

A Monomaniac in Court
by Sylvanus Cobb, Jr.

They called him a monomaniac; but I called him a moral hero. Many there were who blessed him, while many others derided him for his folly. I speak of Matthew Croft,—and this is the story.

In the earlier days of our town, and before the time of the railroads, when the sturdy yeomen raised upon their farms nearly everything that was necessary to their living, Ezekiel Croft came from a distant city, and set up a store in the village. The village shoemaker had kept for sale such imported articles as tea, sugar, salt, cotton fabrics, ribbons, etc., and people prophesized that Ezekiel Croft would never make a living in Downterry, unless he took off his coat, rolled up his sleeves, and went at work; but they did not know their man. With the first load of goods that came to Croft's new store were two hogsheads and four barrels of peculiar shape, and banded by an extraordinary number of hoops. A few days afterwards the citizens, from far and near, were invited to the new store, to a free entertainment; and it was then discovered that the two hogsheads contained Old Jamaica and New England rum, and that the four barrels contained gin, brandy, and Port and Madeira wine. The citizens came, and many of them went away with the idea that Ezekiel Croft was a glorious fellow.

And Ezekiel Croft grew and flourished. The hogsheads and the barrels were replenished continually; and after the lapse of a few years a change had come over the homes of very many of the honest, hard-working farmers of Downterry. They drank deeply and ran in debt to Ezekiel Croft. Such a free-hearted, easy, genial fellow was Ezekiel, that they deemed it a pleasure to patronize him; and then he was not particular about his pay. At the end of the year he was perfectly willing to take their notes for the amounts due. By and by he took mortgages upon their farms, and bills of sale of their stock.

But it is an old story, and one oft repeated. The keeper of the pipes and barrels became rich, and his customers became poor; and when he had been in business twenty years, he owned a score of the old homestead farms of Downterry, and rented them out to their former proprietors,—or to their children; for many of those old proprietors had dropped away from his bar, and had been buried in the churchyard.

Dear reader, I can take you to the very town—to many such towns,—and I can show you a score of Ezekiel Crofts; and I can show you the impoverished and blighted homesteads, that have been sapped to fill the seller's greedy till.

In time Ezekiel Croft retired from business, but not long to the enjoyment of his wealth. He shortly afterward died, leaving his property to his son—and only child—Matthew. Matthew Croft was five and twenty years of age when his father left this mundane sphere. He had graduated at college, and had studied law; but his father's failing health had called him home before he could commence the practice of his chosen profession, and the management of the store came upon his hands.

On the day after his father had been buried Matthew Croft invited the citizens again to the store; but this time it was not for carousal. No, no. It was to witness the breaking in of the heads of the pipes and casks, and the smashing of all the decanters, and the spilling of every drop of liquor which the store contained.

Many of the people shook their heads, and said that Matthew Croft was crazy; and some were highly incensed upon beholding their supply of the ardent thus cut off. One man, in particular, was exceeding wroth, and swore all sorts of vengeance. This was Alanson Buffington, the only man who had ever been able to sponge favors from Ezekiel Croft. This Buffington was agent for several Insurance Companies; he dabbled in patents; traded dogs and horses; and had been employed by Ezekiel to collect debts. On the morning of this day he had said to Matthew:

“My dear Mr. Croft, your worthy father has left a great many bills uncollected. If you will give them to me, I will collect them at the usual percentage.

And Matthew Croft had told him to go about his business, and had informed him that he wanted nothing to do with him.

And the business which Alanson Buffington went about was to hate Matthew Croft with all his heart.

Ere long things most strange were whispered of Matthew Croft. The old homesteads which his father had held by mortgage he had restored to the heirs of the original owners, burning the notes, and sending the mortgage deeds to the Registry to be cancelled.

There might be an affecting story told of each of the redeemed households to whom the blessing of Matthew Croft’s unexpected restitution came; but all the joy and the gratitude of the recipients of this unexampled bounty can be well imagined.

In time, all the claims which had been held by the elder Croft against the hard-working yeomanry of Dowerry, not one remained; and it was estimated by the curious that at least twenty thousand dollars had been thus thrown away by Matthew. Surely, he must be crazy—crazy as a loon!

But the end was not yet. On the night of the first day of June the great store which Ezekiel Croft had built took fire, and was burned to the ground, and with it were burned all the goods which the elder Croft had left upon the shelves. The loss was heavy.

“Was the store insured?” asked a looker-on.

“Yes,” answered one who knew,—“it was insured in the Fallowdale Mutual, for eight thousand dollars.”

Before night, on the second day of that June, it was told that Matthew Croft had himself set fire to the store. He had been seen to do it by two men whose words were beyond dispute. Here was

an opportunity for Alanson Buffington, and he was not the man to let it slip. Now he would make Matthew Croft suffer.

I was the only lawyer in Donderry, and Buffington came to me. He asked me if Matthew Croft could be prosecuted for arson.

“No,” said I. “No other buildings were endangered; and even admitting that he set fire to his own property, that does not constitute arson within the meaning of the statutes.”

“Then,” pursued Buffington, somewhat crestfallen, but with much malignity, “I shall have to fall back upon a prosecution for malicious attempt to defraud our Insurance Company. The store, and the goods, were insured by the Fallowdale Mutual for eight thousand dollars. I took the risk myself, as Agent of the Company, and hold myself personally responsible. It is a high-handed crime. Of course an action would stand against that?”

I told him I thought it might, if he had evidence that Mr. Croft had set the fire himself.

He smiled contemptuously. He knew that Croft had set the fire. And now, would I take the case in hand?

I told him, No! most emphatically; and he went away.

The next thing I knew of the matter, Matthew Croft had been arrested, and indicted by the grand jury, and was on bail, awaiting his trial on the charge of malicious attempt to defraud the Fallowdale Mutual Insurance Company by firing his own building.

