

My Wife's Legacy

“We must really have a civility-dinner next week. There are the—” here my wife enumerated some half-dozen or so of acquaintances, who had not ripened into intimates— “to whom we are in debt.”

“Then let us settle the score as soon as possible,” I replied. “Send out your invitations, and give me the number, that I may know what wine to order from Bookay & Baddy.”

For I blush to confess that I had no cellar. I had twice attempted to “lay down” wine, but it would keep rising up again with such pertinacity that I gave up the experiment. I believe, however, that although cellarless, I am rather of a hospitable disposition, and like playing host, so that I spoke with a cheerful accent, which rather aggravated my spouse.

“Ah,” she said, and with perfect truth, “it is easy enough to order the wine; but if you had before you the task of looking after the collection of the silver, with the bother, and anxiety, and responsibility which I feel till it is all returned safely, you would not be so pleased at the prospect. Let me see: there is Cousin Mary’s dozen of forks and spoons. Mrs. Tomkins’ epergne. Louisa’s fish-slice” — and the little woman soon made out a list of the friends who were to supply us with the silver requisite to make our table sufficiently imposing in the eyes of comparative strangers.

For on ordinary occasions we ate off, sipped out of, and stirred with electroplate. With the exception of a few bachelor teaspoons, and a tobacco-box bearing an inscription which tended to perpetuate the remembrance of the grace and dexterity with which a certain undergraduate was once wont to handle an oar, there was not an article of silver in the house. It is true that our tea pot has hitherto always borne the credit of being genuine, but that was owing to a ruse of mine; for, learning at an early period of hymeneal initiation that plated tea-pots were distinguished by the thickness of their nozzles, I had ours fitted with a silver spout, which *did* the gossips.

We were not wealthy or titled, it is true: but most people with our incomes and position have some little property sunk in precious stones and metals; while I do not believe that the most enterprising pawnbroker would have advanced twenty pounds upon our united stock of rings, brooches, chains, watches, and other trinkets. We were married with the joyous approbation of our respective relations, yet our wedding presents were not so handsome as those often bestowed by them upon comparative strangers on like occasions, but ran mostly to illustrated Byrons, *papier-mache* knives, and cut-glass butler-coolers. Our children had been godfathered and godmothered in a genteel and Christian manner, yet their little mugs were made of delf, not silver. The fact was that no one cared to give us, nor did we feel inclined to buy either plate or jewelry, because at most it was only five to one against my wife being heiress to about the largest collection of gold and silver articles, and, above all, of emeralds and diamonds, possessed by any private individual in England. In a word, she was the favorite niece and the promised inheritrix of Sir Peter Sparkles.

An astrologer who once cast Sir Peter’s horoscope, said that he was born when the Gemini were in conjunction with Aquarius, which accounts, perhaps, for his instinctive perception of the

fineness of the water of precious stones, and the mania he had for their acquisition. This taste, which in very early life had been comparatively harmless, had become developed and fostered by an accidental opportunity which occurred to him while serving against Tippoo, in India, of purchasing looted jewels of inestimable value for a hundred pounds or so; and having thus formed the nucleus of a collection, he devoted the remainder of his life, his own considerable fortune, and that of the two wives whom (from *virtuoso* reasons, principally) he had at different times married, to its increase and enrichment; so that at the age of seventy-five he was a childless, solitary old man, with an annuity, which he had taken the precaution to purchase, of two hundred a year for his sole support, but with plate which might have furnished the mess table of a volunteer regiment officered by the Rothschilds, Barings, Childs, and Couttses, and jewels enough to set a couple of monarchs up in regalia, all in an iron-bound fire-proof closet at the back of his bed.

While he was somewhat like other men before he had secluded himself from his fellow creatures, and spent his last ten thousand pounds upon a sapphire which had caused two wars, and three *coups-d'etat*, he had taken a great fancy to the daughter of his favorite sister, who had died under somewhat affecting circumstances, had had the child to stay with him on several occasions, and had spoken of her as holding a most prominent position in his will. Better still; when that little girl grew up, and married the present writer, she received a letter from her crotchety uncle on her wedding morning, apologizing for not sending her some little ornament, on the plea that it would "spoil the collection," but consoling her with the promise, that it should all be hers one day; and so we contented ourselves with mother-of-pearl studs, ivory brooches, and silken watch-guards; our fingers and ears were, with one unavoidable exception, ringless; and our plate was all make-believe, pending the time when we should make our selection from Sir Peter Sparkles' hoards, prior to converting the hulk into three-per-cent annuities.

