

A BOY'S LESSONS IN DISHONESTY

(Picture 1)

"Have you examined that bill, James?"

"Yes, sir."

"Anything wrong?"

"I find two errors."

"Ah, let me see."

The lad handed his employer a long bill that had been placed on his desk for examination.

"Here is an error of ten dollars in the calculation which they have made against themselves; and another of ten dollars in the footing."

"Also against themselves?"

"Yes, sir."

The merchant smiled in a way that struck the lad as peculiar.

"Twenty dollars against themselves," he remarked in a kind of pleased surprise; "trusty clerks they must have!"

"Shall I correct the figures?" asked the lad.

"No; let them correct their own mistakes. We don't examine bill's for other people's benefit," replied the merchant. "It will be time to correct those errors when they find them out. All so much gain as it now stands."

The boy's delicate moral sense was shocked at so unexpected a remark. He was the son of a poor widow, who had taught him that to be just is the duty of man, and that "honesty is the best policy" always.

Mr. Carman, the merchant, in whose employment the lad James had been for only a few months, was an old friend of James's father, and a man in whom he had the highest confidence. In fact, James had always looked upon him as a kind of model man. When Mr. Carman agreed to take him into his store, the lad felt that great good fortune was in his way.

"Let them correct their own mistakes." These words made a strong impression on the mind of James Lewis. When first spoken by Mr. Carman, with the meaning which he gave them, as we have said, he felt shocked. But as he turned them over again in his thoughts, and remembered that this man stood very high in his mother's estimation, he began to think that perhaps the thing was fair enough in business. Mr. Carman was hardly the man to do wrong.

(Picture 2) A few days after James had examined the bill, a clerk from the house which had sent it, called for settlement. The lad, who was present, waited with interest to see whether Mr. Carman would speak of the error. But he made no remark. A check for the amount of the bill as rendered, was filled up, and a receipt taken.

"Is that right?" James asked himself this question. His conscience said no. The fact that Mr. Carman had so acted, bewildered his mind.

"It may be the way in business"—he thought to himself—"but it doesn't look honest. I wouldn't have believed it of him.

Mr. Carman had a way with him that won the boy's heart, and naturally tended to make him judge of whatever he might do in a most favorable manner.

"I wish he had corrected that error," he said to himself a great many times when congratulating himself upon his own good fortune in having been received into Mr. Carman's employment. "It doesn't look right, but it may be in the way of business."

One day he went to the bank and drew the money for a check. In counting it over, he found that the teller had paid him fifty dollars too much. So he went back to the counter and told him of his mistake. The teller thanked him, and he returned to the store with the consciousness in his mind of having done right.

"The teller overpaid me fifty dollars," he said to Mr. Carman, as he handed him the money.

"Indeed," replied the latter, a light breaking over his countenance; and he hastily counted the bank bills.

The light faded as the last bill left his fingers. "There's no mistake, James." A tone of disappointment was in his voice.

"Oh, I gave them back the fifty dollars. Wasn't that right?"

(Picture 3) "You simpleton!" exclaimed Mr. Carman.

"Don't you know that bank mistakes are never corrected? If the teller had paid you fifty dollars short he would not have made it right."

The warm blood mantled the cheek of James under this reproof. It is often the case that more shame is felt for a blunder than for a crime. In this instance the lad felt a sort of mortification at having done what Mr. Carman was pleased to call a silly thing, and he made up his mind that if they should ever over-pay him a thousand dollars at the bank, he should bring the amount to his employer, and let him do as he pleased with the money.

"Let people look out for their own mistakes," said Mr. Carman.

James Lewis pondered these things in his heart. The impression they made was too strong ever to be forgotten. "It may be right," he said, but he did not feel altogether satisfied.

(Picture 4.) A month or two after this last occurrence, as James counted over his weekly wages, just received from Mr. Carman, he saw that he had been paid a half dollar too much.

His first impulse was to return the half dollar to his employer, and it was on his lips to say, "You have given me a half dollar too much, sir," when the unforgotten words, "Let people look after their own mistakes," flashing into his mind, made him hesitate. To parley with evil is to be overcome.

"I must think about this," said James, as he put the money into his pocket. "If it is right in one case, it is right in another. Mr. Carman doesn't correct mistakes that people make in his favor, and he can't complain when the rule works against himself."

