

The Japanned Box
Or
Old Abraham's Bequest

by Mary C. Vaughan

An early summer twilight, with the dew-fall and the shadows of that delicious hour, for time. For place, a broad Western prairie partly broken by cultivate fields, with a yellow road wandering tortuously across the expanse, and passing near a low one-story cottage which stood also near the wood which bordered the prairie, and indicated the vicinity of a water-course.

Along this dusty road a pedestrian moved slowly. His form was bent, and there was weariness in his air. He carried a heavy pack of such wares as tempt the tastes of farmer's wives and daughters.

The woman who inhabited the house answered the peddler's salutation civilly, and assented to his question if she could give him supper and a night's lodging.

Then he laid his pack aside and seated himself upon a bench in the porch while she continued her task of preparing her children for their nightly rest.

Suddenly the sharp, impatient voice of the mother smote his ear:

"Lucinda Carter! If you don't behave yourself I'll give you a good whipping."

The old man started up, sat erect, and turned an intent, listening face toward the noisy group. But he did not speak till all had trouped off.

"I heard you call that child Lucindy Carter," the old man said. "Carter, that there's my name, and my wife, that's dead and gone this many a year, her name was Lucindy. See! Twas '35 she died and I ain't heard the name of Lucindy Carter since, till this night."

"That's our name—Carter," the woman replied. "Husband's name, you know—I was a Wiggins myself. He's away from home; he's a preacher, and has gone on his circuit."

As she prepared the meal for her guest, she told him all she knew of her husband's parentage and early life, and learned that the quaint being before her was indeed a distant relative.

The minister's family did not hesitate to acknowledge the wandering packman. In truth, before he left them the following morning the distribution with skillful hands of certain gaudy but inexpensive presents, had established him prime favorite, particularly with the handsome, boisterous little damsel whom he caressed with extreme partiality, as it seemed, in remembrance of the lost wife whose name she bore.

Before he came again the father had returned, and heard, with many amplifications, the story of his visit. He was a kind-hearted man, devout and firm in his faith, but not strong in any other particular. His whole life was a struggle with poverty and a sacrifice to duty. The farm he lived on belonged to the rich brother of his wife, and he had it rent free. Had he stayed at home and tilled, or even superintended the tilling, of its acres, it must have brought him competence. But he was firmly persuaded that it was his duty to preach the gospel, and he would have done so had his family been reduced to a crust.

But he was kind and hospitable, and ready to share with friend or kinsman his poor food and the shelter of his home. He had no kinsfolk in the western region, where his parents had long ago emigrated and died, leaving him to orphanage. It pleased him, therefore, to hear of the old packman, and not one of the family gave to that wandering personage, when he again approached their door, a warmer welcome than he.

From that day forth Abraham Carter made the preacher's house one of his homes. Far away in another country lived some distant kinsfolk with whom he sometimes tarried, and he had a welcome in many houses to which his wandering life brought him. He had also a little gray, desolate house of his own, from whose chimney the smoke curled at rare intervals, when he temporarily sought its shelter.

Laurence Carter and his wife were somewhat in the condition of the famous old woman of the nursery rhyme, "who lived in a shoe." But though they "had so many children they didn't know what to do"—healthy, ruddy, boisterous little animals—old Abraham seemed to prefer all the noise and discomfort of their home, rather than the quiet good-order he might have achieved in his own. The intervals between his journeys grew longer and longer, gradually the few moveables that he possessed, which he did not carry with him in his travels, were removed to the preacher's house. It came to be looked upon as his real home.

Something in the cheerful happiness of a life that the struggles of poverty scarcely shadowed seemed to reach and warm the cockles of the old man's heart. The chief attraction there was doubtless the pretty child Lucinda, but the whole family stood high in his good graces, and he, from time to time, uttered vague, but gradually more distinct, hints of his intention of dividing his property among them. He was known to be somewhat miserly, and supposed to be rich. With great show of secrecy and caution, he, on one of his visits, brought a small japanned trunk, or box, similar to those in which peddlers sometimes carry jewelry and trinkets; and this, which he informed the preacher contained important papers, he left, with many injunctions for its safe keeping, in his charge,

The great weight of the box contradicted the statement that it contained papers only, but it was safely cared for, and a few years later, when the old man abandoned his profession, and remained permanently in his chosen home, the family all knew something of its contents. There were, besides papers—deeds of two fine farms in another part of the State, the lonely gray house, and some real estate in the city of Cincinnati—several bags

of coin. No one ever knew the value of these hoards, which the old man counted so frequently; but as most of the coin was gold, in half and quarter eagles, with a goodly pile of Mexican and U.S. dollars, it was easy to see that the tin box was the deposit of wealth.

The preacher was not a shrewd or worldly wise man, but he had some natural misgivings for the safety of the property in his house, which was lonely, and, in his frequent absences, unprotected by any stronger arms than those of a feeble old man and of children. His representations of this fact produced no result, however, neither did the old man incline to invest his money in paying securities. He loved to count his hoards and gloat over them. His rents, after deducting his trifling expenses, and procuring handsome presents for Lucinda, and more homely but useful ones for other members of the family, were invariably turned into gold, and added to his already overflowing bags. At last all his affections centered in the blooming, buxom damsel and the glittering contents of the japanned box.

Twice a year the old man journeyed to Cincinnati to collect his rents. It was just before one of these periodical visits that Laurence earnestly urged him to make some different disposition of his property. The old man was angry at his pertinacity; but finally consented to out the money in safety, a promise which lifted a heavy load from the preacher's mind.

