Bigamy or Not Bigamy?

THE firm of Flint and Sharp enjoyed, whether deservedly or not, when I was connected with it, as it still does, a high reputation for keen practice and shrewd business-management. This kind of professional fame is usually far more profitable than the drum- and-trumpet variety of the same article; or at least *we* found it so; and often, from blush of morn to far later than dewy eve—which natural phenomena, by the way, were only emblematically observed by me during thirty busy years in the extinguishment of the street lamps at dawn, and their reillumination at dusk—did I and my partner incessantly pursue our golden avocations; deferring what are usually esteemed the pleasures of life—its banquets, music, flowers, and lettered ease—till the toil, and heat, and hurry of the day were past, and a calm, luminous evening, unclouded by care or anxiety, had arrived. This conduct may or may not have been wise; but at all events it daily increased the connection and transactions of the firm, and ultimately anchored us both very comfortably in the three per cents; and this too, I am bold to say, not without our having effected some good in our generation. This boast of mine the following passage in the life of a distinguished client— known, I am quite sure, by reputation, to most of my readers—whom our character for practical sagacity and professional shrewdness brought us, will, I think, be admitted to in some degree substantiate.

Our connection was a mercantile rather than an aristocratic one, and my surprise was therefore considerable, when, on looking through the office-blinds to ascertain what vehicle it was that had driven so rapidly up to the door, I observed a handsomely-appointed carriage with a coronet emblazoned on the panels, out of which a tall footman was handing a lady attired in deep but elegant mourning, and closely veiled. I instantly withdrew to my private room, and desired that the lady should be immediately admitted. Greatly was my surprise increased when the graceful and still youthful visitor withdrew her veil, and disclosed the features of the Countess of Seyton, upon whose mild, luminous beauty, as rendered by the engraving from Sir Thomas Lawrence's picture, I had so frequently gazed with admiration. That rare and touching beauty was clouded now; and an intense expression of anxiety, fear—almost terror—gleamed from out the troubled depths of her fine dark eyes.

"The Countess of Seyton!" I half involuntarily exclaimed, as with my very best bow I handed her ladyship a chair.

"Yes; and you are a partner of this celebrated firm, are you not?"

I bowed again still more profoundly to this compliment, and modestly admitted that I was the Sharp of the firm her ladyship was pleased to entitle "celebrated."

"Then, Mr. Sharp, I have to consult you professionally upon a matter of the utmost—the most vital importance to me and mine." Her ladyship then, with some confusion of manner, as if she did not know whether what she was doing was in accordance with strict etiquette or not, placed a Bank of England note, by way of retainer, before me. I put it back, explaining what the usage really was, and the countess replaced it in her purse.

“We shall be proud to render your ladyship any assistance in our power,” I said; “but I understood the Messrs. Jackson enjoyed the confidence of the house of Seyton?”

“Precisely. They are, so to speak, the hereditary solicitors of the family more than of any individual member of it; and therefore, though highly respectable persons, unfit to advise me in this particular matter. Besides,” she added, with increasing tremor and hesitation, “to deal with, and if possible foil, the individual by whom I am persecuted, requires an agent of keener sagacity than either of those gentlemen can boast of; sharper, more resolute men; more—you understand what I mean?”

“Perfectly, madam; and allow me to suggest that it is probable our interview may be a somewhat prolonged one: your ladyship’s carriage, which may attract attention, should be at once dismissed. The office of the family solicitors is, you are aware, not far off; and as we could not explain to them the reason which induces your ladyship to honour us with your confidence, it will be as well to avoid any chance of inquiry.”