Shortly before the trial was to come on, Matthew Croft’s wife came to see me. she was a most loveable woman,—not only exceedingly pretty, but fond, true, and affectionate. She wanted me to assist her husband.

“If he would only suffer me to testify in his behalf,” she said, “I am sure I could shield him. I think I could have prevented the grand jury from finding a bill. But he would not allow me. In truth, Matthew is a monomaniac upon the subject of what he calls his ‘inheritance of shame.’ Every dollar of property which came from the sale of spirituous liquors to citizens of his native town, he has sworn to put away from him,—to make restitution where he can,—but at any rate, to obliterate any trace of the income of the seller of rum. His feelings upon the subject are deep and morbid. He has given up property, in bills of sale, deeds, notes, and mortgages, to the amount of over twenty thousand dollars; and I bid him God-speed in the noble, generous work. I knew, long ago, that the store was doomed; but I dared not speak of it. Matthew felt that the building was an outgrowth from the traffic in liquor; he regarded it as a temple of the Demon of Drunkenness, and he was determined to wipe it away. Why he waited so long I do not know; for the pile was doomed months before it was offered in sacrifice.”

Mrs. Croft was fearful that it would go hard with her husband at the trial, for she was aware of the bitter enmity of the prosecutor. Buffington had prosecuted in his own name, as Agent of the

Insurance Company. In fact, he had been headstrong and precipitate. And the wife thought, if the plea of insanity could be put in, that it might be sustained.

I told her I would take the matter in hand, and do my best.

I saw Matthew Croft, and offered him my services. He thanked me very kindly, and assured me that he counted me as one of his true friends.

“But,” said he, with a smile of perfect self-assurance. “I need no help. I am, as you know, a bit of a lawyer myself, and I shall conduct my own defense. Alanson Buffington is a fool, as well as a knave.”

I knew it would be useless to urge the matter, and our conversation turned upon other subjects.

Before the trial came on, the people of Dowerry, saving Buffington, and a few of his paid satellites, had learned to love and esteem Matthew Croft. It had become publicly known how he had restored over thirty suffering families to the possession of their homesteads which their fathers had lost through drink; and it had also leaked out that he was determined to put from him the last dollar which bore the stain of the soul-searing traffic upon it. And so the good people had come to hope and pray that he might get clear; but they saw not how, for he had never once denied that he set fire to the store.

The day of the trial came, and the courthouse was crowded by the citizens of Dowerry. The prosecution made out a case clear and inconvertible. The firing of the store by the defendant was fully proved. Alanson Buffington rubbed his hands in spiteful glee; while the any friends of the accused man were despondent.

“What is the burden of this charge against me?” demanded Matthew Croft, arising for his own defense. His bearing was proud and defiant, his look sublime,—for he was a man of magnificent form and presence. “If I mistake not, I am charged with an attempt to defraud a certain Insurance Company. The firing of my store, as alleged, is held to have been only a means toward that fraud. So, if the charge of attempted fraud falls, the whole fabric of the case goes down.”

He looked at the judge, and the judge nodded.

“Has the Insurance Company instituted this prosecution?” continued Croft. “No,” he added, turning his look upon Alanson Buffington; “but yonder wretch, whose intense stupidity can only be equaled by his base vindictiveness, hath done it! I call him to the stand.”

Buffington was placed upon the witness stand.

“Alanson Buffington,” spoke Croft sternly, “can you swear that my store, which was burned, was insured by the Fallowdale Mutual Company?”

“Yes,” answered Buffington, emphatically “I myself took the risk, and got the policy for your father.”

“How long did that policy run?”

“Five years.”

“When was it given?”

“I don’t justly remember the exact date,” retuned the witness, looking from Croft to the Judge, and then to the jury; “but I have a minute of it among my papers. I think it was somewhere about four years ago.”

“Have you your papers with you?”

“No. But—you don’t mean to deny that the store was insured?”

“Get thee down, dolt! I have done with you.” And turning to the Judge, Matthew proceeded,—

“Your honor, if any man set fire to the store in question, he must have had more regard for the interests of the Fallowdale Mutual Insurance Company than has the Agent whose head is so thick, or whose wits are so stupefied by drink, that he cannot keep the run of his own business. Here is the Policy, sir, which was issued to my father, insuring the store and goods against loss by fire in the sum of eight thousand dollars. Your honor will observe that the instrument bears the date the first day of June, one thousand eight hundred and forty-four; and that the policy expires at twelve of the clock—at noon—on the first day of June, one thousand eight hundred and forty-nine. It has already appeared in evidence when my store was burned; and it was not, at least, until twelve hours after the expiration of the Insurance Policy of the Fallowdale Mutual Company! And now, your Honor, I submit that this outlawed instrument to you and the jury, and leave the matter in your hands.

Mercy! How blank and consternated looked the prosecuting attorney. He had taken it for granted that the fact of insurance existed, trusting entirely in Buffington’s word. And how abased and abject looked Alanson Buffington. In his vindictive wrath he had forgotten to consult dates, being fully assured, in his hot haste for vengeance, that he had the whip-row of the man who had so unceremoniously told him to “go about his business.”

Of course there could be but one result after the production of that defunct policy. The idea of intended fraud fell to the ground, and the whole case went with it. And hundreds of people were glad, and made known their joy even in the presence of the august court. But it was not until he reached home that Matthew Croft knew, from the ovation which was given him, how deeply he was held in the love and esteem of his townsmen.

With the sweeping away of Buffington’s charge, the monomania faded from Matthew’s mind; and, with less material wealth than he might have had, but with the far richer wealth of conscious integrity and honor, he stepped forth into the practice of his profession, to win for himself a name that is already known and revered far and wide.

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