

[Written for The Flag of our Union]
The Power of Conscience
by James Dabney

MRS. JENKINS was fond of sight-seeing, and her husband was equally fond of gratifying her fancy. But Mrs. Jenkins had the bad taste always to deck herself in her finest apparel and with her handsomest jewels on such occasions. She by no means believed that modesty and simplicity are the most beautiful features in a woman's dress, and her practice always accorded with her belief.

One evening she accompanied her husband to a public meeting. She was dressed more richly than usual, and had noticed before starting, that the guard of her watch-chain was broken, but resisting the advice of her husband to leave the watch at home, she wore it, thinking that she would notice it closely during the evening.

As she was leaving the hall after the close of the meeting, she felt for her watch. It was gone.

"William," she exclaimed, in alarm, "I have lost my watch."

"I feared you would," said her husband. "You may have dropped it in the hall. Come, let us go back and look for it."

They returned to the hall, and a search was made for the watch, but it could not be found. Hastening home, Mrs. Jenkins searched through her clothing, but could not find it. The watch was gone, and it was vain to search for it. It had either been stolen from her during the evening, or been dropped in the hall, and picked up by some one. This much was plain, however, the watch was gone. An advertisement was inserted in the daily papers, describing the loss, and offering a handsome reward for the return of the property. This, too, was ineffectual. The watch was not heard from, and Mrs. Jenkins remained overwhelmed with grief.

Two years passed away, and Mrs. Jenkins had provided herself with a new watch and chain, having given up all hope of ever hearing from the missing articles. One morning in glancing over one of the daily newspapers, she chanced to see this advertisement:

"If the lady who, two years ago, lost a gold watch and chain at the — Hall, will send her address to A.B. City Post-office, she will hear something to her advantage."

Mrs. Jenkins could scarcely believe that she was the person alluded to in this advertisement, nevertheless she resolved to ascertain if she were. She at once enclosed her address to the party, and, without mentioning the matter to her husband, awaited a reply.

The next day a private carriage stopped before her door, and a lady, dressed in deep mourning, and closely veiled, alighted from it, and rang the door bell. She asked to see Mrs. Jenkins entered, she rose, and without removing her veil, said with quiet dignity:

"Mrs. Jenkins, I presume."

“Yes,” replied that lady, “and may I ask to whom I am indebted for this visit?”

“I must beg to be permitted to refrain from mentioning my name,” said the lady. “I am here on an errand of justice, and it is most probable that we may never meet again. Therefore I would rather remain unknown to you.”

“As you please,” said Mrs. Jenkins. “I suppose your visit is in relation to the watch and chain which I was so unfortunate as to lose two years ago.”

“It is,” replied the lady.

“Can you tell me any means by which I can recover it? I am willing to pay a liberal reward for it.”

“I desire no reward,” said the lady, “and I have come, not only to tell you of your lost property, but to restore it on one condition.”

“I grant the condition,” exclaimed Mrs. Jenkins, eagerly, “provided it is not unreasonable.”

“It is simply this; that upon receiving the articles again, you let the matter remain silent.”

“That I readily promise,” said Mrs. Jenkins. “I suppose the person that took them from me naturally desires to be unmolested. I shall be perfectly satisfied with the return of my property.”

The lady handed Mrs. Jenkins her long lost watch and chain. Nothing was missing. Everything was in as complete order as when she had last worn them.

“Everything is there, I believe,” said the lady.

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Jenkins, “everything is perfect. Will you tell me how you knew they were mine?”

“I was told so by the person from whom I received them.”

“Did that person take the articles from me?”

“No, you lost them, and they were found.”

“Then why were they not returned to me sooner?”

“I may as well tell you the whole story,” said the lady, after a pause. “You will never know any of the parties concerned; and I see no harm in telling you.

“Two years ago you attended a public meeting, in company with your husband. You wore the watch and chain which I have just restored to you. It seems that the guard which held the chain to

your dress was broken, and this, I suppose, accounts for your losing it. Sitting near you was a gentleman of wealth and position, but who was then greatly harassed by pecuniary difficulties. He had gone to this meeting to obtain relief from his distressing thoughts. He knew your husband by sight, and in this way knew you. After the meeting was over, and as he was going away, he noticed a handsome gold watch and chain lying on the floor where you had been sitting. As it was a lady's watch he at once supposed it to be yours. He picked it up, and looked around for you to restore it to you, but you had gone. Putting it in his pocket he left the hall, intending to call at your house the next day and return it; but, during the evening he thought he would sell the watch, use the money in the effort to recover from his business troubles, for every cent was of great value to him then, and, when he had fairly recovered, present you with a better and handsomer watch and chain, in the place of that which you lost. At last he determined to adopt this plan, and the next day started out for the purpose of selling the watch. His conscience reproached him so sorely, however, that he turned aside before reaching the place where he intended to make the sale, and concluded to postpone it until later in the day. He started out a few hours later on the same errand, but with the same result. Something, he could not tell what, seemed to hold him back, and prevent him from disposing of the watch. He would start out frequently with a firm determination to sell the watch, but each time his conscience would reproach him so greatly that he always abandoned his plan. This continued for several months, and at last the gentleman resolved to throw the watch away, and with it end the whole matter. Each time he did so his conscience restrained him even more powerfully than when he wished to sell the watch.

“At last he carefully sealed up the articles, and deposited them in his safe. He succeeded in getting through his difficulties, and in maintaining his mercantile position.”

“Why didn't he return the articles, and have done with them?” asked Mrs. Jenkins.

“He was ashamed to do so,” replied the lady. “It was a sore subject to him, and he never enjoyed much peace after the watch came into his hands. A short while ago he died. On his deathbed he revealed to his wife the history of the watch, and begged her to return it to you. At her desire I am here to-day to discharge this duty. The gentleman of whom I have been speaking was a dear friend of mine, and I knew him to be a good and upright man. In a moment of weakness he yielded to a great temptation, and was only kept from a greater sin by the strong power of conscience.”

As the lady ceased speaking, she rose, and bidding Mrs. Jenkins, “good morning,” took her departure. Mrs. Jenkins respected her promise, and never sought to know the name of the man whose story she had heard, but she always believed the lady who returned her watch to be his wife.

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