But the boy was very far from being comfortable. He felt that to keep a half dollar would be a dishonest act. Still he could not make up his mind to return it, at least not then.

James did not return the half-dollar, but spent it for his gratification. After he had done this, it came suddenly into his head that Mr. Carman had only been trying him, and he was filled with anxiety and alarm.

Not long after this Mr. Carman repeated the same mistake. Again James kept the half-dollar, and with less hesitation.

"Let him correct his own mistakes," said he resolutely; "that's the doctrine he acts upon with other people, and he can't complain if he gets paid in the same coin he puts in circulation. I just wanted a half dollar."

From this time, the fine moral sense of James Lewis was blunted and his conscience troubled him but little. He began to cherish a spirit of covetousness, which is in the heart of all, until subdued by the grace of Christ. He soon began to desire the possession of things for which he was not able to pay.

James had good business qualifications. This pleased Mr. Carman. He saw that the young man was intelligent, industrious, and tactful with customers. For this reason, he advanced him rapidly, and, before he was eighteen years of age, he held the most responsible position in the store.

But James had learned something more from his employer than the secret of doing business well. He had learned to be dishonest. He had never forgotten the first lesson he had received in the downward course. And this wicked instruction he had acted upon, not only in two instances, but in a hundred, and almost always to the injury of Mr. Carman.

The young man had long since given up waiting for mistakes to be made in his favor. He originated them in the varied and complicated transactions of a large business in which he was trusted implicitly.

Of course, he grew to be sharp and cunning; always on the alert; always bright, and ready skillfully to meet any approaches towards a discovery of his wrong-doing by his employer, who held him in high regard.

In this way it went on until James Lewis was in his twentieth year. Then the merchant received a letter which aroused his suspicions. This letter spoke of the young man as not keeping the most respectable company, and as spending money too freely for a clerk on a moderate salary.

Before this time James and his mother had removed into a pleasant house, for which he paid a rent of four hundred dollars yearly. His salary was only eight hundred dollars, but he deceived his mother by telling her that it was fifteen hundred. Every comfort that she needed was fully supplied, and she was beginning to feel that, after a long struggle with the world, her happier days had come.

(Picture 5) James was at his desk when the letter was received by Mr. Carman. He looked at his employer, and saw him change countenance suddenly. The letter was read twice, and James saw that the contents appeared to disturb his employer. Mr. Carman glanced toward the desk and their eyes met. It was only for a moment, but the look that James received made his heart stop beating.

There was something about the movements of the merchant for the rest of the day that troubled the young man. It was plain to him that suspicion had been aroused by that letter. Oh, how bitterly now did he repent! How he dreaded discovery and punishment! Exposure would disgrace and ruin him, and bow the head of his widowed mother even to the grave.

That evening at supper, Mrs. Lewis noticed that her son did not eat; and that his face was troubled.

"You are not well," she said "perhaps a rest will make you feel better."

"It's nothing but a headache; I'll lie down on the sofa in the parlor a little while."

Mrs. Lewis followed him into the parlor shortly, and sitting down on the sofa on which he was lying, placed her hand upon his head. Ah, it would take more than the loving pressure of a mother's hand to ease the pain which he was suffering. The touch of that pure hand increased the pain to agony.

"Do you feel better?" asked Mrs. Lewis. She had remained some time with her hand on his forehead.

"Not much," he replied; "I think a walk in the open air will do me good," he added, rising.

"Don't go out, James," said Mrs. Lewis, a troubled feeling coming into her heart.

"I'll only walk a few squares," he replied, as he hurried down the street.

"There is something more than headache the matter with him," thought Mrs. Lewis.

For half an hour James walked without any purpose in his mind beyond the escape from the presence of his mother. At last his walk brought him near Mr. Carman's store, and in passing, he was surprised at seeing a light within.

"What can this mean?" he asked himself, a new fear creeping into his trembling heart.

He listened by the door and windows, but he could hear no sound within.

"There's something wrong," he said; "what can it be? If this is discovered what will be the end of it? Ruin! ruin! O my poor mother!"

The wretched young man hastened on, walking the streets for two hours, when he returned home. His mother met him when he entered, and with unconcealed anxiety, asked him if he were better. He said "yes," but in a manner that only increased the trouble she felt. He then passed hastily to his own room.

