

## *The Chest of Drawers*

I AM about to relate a rather curious piece of domestic history, some of the incidents of which, revealed at the time of their occurrence in contemporary law reports, may be in the remembrance of many readers. It took place in one of the midland counties, and at a place which I shall call Watley: the names of the chief actors who figured in it must also, to spare their modesty or their blushes, as the case may be, be changed; and should one of those persons, spite of these precautions, apprehend unpleasant recognition, he will be able to console himself with the reflection, that all I state beyond that which may be gathered from the records of the law courts will be generally ascribed to the fancy or invention of the writer. And it is as well, perhaps, that it should be so.

Caleb Jennings, a shoemaker, cobbler, snob—using the last word in its genuine classical sense, and by no means according to the modern interpretation by which it is held to signify a genteel sneak or pretender—he was anything but that—occupied, some twelve or thirteen years ago, a stall at Watley, which, according to the traditions of the place, had been hereditary in his family for several generations. He may also be said to have flourished there, after the manner of cobblers; for this, it must be remembered, was in the good old times, before the gutta-percha revolution had carried ruin and dismay into the stalls—those of cobblers—which in considerable numbers existed throughout the kingdom. Like all his fraternity whom I have ever fallen in with or heard of, Caleb was a sturdy Radical of the Major Cartwright and Henry Hunt school; and being withal industrious, tolerably skilful, not inordinately prone to the observance of Saint Mondays, possessed, moreover, of a neatly-furnished sleeping and eating apartment in the house of which the projecting first floor, supported on stone pillars, overshadowed his humble workplace, he vaunted himself to be as really rich as an estated squire, and far more independent.

There was some truth in this boast, as the case which procured us the honour of Mr. Jennings's acquaintance sufficiently proved. We were employed to bring an action against a wealthy gentleman of the vicinity of Watley for a brutal and unprovoked assault he had committed, when in a state of partial inebriety, upon a respectable London tradesman who had visited the place on business. On the day of trial our witnesses appeared to have become suddenly afflicted with an almost total loss of memory; and we were only saved from an adverse verdict by the plain, straightforward evidence of Caleb, upon whose sturdy nature the various arts which soften or neutralise hostile evidence had been tried in vain. Mr. Flint, who personally superintended the case, took quite a liking to the man; and it thus happened that we were called upon some time afterwards to aid the said Caleb in extricating himself from the extraordinary and perplexing difficulty in which he suddenly and unwittingly found himself involved.

The projecting first floor of the house beneath which the humble workshop of Caleb Jennings modestly disclosed itself, had been occupied for many years by an ailing and somewhat aged gentleman of the name of Lisle. This Mr. Ambrose Lisle was a native of Watley, and had been a prosperous merchant of the city of London. Since his return, after about twenty years' absence, he had shut himself up in almost total seclusion, nourishing a cynical bitterness and acrimony of temper which gradually withered up the sources of health and life, till at length it became as visible to himself as it had for some time been to others, that the oil of existence was expended,

burnt up, and that but a few weak flickers more, and the ailing man's plaints and griefs would be hushed in the dark silence of the grave.

Mr. Lisle had no relatives at Watley, and the only individual with whom he was on terms of personal intimacy was Mr. Peter Sowerby, an attorney of the place, who had for many years transacted all his business. This man visited Mr. Lisle most evenings, played at chess with him, and gradually acquired an influence over his client which that weak gentleman had once or twice feebly but vainly endeavoured to shake off. To this clever attorney, it was rumoured, Mr. Lisle had bequeathed all his wealth.

This piece of information had been put in circulation by Caleb Jennings, who was a sort of humble favourite of Mr. Lisle's, or, at all events, was regarded by the misanthrope with less dislike than he manifested towards others. Caleb cultivated a few flowers in a little plot of ground at the back of the house, and Mr. Lisle would sometimes accept a rose or a bunch of violets from him. Other slight services—especially since the recent death of his old and garrulous woman-servant, Esther May, who had accompanied him from London, and with whom Mr. Jennings had always been upon terms of gossiping intimacy—had led to certain familiarities of intercourse; and it thus happened that the inquisitive shoe-mender became partially acquainted with the history of the wrongs and griefs which preyed upon, and shortened the life of, the prematurely-aged man.

The substance of this everyday, commonplace story, as related to us by Jennings, and subsequently enlarged and coloured from other sources, may be very briefly told.

