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A VILLAGE INCIDENT.

I was the 19th day of October, I remember the date now, even if I had forgotten it when the prosecuting attorney questioned me. I sat in the last seat in the row, on the east side of the school room near the window. A dull October rain was falling outside, and occasionally the surly northeast wind dashed the water dripping from the eaves against the pane. The swish and howl made me shiver. The few patches of grass remaining on the play ground were already brown, and the sunflowers at the edge of the neighboring cornfield stood like skeletons with their bickened heads and curled remnants of leaves. The corn had been gathered from the field adjacent to the window, and a drove of cattle were taking their first run through the stalks. I was dreamily watching one of them eat a big ear of corn when the sheriff's rap at the door startled me.

This school was small that day for not many of the little ones had ventured out and few of the older pupils had enrolled yet. Three large girls sat opposite me, seven boys were in the double row of small seats back of the stove, and two wee girls occupied a moveable bench at the fire. The teacher, Orin Stearns, was busying himself with little Clifford Beahm, who had come a long distance through the rain and mud. He had taken off the child's shoes and was drying and warming his feet at the stove. I recall that I had observed that morning more than ever the peculiar expression in the teacher's face. The older people had all noticed it one Sunday in August when he came to church for the first time at Minona. They had no set rules for inferring character from the physiognomy, but they had decided one and all that there was something on his mind. They afterward understood what it was. I noticed, too, that his eyes were heavy as though from loss of sleep and that his cheeks were more sunken than usual. At times he sat, unobserved he supposed, and looked before him as though deep in thought or stood and gazed from the window with his firm lips relaxed from their habitual smile, his heavy brows and his dark eyes seemingly fixed upon some grave object in the chambers of his mind. Such a gloomy aspect possessed him at these times that even the small children noted it. Little Clifford Beahm, who was more familiar with the teacher than were any of the rest of us, once he found him thus abstracted when he stole in at recess from the playground to have a talk with him. I recollect he asked me in a whimper, "What's the matter wif teacher? He looks so funny!" I tiptoed into the entry and while Clifford inadvertently coughed, I saw a transformation.

Although school had been in progress for six weeks none of us felt acquainted with the teacher. It was not because he repelled us, for no one could be more affable. He had a bright smile and a cheerful, kind word for us everywhere, but we had heard rumors and read omen until we came to regard his dark, Napoleonic face when smiling on us, as the countenance of an actor, and we sought his secret at a distance, as one surrounds the lair of dangerous game.

Ralph LeGrande in the Minona bank, had known Stearns at the University, and had told my father about him. It seemed he had stood very well in his classes, but he had not moved in LeGrande's social set, he had lacked the polish of polite circles; besides he had dressed shabbily and had put in his spare minutes weeping offices, carrying papers and other low jobs. Ralph had a dim recollection of seeing his name connected with some sort of mission work, but it was among a very degraded class of people.

When the officer had read the warrant to him the teacher came into the room as if he might have just had an invitation to dine. That was at 10 o'clock Wednesday. He told us there would be no more school until Monday, and called the roll with his usual clear, steady voice and deliberate manner. I told father about him and he shook his head remarking that an educated rogue is worse than any other. When I reached home I learned that during the previous night the bank at Minona had been robbed of five thousand dollars. A wire screen had been torn away from a window and the glass broken but

no one had heard the noise, not even the watchers by Mart Howe's sick bed, in the room just over the window (had hear any stir below). At twenty minutes to one o'clock the doctor had seen some one hastily leaving the building. The fact and a key to the combination of the safe picked up on the floor of the bank next morning were the only clues. I found out afterwards that to Ralph LeGrande, the assistant cashier more than to any other belonged the praise of following up the doctor's story and causing the arrest of Stearns before the crime was a day old.

For some reason LeGrande had come early to the bank that morning and found the open window and the rifled safe. There were foot prints in the soft earth at the end of the sidewalk leading from the bank. When after talking with Dr. Phillips, he followed these. For a mile and a half they had led him along the edge of the road to the home of Farmer Inman with whom Stearns had been lodging. With this information and some of the bank's papers which he claimed to have picked up a half mile out, he returned to town. Putting these with some private suspicions, before five people in Minona knew what had happened, he was on his way to the county seat.

Thursday at half past one Stearns had his preliminary hearing. In the forenoon a telegram had come for the prisoner in these words: "Orin Stearns. Her suffering is over at last; mother passed away at seven twenty this morning. John."

As he sat that afternoon in the smoky court room I saw on his face that expression out of which little Clifford Beahm had startled him that day in the school room. Then I thought I understood him, but I knew him better later on.

The evidence against the accused although purely circumstantial, was convincing. He had left Mart Howe's sick room before twelve, but if he was the figure seen by the doctor as the foot prints seemed to indicate, he was still about the building at twenty minutes to one. These facts taken with the tell-tale paper made a strong chain, in the minds of the listeners which closed around the unfortunate school teacher. There were two mysteries, however, not yet explained: a thorough search of the culprit's belongings had failed to disclose the treasure and yet Stearns had little chance to seclude it and no good use had yet been made of the safe combination. The only copy known to be in existence had been in possession of Mr. MacLaughlin, the president. The one found on the floor of the bank after the robbery was in a hand writing not unlike that of the assistant cashier.

It was by the merest chance that the real truth of the matter ever became known. Mrs. McCurdy was very proud of her part in the discovery and she certainly deserved a great deal of praise for it. She dined with my mother on Sunday and told all about it. I suppose if she were to visit us now after so many years she would tell the story over again and laugh at LeGrande's carelessness.

"You see," she said, "Ralph has lived with us ever since the first day his father sent him to work in the bank here. I never did like his stuck-up ways, but he paid his bills tol'by regular and that's what interested me. I've noticed he's been gettin' more reckless of late. I allus thought he drunk more or less, but I never knew him to gamble tel jest last summer. Fourth o' July he fetched some young fellers from the city to dinner with him. They've visited with him off and on ever sence. Two weeks ago today one of them, a dissipated lookin' chap staid all night with him. Well, when this thing happened and Ralph wuz in sich a hurry to shove it off on the school teacher that I knowed would never do the like of it, I begun to think. I remembered he had been out late Tuesday night, but it ain't like'y I should have said anything if he hadn't left his trunk open Thursday mornin'." It appeared afterwards that the president had been thinking even before Mrs. McCurdy.

When school called Monday mornin' we pupils all felt acquainted with Orin Stearns.

On day last June I visited Minona again. The little town showed

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