

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

'It beats all!' said the proprietor of Lufkin's store at Hardhack Corner, drawing his shaggy eyebrows together in a puzzled frown. 'You sure you laid it on the counter, John?'

'I certainly did,' replied John Burton, a customer of many years' standing. 'I laid it right down there,' he added, smiting the indicated spot with a hairy fist. 'You were back to me at the time, putting up some dishes on the shelf. Just then Uncle 'Bijah came along, and I turned to shake hands with him, and when I looked round again you were facing the counter, and there wasn't anything there. Sure you didn't pick it up absent-minded like, and put it in your pocket, or else in the drawer?'

'No, I never touched it,' declared Mr. Lufkin. 'Beats all how a thing can get away from right under your nose.'

'Lost something?' asked Uncle Abijah Neal, in a tone of mild interest, while others of the little company who had gathered in the store this summer evening left their seats on sundry chairs and kegs, and moved up within closer range of the discussion.

'Yes,' said John Burton, 'it's a dollar bill. I laid it down on the counter and waited for my change, and now it's mysteriously disappeared. Looks kind o' suspicious. You don't know anything about it, do you, Uncle 'Bijah?' he continued, with a twinkle in his eye. 'You were standing pretty close to it before it vanished.'

'Well, you are welcome to search me,' responded the old gentleman. 'I guess I sha'n't run away as I did the last time I was accused of stealing a dollar bill.'

There was an invitingly reminiscent note in his voice that at once called out the question, 'How was that, Uncle 'Bijah?'

'It was when I was a boy up in Pooduck,' he began.

'Might as well all sit down,' said Abner Harmon, one of the younger members of the loafing fraternity. 'I wouldn't be a mite surprised if one of Uncle 'Bijah's Pooduck stories charmed that bill right back.'

'I was only ten years old or so at the time,' Uncle 'Bijah went on, 'and I guess I was about the loneliest little chap that ever was. I'd lost my own folks, and I was living with a cousin on my mother's side—David Berry by name.'

'I've nothing to say now against David, nor Mehitable, his wife. I suppose they thought that the proper way to bring me up was to make me toe the mark. They used to say that they didn't intend to have any spoiled child on their hands. But I don't know; I guess they came pretty near it, after all. When a little shaver has had all the spunk taken out of him, so that he goes meeching round, expecting a scolding or a cuff at every turn, he doesn't lack much of being spoiled, according to my way of thinking. Sparing the rod isn't the only way of spoiling a child.'

'Well, to come to my story. One day in the fall along came Sol Peters, a tin pedlar that used to make regular trips through those parts. He didn't stop at our house, for Mehitable couldn't abide pedlars; but I knew that he would call at the Dobsons', and so, as David wasn't round, and Mehitable wasn't looking, I tagged on behind the cart.'

'In those days a tin pedlar's cart had a powerful attraction for me, and if I had any ambition it was to drive one of my own when I grew up.'

'Mrs. Dobson and her daughter Jane came out to the cart, and spent some time dickering with Sol, and finally bought quite a little truck. Sol figured it up, and it came to 87 cents, besides the rags that he had taken in exchange, and Mrs. Dobson went into the house and came back with a dollar bill.'

'Sol was busy packing his goods into the cart, and Mrs. Dobson was looking over what she'd bought; and somehow, when he got ready to change the bill, it wasn't anywhere to be found. Meanwhile Jane had gone back into the house.'

'Of course, there was a good deal of hunting and wondering, and pretty soon I began to get scared and to think that I'd better be making myself scarce.'

'I didn't have the least idea what had become of the bill, though I had been hanging round the cart all the time; but I was so used to being blamed that I was afraid they'd suspect me. And, of course, that was just what they did.'

'When Sol saw me slinking off, he sang out, "Look here, Bub, do you know anything about that money?" And at that I started to run, and Sol after me. He caught me easy enough, and came dragging me back. Then he made me empty out my pockets. Of course, he didn't find what he was after, but that didn't anyways pacify him. There was a lump in my throat that made me keep swallowing, I suppose; at any rate, Sol says, says he:

"I'm blest if I don't believe the little scamp has gone and swallowed that bill!"