In the morning the strangely altered face of her son as he met his mother at the breakfast table, struck alarm to her heart. He was silent, and evaded all her questions. While they still sat at the table, the door bell rang loudly. The sound startled James, and he turned his head nervously to listen.

"Who is it?" asked Mrs. Lewis.

"A gentleman who wishes to see Mr. James," replied the girl.

James rose instantly and went out into the hall, shutting the dining-room door as he did so. Mrs. Lewis sat waiting her son's return. She heard him coming back in a few moments; but he did not enter the dining-room. Then he returned along the hall to the street door, and she heard it shut. All was silent. Starting up, she ran into the passage, but James was not there. He had gone away with the person who called.

(Picture 6) Ah, that was a sad home leaving. Mr. Carman had spent half the night in examining the accounts that had been kept by James. He discovered frauds of over six thousand dollars. Blindly indignant, he had sent an officer to arrest him early in the morning. It was with this officer that he went away from his mother, never to return.

"The young villain shall lie in the bed he has made for himself!" exclaimed Mr. Carman, in his bitter indignation. And he made a complete exposure. At the trial he showed an eager desire to have him convicted, and presented such an array of evidence that the jury could not give any other verdict than guilty.

The poor mother was in court, and sobbed as she heard the evidences of the guilt of her son. The presiding judge addressed the culprit, and asked if he had anything to say why sentence should not be pronounced against him. The prisoner arose, and said:

"Will it please your honor to ask my prosecutor to come a little nearer, so that I can look at him and your honor at the same time?"

Mr. Carman was directed to come forward. James looked at him a few moments, and turned to the judge.

(Picture 7) "What I have to say to your honor is this" (he spoke calmly and distinctly), "and it may, in a degree, excuse, though it cannot justify, my crime. I went into that man's store an innocent boy. If he had been an honest man, I would not stand before you to-day as a criminal!"

Mr. Carman appealed to the court for protection against that which he called an outrageous attack upon his character; but he was ordered to be silent. James went on in a firm voice:—

"Only a few weeks after I began work in this man's store, I examined a bill, by his direction, and discovered an error of twenty dollars."

The face of Mr. Carman was crimson.

"You remember it, I see," said James, "and I shall have cause to remember it as long as I live. I asked if I should correct the figures, and you answered:—

"No; let them correct their own mistakes. We don't examine bills for other people's benefit.'

"It was my first lesson in dishonesty. I saw the bill settled, and Mr. Carman took twenty dollars that was not his own. I felt shocked at first. It seemed such a wrong thing. But soon after this, he called me a simpleton for handing back a fifty-dollar bill to the teller of a bank, which he had overpaid me on a check, and then"—

"May I ask the protection of the court?" said Mr. Carman.

"Is the story of the lad true?" asked the judge.

Mr. Carman looked confused. All felt certain that he was guilty of leading the unhappy young man astray.

"Not long afterward," resumed the young man, "in receiving my wages, I found that Mr. Carman had paid me fifty cents too much. I was about to give it back to him, when I remembered his remark about letting people correct their own mistakes, and I said to myself, 'let him discover and correct his own errors.' Then I dishonestly kept the money.

"Again the same thing happened, and again I kept the money that did not belong to me. This was the beginning of evil, and here I am. If he had shown any mercy to me, I might have kept silent and made no defense."

The young man covered his face with his hands, and sat down overpowered with his feelings. His mother who was near him, sobbed aloud, and bending over, laid her hands on his head. "My poor boy! my poor boy!" she murmured.

There were few undimmed eyes in the court-room. In the silence that followed, Mr. Carman exclaimed:—

"Is my character to be thus blasted on the word of a criminal, your honor? Is this right?"

"Your solemn oath that this charge is untrue," said the judge, "will clear your reputation in the eyes of the people."

At these words, James Lewis stood up again instantly. It was the unhappy boy's only opportunity, and the court felt bound in humanity to hear him. Turning his eyes upon Mr. Carman, he exclaimed:—

(Picture 8) "Let him take his oath if he dare!"

Mr. Carman consulted with his counsel, and withdrew.

The judge then arose to pass sentence.

