

The Good Doctor Ambrose
by Albert Webster, Jr.

In a crypt of the greatest library of one of our great cities, there dwelt the aged and respectable janitor, together with his daughter and a servant.

The main floor of the building rested upon a series of heavy columns; and as it had appeared that the spaces between them were likely to be unemployed for the storage of waste and rubbish, a shrewd spirit among the managers suggested that a few board partitions be erected, and that the dutiful janitor and his wife be invited to occupy the apartments thus made, at an abatement of a hundred dollars from his yearly salary for rent. The idea was adopted with acclaim, for it was at once perceived that, by establishing the janitor in the building, the necessity of purchasing the services of a watchman was obviated at a blow.

This was a stroke of good business; but, concealing their economical policy under many smiles of benevolent and generous import, the astute board mentioned the plan to the grateful Corbin, who hastened to accept it with tears of gratitude, and who never failed to speak of their tender consideration at least once a day until the hour of his death.

Thus it was that the janitor became domiciled in the cellar. But his apartments were not at all times unpleasant. To be sure, his good wife died in one of them from bronchial disease, contracted from the damps which exhaled from the walls in the spring-time, and the dairyman could never be made to descend to the kitchen, but would always leave the filled pitcher near the low window-sill, where it was more handy for the cats than for Corbin's servants; but, barring these and a few minor reasons, the little rooms were not wholly unendurable. For a few hours on each pleasant day the sun came in at the back-windows, which looked upon, an ancient cemetery, filled with flowers and verdure above-ground, and mouldy revolutionary bones below; the harsh noises of the adjacent streets were here hushed to a gentle murmur, which rather soothed than disturbed; the songs of the birds in the trees of the church-yard often rang merrily through the vaulted apartments; and, as Corbin and his daughter were naturally light-hearted, the two were never cursed with repining.

At his business Corbin was a martinet. His duties required intelligence, diligence, and a faculty for system and order. In his way he was a tyrant. He would follow the dusters and sweepers with the eye of a Dame Durden. No carpenter employed by him to lay a shelf or to repair a desk ever collected the price of a nail more than his fair and proper due; no wood-sawyer or coal-heaver was ever known to delay too long in his work for either breath or ale; no breaker of library-rules ever went unwarned by him, and his solemn and threatening eye kept the boisterous children in check, when, after school, they rushed in to get their evening's reading.

But it was with the regular patrons of the library, the students, young and old, that Corbin was most congenial. Though not a learned man himself, far from it, indeed, yet he appreciated knowledge in others; he respected a bookworm devoutly, and would go far and do much to oblige one.

He was especially devoted to one in particular—a man of such vast erudition and scholastic acquirements, that Corbin never ceased to wonder at him; this was Doctor Ambrose, the great philologist and lexicographer.

Corbin considered it a privilege to wait upon this famous man whenever he appeared within the precincts of the library. He would stand at the head of the stairs and welcome him like a host. He would take charge of his outer clothing, find him a comfortable seat, and then would hurry off for the various catalogues, and upon a slip of paper he would jot down, with bated breath, the numbers of the volumes which his great friend required; then with his own hands and arms he would quickly bring the ponderous tomes, and arrange them in their proper order before him, and then would retire, with a genial smile, a little to the rear, conscious of having contributed something to the literature of the age.

Now and then an accident would expose to the reverent janitor that his friend possessed even another title in addition to those already known. Corbin often ran over in his mind, as his eyes rested admiringly upon the doctor, the sounding honors which belonged to him, and he loved to recite them to his daughter, who naturally partook of her father's adoration for this illustrious man. These were some of his attainments:

He was president of the Philadelphia Philological Society; president of the Geographical and Statistical Society of America; secretary to the Board of Home Missions; the chief inspirer of the Association for the Promotion of Collegiate and Theological Education at the South; a correspondent of Dr. Livingstone, and also of the Royal Educational Societies of Berlin, Paris, and London. He was an eminent microscopist, and was the only member of High Honor of the Queen Adelaide Association of Germany. He was fellow of many societies, philosophical, scientific, and others; and, when Corbin's memory conjured something like a dozen more titles, he very excusably began to think that there was no practical limit to the doctor's brain.

No wonder, then, that the amiable janitor danced attendance upon this mighty personage with feelings of delight and awe. He provided the best ink for him; he wiped his pen upon the lining of his own coat; and he felt a deep satisfaction when he beheld the doctor drawing in huge draughts of knowledge from the books he had provided.

In person the doctor was agreeable and even charming, notwithstanding his age of sixty years. His hair was very gray, but very thick; his eyes blue; his face thin, smooth, and regular; and his figure erect and spare.

