

Bread Cast Upon Waters

A dingy lodging at Bloomsbury, a shabby, broken looking man of dejected and miserable appearance; a woman, rather younger, evidently his wife, trying in vain to comfort him; such were the persons and such the scene of the threadbare tragedy—one, doubtless, of many in London—upon which the pale sun of that October day had set.

The man sat in a lodging-house chair, as shabby as himself, with his elbows resting on his shiny knees and his face between his hands, staring miserably before him, a picture of despair. His wife sat near him, laying ever and anon a thin hand upon his shoulder, and, in trembling tones and evidently with a great effort, attempting to speak words of encouragement and consolation. In vain. The despairing look on his face never for one instant relaxed. I doubt if he even heard what she said. He was thinking—thinking.

Tomorrow, he, Charles Edward Blinkstone, solicitor, member of an honorable profession, an officer of the high court, was to stand in the dock at the Old Bailey, charged with the misappropriation of his client's money. Six weeks before he had been committed at Bow street, and admitted to heavy bail. And now, tomorrow, he must face his final judgment.

There is an impression in many minds that solicitors who are guilty of fraud or irregularity can under no circumstances be deserving of pity, and that dishonesty in them should always be punished with the utmost rigor. The impression, in a general way, rests upon a sound basis. But there is no rule so universal as not to be liable to exceptions; and Charles Edward Blinkstone, if a subject for indignation, was also a subject for some compassion.

Good-natured—good-natured amounting, in fact, to culpable weakness—was the cause to which all his misfortunes, and now at last this final calamity were traceable. Throughout his life he had evinced a constant incapacity to say "No" to any appeal that moved his pity, if it were pressed upon him with sufficient insistence. He had often been warned against it by his more hard-headed friends, and particularly by his father, who, while he lived and remained at the head of the business, had resolutely refused to let his son advance any office moneys to his impecunious acquaintances who were frequently applying to him for loans.

The wretched man now remembered well the first occasion on which his old father had taken him to task for an act of good-nature, which (as his parent very truly pointed out) was as absurd as, if repeated, it must soon prove ruinous, to any man of business.

The firm had been instructed to collect a debt of £100 due from a young man named Robinson (the son of a country parson) who had just left Cambridge. The young fellow, by his creditor's account, appeared not to have behaved any too well in the matter, and the solicitor's instructions were to press him to the utmost; without grace or indulgence. A writ was issued in the ordinary course; the effect of which was that the debtor, in evident perturbation and alarm, came round to plead with the Blinkstones for time.

It was Charles who saw him. The young man told a distressful tale. Neither his father nor any of his relations was in a position to help him and it was utterly impossible for him to pay the debt then. But he had just accepted the post of tutor to the son of a wealthy merchant at a salary of £150 a year, out of which he would promise—faithfully promise—to discharge the whole liability within 12 months. But if he were pressed in now, and the debt, together with the somewhat shady circumstances under which it had been incurred, came to his patron's knowledge, the latter, being a very strict and particular man, would doubtless cancel the engagement; and thus his chance of a fresh start and of retrieving his position would be lost. Charles Blinkstone replied that his instructions were imperative. But in the end, moved by the young man's entreaties, he promised to refer the matter back to his client.

He did so. But the latter would not hear of time being granted. For some reason or other, he seemed to entertain very vindictive feelings toward his debtor and to care more for punishing him than for getting his money; and he instructed his solicitors to go on as rapidly and vigorously as the law would permit.

In reply to Charles Blinkstone's letter informing him of this, young Robinson called upon him again at the office. Charles accorded the interview, which was foolishly weak of him, since obviously, under the circumstances, the proper course was to

decline to see him. But he did see him, and his appeals and entreaties had such an effect upon our good-natured young solicitor that in the end he did a very absurd, unprofessional and Quixotic thing. He actually himself (out of his own pocket) advanced the money for the discharge of the debt and costs, taking a simple I. O. U. from Robinson for its repayment.

