's your turn, and I must overhaul your pockets."

John obeyed and put every facility in his visitor's way.

"Has anything been found, sir?" he asked nervously.

"Nothing as yet."

"Then it is all right. I know nothing about the notes. I only went into the room—"

"Hush, my lad," said the policeman. "You had better say nothing. It might be brought up against you later."

The policeman's caution frightened him still more. Things were really serious, then.

"There, that's all; your box is finished."

The policeman went out, his boots creaking cheerfully, and John, absorbed in miserable reflections, was once more alone.

He took up his coat again and turned the pockets right. He brushed it and put it on, thought a moment, then with a firm step he hurried to the library.

If no one else could find the notes he, who had the greatest interest in their recovery, surely would. He would never cease from rummaging and hunting until successful. Hope revived. No one could innocently fall into such trouble.

The library was empty. John looked around and spied his master's coat hanging over the back of a chair. He approached, thrusting his hands into the pockets in his eager search.

Suddenly he heard his master's angry voice.

"What are you doing with my coat?"

Rosy from stooping, John looked up quickly.

"How dare you touch it! Leave the room, leave the house! Your presence is dangerous! You are a thief!"

John's limbs trembled under him. He, an honest lad, to be accused of stealing! The very thought choked him, he could scarcely speak.

"I am innocent, indeed, sir, I am innocent. I have taken nothing," he blurted out.

"It is fortunate for you," said Mr. Surtees, "that the police are not yet on your track. One word from me and you would be arrested. Meanwhile, go."

"Where shall I go, sir?" said John, meekly.

"Wherever you like. I suppose you have a home?" he added, less malignantly.

"It will break my father's heart, sir," said John, a vision of that narrow-minded parent's wrath before his eyes.

"Oh, sir, give me another chance, do. Time will show."

"Time to enable you to commit some more cleverly-planned robberies," exclaimed his master. "No, indeed, I've done with you. I only want honest people in my house. Go!"

John withdrew silently, a look of hunted anguish in his eyes.

He was young and inexperienced. Unversed in the criminal law, and with all the respectable person's natural shrinking from it, he scarcely realized what his dismissal under such circumstances implied, yet he felt the full disgrace and horror of his situation. As he packed his small belongings he gulped down the unshed tears, trying, poor boy, to be as manly as he could. He scrupulously put aside his livery suit and hat, and such things as might not be supposed distinctly his property.

He would leave the house, at any rate, free from the smallest blame. All was finished. He stood, bilkily in hand, ready to depart, when the butler appeared.

"So you're off, John?" he said. "And a good thing, too. Mind, you're not to run away, master says, till he has a talk with your father tomorrow."

"I shall not run away," John stood a little more upright. "I am an honest man, and I want to be cleared."

"Cleared? Him, not much chance of that, I think. It's sad to see promising young fellows going that way. Tell me," he added, with a leer of unwholesome curiosity, "was it a woman, John,

some girl you're sweethearting with, put you up to the job?"

"I have no sweetheart and I never saw the money," said John, a ring of sturdy bravery in his voice and his regrets evaporating in righteous anger. He swung himself out of the door without another word, and act first of John's dramatic career was over.

The butler metaphorically rang down the curtain, locked the cupboards, and put the key in his pocket.

Then Mr. Surtees sent for his legal adviser, Mr. Cramp, of Cramps, Bland, Fettle and Co., and told him the story of John's misdeeds over a glass of toddy after dinner, for Mr. Cramp was as much a friend as lawyer, and the two often spent an evening together. Mr. Cramp was as kind, and stout, and fussy as a person as his friend was thin and forbidding in manner. The pair were a complete contrast, but they understood one another.

"Yet, with all his smooth, bland, purring tones, Mr. Cramp was a terror to evil-doers. Justice in such a benevolent guise was even more to be dreaded. He listened now with the abstract look of a man not personally interested, holding up his glass to the light sometimes, and looking little caressing slips of its contents."

"You had in the police," he observed. "The footman's person and his box were searched and nothing was found. The notes have not been cashed, then where are they?"

"That's the mystery. I fancy he made away with them."

"Ah! now the thing is becoming interesting."

"My impression is he stole the notes, and then, frightened at the consequences, destroyed them."

"But how?" mused Mr. Cramp. "He had not much time."

"He was alone in the pantry. There was a fire, he may have thrown them there."

"True, he may. What do you propose to do?"

"I have no wish to prosecute."

"You've no proofs."

"I should like to get the money back."

"And I should like to know what became of it. I am inclined to think your surmise right. You made a complete search?"

"At once. But, of course, I only laid them on the table."

"You are sure?"

"Quite. I mean to apply to the bank for repayment of the money. I have the numbers of the notes and have stopped their circulation."

"They won't restore you the money without certain formalities."

"An affidavit of the destruction of the notes."

"I can't give that."

"No, but John can. John must tell the truth."

"Easily. If you promise that no further steps will be taken against him, and that the matter shall rest there, he will confess, and then I shall expect the poor fellow is shaking in his shoes already."

"Your plan is not a bad one."

"It is the only one."

"He was one of the nicest and quietest footmen I ever had," mused Mr. Surtees. "It is a pity."

"He must have fallen into bad company, or perhaps he is a thief by nature; one can never tell."

"I suppose I must follow your advice."

"Certainly, that is all I can do for you. The money and deal leniently with the thief."

"No, no, that's impossible. I can't do it. It wouldn't be right to let him off scot-free. In this way we shall have a hold over him."

So it was settled. Mr. Surtees and Mr. Cramp called on John's father next day. The footman, as he had assured the butler, made no attempt to abscond and appeared at once ashamed, unhappy, exchanging few words with a friend, and explained the motives of his visit.