Ambrose Lisle, in consequence of an accident which occurred in his infancy, was slightly deformed. His right shoulder—as I understood, for I never saw him—grew out, giving an ungraceful and somewhat comical twist to his figure, which, in female eyes—youthful ones at least—sadly marred the effect of his intelligent and handsome countenance. This personal defect rendered him shy and awkward in the presence of women of his own class of society; and he had attained the ripe age of thirty-seven years, and was a rich and prosperous man, before he gave the slightest token of an inclination towards matrimony. About a twelvemonth previous to that period of his life, the deaths—quickly following each other—of a Mr. and Mrs. Stevens threw their eldest daughter, Lucy, upon Mr. Lisle's hands. Mr. Lisle had been left an orphan at a very early age, and Mrs. Stevens—his aunt, and then a maiden lady—had, in accordance with his father's will, taken charge of himself and brother till they severally attained their majority. Long, however, before that she married Mr. Stevens, by whom she had two children—Lucy and Emily. Her husband, whom she survived but two months, died insolvent; and in obedience to the dying wishes of his aunt, for whom he appears to have felt the tenderest esteem, he took the eldest of her orphan children to his home, intending to regard and provide for her as his own adopted child and heiress. Emily, the other sister, found refuge in the house of a still more distant relative than himself.

The Stevenses had gone to live at a remote part of England—Yorkshire, I believe—and it thus fell out, that till his cousin Lucy arrived at her new home he had not seen her for more than ten years. The pale, and somewhat plain child, as he had esteemed her, he was startled to find had become a charming woman; and her naturally gay and joyous temperament, quick talents, and

fresh young beauty, rapidly acquired an overwhelming influence over him. Strenuously but vainly he struggled against the growing infatuation—argued, reasoned with himself—passed in review the insurmountable objections to such a union, the difference of age—he leading towards thirty-seven, she barely twenty-one: he, crooked, deformed, of reserved, taciturn temper—she full of young life, and grace, and beauty. It was useless; and nearly a year had passed in the bootless struggle when Lucy Stevens, who had vainly striven to blind herself to the nature of the emotions by which her cousin and guardian was animated towards her, intimated a wish to accept her sister Emily's invitation to pass two or three months with her. This brought the affair to a crisis. Buoying himself up with the illusions which people in such an unreasonable frame of mind create for themselves, he suddenly entered the sitting-room set apart for her private use, with the desperate purpose of making his beautiful cousin a formal offer of his hand. She was not in the apartment, but her opened writing-desk, and a partly-finished letter lying on it, shewed that she had been recently there, and would probably soon return. Mr. Lisle took two or three agitated turns about the room, one of which brought him close to the writing desk, and his glance involuntarily fell upon the unfinished letter. Had a deadly serpent leaped suddenly at his throat, the shock could not have been greater. At the head of the sheet of paper was a clever pen-and-ink sketch of Lucy Stevens and himself: he, kneeling to her in a lovelorn ludicrous attitude, and she laughing immoderately at his lachrymose and pitiful aspect and speech. The letter was addressed to her sister Emily; and the enraged lover saw not only that his supposed secret was fully known, but that he himself was mocked, laughed at for his doting folly. At least this was his interpretation of the words which swam before his eyes. At the instant Lucy returned, and a torrent of imprecation burst from the furious man, in which wounded self-love, rageful pride, and long pent-up passion, found utterance in wild and bitter words. Half an hour afterwards Lucy Stevens had left the merchant's house—forever, as it proved. She, indeed, on arriving at her sister's, sent a letter supplicating forgiveness for the thoughtless, and, as he deemed it, insulting sketch, intended only for Emily's eye; but he replied merely by a note written by one of his clerks, informing Miss Stevens that Mr. Lisle declined any further correspondence with her.

The ire of the angered and vindictive man had, however, begun sensibly to abate, and old thoughts, memories, duties, suggested partly by the blank which Lucy's absence made in his house, partly by remembrance of the solemn promise he had made her mother, were strongly reviving in his mind, when he read the announcement of her marriage in a provincial journal, directed to him, as he believed, in the bride's hand-writing; but this was an error, her sister having sent the newspaper. Mr. Lisle also construed this into a deliberate mockery and insult, and from that hour strove to banish all images and thoughts connected with his cousin from his heart and memory.