Corbin admired him profoundly, but he discreetly held himself aloof, and always poured the story of his passion into the ear of his daughter at tea.

One day the good and sage Doctor Ambrose appeared to be lazy. He wished for no books, no pamphlets, no ink, no paper; in fact, nothing.

He went to one of the long windows which looked upon the cemetery, and gazed out upon the lofty trees and the lowly stones, which were half hidden with moss. It was a delightful day; the

air was warm and permeated with the smell of flowers, and there arose that peaceful hum which the wings of the hordes of insects make as they prey upon each other.

Corbin stood a little in the rear, trying to decide what it was that affected his friend.

The doctor gazed up at the sky and down at the ground, at the trunks and the leaves of the trees, and seemed to be entirely aimless. Presently, however, his eyes became fixed. He seemed interested, and leaned forward, with his knuckles on the sill.

He beheld a young girl, standing amid a tall hedge of hollyhocks which surrounded a greenish slab of sandstone, busily employed in scraping away the accumulated dust from the inscription thereon with a bit of stick.

Stray shadows from the leaves above glided over her to and fro, and her pretty head was bent slightly downward, and her face was a little saddened, probably from her proximity to the dead.

Without turning around, the great doctor beckoned with his finger to the janitor, who he knew was near.

“Corbin,” he whispered.

[Corbin] darted forward like a hungry pike.

“Sir,” he ejaculated.

“Who is that, pray?”

Corbin looked downward with a thrill of pride. Tears of gratitude (they were always at hand) at once rushed into his eyes, for he was overjoyed that such a great man should be moved to curiosity by any thing that belonged to him.

“That’s my daughter, sir,” replied he; inwardly praying meanwhile that she would not move away.

The doctor was incredulous; and such was Corbin’s respect and faith in his knowledge, that he actually looked out of the window again in order to verify his first impressions. He was only twenty yards distant. “Yes,” he added, emphatically, “that is my daughter.”

“But how came she down there?” asked the doctor. “Did she go around to the gate, or did she drop out of a window, or how was it?”

“I am afraid she must have walked out of our back-door; in fact, I am sure of it, for I opened it for her myself.”

This awakened curiosity in regard to Corbin's domicile, and he replied to the doctor at length, and described his premises in such glowing colors, that the lexicographer, in a ponderous sentence, expressed a desire to go down and see it.

"But, first," added he, "allow me to say that your daughter is exceedingly good-looking, and is graceful to a remarkable degree. She partakes of the Grecian in style. What is her name, sir?"

"Alice," replied Corbin, faintly, secretly wishing it was Althea.

"And, no doubt, she is an excellent daughter, industrious, frugal, and loving?"

"Yes," answered the happy janitor, "she is obedient, tidy, and wide-awake."

"Has she any prospect of marriage?"

"No—no, I think not," replied Corbin; "there is a young man hanging around, but we both think we should prefer an older person."

The two descended the wide stone steps together, and came to the cellar, in the farthest part of which were Corbin's rooms, partly illuminated by gas, and partly by the sunlight which strayed in at the low windows cut in the thick underpinning of the building.

With great assiduity Corbin led the doctor hither and thither, pointing out the charms of his residence, and descanting upon the overwhelming kindness of the board which permitted him to occupy such desirable quarters.

The doctor was gravely interested. He asked many questions, which his host answered with trembling eagerness. Corbin never had dreamed that the doctor was such an observer. In two minutes he convinced Corbin that his very best apartment was used for a kitchen, when it should have been the sitting-room. Corbin's surprise was great, and he declared he would have the change effected that very day. He begged the doctor to mention any other alteration he thought desirable; consequently the doctor fell foul of the antiquated gas-jets, and declared Corbin was burning twice the amount of gas necessary for twice the amount of light. This delighted Corbin, who bowed constantly at the words of wisdom, and jotted down the words "gas-fixtures" upon a slip of paper, which he put into his waistcoat-pocket.

In fact, the more the doctor criticized and suggested, the more grateful did Corbin become; and, by the time the learned man had proposed turning all his surroundings bottom up, he was ready to fall prostrate before him in consequence of his great regard for his opinions.

Presently the doctor mentioned that he should like to see Corbin's daughter, and so that slavish man hastily departed to bring her in.

It is to be hinted that the two men had overrated the pretty Miss Alice by just a very little. It is not denied that she was pretty and graceful, but it must be stated, with due deference to the doctor and to her father, that she was also a trifle irrational.

She simpered and blushed and hung her head when her father brought her in, with the skirt of her dress securely clutched in his fingers, in order to prevent a sudden bolt on her part, and she trembled from head to foot when she gave the honorable and terrible visitor her pretty hand.

But, on acquaintance, he was not so severe, and she found the famous Doctor Ambrose a very companionable man.

