

APROPOS OF HUNKER CHISHOLM

Victor Speer

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WHEN Murray arrived in Toronto his attention was called to a series of horse-stealings occurring in several adjoining counties.

"I went to investigate," says Murray, "and I met one of the most picturesque old crooks I ever became acquainted with. His name was Chisholm, George Chisholm, called by some of his friends, Hunker. He was an inveterate horse thief. He simply could not help it. In the many years I knew him he never stole anything else, but out of sixty years of life he spent about forty years in prison, all for stealing horses.

"Chisholm stole horses to order. Sometimes he would read the papers for advertisements of men who wanted to buy horses. He would cut out the description of a horse, go around the country hunting for an animal to match the description, and when he found such a horse he would steal it and go and sell it to the man who advertised. Sometimes he would spot or locate a fine horse, and would go and look him over carefully. Then he would go to some other county and hunt for a purchaser. He would describe the horse exactly as he was, and if the prospective purchaser seemed pleased and told him to bring the horse around, Chisholm would disappear, steal the horse, and in a few days reappear and sell him. He never stole anything else. He never was a born burglar except for horses. He never robbed a house. He simply was a horse thief. From time to time he would get caught and sent down to a stiff term, but at its expiration he would bob up serenely, and horses would begin to disappear again.

"When I was investigating the horse thefts I recalled that a tailor named Spellman had been arrested in the town of Vienna, in the county of Elgin, and accused of arson. The chief witnesses against him were Chisholm and an acquaintance of his named Bloom. He was convicted chiefly on their evidence, and was sentenced to seven years in the Penitentiary. I heard about it and made inquiries, and satisfied myself that Spellman was innocent. I interested County judge Hughes, and finally had the tailor pardoned, after he served a considerable length of time. Meanwhile Chisholm had landed back in the clutches of the law himself. The same old charge was against him horse-stealing. He was convicted and sentenced under another name.

"About this time the Government began to receive letters regularly from an inmate of the Penitentiary regarding crimes that had been committed. A day or two after any big burglary or murder or other crime occurred, a letter would come from Kingston Penitentiary offering to reveal the names of the perpetrators. In 1876 an obstruction was placed on the tracks of the Canada Southern Railroad, and in the wreck that followed Engineer Billy Hunt was killed. Three days later came a letter to the Government, and a letter also to the solicitor of the Canada Southern, signed James Clark, from the correspondent in Kingston Penitentiary. Both letters were turned over to me. Clark offered to reveal the names and get the evidence to convict those who did the job. I told the Government officials that I did not believe the letter, but I went to Kingston and the Warden sent for James Clark. Who walked in but old Chisholm! I looked at him as he hopped blithesomely along, and I could hardly keep from laughing.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"James Clark," said he.

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"This is your correspondence?' I asked, producing various letters to the Government on numerous cases.

"Yes, I wrote them,' said he.

"Chisholm,' said I, 'you are as big a fraud as you ever were.'

"Old Chisholm stared with open mouth. Then he slapped me on the shoulder.

"Murray, be a man! Be a man!' he said. 'Liberty is sweet. Don't betray me.'

"Chisholm,' said I, 'I could forgive you everything if you had not sent Spellman, the tailor, to the Penitentiary for burning that barn, when you know he didn't do it.'

"Oh no, oh no. He did do it,' insisted the lying old rascal.

"Well, Chisholm, I intend to put a stop to your writing all over the country with these bunko letters,' said I. 'I'll tell the Warden not to send out any more of them. Try to get pardoned some other way, but stop trying to put up jobs to land innocent men in prison simply in hope of getting yourself out.'

"Old Chisholm looked at me sadly.

"And to think, I thought you were a man, Murray,' he said. 'I honestly thought you were a man. Here am I, in prison, giving you a chance to be a man and get me out, and you won't take it. Well, well, Murray. I'm disappointed in you.'

I left him wagging his head in seeming sorrow. But he did not stop writing letters. He wrote as before, immediately after hearing of a crime. Nothing was done anywhere in the criminal line, but old Chisholm, upon hearing of it, wrote a letter stating he knew the very man or men who did it. He always added a postscript after my visit. It read: 'Don't tell Murray about this.'

He got out when his term expired. He stole some more horses and promptly went back again. When arraigned and asked to state his residence, Chisholm answered: 'The Penitentiary.' In truth he spent two-thirds of his sixty years there. Even then, he was away from home about ten years too much. A man like Hunker Chisholm should stay at home indoors about fifty out of sixty years.

"I met later an old, old man who had been Chisholm's teacher in his boyhood. He told me that at-school Chisholm stole slate pencils from every one. He stole nothing but slate pencils. When kept in after school or about to be punished he invariably informed the schoolmaster that there was a plot on foot among some of the other pupils to do mischief, and if he was not punished he would tell who the plotters were. This worked at first, and several times innocent boys were punished, just as the innocent tailor, Spellman, was sent to prison. But eventually the schoolmaster got on to Chisholm, although Chisholm kept it up to his last day of school life. The slate pencils of his boyhood symbolised the horses of his manhood."