Our chance of inheriting was certainly not a good one, but not so hollow a thing as it might appear at first sight. There were four other competitors entered besides my wife, all of whom were "well in;" doubtless each stable thought the chances of its own horse were the best.

First, Paul Sneezinski, the son of Sir Peter Sparkles' first wife by a former marriage. This young man had a sort of moral right to the magnificent head-dress and stomacher of brilliants, which had belonged to his Polish mother; and Sir Peter had, in writing, admitted the claim.

Secondly, Don Esteban de Santiago, a South American gentleman, had certainly been disappointed of inheriting a number of emeralds of rare size and water, which would probably have come into his possession, had not his foolish old aunt been caught by the attentions and title (the value of which she somewhat overestimated) of the English baronet; and as the Don had refrained from even attempting to pistol or stiletto the intruding uncle, that gentleman had felt the extent of his obligations towards him, and had promised that he too should find himself all the better for his forbearance when that death befell which he had refrained from anticipating.

Thirdly, Lord Montechristo, a rival collector of rare jewels, had once proposed to Sir Peter Sparkles that the one who died first should leave his stock to the survivor, and so, at all events, delay the dispersion of the gems, which it had taken so much time, labor and expense to gather

together; and Sir Peter had seemed pleased with the idea, though he would not positively pledge himself to the arrangement.

Fourthly, Heziah Buggins, Sir Peter's housekeeper, was supposed to make him very comfortable, and to be an artful, designing woman. She certainly had done her best of late years to prevent the old man's relatives from obtaining an interview with him; but that might have been in deference to his express orders. However that might be, her chance was considered a good one, and she was considered quite a favorite (in the dialect of the betting-ring, mind you, and by no means in any affectionate sense of the term) amongst those who watched the event with interest.

Four to one on the field would have been very safe betting, far we were all "dark horses;" and though we were standing, figuratively, cap in hand, round the old man's jewel-closet, it would have puzzled Admiral de Rouz himself to have handicapped us.

This was the state of the odds and latest news at the (chimney) Corner on the morning when my wife was reckoning up all the friends whose silver she could borrow: but while she was absorbed in her calculations, the post came in, and a black-bordered letter was placed in my hands, which quite dispersed all her plans.

"I do not know any one who has fish knives," she was saying at the moment I opened it, "which is a pity, for I like the fashion vastly. Do you think you could hire any?"

"It will not be necessary to do so now," I rejoined, "nor will you ever be able to borrow plate again, for we shall either have a superfluity, or be left without excuse for not providing ourselves with what is needful from our own resources."

"What! Uncle Peter?"

"Is dead!"

"Poor old man!"

But when a man is very old and very cracked, and one has not seen him for years, one cannot feel inconsolably grieved at his decease, even if he be one's mother's brother, especially while uncertain whether he has left one anything. My wife is not a humbug, so she did not cry, but turned very pale, and the next thing she said was "Now we shall know!"

All the horses came to the post, or rather, to drop the sporting metaphor which struck me so whimsically at the time, that I am unable to help introducing it while telling my story, all five expectants were at the funeral. Paul Sneezinski and Don Esteban, who were in England with a view to urging their respective claims upon the old man (whom their agents had represented as declining rapidly,) but who had been foiled in their attempts to gain access to him; Lord Montechristo—who had left *his* jewels to the other, and felt that he had a right to count upon reciprocity—and myself, were all present by special invitation: Mrs. Boggins was in the house *ex-officio*.