He proposed they should go into the cemetery again, and he promised to tell her some curious stories about the people who were buried there. She gladly assented, and they emerged together upon the hollyhock-grove, while Corbin remained behind, looking furtively through a crack in the door.

“Ah,” sighed he, “how happy should I feel if she could only marry such a man as that!”

He remained for ten minutes, entranced at the little picture of the great man carefully entertaining his daughter; and was about to go away to look after some cleaning he was having done, when he was struck by a sudden thought.

“Stop,” said he to himself, “I think it will be a good move to ask the doctor about this stealing. He knows the ins and outs of the library so well that he may be able to advise me how to catch the thief; at least I can ask him.”

Therefore he returned, went out through the little door, and stepped into the cemetery again, and went down the path where the doctor and his daughter were talking together.

He laid his finger upon the doctor’s arm, and whispered in his ear:

“There are two more volumes missing, sir, two rare and old and well-preserved books.”

The doctor quickly turned his eyes upon him with a most extraordinary gaze. But his face immediately cleared up again, and he smiled.

“My dear man,” said he, gently, “you startled me—you touched me like an executioner. Two more books, did you say? That’s very bad, Corbin. If we let the rascals go on in this fashion, we shall very soon be without a library.”

“Very true, sir, very true,” sighed Corbin. “The superintendent is furious, and we are at our wits’ ends to know what to do to stop it. I hoped you might suggest some plan, and so I took the liberty to speak to you.”

“Oh, it’s no liberty, Corbin, no liberty at all. Only, you must watch them, Corbin—watch them.”

Inasmuch as Corbin and his assistants had been doing little else than scrutinize visitors to the library for the past two years, this advice did not seem particularly interesting, and he hung his head as if thinking.

“Yes, Corbin,” continued the doctor, “though I am not a great thief-taker myself, I shall advise that you examine each suspicious circumstance very narrowly, and, when you have caught the culprit, hold on to him tight.”

With a mere suspicion that the famous lexicographer was laughing at him, Corbin retired, full of reflection, leaving his daughter and her companion digging the dust from the inscriptions on the gravestones, and discoursing most amiably together.

This thieving business plagued him mightily. Now and then a book would be called for by a subscriber, and, while the records of the library would show that it should be in its place, yet examination would exhibit the fact that it was missing. In nearly every case the volume was very valuable, and, as long intervals had elapsed between its various consultations by the readers, it was impossible to fix any date on which it had been taken away.

The energy and ingenuity of the librarians had been taxed to the utmost to discover the thief, but without effect; and, although their zeal had been whetted of late by fresh evidences of pilferings, yet nothing had been discovered, and they had almost begun to consider themselves helpless.

Hence it was that the perturbed and distracted Corbin grasped at the fancy that the intelligent Doctor Ambrose might possibly give him a hint, inasmuch as he had almost free access to the books; but, having been disappointed, he retired abashed and nonplussed.

But the prettier and more ardent daughter, unharassed by any of her father’s trials, had a far different experience with the illustrious doctor. While she and the janitor sat at tea that evening, she chatted most eloquently upon the charms of her new-found friend.

“O father dear, he’s a mine of history. He described the ancient city for me, and I could almost see the red-coated soldiers and the blue-stockinged townsmen, and the awkward beacon on the hill, and the terrible stocks and gallows in the valley beside it; indeed, I am half tempted to become a browsing, dusty bookworm, with a little lantern on top of my head, and an ink-bottle tied to my waist.”

Corbin shook his head doubtfully.

“Yes, and my voice would crack, my shoulders drop down, my back rise up in a hump, my neck would wrinkle like an accordion, and I would shuffle around in the musty libraries and family-archive closets a happy woman.”

“My love!” Corbin set down his cup.

“But then,” she continued after a moment’s reflection, “he is as good a poet as he is historian, and beautiful language from the lips of an old man like him is very charming to me, pa.” She refrained from eating for a while, and folded her hands. “Ah, what would you give to hear ‘Gray’s Elegy’ from his lips! He recited the whole of it, word for word, and such feeling! such

pathos! such intonation! I think I shall begin to write. I've been thinking of an 'Elegy in a City Church-yard'—with a ten-foot verse. How do you like the idea?"

"Your muffins are getting cool, Lollipops."

"Very likely, pa, very likely. They may freeze if they choose, but still I insist on telling you that Doctor Ambrose is truly a wonderful man—a charming man, if he is gray."

"Indeed he is; he is astonishing!"

"He's beautiful!"

"Eh!" cried her father.