'At that it did seem to me as if I should sink right down into the earth. I expected to be whipped, and I didn't know but I'd have to go to State's prison; but, worse than all was the idea that folks would always be pointing me out for the chap that swallowed a dollar bill.'

"Own up, or I'll trounce you!" says Sol; and I don't know but I should have owned up if Jane Dobson hadn't appeared on the scene just then. Jane was certainly a friend in need. She said right off that she didn't believe that I had taken the money.

"Well, then," says Sol, "where's the bill, and what did he run for?" And she says, "He ran because he was frightened; and as for the bill," says she, "I don't know where it is, but I guess I'd hunt round a while longer before I accused a poor little motherless boy of stealing it," says she.

'At that Sol let go of my jacket, and they all began to hunt again; but they couldn't find hide nor hair of the bill, and I could see by the way that Sol looked that he hadn't changed his mind about me.'

'Pretty soon Jane says, "You just wait a minute," and went into the house. I guess it was what you might call an inspiration that had come to her.'

'In a jiffy she came out, holding a piece of brown paper that she'd cut out just about the size of a bill.'

'I can see her now as she stood by the cart, holding the paper between her thumb and finger, her eyes shining, and her cheeks as smooth and red as a sop-savine apple, and her curls kind of blowing about in the breeze. 'Pears to me I don't see any such pretty girls nowadays, but perhaps it's because my eyesight is failing.'

'Then she dropped the piece of paper, and before it got to the ground a gust of wind took it, and away it went through the air, with Jane following along to keep it in sight.'

'There was quite a sizeable brook crossed the road a few rods below the Dobson place, with a bridge built over it; and in under the bridge that paper blew, and Jane crawled in after it.'

'In a minute back she came, with the paper in her hand. She'd found it in a little crevice, like, between two stones in the arch. And that wasn't all that she had in her hand.' Here Uncle 'Bijah paused impressively. 'For in that very same place, right beside that piece of paper, she'd found the identical dollar bill!'

'Oh, Uncle 'Bijah!' exclaimed Abner Harmon, a little incredulously. 'That wouldn't have happened once in a million times!'

'Maybe not,' was the quiet reply.

'I wasn't telling you about the million times that it didn't happen. I was telling you about the one time that it did.'

'Well,' resumed the old gentleman, 'that cleared my skirts, and Sol gave me a tin whistle by way of apology, and Mrs. Dobson brought me out some caraway-seed cakes to soothe my feelings with.'

'But Jane just patted my cheek, and says she, "You mustn't ever run away from trouble, 'Bijah. Just stand your ground, and speak up for yourself, and be a man!" says she.'

'And that little bit of advice did me a lot more good than the whistle or the seed-cakes. It was a word spoken in season, and I took it to heart.'

'It's curious,' mused the old man, 'how memory works. I'm getting sort of forgetful, but it's only what has happened lately that seems to slip my mind. Well, I suppose it's just the same as when you have a basketful of odds and ends, and they begin to spill out—it's the things near the top that go first. This little circumstance that I've been relating was pretty near the bottom of my basket, buried, as you might say, under the happenings of seventy odd years. And yet it came out just as fresh and distinct as if it was a thing of yesterday the minute I heard you speaking about a dollar bill disappearing. You sure you've made a thorough search for that bill, Mr. Lufkin?'

'Why, yes, I think so,' said the storekeeper, with a little start, as if he had suddenly been brought back to a consciousness of the loss. 'However, I guess we'll look again. Perhaps we'd better have a little light on the subject,' he added, scratching a match and turning to the kerosene lamp behind the counter. 'The days aren't quite so long as they were.'

'What's that hanging on to your coat-tail, Lufkin?' called out John Burton, with a chuckle.

'Oh, that is one of those sheets of sticky fly-paper, I suppose,' said Mr. Lufkin, impatiently. 'I declare, they're more plague than profit!'

Then, after a downward glance, he added, in a tone of deep disgust, 'And I'll be jiggered if this one hasn't got that dollar bill plastered on to it!'—*Youth's Companion*.