What a demoralizing thing that greediness is; the solemnity of death, the hope of immortality, the thought that the poor body which we were hiding away in the earth was but the other day living, talking, planning as we then were, and that in a few short years, at the farthest, we should be helpless, senseless, dark, like *it*: the moral lesson taught by the little good the dead man had derived from his hoarded treasures, seeing that a penny given to a beggar (*lent*, we are told) would be of more value to him now than the Koh-i-nur— to all this we were deaf and blind; the one thought which dinned our ears, and swam before our eyes, was, who will inherit? I felt it myself, and I saw it in the eyes, and especially on the lips of my companions, *that* was our only thought. We returned to the house, and gathered in the sitting-room; the lawyer opened the will. I wonder whether the principal end and aim of all legal documents is to spoil as much parchment as possible before coming to the point; if so, they are marvellously successful, and the present will was a masterpiece. At last the name Montechristo surged out of a sea of words, and this is an abridgement of what followed: “I know that there was a sort of understanding between Lord Montechristo and myself that the one who died first should leave his collection to the survivor, and this I at one time intended to adhere to; but the serious considerations upon death and responsibility called up by the making of my will, and putting down in black and white what I desired might be done when I was no more, together with a chapter in the Bible, upon which I accidentally lit, about a man who hid his talent in a napkin, diverted me from an act of so great injustice: and if Lord Montechristo has fulfilled his part of the proposed agreement, to which, however, he must remember that I never absolutely pledged myself, I can only beg his forgiveness.”

Lord Montechristo turned scarlet.

“Forgiveness!” he cried. “Why, it is a breach of contract, a swindle, an attempt to obtain money under false pretences; why, I have left him, on my side, every diamond, every—”

“Pardon me, my lord,” said the lawyer; “this outburst is hardly opportune. If you have any legal remedy, bring it forward afterwards; if not, remember that it is hardly reasonable to expect the present company to sympathize with your disappointment.”

He was right: we were delighted: one horse was out of the race, and the odds were a point less against each of the remainder. The reading of the will was continued—

“I feel that Paul Sneezinski ought to have his mother’s jewels; but I neither like the idea of any property which has once belonged to an Englishman going out of the country, except for value received, nor can I bear to break up the collection with my own hand. If my heir likes to make them over to him, or to compensate him in any other way, she is free to do so.”

It was evidently Paul Sneezinski’s first impulse to tear his hair and use bad language, but he remembered that someone had to be conciliated and restrained himself.

“The same remarks apply to Don Esteban de Santiago, though, of course, his claims to compensation are infinitely inferior to those of the Pole.”

Don Esteban smiled bitterly, bowed elegantly, drew himself up to his full height, and commenced twirling his moustaches.

The race now lay between Heziah Buggins and myself. I do not know how I looked, but my heart beat at a tremendous pace, and there was a look of insolent triumph in the full and rosy (not to say “bloated”) face of my opponent, which made me fear the worst.

“To my housekeeper, Heziah Buggins —”

“Yes, sir, that’s me; go on quick, please!”

“I bequeath all that she has robbed me of during the years that she has been in my service, so that now she can with truth call herself an honest woman. May she remain so! For any disappointment she may now feel, she may thank herself; her system of intimidation led me to deceive her. She must have feathered her nest comfortably: let her be content. Finally, to my niece —”

In short, I was left sole heir. All the gold, silver, diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, topazes, &c., were bequeathed to me. I say “to me” because husband and wife are one, more especially in the case of property accruing to the latter.

I sent off at once for my wife, according to agreement; and considering the great value of the property, and the public attention which had been drawn to that fact, and all the other singular circumstances of the case, I applied to the authorities for a policeman to remain in the house until I could get the will proved and the valuables removed; and I determined not to leave myself before I could take them with me. So I sat up all night in the room in which the old man had lived and died, with a box of cigars and a bottle of whiskey on the table, a bright fire, and a simmering kettle on the hearth, and a document which had been folded up with the will, in my hand. I had the bed removed, and the door of the iron closet could be seen from where I sat. My wife, more philosophical or weary than myself, slept on the sofa in the adjoining drawing-room: the policeman was in the dining room down stairs. Altogether, considering the watch that was kept, and the house being in a row in a frequented quarter, I felt that my property was pretty safe.

