

# Footprints Without Feet

## (Class X – NCERT)

### Chapter 4: A Question of Trust – Victor Canning

#### Detailed Summary (Expanded, Exam-Oriented)

The story "A Question of Trust" by Victor Canning is an ironic tale about a thief who becomes a victim of another, cleverer thief. It explores themes of misplaced trust, pride before a fall, and the dangers of underestimating others.

Horace Danby is a 50-year-old man who runs a respectable business making locks. To the outside world, he appears to be an honest, hardworking citizen. However, Horace has a secret double life - he is a careful and methodical thief who commits one robbery every year.

Horace is not an ordinary criminal. He steals not for greed but to fund his expensive hobby - collecting rare and valuable books. He loves books so much that he is willing to break the law to acquire them. His annual robberies provide him with enough money to buy rare books for the entire year.

For fifteen years, Horace has been committing these robberies without ever being caught. He takes great pride in his meticulous planning. Before each robbery, he spends about two weeks studying everything about his target house - the layout, when the owners will be away, the servants' schedule, and most importantly, where the safe is located and what kind of lock it has.

Horace suffers from hay fever, which causes him to sneeze when exposed to flowers or dust. Despite this vulnerability, his careful planning has always kept him safe. He wears gloves to avoid leaving fingerprints and plans every detail perfectly.

This year, Horace has chosen his target - a house called Shotover Grange. He has spent two weeks carefully researching it. He knows the family is away in London for several weeks, and he knows exactly where the safe is located and what it contains - about fifteen thousand pounds worth of jewels.

On the day of the robbery, Horace enters Shotover Grange confidently. Everything goes according to plan. He makes his way to the drawing room where the safe is hidden behind a painting. As he approaches the safe, he notices some flowers in the room. Predictably, his hay fever acts up, and he begins sneezing violently.

After his sneezing fit subsides, Horace is about to open the safe when suddenly he hears a voice behind him: "What is it you want?" He turns around, his heart nearly stopping with fear. Standing in the doorway is a young, attractive woman dressed in a red dress.

The woman appears calm and unafraid. She speaks to Horace in a friendly, almost conversational tone. She mentions that if she were to call the police, Horace would go to prison for many years. Horace is terrified - his perfect record, fifteen years of successful robberies, is about to end in disaster.

But then the woman surprises him. Instead of threatening him, she explains that she is the lady of the house and that she has a problem. She tells Horace that she and her husband were at the theater when she suddenly remembered that she had forgotten the combination to the safe. She needs her jewels urgently for a party that very night.

The woman says her husband, who knows the combination, is still in London, and she doesn't want to call him and admit she forgot because he'll be angry. She asks Horace if he can open the safe for her. If he does, she promises to forget she ever saw him.

Horace is overwhelmed with relief. This seems like an incredible stroke of luck - instead of going to prison, he is being asked to help the lady of the house! She seems kind and understanding, even sympathetic about his hay fever. She treats him like a friend rather than a criminal.

There is one problem - Horace is not wearing gloves. He always wears gloves during robberies to avoid leaving fingerprints, but in his current nervous state and eagerness to help this kind lady, he forgets this crucial detail. The woman even comments, "How could you do such a thing without gloves?" but Horace, believing she is genuinely concerned for him, doesn't think much of it.

The woman tells Horace she will go to the kitchen to prepare tea for him, which further relaxes him. He feels completely safe and even grateful. He proceeds to open the safe with his bare hands, leaving his fingerprints all over it. He opens the safe successfully, and the woman takes the jewelry box, thanks him warmly, and tells him to leave quickly before the servants return.

Horace leaves Shotover Grange feeling incredibly lucky. He thinks he has narrowly escaped prison and even helped a kind lady. He cannot believe his good fortune. However, his sense of relief is about to be shattered in the most devastating way.

Two days later, while reading the newspaper, Horace sees a report about a robbery at Shotover Grange. Jewels worth fifteen thousand pounds have been stolen. The police have found clear fingerprints all over the safe and are using them to identify the burglar.