He unfortunately adopted the very worst course possible for effecting this object. Had he remained amid the buzz and tumult of active life, a mere sentimental disappointment, such as thousands of us have sustained and afterwards forgotten, would, there can be little doubt, have soon ceased to afflict him. He chose to retire from business, visited Watley, and habits of miserliness growing rapidly upon his cankered mind, never afterwards removed from the lodgings he had hired on first arriving there. Thus madly hugging to himself sharp-pointed memories which a sensible man would have speedily cast off and forgotten, the sour misanthrope passed a useless, cheerless, weary existence, to which death must have been a welcome relief.

Matters were in this state with the morose and aged man—aged mentally and corporeally, although his years were but fifty-eight—when Mr. Flint made Mr. Jennings's acquaintance. Another month or so had passed away when Caleb's attention was one day about noon claimed by a young man dressed in mourning, accompanied by a female similarly attired, and from their resemblance to each other he conjectured brother and sister. The stranger wished to know if that was the house in which Mr. Ambrose Lisle resided. Jennings said it was; and with civil alacrity left his stall and rang the front-door bell. The summons was answered by the landlady's servant, who, since Esther May's death, had waited on the first-floor lodger; and the visitors were invited to go up stairs. Caleb, much wondering who they might be, returned to his stall, and from thence passed into his eating and sleeping room just below Mr. Lisle's apartments. He was in the act of taking a pipe from the mantel-shelf, in order to the more deliberate and satisfactory cogitation on such an unusual event, when he was startled by a loud shout, or scream rather, from above. The quivering and excited voice was that of Mr. Lisle, and the outcry was immediately followed by an explosion of unintelligible exclamations from several persons. Caleb was up stairs in an instant, and found himself in the midst of a strangely-perplexing and distracted scene. Mr. Lisle, pale as his shirt, shaking in every limb, and his eyes on fire with passion, was hurling forth a torrent of vituperation and reproach at the young woman, whom he evidently mistook for some one else; whilst she, extremely terrified, and unable to stand but for the assistance of her companion, was tendering a letter in her outstretched hand, and uttering broken sentences, which her own agitation and the fury of Mr. Lisle's invectives rendered totally incomprehensible. At last the fierce old man struck the letter from her hand, and with frantic rage ordered both the strangers to leave the room. Caleb urged them to comply, and accompanied them down stairs. When they reached the street, he observed a woman on the other side of the way, dressed in mourning, and much older apparently, though he could not well see her face through the thick veil she wore, than she who had thrown Mr. Lisle into such an agony of rage, apparently waiting for them. To her the young people immediately hastened, and after a brief conference the three turned away up the street, and Mr. Jennings saw no more of them.

A quarter of an hour afterwards the house-servant informed Caleb that Mr. Lisle had retired to bed, and although still in great agitation, and, as she feared, seriously indisposed, would not permit Dr. Clarke to be sent for. So sudden and violent a hurricane in the usually dull and drowsy atmosphere in which Jennings lived, excited and disturbed him greatly: the hours, however, flew past without bringing any relief to his curiosity, and evening was falling, when a peculiar knocking on the floor overhead announced that Mr. Lisle desired his presence. That gentleman was sitting up in bed, and in the growing darkness his face could not be very distinctly seen; but Caleb instantly observed a vivid and unusual light in the old man's eyes. The letter so strangely delivered was lying open before him; and unless the shoemaker was greatly mistaken, there were stains of recent tears upon Mr. Lisle's furrowed and hollow cheeks. The voice, too, it struck Caleb, though eager, was gentle and wavering. "It was a mistake, Jennings," he said; "I was mad for the moment. Are they gone?" he added, in a yet more subdued and gentle tone. Caleb informed him of what he had seen; and as he did so, the strange light in the old man's eyes seemed to quiver and sparkle with a yet intenser emotion than before. Presently he shaded them with his hand, and remained several minutes silent. He then said with a firmer voice, 'I shall be glad if you will step to Mr. Sowerby, and tell him I am too unwell to see him this evening. But be sure to say nothing else,' he eagerly added, as Caleb turned away in compliance with his request; "and when you come back, let me see you again."

When Jennings returned, he found, to his great surprise, Mr. Lisle up and nearly dressed; and his astonishment increased a hundredfold upon hearing that gentleman say, in a quick but perfectly collected and decided manner, that he should set off for London by the mail-train.

“For London—and by night!” exclaimed Caleb, scarcely sure that he heard aright.