The difficulty threatened to lie in getting at it, for the paper which had been tied up with the will, and which was in Sir Peter’s own hand-writing ran thus: “The person who opens the jewel-closet must be careful, or he will inevitably be shot. I have always had a great taste for mechanical contrivances, and some skill in locksmiths’ work; and for the last ten years I have devoted all my time and ingenuity to the perfection of an apparatus so fixed within the closet that the outward movement of the door for a space of more than two inches should cause six pistol barrels to explode simultaneously; one upwards, one downwards, two latterally, and two straight to the front. The iron rod which connects the door with a trigger, any pressure upon which will fire the machine, was to have been raised, and so rendered harmless, by pulling a wire, the end of which I intended to hang on a nail just inside the left top corner of the door, and easily got at when the door was opened *one inch*, thus leaving the margin of an inch for the benefit of burglars, as unless the door revolves on its hinges two full inches, it is utterly impossible that the barrels should go off. My latter years have been rendered wretched by perpetual fear of robbers. The

infirmities of age crept upon me; I felt myself growing weaker; I could not trust my servant; and it was with feelings of delight and triumph that, not quite a year ago, I completed a work which had cost me so much time and labor, and which a skilled blacksmith could have done for me in a few days, had I known one whom I dared to trust. I arranged the apparatus, and quietly closed the door until when there was only the exact gap of two inches left, I heard the iron rod click into its place. I was standing on a chair with the end of the wire, which when pulled would render the instrument harmless in my hand, and I now proceeded to hitch it by a loop which I had twisted in the further end on to the appointed nail. At that moment, someone came to the door of the room; I started, and dropped the wire, which sprang into the interior of the closet, and rattled down on the gold and silver dishes.”

“It is nine months and four days since I have seen my treasures. My diamonds that a prince might covet; my emeralds, that have sparkled in the sword-hilt of the warrior: my goblets carved by Bevenuto Cellini; my loves, my children, to enjoy which, perpetually and undisturbed, I have separated myself from my kind, and become a sort of Mammon hermit, are there, separated from me by a mere plank, and I cannot see them, cannot gloat over their glittering beauties, cannot touch them, cleanse them, polish them.”

There was a good deal more: the poor old man had evidently thought of sending for his niece and myself to take care of him and his treasures, while he intrusted some workmen with the task of extracting them for him, but determined to wait until he was worse or better before he took this step. But there was nothing new or original about the composition, and I do not think that it would be generally interesting *in extenso*. The details which I have extracted were excessively interesting to my wife and myself, though; and when I was fully entitled to take possession, I sent for a clever locksmith, a lawyer, and a detective—the last, I thought might be useful in suggesting plans for the avoidance of danger — and held a grand consultation upon how to crack our nut and get at the kernel.

My confidence in the detective was not misplaced; he listened to all our ingenious devices in judicial silence, and when we had quite done, said: “Would it not be simpler to break in at the back of the cupboard?”

Of course it would; we all knew that now. It was the old story of the leather portmanteau, which can be ripped up with a penknife, secured by a Bramah lock of labyrinthine intricacy. On examination, we found that the closet was built against the partition wall, so that the back could not be got at without going into the next house. So the next inquiry was, who lived there? A city clerk and his wife, we soon learned; young people who had been there about a month, and were not likely, one would hope, to prove cantankerous. The police officer offered to it “square it,” as he said, with them, and having done so in a remarkably short space of time, we proceeded to the next house, leaving one of the party behind to guide us by knocking against the wall to the right spot for commencing operations. We soon found it; it was in a bed-room, the nuptial chamber, unfortunately, but that had already been perceived and considered in the compensation. Quickly was the bright, fresh paper torn from the wall, and easily did the locksmith and a workman whom he had called to his assistance effect an entrance. Too easily, alas! for some thief had caught the same idea as the detective; and when we gained admittance into the closet, we found a

complicated arrangement of pistol barrels, but nothing else—not a brilliant, not a ruby, not an ounce of gold or silver.

I investigated, I inquired, I threw much good money after the bad. The present tenants were proved to be innocent; the former ones could not be traced; and to this day, no one actually knows who the very dark horse was that carried off the plate.

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