The other's gratitude for kindness so unexpected and so extraordinary was expressed in the most fervent terms. He vowed that he would pay back the money within twelve months though he was conscious that this was only a small part of the obligation under which Charles Blinkstone had laid him, and which was greater than he could ever discharge. Charles believed his word. The elder Blinkstone, when he heard of it, did not. Moreover, he was extremely angry with his son for the ridiculous folly of his conduct.

"Never in my life," he said, "have I heard of a solicitor doing anything so fatuous. You may call it good-nature. I call it sheer idiocy. And I tell you plainly that if you do anything of the kind again, I shall cancel our articles of partnership and kick you out of this office. I'm not going to let you ruin a good business just because you cannot muster sufficient strength of mind to resist the whinnings and snivelings of every impecunious debtor whom you have to sue. And mind, my fine fellow, you lose that £100 yourself. Not a penny of it shall be made good out of the office accounts. And I hope it will be a lesson to you."

"I don't want it made good out of the office accounts," replied Charles. "If there is to be a loss, I am prepared to stand it myself. But I don't think that there will be. I believe he will repay me."

"Fudge!" was the contemptuous retort. "But, for once in a way, the elder Blinkstone was at fault. Within twelve months the young man had repaid Charles every penny."

"Be thankful you're so well out of it, that's all," said his practical father, "and don't go tempting Providence like that again. No lending money to your friends without security either. I know what you are. But I won't have it. This office is a place of business, sir; not a philanthropic agency for the relief of beggars. Mind that, now."

And Charles did mind it while his father lived. Indeed, the old gentleman kept too strict an eye on the books to admit of any such foolish practices. It was not until after the former's death that his son found himself in the position to indulge his good-natured propensities and his too credulous belief in the promises of his friends.

From that instant Charles Blinkstone began to drop money over his business. Taking the book debts, indeed, he appeared to be making a handsome annual profit. But most of the large sums due to him for moneys advanced, and not a small proportion of those for services rendered, might as well have been written off for all the likelihood there was of his ever seeing the money.

All his friends, you see, came to him for professional advice and assistance, but not ten per cent. of them paid, or thought of paying, the accounts which he rendered them. Then, too, when they wanted money, they applied to him for it, and it was odds, if they made out a sufficiently distressful story, that they got it. Occasionally, when he could obtain it, he took security. More often they were unable to give any security more valuable than an I. O. U. or a promissory note, which (even if Charles had not been too good-natured to sue them) were seldom worth more than so much waste paper.

As each year came round, he had more and more reason to regret that he had neglected his father's advice and warnings and he registered a stern resolve not to lend any more money for the future. He broke these prudent resolves as frequently as he made them; for the very next friend who came to him with an urgent and pitiable story of financial straits invariably succeeded in getting the desired advance.

Such incurable benevolence to friends—if benevolence is the right name—could have, in the long run, but one result—financial ruin. And this result, after 20 years, had overtaken Charles Edward Blinkstone. Then had come to light the case of misappropriation for which he now stood committed to the Old Bailey. The amount involved was £1,500, the property of a Mrs. Drewett, a lady client, residing abroad, which he had been instructed to put out on mortgage. Instead, however, of doing this, he had lent the money to his nephew, Ralph Urmsion, without any sort of security, as capital to start upon the

Stock Exchange; and the young man had never done sufficiently well to be able to repay even a fraction of the loan. It may be said, in Blinkstone's favor, that this was the only case in which he had misapplied clients' money; also, that when he made the advance, he had sufficient capital of his own to make it good—a squeeze. But that capital had since been spent; and so, when his bankruptcy came, the £1,500 could not be produced, and his client had no security for it, except the worthless promissory note of young Urmsion, who was himself on the brink of bankruptcy.

Possibly, if Urmsion had been a stranger, a charge of fraud against Blinkstone might not have been sustained; but the fact that he was so near a relative gave things an ugly look, and in the then state of feeling against dishonest solicitors, and considering that the judge who was down to try the case was well known for his Draconic severity, Charles Blinkstone felt little hope of escaping conviction and a long term of imprisonment.