"We are satisfied that it was you, John," he said, "who took the money and made away with the notes, but Mr. Surtees has kindly determined not to prosecute you if you will confess the whole matter and tell us what you did with the bank-notes."

John again protested his innocence.

His father interrupted him testily: "That's the way he goes on. He keeps saying he knows nothing of the money, but I say: 'Tell the truth and shame the devil.' It passes my comprehension to see him on the high road to a few words of confession."

"Don't, father, don't!" pleaded John. "Yes, my boy, I will. You've had a good education and a good example from me," pursued the irate father. "However, sir," he addressed himself to the gentlemen—"as I see, if this here affair isn't cleared up right and straight it's no son of mine he'll be, but, quick march, and out of the house you go!"

"We trust it will not come to that," said Mr. Cramp, in his soft, purring tones. "The wisest thing is to make the best of a bad business. Confession is the only explanation he can give. Let him do so at once without delay. No doubt the lesson, if severe, will prove salutary. Turn over a new leaf, young man, and perhaps your father may yet live to be proud of you."

"Not much chance of that," said Mr. Surtees.

The Publisher of the East Farmer's paper in the Maritime Provinces in writing to us states:

"I would say that I do not know of a medicine that has stood the test of time like MINARD'S LINIMENT. It has held ever since I can remember, and has outlived dozens of would-be competitors and imitators."

Bennet, throwing a vindictive glance at his son.

"We do not wish to press or hurry you, John," continued Mr. Cramp, rippling on gently. "We'll leave you to think it over and tomorrow we'll call again and hear your decision."

With which lenient remark the gentlemen departed, escorted to the door by the apologetic and indignant father.

"Do you know," said Mr. Cramp to his friend on the way home. "I fear lest we have made a mistake. The parents are respectable people, and John may be innocent. He has an honest look in his gray eyes."

"How could that be? No one else had even a chance of stealing the notes."

"To be sure; yet truth is stranger than fiction."

John passed a miserable evening. His father stormed, swore and raved at him, declaring he was the family disgrace, the curse of his mother, and a precious fool into the bargain.

"Take the gentleman's offer, it's the only chance," he concluded.

"But if I am innocent?"

"Stuff and nonsense! If you are, you can't prove it."

"Truth will out."

"Truth where's the truth? The gentleman says you're a thief."

"And I know I am not," responded John.

His mother meanwhile wept silently, and from time to time threw at him piteous looks.

John could stand his father's raving better than his mother's grief.

"Oh, father, what is to be done?" he groaned.

"Take the gentleman's offer or go to jail."

Therewith Bennet senior retired to bed in duddon.

John sat down in the kitchen. His heart felt heavy as lead, his head swam, he began to be afraid of his own convictions.

The whole world seemed arrayed against him, no ray of light pierced the darkness that surrounded him. Then a soft step approached and two arms were flung round his neck.

"My boy, my poor boy!"

"Mother, don't cry. Leave me, go to sleep."

"I can't sleep, John, if you love me, confess."

"But, mother—"

"You'll have peace, dear, then."

John held his mother fast, locked in his embrace, then, as he wept, she believed him guilty. They stayed thus several minutes pressed together, his mother's other, united in their misery, two poor, disconsolate souls, helpless and despairing. It wrung his heart against the man to be the cause of his mother's suffering. Each wanted to help the other, but each was so weak and so dupli-

cated. Suddenly John spoke:

"I'll do it, mother, for your sake. And may Heaven forgive me," he added, under his breath.

"My boy, I knew it. I knew you would. You were always a good lad. Keep straight now, won't you? Promise me."

"I promise," said John, kissing his mother's head. At that moment he felt unworthy to kiss her cheek.

"You'll do it tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. And you'll fret no more, mother?"

"I'll try not to, John, my son." Then the old lady crept back to her room and John held vigil till the day.

Mr. Cramp, at an easy task next morning, found John quiet and docile, and completely resigned to his position. He solemnly declared that he had stolen the notes and thrown them into the fire. He expressed full contrition for the act, signed the affidavit, which was duly attested. His calm misery touched the lawyer.

"You've done right," he said as they left the house. "You will never regret it. Be an honest man for the future."

After their departure John shut himself up in his room.

Even his mother's entreaties failed to move him. He neither ate nor slept for forty-eight hours. At the end of that time he came forth aged, pallid, with a hard, impassive face.

He announced his immediate intention of seeking another situation. But he had reckoned without his home. His troubles began in earnest now. He had no character. He could give no explanation of his reasons for leaving his last place; he could refer to no one. From door to door he wandered, always turning away with a furtive glance at the attention of his master. By degrees he was favored, advanced, and at last permitted to drive a doctor's hired brougham.

But it began now in a period of comparative happiness. He had regular work, he was trusted and respected. The housemaid, Jenny, a buxom girl of twenty, graciously consented to walk out with him on Sundays, even to promise to marry him some day.

John's good spirits returned; he plucked up courage and began to whistle merrily. He had not been long in his new position, and he was already well settled in the bottom of his heart lay the confession, that fatal paper which he had hidden in the bottom of his desk. He had bargained away his honor, and under the name of peace he had again begun to live.

His old master had not forgiven him. Once when he met him in the street John touched his hat to him with respect, but Mr. Surtees turned away and refused to acknowledge his salutation. He had not prosecuted him, and the worst was over.

One summer's day John, spick and span in his livery, drove his horse amply up to a house whence the doctor, his professional visit paid, was issuing.

John's hat was not a carriage and his stout, pleasant-looking man. John knew him at once, and under the healthy glow of his cheeks he smiled. It was Mr. Cramp. The lawyer caught sight of him, and the recognition was mutual. He was waiting for the carriage and whispered to the doctor:

"Have you had your coachman long?"

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