Lady Seyton acquiesced in my suggestion: the carriage was ordered home, and Mr. Flint entering just at the time, we both listened with earnestness and anxiety to her communication. It is needless to repeat verbatim the somewhat prolix, exclamative narration of the countess: the essential facts were as follows:—

The Countess of Seyton, previous to her first marriage, was Miss Clara Hayley, second daughter of the Reverend John Hayley, the rector of a parish in Devonshire. She married, when only nineteen years of age, a Captain Gosford. Her husband was ten years older than herself, and, as she discovered after marriage, was cursed with a morose and churlish temper and disposition. Previous to her acquaintance with Gosford, she had been intimate with, almost betrothed to, Mr. Arthur Kingston, a young gentleman connected with the peerage, and at that time heir-apparent to the great expectancies and actual poverty of his father, Sir Arthur Kingston. The haughty baronet, the instant he was made aware of the nature of his son’s intimacy with the rector’s daughter, packed the young man off to the continent on his travels. The Reverend John Hayley and his beautiful Clara were as proud as the baronet, and extremely indignant that it should be thought either of them wished to entrap or delude Arthur Kingston into an unequal or ineligible marriage. This feeling of pride and resentment aided the success of Mr. Gosford’s suit, and Clara Hayley, like many other rash, high-notioned young ladies, doomed herself to misery, in order to show the world, and Mr. Arthur Kingston and his proud father especially, that she had a spirit. The union was a most unhappy one. One child only, which died in its infancy, was born to them; and after being united somewhat more than two years, a separation, vehemently insisted on by the wife’s father, took place, and the unhappily-wedded daughter returned to her parent’s roof. Mr. Gosford—he had some time before sold out of the army—travelled about the country in search of amusement, and latterly of health (for his unhappy cankerous temper at last affected and broke down his never very robust physical constitution), accompanied for the twelvemonth preceding his death by a young man belonging to the medical profession of the name of Chilton. Mr. and Mrs. Gosford had been separated a few days less than three years, when the husband died, at the village of Swords in Ireland, and not far distant from Dublin. The intelligence was first conveyed to the widow by a paragraph in the *Freeman’s Journal*, a Dublin newspaper; and by the following post a letter arrived from Mr. Chilton, enclosing a ring which the deceased had

requested should be sent to his wife, and a note, dictated just previous to his death-hour, in which he expressed regret for the past, and admitted that he alone had been to blame for the unhappy separation. A copy of his will, made nearly a twelvemonth previously, was also forwarded, by which he bequeathed his property, amounting to about three hundred pounds per annum, to a distant relative then residing in New Holland. By a memorandum of a subsequent date Mr. Chilton was to have all the money and other personals he might die in actual possession of, after defraying the necessary funeral expenses. This will, Mr. Chilton stated, the deceased gentleman had expressed a wish in his last moments to alter, but death had been too sudden for him to be able to give effect to that good, but too long delayed intention.

It cannot be supposed that the long-before practically widowed wife grieved much at the final breaking of the chain which bound her to so ungenial a mate; but as Lady Seyton was entirely silent upon the subject, our supposition can only rest upon the fact, that Arthur Kingston—who had some time previously, in consequence of the death of the Earl of Seyton and his only son, an always weakly child, preceded a few months by that of his own father, the baronet, succeeded to the earldom and estates—hastened home, on seeing the announcement of Gosford's death in the Dublin paper, from the continent, where he had continued to reside since his compelled departure six years before; and soon afterwards found his way into Devonshire, and so successfully pressed the renewed offer of his hand, that the wedding took place slightly within six months after the decease of Mr. Gosford. Life passed brilliantly and happily with the earl and countess—to whom three children (a boy and two girls) were born—till about five months previous to the present time, when the earl, from being caught, when out riding, in a drenching shower of rain, was attacked by fever, and after an acute illness of only two or three days' duration, expired. The present earl was at the time just turned of five years of age.

This blow, we comprehended from the sudden tears, which filled the beautiful eyes of the countess as she spoke of the earl's decease, was a severe one. Still, the grief of widowhood must have been greatly assuaged by love for her children, and not inconsiderably, after a while, we may be sure, by the brilliant position in which she was left—as, in addition to being splendidly jointured, she was appointed by her husband's will sole guardian of the young lord her son.

A terrible reverse awaited her. She was sitting with her father the rector, and her still unmarried sister, Jane Rayley, in the drawing room of Seyton House, when a note was brought to her, signed Edward Chilton, the writer of which demanded an immediate and private interview on, he alleged, the most important business. Lady Seyton remembered the name, and immediately acceded to the man's request. He announced in a brusque, insolent tone and manner, that Mr. Gosford had not died at the time his death was announced to her, having then only fallen into a state of syncope, from which he had unexpectedly recovered, and had lived six months longer. "The truth is," added Chilton, "that, chancing the other day to be looking over a "Peerage," I noticed for the first time the date of your Marriage with the late Earl of Seyton, and I have now to inform you that it took place precisely eight days previous to Mr. Gosfold's death; that it was consequently no marriage at all; and that your son is no more Earl of Seyton than I am."