"Beautiful, pa. If you had seen him, as I did, standing amid the tall flowers which reached up above his head, and leaning with one shoulder against an old weather-worn pedestal with its mouldy urn, and had watched his splendid face flush all over with the feeling he aroused within himself, you would have called him beautiful as soon as I. I think I must have been entranced; for, while I was busy watching his eye and figure, and thinking that such a noble, active life as his must be the only one to live, I caught him smiling at me, and you know his smile is divine!"

"Of course!" returned Corbin, warmly.

"It is so sweet."

"And so expressive."

"It is a little rare, though," objected the fair.

"Better so than common," said the father.

"Decidedly," replied the daughter. In a few moments she murmured, meanwhile rattling her spoon in the cup: "He is a much older person than Arthur, pa."

Corbin glared at her across the table. But he was not angry in the least; he was merely shocked—violently shocked. But the redoubtable Alice sat perfectly still in the twilight. Presently he replied, in rather a thinner voice than common:

"Thirty-five years, my love, only thirty-five years. It might be more."

Both the Corbins slept ill that night.

But, seriously, it was no commonplace matter for a young girl to be beset by a man like the great Doctor Ambrose. He had all the graces of language at his tongue's end, and he had by no means forgotten the old tricks of the beau that he had been in his younger days.

On the morrow he came again to walk in the cemetery-paths with his bright young friend, and also on the next day. He brought a book for her—"The Curiosities of Philological Research"—and explained the singular jokes contained therein with such an interesting manner that Miss Alice for forty-eight hours dreamed of becoming a philologist out of hand.

The great man was any thing but a pedant. He was never dry in his subjects and explanations, but talked so daintily and vigorously that the pretty girl could think of nothing else than what he said to her. He never frowned upon a laugh, but gave himself up to it with such heartiness that it overjoyed her, and put her in such a rollicking mood that the watchful Corbin felt in his inmost soul that matters were truly getting on.

For the better part of a fortnight the comedy was played without a blemish to mar. True it was that the "grave and reverend" associates of the learned man looked askance upon his manner of spending his hours, and laughed and spoke doubtfully among themselves, albeit he was a bachelor, and free to do as he chose.

The young gentleman hinted at a moment ago now began to know what it was to be defeated. His foothold within the precincts of Corbin's abode, always slippery and insecure at the best, now became precarious and even dangerous.

"No, my dear friend," said Corbin, placing his hand upon his arm, "should I by any means ever come into possession of another daughter, and should you by diligent study and close application ever rise to become an eminent lexicographer, or microscopist, or philologist, and become the president of any of the great societies which bloom upon every hand, then I may be induced to consider your claims; in fact, my dear Arthur, I hold this out as an incentive: concentrate your talents and industry upon some science, and the next daughter I have shall be yours."

"But you are not yet married?" sighed the disconcerted lad.

"I am thinking of it, however," replied Corbin. "No doubt, a few years hence will find me about to become engaged to some person of good social standing and of sufficient income to educate any children which may result from our union in a becoming manner; and, as I decidedly object that any child of mine shall marry before she has attained twenty years, you perceive you have ample opportunity to perfect yourself, even in the driest pursuit, before you call upon me to demand her hand, and perhaps," added the janitor, modestly, "her little fortune."

True love, however, was not to be quenched by such speeches as this, and the unhappy boy, no longer welcome to the beloved cellar-rooms, hovered in the vicinity of the library, and looked down from the reading-room windows, which commanded a view of Corbin's door, and carefully nursed and augmented his misery by what he beheld going on below.

One bright morning Corbin again approached the good Doctor Ambrose, who was telling Miss Alice some of the sad stories of the old Puritan times, and with a doleful face related the discovery of the loss of more valuable books from the library.

“We do not know which way to turn, sir,” said the unhappy janitor, twisting his handkerchief into a knot; “the thieves are wonderfully shrewd. All the books may have been taken a year ago for aught I or any one else can tell, and it makes the task of discovery dreadfully hard. Now, three days ago, we found that two ancient Spanish books had disappeared, and the next morning an old volume of sermons, with notes in the handwriting of Cotton Mather, was not to be found. And now, not half an hour ago, a very old treatise on heraldry and an illuminated prayer-book from an Italian monastery have vanished.”

“Ah, Corbin,” sighed his listener, “this is very sad.”

“Yes,” replied the janitor, “I cannot think of any villainy so black as robbing a person of his books; I would quarter the robber if I could lay my hands upon him.”

“And burn his remains,” added the doctor, angrily.

“And burn his remains,” echoed Corbin.

He then went away with a rapid stride, and left the two to chat in quietness. But the doctor kept silence for a moment, while he watched the retreating form of the janitor, and, after he had gone entirely out of sight, he said to his companion, who was assisting a toad to bury himself:

“I am afraid your good father has not got the true antiquarian regard for books that some men have. I think he is too fierce, for there is something excusable in such thefts, and some even go so far as to say the taking of any thing which is extremely rare is not a theft at all.”