"In consideration of your youth, and the temptation to which in tender years you were subjected, the court gives you the lightest sentence,—one year's imprisonment. But let me solemnly warn you against any further steps in the way you have taken. Crime can have no valid excuse. It is evil in the sight of God and man, and leads only to suffering. When you come forth again after your imprisonment, may it be with the resolution to die rather than commit crime!"

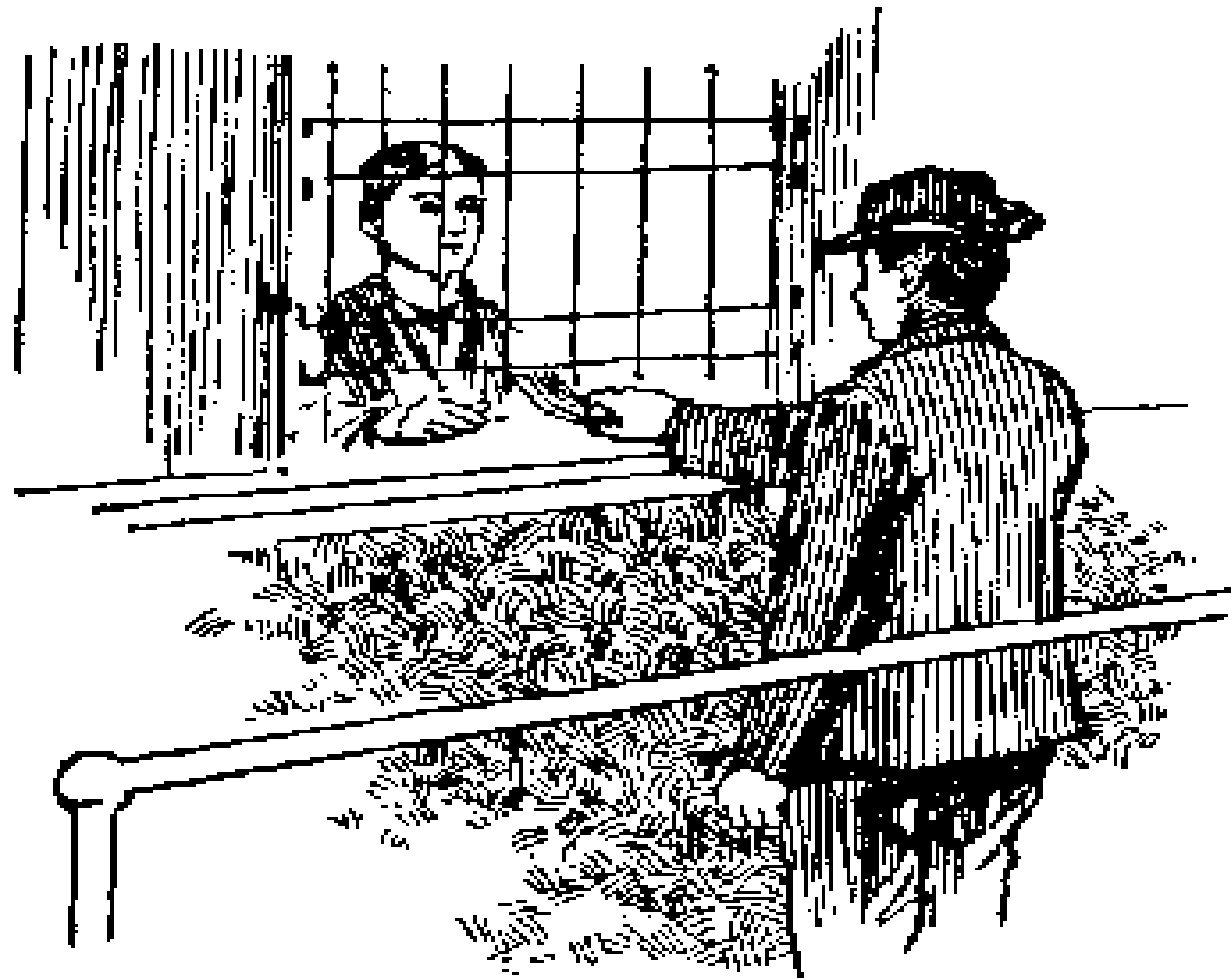
A year afterward, when James Lewis came from prison, his mother was dead. From the day her pale face faded from his vision as he passed from the court-room, he never saw her again.