This dreadful announcement, as one might expect, completely overcame the countess. She fainted, but not till she had heard and comprehended Chilton's hurried injunctions to secrecy and silence. He rang the bell for assistance, and then left the house. The mental agony of Lady

Seyton on recovering consciousness was terrible, and she with great difficulty succeeded in concealing its cause from her anxious and wondering relatives. Another interview with Chilton appeared to confirm the truth of his story beyond doubt or question. He produced a formally-drawn-up document, signed by one Pierce Cunningham, grave digger of Swords, which set forth that Charles Gosford was buried on the 26th of June 1832, and that the inscription on his tombstone set forth that he had died June 23rd of that year. Also a written averment of Patrick Mullins of Dublin, that he had lettered the stone at the head of the grave of Charles Gosford in Swords burying-ground in 1832, and that its date was, as stated by Pierce Cunningham, June 23, 1832.

"Have you copies of those documents?" asked Mr. Flint.

"Yes: I have brought them with me," the countess replied, and handed them to Mr. Flint. "In my terror and extremity," continued her ladyship, "and unguided by counsel—for till now I have not dared to speak upon the subject to any person—I have given this Chilton, at various times, large sums of money: but he is insatiable; and only yesterday—I cannot repeat his audacious proposal: you will find it in this note."

"Marriage!" exclaimed Mr. Flint with a burst. He had read the note over my shoulder.
"The scoundrel!"

My worthy partner was rather excited. The truth was, he had a Clara of his own at home—a dead sister's child, very pretty, just about marriageable, and a good deal resembling, as he told me afterwards, our new and interesting client.

"I would die a thousand deaths rather," resumed Lady Seyton in a low, tremulous voice, as she let fall her veil. "Can there," she added, in a still fainter voice, "be anything done—anything—"

"That depends entirely," interrupted Mr. Flint, "upon whether this fine story is or is not a fabrication, got up for the purpose of extorting money. It seems to me, I must say, amazingly like one."

"Do you really think so?" exclaimed the lady with joyful vehemence. The notion that Chilton was perhaps imposing on her credulity and fears seemed not to have struck her before.

"What do you think, Sharp?" said my partner.

I hesitated to give an opinion, as I did not share in the hope entertained by Flint. Detection was so certain, that I doubted if so cunning a person as Chilton appeared to be would have ventured on a fraud so severely punishable. "Suppose," I said, avoiding an answer, "as this note appoints an interview at three o'clock today at Seyton House, we meet him there instead of your ladyship? A little talk with the fellow might be serviceable."

Lady Seyton eagerly agreed to this proposal; and it was arranged that we should be at Seyton House half an hour before the appointed time, in readiness for the gentleman. Lady Seyton left in

a hackney-coach, somewhat relieved, I thought, by having confided the oppressive secret to us, and with a nascent hope slightly flushing her pale, dejected countenance.

The firm of Flint and Sharp had then a long conference together, during which the lady's statement and Mr. Chilton's documents were, the reader may be sure, very minutely conned over, analysed, and commented upon. Finally, it was resolved that if the approaching interview, the manner of which we agreed upon, did not prove satisfactory, Mr. Flint should immediately proceed to Ireland, and personally ascertain the truth or falsehood of the facts alleged by Chilton.

"Mr. Chilton is announced," said Lady Seyton, hurriedly entering the library in Grosvenor Square, where Mr. Flint and myself were seated. "I need not be present, I think you said?" she added in great tremor.

"Certainly not, madam," I replied. "We shall do better alone."

She retired instantly. Flint rose and stationed himself close by the door. Presently a sounding, confident step was heard along the passage, the library door swung back on its noiseless hinges, and in stalked a man of apparently about thirty-five years of age, tall, genteel, and soldier-looking. He started back on seeing me, recognising, I perceived, my vocation at a glance.