“Yes—yes, I shall not be observed in the dark,” sharply rejoined Mr. Lisle; “and you, Caleb, must keep my secret from everybody, especially from Sowerby. I shall be here in time to see him to-morrow night, and he will be none the wiser.” This was said with a slight chuckle; and as soon as his simple preparations were complete, Mr. Lisle, well wrapped up, and his face almost hidden by shawls, locked his door, and assisted by Jennings, stole furtively down stairs, and reached unrecognised the railway station just in time for the train.

It was quite dark the next evening when Mr. Lisle returned; and so well had he managed that Mr. Sowerby, who paid his usual visit about half an hour afterwards, had evidently heard nothing of the suspicious absence of his esteemed client from Watley. The old man exulted over the success of his deception to Caleb the next morning, but dropped no hint as to the object of his sudden journey.

Three days passed without the occurrence of any incident tending to the enlightenment of Mr. Jennings upon these mysterious events, which, however, he plainly saw had lamentably shaken the long-since failing man. On the afternoon of the fourth day, Mr. Lisle walked, or rather tottered, into Caleb’s stall, and seated himself on the only vacant stool it contained. His manner was confused, and frequently purposeless, and there was an anxious, flurried expression in his face which Jennings did not at all like. He remained silent for some time, with the exception of partially inaudible snatches of comment or questionings, apparently addressed to himself. At last he said, “I shall take a longer journey tomorrow, Caleb—much longer; let me see—where did I say? Ah, yes! to Glasgow; to be sure, to Glasgow!”

“To Glasgow, and tomorrow!” exclaimed the astounded cobbler.

“No, no—not Glasgow; they have removed,” feebly rejoined Mr. Lisle. “But Lucy has written it down for me. True—true; and tomorrow I shall set out.”

The strange expression of Mr. Lisle’s face became momentarily more strongly marked, and Jennings, greatly alarmed, said, “You are ill, Mr. Lisle; let me run for Dr. Clarke.”

“No—no,” he murmured, at the same time striving to rise from his seat, which he could only accomplish by Caleb’s assistance, and so supported, he staggered indoors. “I shall be better tomorrow,” he said, faintly, and then slowly added, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow! Ah, me! Yes, as I said, tomorrow I—” He paused abruptly, and they gained his apartment. He seated himself, and then Jennings, at his mute solicitation, assisted him to bed.

He lay some time with his eyes closed; and Caleb could feel—for Mr. Lisle held him firmly by the hand, as if to prevent his going away—a convulsive shudder pass over his frame. At last he slowly opened his eyes, and Caleb saw that he was indeed about to depart upon the long journey from which there is no return. The lips of the dying man worked inarticulately for some moments: and then with a mighty effort, as it seemed, he said, whilst his trembling hand pointed feebly to a bureau chest of drawers that stood in the room, “There—there, for Lucy; there, the secret place is—” Some inaudible words followed, and then after a still mightier struggle than before, he gasped out, “No word—no word—to—to Sowerby—for her—Lucy.”

More was said, but undistinguishable by mortal ear; and after gazing with an expression of indescribable anxiety in the scared face of his awestruck listener, the wearied eyes slowly reclosed—the deep silence flowed past; then the convulsive shudder came again, and he was dead.

Caleb Jennings tremblingly summoned the house servant and the landlady, and was still confusedly pondering the broken sentences uttered by the dying man, when Mr. Sowerby hurriedly arrived. The attorney’s first care was to assume the direction of affairs, and to place seals upon every article containing or likely to contain anything of value belonging to the deceased. This done, he went away to give directions for the funeral, which took place a few days afterwards; and it was then formally announced that Mr. Sowerby succeeded by will to the large property of Ambrose Lisle; under trust, however, for the family, if any, of Robert Lisle, the deceased’s brother, who had gone when very young to India, and had not been heard of for many years—a condition which did not at all mar the joy of the crafty lawyer, he having long since instituted private inquiries, which perfectly satisfied him that the said Robert Lisle had died, unmarried, at Calcutta.