No wonder that the pretty Miss Alice opened her eyes and deserted her employment. She laughed and shook her head.

“You have persuaded me to believe a great many strange things, so please try and make me believe that if you can.”

“Oh, I don’t say that I believe it, but still some good men say that what is very beautiful and very singular is not purchasable for private satisfaction; that one appreciative man has as good a right to that which he comprehends, provided he cannot get the same pleasure from any thing else, as his neighbor; that my visitor has a right, in a certain sense, to pocket and carry off any trifle which is a sample of high art, as it belongs to him as much as it does to me, because it is the only thing of its kind in the world. Every one agrees that the gentleman who has fine pictures in his gallery has no right to wholly exclude the public from them, and it is but a step further in the same direction to say that they do not belong to him at all. Inasmuch as no man has the right to purchase for himself the privilege to study a particular branch of painting, sculpture, or literature, it seems clear that he has no right to purchase and keep secret any painting, statue, or book, which shall push him ahead at the cost of the ignorance of everybody else. Therefore, if a student come upon any thing anywhere that he feels is important to him, and is not to be procured elsewhere, he has a right to take it—that is, he is by no means to be classed among thieves. All the conquering generals carry off ancient sculptures and rare works of art wherever they can find them, but they would never think of attaching articles of comfort or convenience. They would

readily seize upon the Laocoon or a Correggio, but they would never confiscate the bed-linen or the decorations of a palace; and so I can understand that some old fellow has been admitted to this library, perhaps among the sweepers and cleaners, who took that disguise for greater security, and has conveyed all these missing books to his own apartments for his own private delectation, yet I would be willing to wager, if such is the case, that the old gentleman would rather die than carry away a door-mat or a pen-holder.”

“Oh,” cried Miss Alice, “I never heard such a talker as you are! Now, that seems very sensible. I believe what you say almost; but I didn’t think you could make me do so. But you are very learned.”

“Yes,” replied the good Doctor Ambrose, with a laugh, “I think I am.”

But he could talk gossip and chit-chat, as well as sophistry. Neither did it come amiss from him; on the contrary, fancies seemed more graceful coming from his venerable lips, and the charm of his eye and the tenderness of his voice took the little maiden all by storm, and by the aid of her vanity, which was gratified by pleasing such a great man as he was, she was able to give her whole soul to the task of pleasing him. She had had practice at the art of looking into one’s face, and the good Doctor Ambrose in his younger days had taught himself how to turn such looks to the best advantage.

If they walked together, both were pleased, and they compared with each other as the flowers and trees which surrounded them, and he would have been a hard judge who would have declared them incongruous.

It was her very want of learning and astuteness which delighted him, and it was his fame and acquirements, together with his gentleness, which pleased her; so they deciphered the tombstones together (as a cover for much quiet fun), and were blind to the amusement manifest at some of the upper windows which overlooked the cemetery.

It was a great day for Corbin when the professor first came to tea, and Miss Alice fluttered about with the toast and jelly with the agitation of a frightened bird, while the visitor, divested of his science and philology, looked on with an approving eye, and dreamed of similar teas which he might call his own.

Even during this pleasant hour the faithful janitor, whose mind was ever upon the welfare of the library, could not separate himself from his grievance. He often sighed as the visions of the stolen books arose before him, and he prayed he might lay but one finger upon the culprit, and felt he would be able to crush him with even that.

Miss Alice gayly detailed the professor’s ideas regarding book-thieves, and her father, shutting his fist, laughed grimly, but at once looked at the doctor, as if to say: “What a joker you are, to be sure!”

But after this sorrow of Corbin’s, the next one was that he was not able to show more clearly to the professor the great esteem in which he held him. Waiting upon him, procuring his books,

cleansing his pen, smiling at his jokes, and removing his overcoat, and inviting him to tea, conveyed a certain amount of good-will, but he yearned to discover something stronger; and so between these two troubles, and his anxiety regarding the great man's intentions toward his daughter, Corbin fell into a state of nervousness disagreeable to behold.

Commonly no one could be of better temper than the professor. This was a source of delight to the pretty Miss Alice, who shunned a downcast face, and who grieved to watch a saddened man.

Now, on the very day following the little tea at the janitor's, the good Doctor Ambrose was depressed and heavy-hearted. He rapped at the janitor's door for his happy friend, who bounded out at once and caught him by the lapels of his long coat.

She chirruped like a bird, and led him out to the gay hollyhock-garden. Here she looked at him. She at once blamed herself with giving him something disagreeable to eat on the previous night.