"How is this?" he exclaimed. "I expected—"

"The Countess of Seyton. True; but her ladyship has deputed me to confer with you on the business mentioned in your note."

"I shall have nothing to say to you," he replied abruptly, and turned to leave the room. Mr. Flint had shut, and was standing with his back to the door.

"You can't go," he said in his coolest manner. "The police are within call."

"The police! What the devil do you mean?" cried Chilton angrily; but, spite of his assurance, visibly trembling beneath Flint's searching, half-sneering look.

"Nothing very remarkable," replied that gentleman, "or unusual in our profession. Come, sit down; we are lawyers: you are a man of business, we know. I dare say we shall soon understand each other."

Mr. Chilton sat down, and moodily awaited what was next to come.

"You are aware," said Mr. Flint, "that you have rendered yourself liable to transportation?"

"What!" exclaimed Chilton, flashing crimson, and starting to his feet. "What!"

“To transportation,” continued my imperturbable partner, “for seven, ten, fourteen years, or for life, at the discretion of the judge; but considering the frequency of the crime of late, I should say there is a strong probability that *you* will be a *lifer*!”

“What devil’s gibberish is this?” exclaimed Chilton, frightened, but still fierce. “I can prove everything I have said. Mr. Gosford, I tell you—”

“Well, well,” interrupted Mr. Flint; “put it in that light how you please; turn it which way you will; it’s like the key in Blue Beard, which I daresay you have read of; rub it out on one side, and up it comes on the other. Say, by way of argument, that you have *not* obtained money by unfounded threats—a crime which the law holds tantamount to highway robbery. You have in that case obtained money for compromising a felony—that of polygamy. An awful position, my good sir, choose which you will.”

Utterly chopfallen was the lately triumphant man; but he speedily rallied.

“I care not,” he at length said. “Punish me you may; but the pride of this sham countess and the sham earl will be brought low. And I tell you once for all,” he added, rising at the same time, and speaking in ringing, wrathful tones, “that I defy you, and will either be handsomely remunerated for silence, or I will at once inform the Honorable James Kingston that he is the true Earl of Seyton.”

“And I tell *you*,” retorted Flint, “that if you attempt to leave this room, I will give you into custody at once, and transport you, whatever may be the consequence to others. Come, come, let us have no more nonsense or bluster. We have strong reasons for believing that the story by which you hare been extorting money is a fabrication. If it be so, rely upon it we shall detect and punish you. Your only safe course is to make a clean breast of it whilst there is yet time. Out with it, man, at once, and you shall go scot-free; nay, have .a few score pounds more—say a hundred. Be wise in time, I counsel you.”

Chilton hesitated; his white lips quivered. There *was* something to reveal.

“I cannot,” he muttered, after a considerable pause. “There is nothing to disclose.”

“You will not! Then your fate be on your own head. I have done with you.”

It was now my turn. “Come, come,” I said, “it is useless urging this man further. How much do you expect? The insolent proposal contained in your note is, you well know, out of the question. How much *money* do you expect for keeping this wretched affair secret? State your terms at once.”

“A thousand per annum,” was the reply, “and the first year down.”

“Modest, upon my word! But I suppose we must comply.” I wrote out an agreement. “Will you sign this?”

He ran it over. “Yes; Lady Seyton, as she calls herself, will take care it never sees the light.”

I withdrew, and in two or three minutes returned with a cheque. “Her ladyship has no present cash at the banker’s,” I said, “and is obliged to post-date this cheque twelve days.”

The rascal grumbled a good deal; but as there was no help for it, he took the security, signed the agreement, and walked off.

“A sweet nut that for the devil to crack,” observed Mr. Flint, looking savagely after him. “I am in hopes we shall trounce him yet, bravely as he carries it. The cheque of course is not payable to order or bearer?”

“Certainly not; and before twelve days are past, you will have returned from Ireland. The agreement may be, I thought, of use with Cunningham or Mullins. If they have been conspiring together, they will scarcely admire the light in which you can place the arrangement, as affording proof that he means to keep the lion’s share of the reward to himself.”

“Exactly. At all events we shall get at the truth, whatever it be.”

The same evening Mr. Flint started for Dublin *viâ* Holyhead.