Mr. Jennings was in a state of great dubiety and consternation. Sowerby had emptied the chest of drawers of every valuable it contained; and unless he had missed the secret receptacle Mr. Lisle had spoken of, the deceased’s intentions, whatever they might have been, were clearly defeated. And if he had not discovered it, how could he, Jennings, get at the drawers to examine them? A fortunate chance brought some relief to his perplexities. Ambrose Lisle’s furniture was advertised to be sold by auction, and Caleb resolved to purchase the bureau chest of drawers at almost any price, although to do so would oblige him to break into his rent money, then nearly due. The day of sale came, and the important lot in its turn was put up. In one of the drawers there were a number of loose newspapers and other valueless scraps; and Caleb, with a sly grin, asked the auctioneer if he sold the article with all its contents. “Oh yes,” said Sowerby, who was watching the sale; “the buyer may have all it contains over his bargain, and much good may it do him.” A laugh followed the attorney’s sneering remark, and the biddings went on. “I want it,” observed Caleb, “because it just fits a recess like this one in my room underneath.” This he said to quiet a suspicion he thought he saw gathering upon the attorney’s brow. It was finally knocked down to Caleb at 5*l.* 10*s.*, a sum considerably beyond its real value; and he had to borrow a sovereign in order to clear his speculative purchase. This done, he carried off his prize, and as soon as the closing of the house for the night secured him from interruption, he set eagerly to work in search of the secret drawer. A long and patient examination was richly rewarded. Behind one of the small drawers of the *secrétaire* portion of the piece of furniture was another small one, curiously concealed, which contained Bank of England notes to the amount of 200*l.*, tied up

with a letter, upon the back of which was written, in the deceased's hand-writing, "To take with me." The letter which Caleb, although he read print with facility, had much difficulty making out, was that which Mr. Lisle had struck from the young woman's hand a few weeks before, and proved to be a very affecting appeal from Lucy Stevens, now Lucy Warner, and a widow, with two grown-up children. Her husband had died in insolvent circumstances, and she and her sister Emily, who was still single, were endeavouring to carry on a school at Bristol, which promised to be sufficiently prosperous if the sum of about 150*l.* could be raised, to save the furniture from her deceased husband's creditors. The claim was pressing, for Mr. Warner had been dead nearly a year, and Mr. Lisle being the only relative Mrs. Warner had in the world, she had ventured to entreat his assistance for her mother's sake. There could be no moral doubt, therefore, that this money was intended for Mrs. Warner's relief; and early in the morning Mr. Caleb Jennings dressed himself in his Sunday's suit, and with a brief announcement to his landlady that he was about to leave Watley for a day or two on a visit to a friend, set off for the railway station. He had not proceeded far when a difficulty struck him: the bank notes were all twenties; and were he to change a twenty pound note at the station, where he was well known, great would be the tattle and wonderment, if nothing worse, that would ensue. So Caleb tried his credit again, borrowed sufficient for his journey to London, and there changed one of the notes.

He soon reached Bristol, and blessed was the relief which the sum of money he brought afforded Mrs. Warner. She expressed much sorrow for the death of Mr. Lisle, and great gratitude to Caleb. The worthy man accepted with some reluctance one of the notes, or at least as much as remained of that which he had changed; and after exchanging promises with the widow and her relatives to keep the matter secret departed homewards. The young woman, Mrs. Warner's daughter, who had brought the letter to Watley, was, Caleb noticed, the very image of her mother, or rather what her mother must have been when young. This remarkable resemblance it was, no doubt, which had for the moment so confounded and agitated Mr. Lisle.

Nothing occurred for about a fortnight after Caleb's return to disquiet him, and he had begun to feel tolerably sure that his discovery of the notes would remain unsuspected, when, one afternoon, the sudden and impetuous entrance of Mr. Sowerby into his stall caused him to jump up from his seat with surprise and alarm. The attorney's face was deathly white, his eyes glared like a wild beast's, and his whole appearance exhibited uncontrollable agitation. "A word with you, Mr. Jennings," he gasped—"a word in private, and at once!" Caleb, in scarcely less consternation than his visitor, led the way into his inner room, and closed the door.

"Restore—give back," screamed the attorney, vainly struggling to dissemble the agitation which convulsed him—"that—that which you have purloined from the chest of drawers!" The hot blood rushed to Caleb's face and temples; the wild vehemence and suddenness of the demand confounded him; and certain previous dim suspicions that the law might not only pronounce what he had done illegal, but possibly felonious, returned upon him with terrible force, and he quite lost his presence of mind.

"I can't—I can't," he stammered. "It's gone—given away—"

“Gone!” shouted, or more correctly howled, Sowerby, at the same time flying at Caleb’s throat as if he would throttle him. “Gone—given away! You lie—you want to drive a bargain with me—dog!—liar!—rascal!—thief!”

This was a species of attack which Jennings was at no loss how to meet. He shook the attorney roughly off, and hurled him, in the midst of his vituperation, to the further end of the room.