"No—no," expostulated the professor, "it is not that. It is the shortcomings of my private library which plagues me. A gentleman called upon me this morning who possesses a volume I have always desired. I had suppressed all thoughts of it, but now they are reanimated again, and I am miserable—foolishly, no doubt, but still I cannot correct myself."

He looked so annoyed and gloomy, that his bright companion at once drooped her head and was ready to weep.

"I cannot purchase it," continued the doctor, "for it is very—very rare. In fact, there are only two copies in the State. This library has one, and it is locked up tight in a walnut cabinet in Alcove No. 10, and the other is possessed by my rival. You must know, my dear girl, that I am a book-fancier of great repute, and I mourn the absence of some volumes from my library as you would mourn the absence of brothers or sisters from your home."

"Ah," sighed Miss Alice, "I'm so sorry!"

The mischievous and gossiping fellow-*savants* of the professor, who were stationed as usual at the upper windows, agreed that the two had quarreled, for they seemed dispirited and downcast.

"What is the name of the book, sir?" asked Miss Alice, in a timid voice.

"*Reliquia Wottoniana*," responded the doctor, with another sigh. "It is an old book of poems and essays by Henry Wotton, printed two hundred years ago. The book is old and brown, and is very much cracked at the back, and the leaves are all a little frayed; in fact it is a treasure of treasures, and I would give a finger, yes, a hand, to possess it."

The professor put out his hand, and they both contemplated it for some seconds in silence, as if mentally calculating whether or not it would be a good bargain.

It was at this point that the disasters which soon overtook the two people began.

The depression of the good Doctor Ambrose was too real to be shaken off at will, and the sympathy of the tender-hearted Miss Alice was too keen to die while the cause existed; therefore they passed a cheerless day, and both grew more and more miserable as the hours went by. The doctor departed early; as he did so, Miss Alice whispered in his ear:

“I wish I only knew how to help you, even if only a very little. I’m sure I would do a great deal to cheer you up, for it makes me so unhappy, so very unhappy, to see any thing annoy you.”

With this particularly selfish, yet well-meant address, she saw him depart, and then retired to her innermost room, and wept and moped the rest of the day.

That day another flutter seized upon the officials of the library. A copy of Eliot’s “Indian Bible” was missed. This was the greatest loss the institution had yet sustained, and the superintendent nearly went mad with the well-bred rage which he tried to smother, and all his subordinates went immediately under a cloud; and Corbin turned pale with excitement, and remained so the rest of the day. Among the precautionary orders which were issued, was one which forbade the information of the loss being spread abroad, and therefore Corbin sat at supper that evening with a face as forbidding as night, and spoke few words to his already-distressed daughter.

It was in the unusual silence of the evening that the way occurred to her by which she could help and relieve her best friend.

She quitted her stitching. She looked furtively at her father. He was busy with his own reflections, and did not observe her. Then she began to tremble all over with the thought that possessed her. The blood flowed back from her fingers, and left them white and cold; they no longer had the strength or will to wield the slender needle they held, and they intertwined helplessly and lay quite still upon the lap of their poor mistress. She seemed suddenly bewitched. Now she would go to bed. Now she would read. Now she would just lie down for a nap, and then would rise and think it all over. Now she would abandon the plan. But she did neither of these things, especially the last.

An hour went by. The Corbins had always stinted themselves to a certain quantity of oil, and, at the end of the hour, this quantity began to be exhausted. Every thing was supremely quiet. Corbin sat in his chair, with his head bent forward, apparently musing, and his daughter sat behind, beside the table, with her arm stretched out upon it, her hand shut tight, her head erect, her eyes wide open, and turned sideways upon her father’s figure. She was painfully wide-awake. It was eleven o’clock.

“Father,” said she, in a soft voice, which was incompatible with her attitude and appearance, “the lamp is going out. Don’t you think we had better go to bed?”

“Yes,” said Corbin, arousing himself and stretching out his arms, “yes, we will go to bed.”

Alice instantly arose and bustled about, and got a lamp for herself and lit it. In a few moments she approached her father. He kissed her.

“Good-night,” said he.

“Good-night,” she returned, in a whisper.

They separated; she to go to her room and to extinguish her light after due time, to divest herself of her shoes, and to sit in the dark, still trembling, and with no thought of sleep; her father to open the shutters silently, and to sit beside the opening thus made, and to gaze watchfully up at the library-windows, which were illuminated by the moon.

At half-past twelve, Miss Alice arose and stole out of her room like a cat. There was not so much as a rustle of her dress, or a jar of a bolt; she was careful and secret.

She went up the winding stairs, turned the handle of the door, and emerged upon the main corridor. She held her breath and looked around. No sound, no sight; nothing but stillness, profound and impressive.