I received in due course a letter from him dated the day after his arrival there. It was anything but a satisfactory one. The date on the grave-stone had been truly represented, and Mullins who erected it was a highly respectable man. Flint had also seen the gravedigger, but could make nothing out of him. There was no regular register of deaths kept in Swords except that belonging to Cunningham; and the minister, who buried Gosford, and who lived at that time in Dublin, had been dead some time. This was disheartening and melancholy enough; and, as if to give our unfortunate client the *coup-de-grace*, Mr. Jackson, junior, marched into the office just after I had read it, to say that, having been referred by Lady Seyton to us for explanations with respect to a statement made by a Mr. Edward Chilton to the Honourable James Kingston, for whom they, the Messrs. Jackson, were now acting, by which it appeared that the said Honourable James Kingston was, in fact, the true Earl of Seyton, he Mr. Jackson, junior, would be happy to hear what I had to say upon the subject! It needed but this. Chilton had, as I feared he would, after finding we had been consulted, sold his secret, doubtless advantageously, to the heir-at-law. There was still, however, a chance that something favourable might turn up, and as I had no notion of throwing that chance away, I carelessly replied that we had reason to believe Chilton’s story was a malicious fabrication, and that we should of course throw on them the onus of judicial proof that Gosford was still alive when the late earl’s marriage was solemnised. Finally, however, to please Mr. Jackson, who professed to be very anxious, for the lady’s sake, to avoid unnecessary *éclat*, and to arrange the affair as quietly as possible, I agreed to meet him at Lady Seyton’s in four days from that time, and hear the evidence upon which he relied. This could not at all events render our position worse; and it was meanwhile agreed that the matter should be kept as far as possible profoundly secret.

Three days passed without any further tidings from Mr. Flint, and I vehemently feared that his journey had proved a fruitless one, when, on the evening previous to the day appointed for the

conference at Seyton House, a hackney coach drove rapidly up to the office door, and out popped Mr. Flint, followed by two strangers, whom he very watchfully escorted into the house. "Mr. Patrick Mullins and Mr. Pierce Cunningham," said Flint, as he shook hands with me in a way which, in conjunction with the merry sparkle of his eyes, and the boisterous tone of his voice, assured me all was right. "Mr. Pierce Cunningham will sleep here tonight," he added; "so Collins had better engage a bed out."

Cunningham, an ill-looking lout of a fellow, muttered that he chose "to sleep at a tavern."

"Not if I know it, my fine fellow," rejoined Mr. Flint. "You mean well, I daresay; but I cannot lose sight of you for all that. You either sleep here or at a station-house."

The man stared with surprise and alarm; but knowing refusal or resistance to be hopeless, sullenly assented to the arrangement, and withdrew to the room appointed for him, vigilantly guarded. For Mr. Mullins we engaged a bed at a neighbouring tavern.

Mr. Flint's mission had been skillfully and successfully accomplished. He was convinced, by the sullen confusion of manner manifested by Cunningham, that some villainous agency had been at work, and he again waited on Mullins the stone-cutter. "Who gave you the order for the grave-stone?" he asked. Mr. Mullins referred to his book, and answered that he received it by letter. "Had he got that letter?" "Very likely," he replied, "as he seldom destroyed business papers of any kind." "A search was instituted, and finally this letter," said Mr. Flint, "worth an earl's coronet, torn and dirty as it is, turned up." This invaluable document, which bore the London post-date of June 23, 1832, ran as follows:—

"ANGLESEA HOTEL, HAYMARKET, LONDON, June 23, 1832.

"SIR—Please to erect a plain tombstone at the head of Charles Gosford, Esquire's, grave, who died a few months since at Swords, aged thirty-two years. This is all that need be inscribed upon it. You are referred to Mr. Guinness of Sackville Street, Dublin, for payment. Your obedient servant,

"EDWARD CHILTON."