They then stood glaring at each other in silence, till the attorney, mastering himself as well as he could, essayed another and more rational mode of attaining his purpose.

“Come, come, Jennings,” he said, “don’t be a fool. Let us understand each other. I have just discovered a paper, a memorandum of what you have found in the drawers, and to obtain which you bought them. I don’t care for the money—keep it; only give me the papers—documents.”

“Papers-documents!” ejaculated Caleb in unfeigned surprise.

“Yes—yes; of use to me only. You, I remember, cannot read writing; but they are of great consequence to me—to me only, I tell you.”

“You can’t mean Mrs. Warner’s letter?”

“No—no; curse the letter! You are playing with a tiger! Keep the money, I tell you; but give up the papers—documents—or I’ll transport you!” shouted Sowerby with reviving fury.

Caleb, thoroughly bewildered, could only mechanically ejaculate that he had no papers or documents.

The rage of the attorney when he found he could extract nothing from Jennings was frightful. He literally foamed with passion, uttered the wildest threats; and then suddenly changing his key, offered the astonished cobbler one—two—three thousand pounds; any sum he chose to name, for the papers—documents! This scene of alternate violence and cajolery lasted nearly an hour; and then Sowerby rushed from the house, as if pursued by the furies, and leaving his auditor in a state of thorough bewilderment and dismay. It occurred to Caleb, as soon as his mind had settled into something like order, that there might be another secret drawer; and the recollection of Mr. Lisle’s journey to London recurred suggestively to him. Another long and eager search, however, proved fruitless; and the suspicion was given up, or, more correctly, weakened.

As soon as it was light the next morning, Mr. Sowerby was again with him. He was more guarded now, and was at length convinced that Jennings had no paper or document to give up. “It was only some important memoranda,” observed the attorney carelessly, “that would save me a world of trouble in a lawsuit I shall have to bring against some heavy debtors to Mr. Lisle’s estate; but I must do as well as I can without them. Good morning.” Just as he reached the door, a sudden thought appeared to strike him. He stopped, and said; “By the way, Jennings, in the hurry of business I forgot that Mr. Lisle had told me the chest of drawers you bought, and a few other articles, were family relics which he wished to be given to certain parties he named. The other things I have got; and you, I suppose, will let me have the drawers for—say a pound profit on your bargain?”



Caleb was not the acutest man in the world; but this sudden proposition, carelessly as it was made, suggested curious thoughts. “No,” he answered; “I shall not part with it. I shall keep it as a memorial of Mr. Lisle.”

Sowerby’s face assumed, as Caleb spoke, a ferocious expression. “Shall you?” said he. “Then be sure, my fine fellow, that you shall also have something to remember me by as long as you live!”

He then went away, and a few days afterwards Caleb was served with a writ for the recovery of the two hundred pounds.

The affair made a great noise in the place; and Caleb’s conduct being very generally approved, a subscription was set on foot to defray the cost of defending the action—one Hayling, a rival attorney to Sowerby, having asserted that the words used by the proprietor of the chest of drawers at the sale barred his claim to the money found in them. This wise gentleman was intrusted with the defence; and, strange to say, the jury—a common one—spite of the direction of the judge, returned a verdict for the defendant, upon the ground that Sowerby’s jocular or sneering remark amounted to a serious, valid leave and license to sell two hundred pounds for five pounds ten shillings!

Sowerby obtained, as a matter of course, a rule for a new trial; and a fresh action was brought. All at once Hayling refused to go on, alleging deficiency of funds. He told Jennings that in his opinion it would be better that he should give in to Sowerby’s whim, who only wanted the drawers in order to comply with the testator’s wishes. “Besides,” remarked Hayling in conclusion, “he is sure to get the article, you know, when it comes to be sold under a writ of *fi. fa.*” A few days after this conversation, it was ascertained that Hayling was to succeed to Sowerby’s business, the latter gentleman being about to retire upon the fortune bequeathed him by Mr. Lisle.

At last Caleb, driven nearly out of his senses, though still doggedly obstinate, by the harassing perplexities in which he found himself, thought of applying to us.

“A very curious affair, upon my word,” remarked Mr. Flint, as soon as Caleb had unburdened himself of the story of his woes and cares; “and in my opinion by no means explainable by Sowerby’s anxiety to fulfil the testator’s wishes. He cannot expect to get two hundred pence out of you; and Mrs. Warner, you say, is equally unable to pay. Very odd indeed. Perhaps if we could get time, something might turn up.”