Ten years thereafter a man was reading a newspaper in a far Western town. He had a calm, serious face, and looked like one who had known suffering and trial.

"Brought to justice at last!" he said to himself, with deep emotion. "Convicted on the charge of open insolvency, and sent to state prison. So much for the man who gave me in tender years the first lessons in wrong-doing. But thank God! another lesson,—the words of the judge, spoken to me so many years ago,—have been remembered. 'When you come forth again, may it be with the resolution to die rather than commit crime!' and I have kept these words in my heart when there seemed no way of escaping except through crime. And God helping me, I will remember them as long as I live."



"Twenty dollars against themselves."



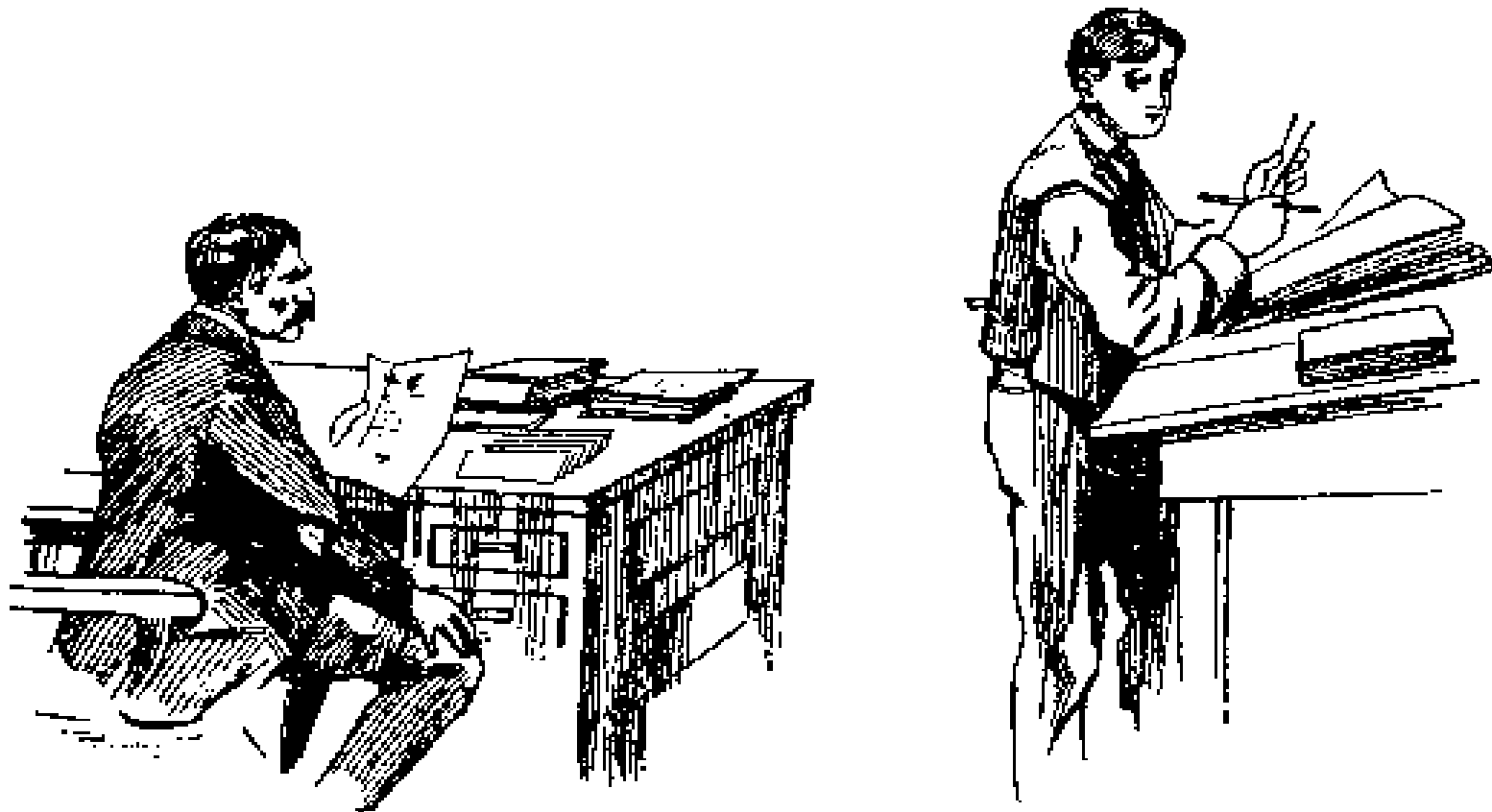
*“The teller over-paid
me fifty dollars.”*



"You simpleton."



