

The Turning of the Worm

James Bray trembled violently as he entered the bank in which he had once been a trusted employee.

They all saw that he had aged in the three months since he had gone away in the custody of the police.

A large screen of clear plate-glass kept the heat of the old-fashioned wood fire from Mr. Francis Clare, the manager, a stern man of fifty, who sat writing at a fine walnut desk.

"Sit down, Bray, until I finish these signatures," said the manager busily, and the visitor sank weakly into a capacious chair.

"Bray," he began at length, after he had rung an electric bell and sent out a bundle of papers by the messenger who answered it, "I congratulate you on the verdict."

"Of course," he continued tapping his thumb-nail with the point of an ivory paper-knife, "you cannot censure the bank for its action. Appearances were against you, you know."

Bray straightened himself, and a little spirit showed in his faded face as he replied: "You might have given me more time to clear myself."

"Well, my dear sir, you know as well as I do that a bank cannot be too strict regarding the honesty of its employees. We have other people's money here. It must be watched with the most exacting vigilance.

"I am compelled to say, Bray, that appearances are still against you. That money has never been recovered."

"In spite of the verdict, sir?" "Yes, in spite of the verdict. Frankly, there are still some people obstinate enough to think you took that money, and, unfortunately for you, they are bank officials."

"They are unjust," said the accused man, with a low chord of despair in his tone.

"Probably. But, as I said, you cannot censure the bank. True, we turned you over to the law, for, as I have remarked, you were the individual, the worm to be brushed aside. But you must remember that our prosecution was not vindictive. Could you expect more?"

"Yes, I think so." "What?" the manager asked quickly, turning rapidly around, now that he had led the man to the chief point.

Bray rose as if for courage and replied, in a quivering voice: "As an intelligent jury acquitted me, it would be no more than just that I should be reinstated."

"I'm truly surprised at your mentioning that after what I have said—that some people still believe that you stole that money. We can't, we dare not, employ a suspected man in the bank. Besides, your place has been filled by a younger man, of high social position—I might say a better man for our purposes in every way. No, Bray, it can't be."

The "worm" was turning. A white look drifted across his face as he stepped to the desk and said: "And my family and I are to starve because I am suspected, and that after having been acquitted by a jury? I couldn't have believed such injustice could be, sir."

each have been a fortune to the discarded employee. This wedding gaoled him. The worm had been brushed aside, he now felt trodden upon.

One evening a hesitating knock fell upon the door of the poor lodging-house whither misfortune had driven Bray and his family. He opened it himself, and was amazed to see Mrs. Price, Clare's daughter. She was much distressed and asked, nervously, for a private interview.

"Mrs. Bray withdrew, and the young bride tremblingly began: "Mr. Bray, I have learned that you are hunting for the man who stole the money from your desk at the bank."

"He had made a few feeble moves in that direction, and his gaunt face hardening at recollection of his failure, he replied affirmatively. "And you have discovered that it was my—"

"She stopped, stared at him, for a light had flashed upon him, driving the flush caused by the visit into a pallor, while his eyes, larger now in the thinness of his face, seemed to glare cruelly.

"He remembered now that Charles Price had frequently done his work while he was out at lunch, and wondered that he had not thought of it before. A cold tremor waved over him at the thought of the power this discovery would place in his hands.

"Yes, I have discovered it." "And you were about to accuse him?" "Yes; just about to put him where I once was," he replied, ferociously. "Oh! he is torn with remorse," she cried, wringing her hands behind her muff. "He confessed it to me. Oh! think a blow to a young wife. Think, Mr. Bray, think what a disgrace to us! Think where it will drag my husband, and my father and me! Oh! Heaven, it would be awful. I came to offer you any sum for your silence. Make it enough to enable you to go away where you can begin life over again."

He drew himself up proudly, but his eyes were unsteady and his nostrils dilating, while his hands, clutching, one above the other, the front of his coat, trembled pitifully. In a tone which he tried to force into sternness and steadiness, he answered: "And still have the disgrace? No, I am entitled to my good name. Nothing can pay me for that. Your father has taken it away from me; he must give it back. I have nothing to do with the disgrace that will fall upon your father and your husband and—no, not upon you. I would spare that if I could."

"I thought you had not forgotten, Mr. Bray, the kindness I showed you once." "Wavering appeared in his face, but an accidental glance around the cramped home, its barrenness, its discomfort, caught his sternness in its flight, and he said: "Is it right, Mrs. Price—is it right for you to make a point of my gratitude now? I dare not let it influence me now. Dare I allow this crime to rest upon me and let my children grow up in its shadow? What would your money be to me, when we would have to go far away among strangers and have the story follow me there? No, no; I would spare you if I could, but my manhood, my wife, my children demand that this cloud should be swept away. And your father must do it, let consequences be what they may. He called me a worm, to be brushed aside. The worm has turned, Mrs. Price!"

"Name any amount and I will double it!" cried the distressed young wife. "I will not!" "But think, Mr. Bray, that hat I offer will be far more than you could save in years from your salary at the bank!"

"And lose something that is worth double, treble any amount you could give. I refuse. I will go to-morrow to your father, and he must lift the heel that he has set upon me."

He was very haggard next morning when the messenger showed him again into the private office. Mr. Clare again sat writing at the table, and again kept him waiting. But one could easily have seen that the visitor was irritating him. At length finishing a signature with an unnecessary scratch of the pen, he said, sharply: "Bray, I am very busy. To save time, I'll tell you at once that there are no vacancies."