The next day Abraham Carter produced from among his effects some buckskin, and called upon Lucinda to assist him in making out of it a number of little bags, similar in size to the linen ones that contained his money. He did not mention the object for which he intended these; but no one doubted what it was. Evening came, and as it was Saturday, the unfinished work was laid aside to be completed on the Monday. On Sunday the family, with the exception of one child left at home with old Abraham, who never went to church, proceeded to the nearest settlement for the purpose of attending divine service. As soon as they were fairly on their way, the old man produced the bags and proceeded to complete the unfinished ones. That done, he sent the boy out of the way, and remained for some time alone in the house. The child soon after peeped in at the window, saw him counting his money, but as that was his usual Sunday pastime, gave no heed of it. An hour later, the old man went out and took his way to the woods that fringed the river. The boy thought he carried a bundle of considerable size, but asked no questions, for Abraham would not tolerate curiosity, and remained quietly at his own occupations, whatever they might have been, till some time after he saw the old man approaching the house from quite an opposite direction. There was nothing remarkable in his taking a walk on Sunday, and it excited no comment.

A few days after he left his home and never returned. After going to Cincinnati and collecting his rents, he came back to the house of the tenant of one of his farms. Here he was taken ill, but after a time was pronounced convalescent, and wrote to Laurence to that effect, and that he should shortly return home.

A week afterward came tidings of his death by a relapse of his disease occasioned by a sudden cold. And these tidings were followed a few days later, by others still more

astounding. The old man had left a will bequeathing to the man at whose house he died the whole of his property, with the single exception of the few moveables that remained at his late home.

It was a severe trial to lose the old man, who had, in spite of his uncouth manners, been invariably kind and generous to the Carters. And now that the hopes of ample provision for the entire family were dashed, it was but natural that they should regret that loss also. But the thought of the contents of the box were consoling. They had but a vague idea of their value, but knew they must be considerable. The preacher indulged in several moral and spiritual aphorisms, heaved a deep sigh or two in concert with the sobs of his weeping family, and then rose up and sought the closet where, hidden on a high shelf among a variety of miscellaneous articles, the box reposed. He got upon a chair, raised his arms, seized the handle and put forth muscular power to the supposed necessary extent, when lo! The box flew up so lightly that it touched the ceiling, and fell from his hand, rattling noisily to the floor not with the dull thud of a heavy weight, but with a metallic clash and jingle quite different from the sound that ought to have been made by a box containing a large amount of coin. Laurence jumped down, raised the box and opened it, thus disclosing its contents. The papers—the bags of coin—had all been removed! There were three Canada half pennies, a bogus half-dollar, and a button or two. On the inside of the lid was a paper pasted containing these words:

“I bequeath the contents of this box to Lucinda Carter, daughter of my friend and kinsman Laurence Carter. May she find as much happiness in spending them as I have in saving them.”

“Abraham Carter.”

Was this a burlesque upon the hopes he had excited? If not, whither had vanished the legacy of Lucinda?

A family counsel was held, when the facts of the old man’s strange conduct on the last Sunday at home came out; and this elicited another fact, namely, that on the day previous to the arrival of the tidings of Abraham’s death, two of the boys of the family had, while at play in the fields, been accosted by two strangers, who, leaving their horse and buggy in the road, had come towards them and inquired minutely as to the location of the farm, the name of its occupant, and the position of certain landmarks in the woods, along the shore of the creek. That they had then said something about purchasing timber in the bottom lands, and producing a couple of spades and a pickaxe, had crossed the fields, and entered the wood at the very point where Abraham had disappeared from view on that eventful Sunday.

Mr. Carter, pioneered by the boys, immediately set out to investigate the matter, and the tracks of the strangers’ feet in the soft loam being easily followed, led them to the foot of a tall tree, from whose side a small oval chip of bark had been removed, evidently with care. The ground below had been disturbed, and a considerable hole dug. At the bottom of this hole was found a bit of newspaper, bearing date the week previous to Abraham’s

leaving home, and a fragment, evidently of a small linen bag, like those in which he had formerly kept his money.

A much less shrewd man than Laurence must have suspected foul play. He was convinced that his kinsman had deposited the money in this place, and that the strangers had removed it. He proceeded at once to Cincinnati, and was fortunate enough to find himself an experienced detective.

I have not time here to explain how, step by step, the plot to divert the possession of old Abraham Carter from their legitimate direction, was unraveled.

It was proved without much difficulty that the tenant and his brother had visited the wood, and removed the money. On the person of one of them was found Abraham's memorandum of the place where he buried the treasure, together with a reiteration of its having been designed for Lucinda. And the money, most of it remaining in their possession, was easily recovered. But the circumstance of the will, dated at the period of his convalescence, as testified to by the neighbors of the accused, was not so readily unraveled. No other will was to be found, and, however strong the suspicions of its fraudulency, it could not be invalidated by sufficient proof.

Both the accomplices in the robbery of the money, were sent to the State Prison, but the family of the former tenant of Abraham's farm, continued to enjoy its ownership for several years. At length the tenant died in prison, and his widow stung by the late remorse, or from other motive, confessed to the fact that her husband had induced Abraham to sign the will while delirious in his last hours, and had purposely dated it back. His real will which she produced, had been signed and witnessed on the day of hate, and the farm servants who had been the witnesses, were easily deceived.

Thus, after many years, the family of the preacher enjoyed old Abraham's bequest, which laid the foundations of the great wealth, for which they are at present distinguished.

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