"You see," continued Flint, "the fellow had inadvertently left out the date of Gosford's death, merely stating it occurred a few months previously; and Mullins concluded that, in entering the order in his daybook, he must have somehow or other confounded the date of the letter with that of Gosford's decease. Armed with this precious discovery, I again sought Cunningham, and by dint of promises and threats, at last got the truth out of the rascal. It was this: Chilton, who returned to this country from the Cape, where he had resided for three years previously, about two months ago, having some business to settle in Dublin, went over there, and one day visited Swords, read the inscription on Charles Gosford's grave-stone, and immediately sought out the gravedigger, and asked him if he had any record of that gentleman's burial. Cunningham said he had, and produced his book, by which it appeared that it took place December 24, 1831. "That cannot be," remarked Chilton, and he referred to the head-stone. Cunningham said he had noticed the mistake a few days after it was erected; but thinking it of no consequence, and never having, that he knew of, seen Mr. Mullins since, he had said, and indeed thought,

nothing about it. To conclude the story—Chilton ultimately, by payment of ten pounds down, and liberal promises for the future, prevailed upon the grave-digger to lend himself to the infamous device the sight of the grave-stone had suggested to his fertile, unscrupulous brain."

This was indeed a glorious success, and the firm of Flint and Sharp drank the Countess of Seyton's health that evening with great enthusiasm, and gleefully thought of the morrow."

We found the drawing room of Seyton House occupied by the Honourable James Kingston, his solicitors the Messrs. Jackson, Lady Seyton, and her father and sister, to whom she had at length disclosed the source of her disquietude. The children were leaving the apartment as we entered it, and the grief-dimmed eyes of the countess rested sadly upon her bright-eyed boy as he slowly withdrew with his sisters. That look changed to one of wild surprise as it encountered Mr. Flint's shining, good-humoured countenance. I was more composed and reserved than my partner, though feeling as vividly as he did the satisfaction of being able not only to dispel Lady Seyton's anguish, but to extinguish the exultation, and trample on the hopes, of the Honourable James Kingston, a stiff, grave, middle-aged piece of hypocritical propriety, who was surveying from out the corners of his affectedly-unobservant eyes the furniture and decorations of the splendid apartment, and hugging himself with the thought that all that was his! Business was immediately proceeded with. Chilton was called in. He repeated his former story *verbatim*, and. with much fluency and confidence. He then placed in the hands of Jackson senior the vouchers signed by Cunningham and Mullins. The transient light faded from Lady Seyton's countenance as she turned despairingly, almost accusingly, towards us.

'What answer have you to make to this gentleman's statement, thus corroborated?' demanded Jackson senior.

'Quite a remarkable one,' replied Mr. Flint, as he rang the bell. 'Desire the gentlemen in the library to step up,' he added to the footman who answered the summons. In about three minutes in marched Cunningham and Mullins, followed by two police officers. An irrepressible exclamation of terror escaped Chilton, which was immediately echoed by Mr. Flint's direction to the police, as he pointed towards the trembling caitiff. 'That is your man; secure him.'

A storm of exclamations, questions, remonstrances, instantly broke forth, and it was several minutes before attention could be obtained for the statements of our two Irish witnesses and the reading of the happily-found letter. The effect of the evidence adduced was decisive, electrical. Lady Seyton, as its full significance flashed upon her, screamed with convulsive joy, and I thought must have fainted from excess of emotion. The Reverend John Hayley returned audible thanks to God in a voice quivering with rapture, and Miss Hayley ran out of the apartment, and presently returned with the children, who were immediately half smothered with their mother's ecstatic kisses. All was for a few minutes bewilderment, joy, rapture! Flint persisted to his dying day that Lady Seyton threw her arms round his neck, and kissed his bald old forehead. This, however, I cannot personally vouch for, as my attention was engaged at the moment by the adverse claimant, the Honourable James Kingston, who exhibited one of the most irresistibly comic, woebegone, lackadaisical aspects it is possible to conceive. He made a hurried and most undignified exit, and was immediately followed by the discomfited 'family' solicitors. Chilton was conveyed to a station house, and the next day was fully committed for trial. He was

convicted at the next sessions, and sentenced to seven years' transportation; and the 'celebrated' firm of Flint and Sharp derived considerable lustre, and more profit, from this successful stroke of professional dexterity.

From *Leaves from the Diary of a Law-Clerk* by the Author of "Recollections of a Detective Police Officer," &c. London: J.C. Brown & Co., 1857