A little red spot flushed upon each of Bray's cheeks, and his eyes flashed the pent fire as he arose, replying: "There will be one soon." "Oh! there will," sneeringly. "I beg your pardon; I didn't know it. Perhaps you mean mine?" "My old place will be vacant to-day."

The other swung angrily around on his chair, but catching himself, as if suddenly struck at the man's seriousness, leaned forward, placed one hand over the other upon the table, and, with calm scorn, said: "Your name should be Daniel Bray. You give your prophecy very little time for fulfillment."

Bray walked forward and stopped at the table opposite Mr. Clare, placing his hat thereon, with his left hand nervously crumpling it. Stern purpose showed in his face, but he evaded the manager's eyes, fixing his own upon the black figures upon the desk calendar. The "worm" was turning, but with a worm's weakness.

"You taunt me," he said, chokingly. "I know you are strong and powerful, but I want you, sir, not to be too scornful. Do you have a daughter?" "You are impudent! I'll have you thrown out of the room!"

"He touched the electric button, but Bray's voice stopped him. "You have married her to the man who stole that money?"

"He shall be summoned, and at once! Do you dare?" "Send for him." The messenger answered the ring, withdrew and Price appeared. With that peculiar stern levity which often shoots up from inward seriousness, Clare motioned flourishingly toward Bray and said: "Ha! Price, our worm here has turned upon us. He says that you—"

He stopped. One swift look into Price's face and the manager sank into his chair; for that face was blanched, leaving red specks of excitement, and the watery eyes had a blank stare. "You—you—" the manager muttered. He could not proceed, could only gaze, fascinated, into Price's twitching face.

He was trying to stand erect, but his chest was heaving, each breath seeming to leave it more inflated, until, as if it could hold no more, and guiltily thoughts were crowding into unbearable pressure, with a deep sigh he said: "Bray has spoken truly; I took the money."

Clare sprang up, livid, his fingers crooking and uncrooking. He stepped toward the young man, but stopped and upbraided him. "You scoundrel! You have deceived us! You will have to suffer!" The fierce words seemed to fan Price's smouldering courage, and he said: "You know why I stole that money."

"I know?" "If you don't, you should." "I don't and I shouldn't." "Then listen, for you must know. By your will you forced your daughter to marry me against her choice. I was of high family; you hoped for some advantage. Don't deny it, you did. I loved Dora, I love her yet. I took that money to hear the expenses of our elegant wedding that you insisted upon. Your wish has been fulfilled, your daughter married high. She is a Price and I—I am a thief! Now, what will you do? Turn me over to the law and disgrace your daughter and yourself?"

The manager fell back into his chair and caught the arms in a grasp of iron. Price remained as he uttered the last word, not defiant, but as if waiting a blow; while Bray stood still by the table, his hat crumpled tightly in his left hand, his right clutching the edge of the desk. He had not moved since Price came in.

A silence prevailed in the room, so deep that the hum of the bank reached them, with the rustling of crisp notes, even the scratching of the nearest pen. Clare's face showed a conflict. The two watchers saw justice desperately fight its way to victory. It almost seemed as if the anger wrinkles, uncurled into those of age. He looked a bowed, broken man, years older, as he turned to his son-in-law, and in a softer, but still stern, voice said: "Price, you have disgraced me and my child! It would seem that I should shield you, for Bray cannot prove your theft."

He slowly arose, and a little of the old tone he had used toward Bray rang in his voice as he exclaimed: "But individuals and their relatives and their hearts sink before the interests of a great institution, such as this. The directors are here. It is my duty to lay this matter before them. Both of you wait until I come back."

He looked at neither as he spoke, but vacantly, as if his whole attention was engaged in wringing these words from a reluctant heart, and he looked at neither as he turned, dignified, determined, and went out of a small door.

Price sank into the nearest chair, but Bray stood. The worm had turned, and was still. Silence, pierced by suspense, crept into the office. The brazen clock beat on sedately, with a seeming longer interval of waiting between ticks; the buzz of the bank and the rattle of wheels in the street leaked in, and each moment Price sank lower into his chair, waves of suspense dashing their white foam on his face.

But the "worm" still stood, looking at the door through which had vanished the man against whom he had turned. His pallid, trouble-stricken face was a study—a deserted look there, as if something were retreating to his head, an expression of looking backward over his suffering and the dreadful consequences of his assumed guilt, or even suspicion of it.

There are degrees of satisfaction. Some demand the highest pleasure; others are content with little. The vengeance of some stops not on this side of murder. "If the trodden worm doth turn, hath it strength to justify revenge?"

Clare returned, wounded, but determined; the old dignity there, but tempered. "Bray, the directors want you. You have suffered most. We will wait and hear their decision regarding you."

The merest tremble of appeal was in the tone, the merest sign in the eyes and face. The mighty man who had crushed him was now appealing to him. Here was the triumph he had prayed for—the chance to mercilessly avenge. But the "worm" quivered, crumpled the hat still more and walked weakly through the door to meet the solemn body above.

The next day he stood making figures, changed, less assertive, older, wrote wavering signatures in his luxurious room, and Charles Price, with his wife, went to Australia "for his health."—Illustrated Bits.

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