So there he sat in his dingy lodging—this man who was by no means naturally unprincipled or unscrupulous, but was still tender on the score of his reputation. There, I say, he sat, brooding in agonized despair upon his position, while the terrible picture rose up before his mental vision of himself, with cropped head, habited in the hideous, loathsome garb of a convict, toiling among a gang of brutalized miscreants in the quarries of Dartmoor, degraded, hopeless, and, to any future life worth living, a dead man.

"Charles, Charles, do not look like that. They cannot find you guilty," said his poor wife, for the twentieth time.

"You never thought you would lose the money. You believed that Ralph would repay you. There was no fraud. They will never be so cruel as to send you to prison."

He shook his head despairingly. "This is the last evening we shall spend together, Polly, for many a long day; perhaps forever; for I think a year of prison life will kill me. Yes! Yes! It is worse than useless to encourage false hopes. By this time tomorrow you will be alone, my dear; and may God support and help you. And I—!" (he shuddered) "shall be in Newgate."

"Charles! They cannot—they shall not," sobbed the unhappy woman. Again he shook his head and groaned, but he said no more. What was the use? He knew, only too well, what his fate would be.

But when that time tomorrow came he was not in Newgate; for his trial did not begin until late in the afternoon and was not completed when the court arose. Another day's respite. Was it merciful or not? He hardly knew. But anyhow the noon of the morrow would see the end.

Tomorrow morning, dazed and trembling, he again stood in the dock. He seemed hardly conscious of what was going on. His counsel rose with a look of some excitement on his face and began to address the court.

"My lud," he said, "since I began my opening speech last night, a development has arisen in my client's case which I think proper to bring at once before your lordship and gentlemen of the jury. You will recollect, my lud and gentlemen, that the fraud of which my client stands accused was the advancing of certain trust moneys to his nephew, Ralph Urmsion, without security and with no reasonable probability of its repayment. I am happy to say, my lud and gentlemen, that the prospect of the repayment of those moneys was not, after all, so remote as the prosecution insisted. At an early hour this morning, my lud and gentlemen, Ralph Urmsion called spontaneously upon the solicitors of the lady whose money my client is charged with having misapplied, and repaid them the whole amount due, with interest to date. I understand, my lud and gentlemen, that Urmsion has made this money during the last few days in the course of his business, and that being so, I submit to you, my lud, and to you gentlemen of the jury, that in lending trust moneys to this young man to start him in business, my client—though his conduct was doubtless somewhat irregular—saw sufficient probability of the advance being repaid to absolve him of any imputation of fraud. And now, my lud, I propose to call Ralph Urmsion, and the solicitor of whom I have spoken, to prove my statements as to the repayment of the money."

Urmsion was then called into the witness-box. He gave his evidence, in a little nervously, with straightforward clearness. The solicitor, a partner in a well-known firm, who was the next witness, proved the repayment of the £1,500, with full interest.

"I do not propose, my lud," said counsel, "to call any more witnesses. The advance to Urmsion is admitted. The repayment, by him, has now been proved. I merely submit to your lordship that there is no evidence of fraud to go to the jury."

The judge, an impassive man, with a stern, inscrutable face, said that the repayment of this money at the last minute—a repayment the means of which were possibly due to lucky speculations on the part of Urmsion, which the prisoner could hardly have foreseen or calculated upon when he made the advance—did not appear to him by any means necessarily to diminish the suggestion of fraud. He ruled, therefore, that the case must proceed, and the question of the prisoner's guilt be left to the decision of the jury.

After a brief final speech by prosecuting counsel, his lordship summed up: "It was a cold, grave, impartial performance, the gist of which was that if they (the jury) considered that the prisoner, when he advanced the trust moneys to his nephew, saw a reasonable chance—a chance, that is, upon which a man of business would care to rely—of its being repaid, with a good interest for its use, then their proper course was to acquit the prisoner."

If, on the other hand, they held that he saw no such reasonable chance, it would be their duty to convict him. The repayment of the money, except in so far as it bore upon either of these two questions, must be excluded from their minds. Finally, if they felt any reasonable doubt, the prisoner should receive the benefit of it.