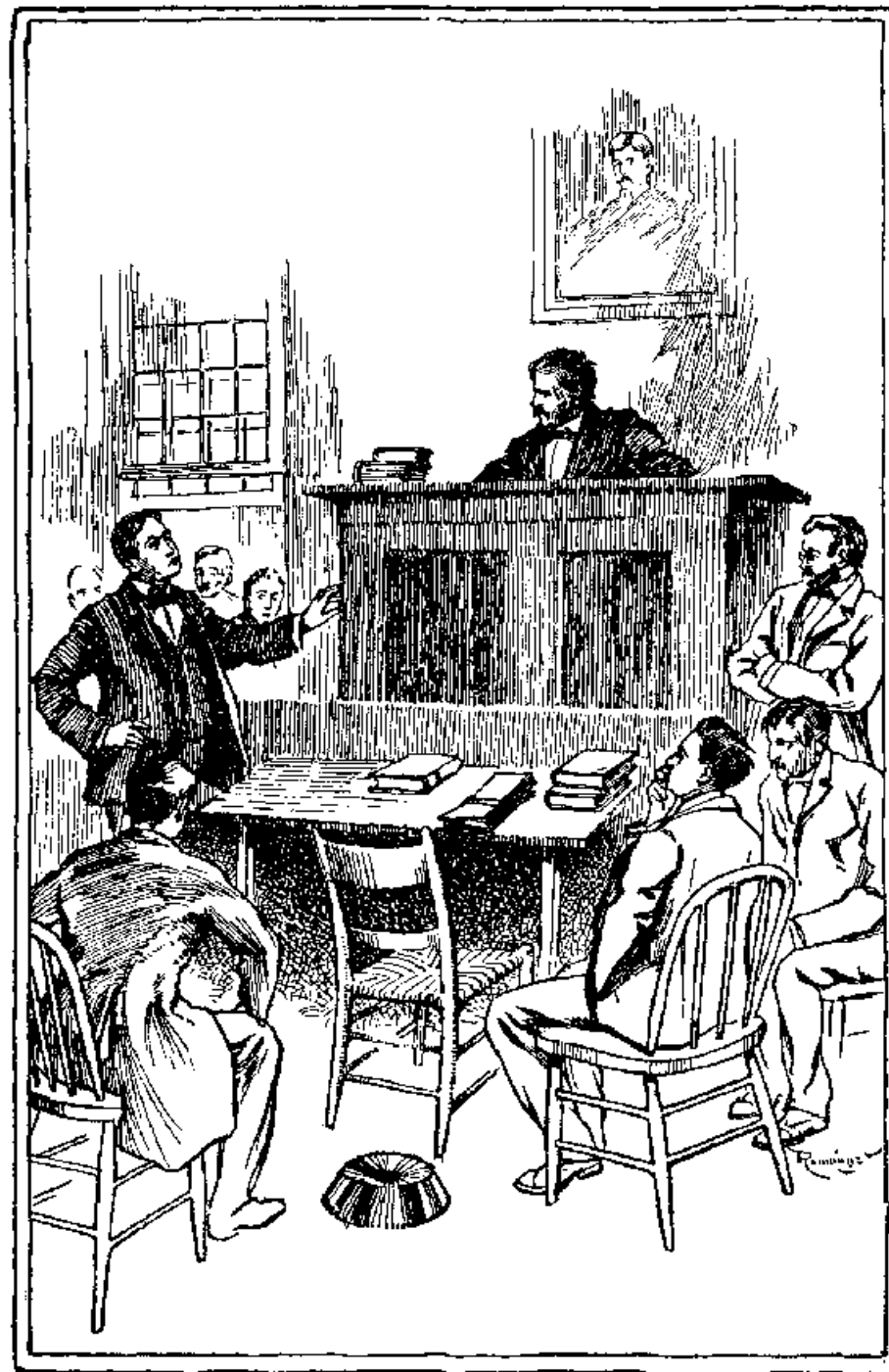
*"He had been paid a half
dollar too much."*



