

The Forged Checks.

It was while I was vicar at St. Chad's, Manchester, that the most trying and painful episode of my life occurred, and there are times even now when I shudder to think of the anguish my dear, dead wife and myself were called upon to undergo.

One morning a shabby young fellow who looked a typical ne'er-do-well called on me to beg. I had great difficulty in recognizing him as Robert Emmerton, the only son of a wealthy corn factor who had been one of my church-wardens at Weymouth. On questioning him I found that he had squandered his wealth by the most riotous living, and for the last two years had been earning a most precarious living as hanger-on at race courses and professional tipster, and, I fear, at other employments more shady still. I did all I could for him, for his father's sake; found him respectable lodgings and got a business friend of mine to take him into his office. But, as I feared, my friend had to dismiss him in less than a month, and I lost sight of him. What his gratitude was like I was to learn a few weeks later.

I was sitting in my study one Tuesday morning, the first week in December, preparing a lecture I was to deliver to our literary society, when I was handed the card of a visitor who wished to see me. The name was "Mr. L. Pridson," and for the moment I could not recall any such person to my mind. But when he was shown in, I instantly recognized him as the cashier of the Manchester City Bank. He was a portly and rather a pompous man, and now he looked decidedly nervous.

"Good morning, Mr. Pridson," I said. "A wretched morning, is it not? Take a seat, please."

He sat down, but made no response to my greeting, and I waited for him to speak. "Mr. Adamson," he said, "I have called upon very unpleasant business. It will be a great relief to us if you can clear yourself, sir."

"Clear myself? Why, Mr. Pridson, what do you mean?" "On the afternoon of the 3rd of November, Mr. Adamson, you came to the bank and requested us to cash a £700 check, drawn in your favor and signed by Sir James Garel. This morning the check was returned by Sir James, with the intimation that it was a forgery. On minutely examining the signature this morning we found that, though a clever imitation, Sir James was right. You will admit that this is a serious business, sir."

"Very serious," I said, "but it does not concern me. I simply know nothing about the check."

"Mr. Adamson," he exclaimed, with severity. "Mr. Pridson," I said, a little heated.

He shook his head impatiently. "Mr. Adamson, about 3.45 on the afternoon of November 3, you came to the bank muffled up, on account of the fog, you said, and young Siddell attended to you. You produced this check, which you had endorsed, and asked him to cash it. Siddell brought the check to me, and I came and spoke to you. A large amount, Mr. Adamson, I said, 'Yes you replied, it represents Sir James' generosity to our restoration and poor funds. I will take the seven hundred in fifty or hundred-pound notes, and the odd fifty in gold.' Of course under the circumstances I never questioned the genuineness of the check or your representations. In the ordinary course of business the check came before Sir James yesterday, and this morning was returned to us, as I have said. There is no doubt it is a forgery."

I saw that there had been a forgery somewhere, and that I was in an unpleasant position, but my conscience was quite clear. "Mr. Pridson," I said, "you are under a delusion. I never had a check of Sir James Garel's and I never brought it to the bank to cash it. I have never seen such a check from first to last."

He took the document from his pocketbook and held it between his fingers. It pained me to see that he would not trust it into my hands. "Here is the check," and turning it over, "is that not your signature?"

I scrutinized it closely. "It certainly looks like it, but it is a forgery. I know nothing about that check, I tell you once again."

"Mr. Adamson," he said, solemnly, "I make one last appeal to you. With my hands I handed the money over to you. For your own sake, confess that you were tempted and fell. Sir James will be merciful, and I can answer for our directors. In fact, I am empowered to say so."

"Mr. Pridson, you mean to be kind, I am sure," I said, speaking steadily, though my limbs trembled, "but your appeal is an insult."

"You know what it will mean—prosecution? Think again of your position, your wife."

"I have told you the truth, I replied, and he left, truly sorry for me, I believe.

I called my wife in, and as gently as I could told her the whole business. I knew what a terrible thing it was for her, but, thank God, she has ever shown the noblest courage and sublimest faith in the worst extremities.

"What shall you do, my dear?" she asked.

"In all probability I shall be arrested shortly. I am going to see Fells at once."

"God help you, my dear," she said simply, as I kissed her.

Mr. Fells was one of the best known solicitors in Manchester, and a man I was proud to call a personal friend. I found him in his office and told him the whole story.

He looked at me keenly when I had done, then said: "It may be an insult, Adamson, but I ask you as a legal adviser, do you know anything about that check?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Thank you. Then, of course,

it is a double forgery—your name and Sir James'?"

"But Pridson persists that it was I he saw."

"O counterfeit of you. Depend upon it, it was not the work of a fool. We must find him, and you must prove where you were at that hour. Come, I'll walk home with you."

We were a few yards from my own door when a cab drove up and two plain clothes constables got out and arrested me. Fells accompanied me to the police station, and there left me to see my wife. And thus, for the first time in my life, I was a prisoner.

Fells came to see me early next morning. "It's all over the place, Adamson, and your parishioners are highly indignant. I have set Lester, the private detective, to work, and he's a good man, I will know. Now, where were you that afternoon?"