After a brief deliberation, the jury found Charles Blinkstone not guilty. And he was accordingly discharged. "Ralph!" exclaimed Blinkstone, in a trembling voice, as, almost overwhelmed by his unexpected good fortune, he left the court with his wife and nephew, "where did you get the money?"

"A most extraordinary thing," said the young man, whose face bore visible tokens of excitement. "But late last night a strange gentleman called upon me and told me that he wished to repay, in my name, the whole of the £1,500 which you were charged with having misapplied. He added that he was deeply concerned to discover the position in which you were placed—a position due more to your excessive good nature than to any other cause. And he was convinced that the repayment by me of the money advanced before your case was resumed tomorrow would have a favorable effect upon the court and the jury; and that even if it did not bring about your acquittal, which, thank God, it has done," said the young man fervently, "it would at least result in a mitigation of your sentence."

"Who was this gentleman? What name did he give?" cried Charles Blinkstone, eagerly.

"He refused to give any name. But early this morning he called again, and brought me cash for the whole sum due, at the same time cautioning me that I must repay the money in my name, as though it were my own, and on no account mention that it had been given to me by any third person for the purpose. I promised to comply with these conditions, and I at once took the cash to Mrs. Drewett's solicitors. More than to this extent I cannot enlighten you, for the stranger absolutely declined to give his name, or even to hint at the reason for his generosity."

"Generosity, indeed!" exclaimed Blinkstone, earnestly. "Who can he be? I was not aware that I had such a friend in all the world."

But that evening he himself saw the mysterious stranger. The latter called upon him at his Bloomsbury lodgings. A perfect stranger, too, Blinkstone was sure he had never set eyes upon him before.

He was a middle-aged man of self-possessed manner and business-like appearance. He still declined to give any name, but he mentioned the fact that he was a solicitor, and stated that he was acting on behalf of a client who had private reasons for wishing to assist Mr. Blinkstone, but whose personality was under no circumstances to be divulged.

"Your nephew will doubtless have told you," he said, "what my client has already done for you; but he wishes to do more. He has commissioned me to provide you with money to make a fresh start. Acting under his instructions, I have now brought you £500. Here it is," he added, producing a roll of notes and laying them upon the table. "I am to hand these to you, with my client's very best wishes for your future success."

Blinkstone gazed at the notes for a moment or two in perfect amazement. Then, utterly overcome by such generosity on behalf of his unknown benefactor, he covered his face with his hands and burst into tears.

"Tell me who he is!" he cried almost wildly. "I must know. I must thank him. I must—"

The other, though evidently touched by Blinkstone's emotion, shook his head gravely.

"It is impossible," he said. "I am under solemn promise to keep my client's secret. My commission having now been executed, I have no more to say. I wish you luck, Mr. Blinkstone. Good-night."

And he took his departure. That night Blinkstone could not sleep. The strain of the day had so excited him as to make repose impossible. As he lay awake, tossing restlessly hour after hour, his brain was strangely active. Many scenes and visions of his past life, some of them trivial, unimportant, and until now forgotten, rose before him with extraordinary vividness. And then something dawned upon him—dawned upon him in an instant, clear, convincing, unmistakable.

A wild excitement—the excitement of a great discovery—seized him. He awoke his wife.

"Polly! Polly!"

"What is it dear? What is the matter?"

"I know—I know now who he is."

"Who?"

"Here—there—was something familiar in his face. I can see it now on looking back. But it never occurred to me to connect—Oh! Polly, wife, have I ever told you of the young man whom I once befriended, in his need, with the loan of £100?"

"Yes, yes! You have told me the story."

"It is he—who is my benefactor," he cried with eager conviction. "And I never knew him today when—"

"What? You have seen him, Charles? Was it then the gentleman himself who came to see you?"

"No," replied her husband. "I

speaking of him before whom I trembled in the dock—the judge who tried me—Mr. Justice Robinson, London 'Truth.'

Patience—Did you enjoy the drama last night? Patience—Enjoy it! I should say I did! Why, I tried nearly the whole time!—Yonkers Statesman

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