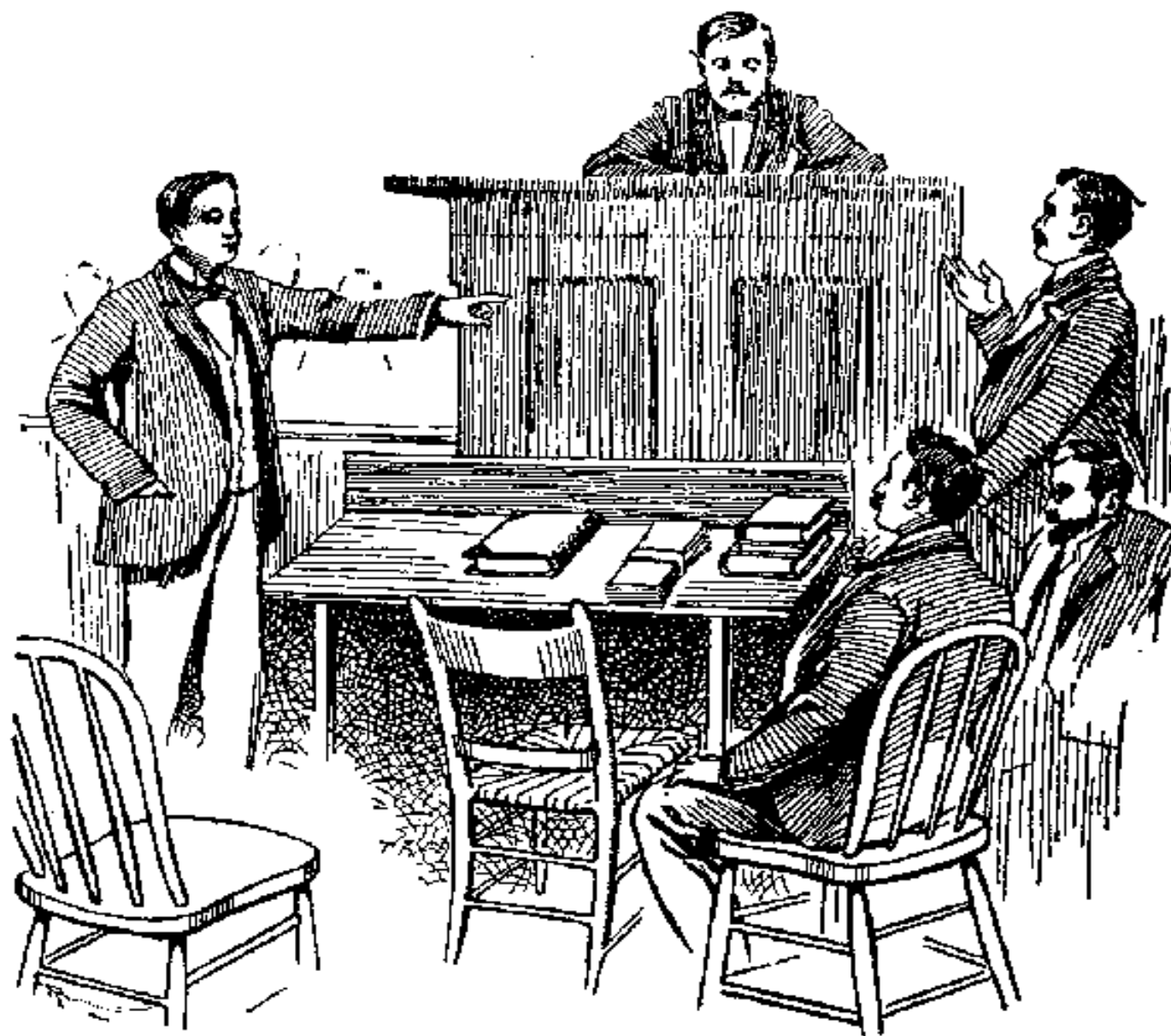
"The look that James received made his heart stop beating."



The Arrest of James



"I went into that man's store an innocent boy."



"Let him take his oath if he dare!"