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HONESTY AND THE ACCOUNTING FOR PETTY CASH: FOUR SCORE AND TEN YEARS AGO

by
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This short human interest item appeared in *The Three Banks Review* (Edinburgh, Scotland) for December, 1979, in an article by R. N. Forbes, entitled ((The Poetry of Banking." It concerns a poet-banker named Robert W. Service (1874-1958), who joined the staff of the Commercial Bank of Scotland at the age of 14, in the year 1889 (salary 20 pounds per year—about \$96 U.S.). He was soon placed in charge of the office stamp fund—a variety of petty cash. As explained by Mr. Forbes (pages 58-59):

He was soon in touch with officialdom, an experience which might still rouse emotive memories—in his own words—

'One morning I arrived very late at the office to find a strange man there. He gave no greeting but looked up sourly at the clock—"Mr. Sleeth, the Inspector" whispered the Accountant. I suddenly remembered my stamp account. I knew it was about 5/-short (money I had "borrowed" until pay-day) . . . reluctantly at his request I surrendered my stamp box and postage book. It was all up I thought, disgrace, dismissal, ruin. My life blasted and all for a measly five bob. So there I stood waiting for the blow to fall. How slow he was, how careful. Then at last he was finished and laid down book and box. His manner was grimmer than ever. Yet there was no triumph in it. "Is it all right?" asked the Accountant. "No!, its no' all right," said Sleeth, "There's jist a wee matter of . . .," here he paused, looked

at me searchingly for a long moment . . ." a wee matter of tippence . . . over.'" The explanation of the mystery was that Sleeth had made an error. He had calculated the stamps on a number of "acknowledgment" post-cards at a penny each instead of a half-penny. That was a lesson to me, I vowed from then on I would be scrupulously honest.'

In his first year in the bank he took to writing poetry—

'I always carried a book of poems in my pocket and I would read it—even on the toilet seat. Several times I narrowly escaped being run over. As soon as I discovered that rhyming presented no difficulty I began to exploit my gift.'

Postscripts—The "scrupulous honesty" of Mr. Service was subsequently rewarded. He not only progressed in the banking profession, but also earned a superior reputation as a poet and dramatist. "The Shooting of Dan McGrew" is known worldwide (written while he was with a bank in The Yukon).