With this view Flint looked over the papers Caleb had brought, and found the declaration was in *trouver*—a manifest error—the notes never admittedly having been in Sowerby’s actual possession. We accordingly demurred to the form of action, and the proceedings were set aside. This, however, proved of no ultimate benefit: Sowerby persevered, and a fresh action was instituted against the unhappy shoemaker. So utterly overcrowded and disconsolate was poor Caleb, that he determined to give up the drawers, which was all Sowerby even now required, and so wash his hands of the unfortunate business. Previous, however, to this being done, it was determined that another thorough and scientific examination of the mysterious piece of furniture

should be made; and for this purpose Mr. Flint obtained a workman skilled in the mysteries of secret contrivance, from the desk and dressing case establishment in King Street, Holborn, and proceeded with him to Watley.

The man performed his task with great care and skill: every depth and width was gauged and measured, in order to ascertain if there were any false bottoms or backs; and the workman finally pronounced that there was no concealed receptacle in the article.

“I am sure there is,” persisted Flint, whom disappointment, as usual, rendered but the more obstinate, and so is Sowerby: and he knows, too, that it is so cunningly contrived as to be undiscoverable, except by a person in the secret, which he no doubt at first imagined Caleb to be. I’ll tell you what we’ll do. You have the necessary tools with you. Split the confounded chest of drawers into shreds: I’ll be answerable for the consequences.”

This was done carefully and methodically, but for some time without result. At length the large drawer next the floor had to be knocked to pieces; and as it fell apart, one section of the bottom, which, like all the others, was divided into two compartments, dropped asunder, and discovered a parchment laid flat between the two thin leaves, which, when pressed together in the grooves of the drawer, presented precisely the same appearance as the rest. Flint snatched up the parchment, and his eager eye had scarcely rested an instant on the writing, when a shout of triumph burst from him. It was the last will and testament of Ambrose Lisle, dated August 21, 1838—the day of his last hurried visit to London. It revoked the former will and bequeathed the whole of his property, in equal portions, to his cousins Lucy Warner and Emily Stevens, with succession to their children; but with reservation of one-half to his brother Robert or children, should he be alive, or have left offspring.

Great, it may be supposed, was the jubilation of Caleb Jennings at this discovery; and all Watley, by his agency, was in a marvelously short space of time in a very similar state of excitement. It was very late that night when he reached his bed; and how he got there at all, and what precisely had happened, except, indeed, that he had somewhere picked up a splitting headache, was, for some time after he awoke the next morning, very confusedly remembered.

Mr. Flint, upon reflection, was by no means so exultant as the worthy shoemender. The odd mode of packing away a deed of such importance, with no assignable motive for doing so, except the needless awe with which Sowerby was said to have inspired his feeble-spirited client, together with what Caleb had said of the shattered state of the deceased’s mind after the interview with Mrs. Warner’s daughter, suggested fears that Sowerby might dispute, and perhaps successfully, the validity of this last will. My excellent partner, however, determined, as was his wont, to put a bold face on the matter; and first clearly settling in his own mind what he should and what he should not say, waited upon Mr. Sowerby. The news had preceded him, and he was at once surprised and delighted to find that the nervous, crestfallen attorney was quite unaware of the advantages of his position. On condition of not being called to account for the moneys he had received and expended, about 1200*l.*, he destroyed the former will in Mr. Flint’s presence, and gave up at once all the deceased’s papers. From these we learned that Mr. Lisle had written a letter to Mrs. Warner, stating what he had done, and where the will would be found, and that only herself and Jennings would know the secret. From infirmity of purpose, or from haying

subsequently determined on a personal interview, the letter was not posted; and Sowerby subsequently discovered it, together with a memorandum of the numbers of the bank-notes found by Caleb in the secret drawer—the eccentric gentleman appears to have had quite a mania, for such hiding-places—of a writing-desk.

The affair was thus happily terminated: Mrs. Warner, her children, and sister, were enriched, and Caleb Jennings was set up in a good way of business in his native place, where he still flourishes. Over the centre of his shop there is a large nondescript sign, surmounted by a golden boot, which, upon close inspection, is found to bear some resemblance to a huge bureau chest of drawers, all the circumstances connected with which may be heard, for the asking, and in much fuller detail than I have given, from the lips of the owner of the establishment, by any lady or gentleman who will take the trouble of a journey to Watley for that purpose.

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.