"I haven't the least idea. I have been racking my brains for the best part of the night, but all to no purpose."

Fells was greatly disappointed. "You must find out," he said; "much depends on it. Mrs. Adamson and myself have searched your diary and engagement book, but there are only two entries toweaker. However, it will come to you later, I hope."

It was a trying ordeal to stand in the dock and see in the crowded court many that I knew. Some of them nodded to me kindly as I entered, but when they heard the evidence I saw trouble and perplexity on their faces. I did not wonder at or resent their changed expression—the evidence was certainly strong. "Poor, dear gentleman," said most of them, trouble must have unhinged his brain, or he couldn't have done it." There were a few, however, who passionately declared their belief in my innocence.

"Have any of the notes been traced?" asked the stipendiary.

"No, sir," said the prosecuting solicitor; "though we hope to do so. I am instructed to ask for a remand, when further evidence will be forthcoming."

"I do not oppose that," said Fells, "but of course you will grant bail. Your Worship? My client is innocent, and himself the victim of the fraud."

"I cannot at present, Mr. Fells," said the Magistrate, curtly. "I remand the accused until next Tuesday."

When I was again before the Magistrate the first witness was a hotel clerk from Liverpool. He recollected a clergyman staying at the hotel on November 4, and the manager cashed him a £100 note, which Mr. Pridson swore was one of those he had paid me.

The clerk professed to identify me, and said I told him I was going to Ireland. The police, through the prosecuting solicitor, were again applying for a remand to trace my alleged movements, when a woman caused a disturbance by trying to push into court. "Let me go, yo' fool," she said to the policeman at the door. "I'm a witness, I tell yo'. I know a lot."

She got in at last—a stout, dirty, panting woman, with a shawl around her head, followed by a stout, old woman who looked rather scared.

"Yo' wussup," she began.

"What do you want, woman," asked the Magistrate, severely.

"I'm a witness, yo' wussup. Let me git in the witness box theer and I'll tell yo'. It's none o' him, pointing to me; 'it couldn't be him. But I'll tell yo'."

After a little demur the woman was sworn. Who she was I could not at that moment conceive.

"My name's Sarah Edmunds, and I'm a widder, 23 Little Emily-street," she began. "That day, November 3, my man had a fit, and the doctor said he'd dee before the day were out. He wanted badly to see a parson, and I humored him and went to fetch Mr. Adamson theer, and he came at once. It was about 2 o'clock, a nasty, misty day, too, I remember. Well he went with me, and rare and nice he were to Jacob. He set by him and read the bible and prayed for him very nicely. Jacob told him what a bad lot he'd been, but it didna make any difference, parson theer prayed for him same as if he'd been gentry. And he stopped with him till he deed at ten minutes past 6, an' he gave me 5 shillings towards the buryin'."

Betsy here, who lives next door, bought a newspaper and lent it to me, and last night I read about this business, and I says, 'Law, Betsy, it's the parson as coom to Jacob,' and I read a bit further and I seed the robbery was done on the very same day he were with Jacob. So I knowed it couldna be him, and I thowt what a fool he were not to tell yo' where he were, and I come to tell yo' myself. Yo' can let him go yo' wussup; yo've got the wrong horse this time."

No sooner had the woman begun speaking than the whole incident came to me. If I had only remembered it at first, what trouble I might have been spared!

The opposing solicitor was suspicious.

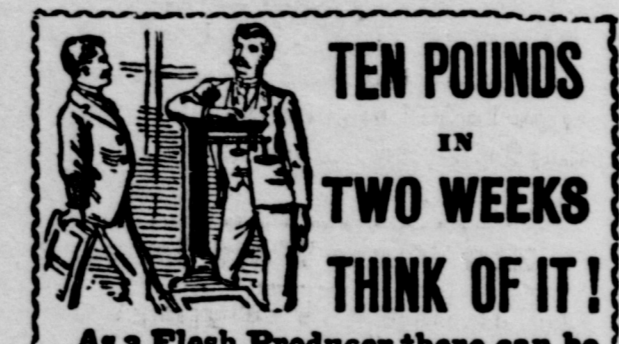
"How do you remember it was the same day, Mrs. Edmunds," he asked.

"Why," she said, "don't you think I know when my Jacob deed? It was the third day of November, at ten minutes past six, and here's Betsy Snill, who seed the parson theer, to speak, and could bring two or three more."

There was a good deal of muttered conversation between the Magistrate, Fells and his opponent, and at last I was remanded on nominal bail. "Considering all the extraordinary features of the case, the woman's story ought to be strictly investigated," the stipendiary said.

But three days later all doubts were set at rest by a letter received from the chief constable at Philadelphia. The writer confessed to having, with the aid of an accomplice, forged the check which had cashed. It had been a very simple

and easy job, the scoundrel airily remarked. "No doubt I could easily catch myself, he went on, but he thought it just as well to write, as perhaps I might get into trouble. The letter was signed "Ronald Emmerton."



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The same having been seized by me under and by virtue of several executions issued out of the Supreme Court and County Courts of New Brunswick against the said Robert C. Byles.

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