Horace is stunned and horrified. The truth crashes down on him - the woman was not the lady of the house at all! She was another thief, far cleverer than him. She had fooled him completely, making him believe she was the house owner and getting him to open the safe for her without gloves.

While Horace thought he was helping her, she was actually using him to do the difficult work of opening the safe. She got all the jewels, while Horace left all the evidence - his fingerprints everywhere. She played on his fear, his relief, and his trust to manipulate him perfectly.

Soon, the police arrest Horace. His fingerprints match those on the safe. Despite his protests and explanations, nobody believes his story about the young lady asking him to open the safe. Why would the lady of the house ask a burglar to open her own safe? The story sounds absurd.

The real owners of Shotover Grange - an elderly couple - testify that they were indeed in London and that no young woman lives in their house. Horace's defense sounds like a desperate lie. He is

convicted and sent to prison.

The ultimate irony is that Horace is imprisoned not for any of the robberies he actually committed over fifteen years, but for one he didn't commit. He opened the safe, yes, but he didn't take anything - yet he suffers the full punishment while the real thief, the clever young woman, goes free with the jewels.

Now Horace sits in prison, working in the prison library, his dreams of rare books reduced to handling ordinary books as a prisoner. He is bitter, angry at himself, and constantly thinks about "the lady in red" who outsmarted him. His pride in his own cleverness has been his downfall. The question of trust - who to trust, when to trust - has cost him his freedom.

## Central Themes

### 1. Deception and Betrayal

The story explores how even experienced criminals can be deceived by someone more clever. Trust, when misplaced, can have devastating consequences.

### 2. Pride and Downfall

Horace's pride in his fifteen years of successful robberies blinds him to danger. His confidence makes him vulnerable to manipulation.

### 3. Irony and Poetic Justice

The greatest irony is that Horace is punished for a crime he didn't commit while escaping punishment for crimes he did commit. The thief becomes the victim.

### 4. Appearance vs Reality

The young woman appears kind and sympathetic but is actually ruthless and manipulative. Nothing is as it seems.

### 5. The Dangers of Assumptions

Horace assumes the woman is who she claims to be without verification. His assumptions cost him his freedom.

## Character Sketches

### 1. Horace Danby

A 50-year-old bachelor and locksmith who leads a double life. He is intelligent and methodical, successfully robbing houses for fifteen years. However, he is also vain and overconfident. His love for rare books drives his criminal behavior. His one moment of letting down his guard - trusting the wrong person - destroys him. He represents how even the clever can be outsmarted.

### 2. The Young Lady in Red

The real master criminal of the story. She is charming, quick-thinking, and utterly ruthless. She sizes up Horace perfectly, understands his psychology, and manipulates him with ease. Unlike Horace, who steals for passion (books), she steals for pure profit. She represents intelligence

without mercy and the danger of underestimating others based on appearance or manner.

### Important Vocabulary (With Meanings)

- **Respectable** – regarded as proper, correct, and decent
- **Rare** – not found in large numbers; uncommon
- **Sneeze** – sudden involuntary expulsion of air from nose
- **Clever** – quick to understand, learn, and devise
- **Danby** – the surname of the protagonist
- **Safe** – a strong fireproof cabinet with a complex lock
- **Shotover Grange** – the name of the house that was robbed
- **Burglar** – a person who enters a building illegally to steal
- **Assistant** – a helper or someone who helps in work
- **Convict** – declare someone guilty of a criminal offense

### Exam-Ready Key Points

- Horace Danby is a 50-year-old locksmith who commits one robbery yearly to buy rare books
- He has been successful for fifteen years due to meticulous planning
- At Shotover Grange, he encounters a woman who claims to be the house owner
- The woman tricks Horace into opening the safe without gloves
- She was actually another thief who used Horace to do the difficult work
- Horace left his fingerprints all over the safe while she took the jewels
- He is arrested and convicted for a robbery he didn't actually commit
- Nobody believes his story about the lady asking him to open the safe
- The story teaches that pride and overconfidence lead to downfall
- It also shows that criminals can themselves be victims of crime