She found a huge key under a mat, and by little and little she thrust it into the enormous door of the library and turned it. She then seized the handle and turned that. The door, fifteen feet high, and ornamented heavily with bronze, swung open without so much as a creak.

She entered the lofty hall with steps as timid as those of a hare, and felt herself more oppressed with space than had she gone out into the open air. Fifty feet above her there was a murky glow of light which came in through the windows of deadened glass. The pillars seemed to stretch away for miles. The floor was cold and damp.

She listened hard. The tiny reports made by the separating of particles in the natural process of decay filled her with terror as they occurred. But she halted only when such assaults petrified her; at other times she crept on and on across the deserted space, and she breathed freer when she came to a circular stairway of iron.

She began to ascend. As she went round and round she went alternately into darkness and light. She was cautious, and never made a misstep.

There were three ranges of alcoves. Her destination was in the second. She gained it without making so much as the smallest alarm. She found the walnut case, and found the key to it under a little ledge at one side. She opened the case; fortune favored her, for she made no noise here.

She lit a match. The noise of the act sounded like thunder. Her heart gave a bound, but she held tight to the glowing splinter. She waved it before the narrow shelves.

She laid her hand upon the “Reliquia Wottoniana,” and pulled it out.

Her light expired. All was dark in an instant. She listened, but only heard the sound of her own rapid pulse.

“How glad he will be to get this!” she thought to herself.

Suddenly she was illuminated by a vivid glare of white light. It came out of the darkness in front of her, like a bolt of lightning, and lit up the entire place. A shrill scream escaped from her, and at the same instant a cry of rage and sorrow burst from him who held the lantern.

The unhappy duet aroused every echo in the lofty hall.

Corbin and his daughter contemplated each other in miserable silence. She shivered like an aspen, and he stood as rigid as a statue, with his chin resting on his hand.

He replaced the book upon its shelf, and then led her down again by the arm, like a prisoner.

What a sorry night it was that they passed together!

Without the cessation of a moment, the janitor walked up and down the little length of his apartment, with his eye upon his daughter.

She was sunken deep in a chair, with a very white face. Her hair had fallen about her shoulders, and her hands hung down by her side with no life in them.

He accused her over and over again, in a high-pitched, rapid tone, of being the stealer of all the books.

Frightened and terrified beyond expression at the event of the night, she but half comprehended him, and replied with feeble articulation:

“No, no, no!”

The agony of her father was without comparison. His life-long rectitude served to exhibit this crime of his own flesh and blood most vividly. He begged her to explain to him why it was that she had done this and like deeds.

She shook her head slowly, and turned away.

He upbraided her fiercely, but she was silent.

He pictured to her the dismal outlook—the forfeiture of his place, the quittal of their little home, the terrible stain that must ever cling to them.

Then she began to weep piteously; but still she said not a word, not a single syllable beyond the simple denial which she uttered at first.

Then her father began to pray for morning, so that he might send for the good Doctor Ambrose, who would advise him.

A glow of light crossed his daughter’s face at this, which appeared to mean:

“Then I shall be free. When he comes, he will side with me, and then my father will forgive me.”

But his name never passed her lips. She would have risen to prepare their breakfast, but her father sternly forbade her, and she retreated, weeping, to a corner, where she strove to be calm and patient.

At the proper time the janitor sent for the great man. It was early in the morning.

He sent back to inquire why he should come.

Corbin, therefore, sat down and wrote with a trembling hand the whole of the bitter story. He also gave the name of the book.

The illustrious doctor, on reading the note, laughed aloud and clapped his hands.

“This is truly unexpected! I think I will now forego the pleasure of marrying her, for she will serve a better purpose. No doubt the pretty puss meant the book for me—but that she should *steal* it—O horror!”

It amused him greatly.

“I see Providence in this,” he murmured, while searching for pens and paper with which to reply to Corbin. “She will be an admirable will-o’-the-wisp for them while I make my last venture. How often Fortune accommodates us if we but let her alone!”

He wrote to Corbin, saying in effect that he was profoundly astonished and was overwhelmed with grief. He would hasten to condole with him that evening after the close of the meeting of the Geographical and Statistical Society, of which he was president.

“How tasteless and valueless are all my honors now!” he exclaimed; “how barren are the achievements of the brain and intellect when the heart is outraged!”

How the day dragged on for the unhappy janitor and his wretched daughter!

She grew ill with the delay. Even in the few hours emaciation made hollows in her checks, and helped to make her face painful to look upon.

She complained at the lingering moments, and looked forward with trust to the kind language of her friend, which should relieve her.

It was nine o’clock at night when he appeared. She heard his step upon the stone stairway, and she went forward lightly.

He came in slowly at the door-way.

She ran up with a cry of welcome, and clasped his arm as if it were the rock of salvation.

He looked down at her with the most implacable severity.

She faltered.

He drew away and crossed over to her father, leaving her petrified and terribly white.

“Corbin,” said the illustrious man, turning around and fixing his eye upon the poor girl, “I feel for you deeply; it is hard, my dear friend; for you, at least, are faithful and true to the core; but alas! that one so beautiful, so young, so ignorant of the world, should develop such—forgive me, Corbin, I say no more, I am silent.”

The crushed and overpowered appearance of the janitor warned him.

He looked at Alice again. She clasped her hands and gazed at him imploringly. But he argued to himself that this was all untrue; that it would one day be discovered that she did not take the books, and so the present scene was but a farce, though honestly played; therefore, it accorded with his interests to scowl upon her and to turn away.

The good Doctor Ambrose, full of grief, presently departed. His heart was too full to advise and counsel, but he hoped good would transpire from it in some way; he did, indeed.

At the door he whispered to Corbin, and asked what she had done with all the books.

Corbin wrung his hands and made no reply.

When he returned to his cellar, he found his daughter lying in a heap upon the floor. He labored hard to revive her. The act awoke a glow of sympathy for her, and he half resolved to arouse her and to fly away with her out of sight and sound of their troubles, and to hide somewhere where the tale could never reach their ears again.

While thus reflecting, a slight, metallic ring reached his ears. He looked up. His door-bell was swaying slowly, as if with caution. He hastened to the door.

A man stood outside, who laid hold of his arm, and drew him out and whispered in his ear.

Corbin’s knees shook beneath him. He retreated within the door again, dragging the man after him.

“By what door?” demanded he in the dark.

“By the little door near the cellar-way. He had a key,” answered the man, with excitement.

“My God!” cried Corbin.

As an Indian follows his enemy, or as a cat pursues its unsuspecting victim, with now a short run or a stealthy step or a vigorous leap, now halting with raised head and now lurking with contracted body, so in the vast and dark and silent library one dim figure pursued another dim figure, and kept just so far behind it, no more and no less.

The first of the two moved warily, but still with ease, as if he knew the place well. The step of the other was soft, sudden, and determined; a fanciful observer would have declared him a dangerous man.

Now and then the first of them stopped to listen, and to look up angrily at the glow of light which came from overhead. He then would hasten away out of it. Once he went to the balustrade and gazed down into the vast space before him, and again turned his ear to hearken for danger.

Both of them kept on up the winding stairs, and, as they reached the third row of alcoves, the two figures became three—one followed and the others following.

Suddenly, the first disappeared in a black closet. One of the others pursued him, and one remained outside.

In a few moments there broke upon the silence a rustling sound—a noise of leaves—then a soft pushing and pulling, made by volumes being taken from and returned to the shelves; then there was a smothered cough, occasioned, perhaps, by the dust; then a prolonged and perfect silence. Nothing moved.

Succeeding this was a rasping sound. The first figure was busy trying to light a match. He did so. A faint glare issued from the room; it flickered, and then became steady. Then a sound of a rapid drawing down of books and of piling them one upon another; then a sound like the pant of a furious man or beast; then another dead silence of a second's duration; then a crash of a falling book; and then, after that, a vivid glow of light over every thing, and two terrible shouts, which for a second time disturbed the silence of the uttermost parts of the building.

Upon the first figure leaped the one that had dogged him, and it bore him down like an avalanche. Its powerful hands laid hold upon his throat, and its knees gathered themselves upon his chest.

He struggled, but in vain; he endeavored to cry out, but in vain; he tried to breathe, but also in vain. Surrounded by his thefts, and held fast in the embrace of an outraged man, it began to look as if he were beginning to meet his deserts.

Corbin arose.

“So,” cried he, in a loud whisper—“so this is the thief, then! It was the good and learned Doctor Ambrose who made us the trouble! Ah! the good Doctor Ambrose—so gentlemanly, so kind, so full of heart!—damn him!”

Arthur, the third figure, added:

“I will swear that I have seen him go in and come out of that little door by the cellar-way eight times, always after hours.”

“He is commencing to breathe again,” said the janitor, as if he were speaking of a dog.

“That’s rather fortunate for you,” said the boy.

“I only wish I had strangled him altogether,” responded Corbin; “but we must be quick and get him arrested, for, if he begins to talk, we shall lose him.”

* * * * *

A week afterward, the Corbins, carefully and primly dressed, presented themselves, together with Arthur, at the porch of the county-jail of B—, and inquired for their enemy.

By way of warning, the turnkey said to them:

“He has changed for the worse, and is a different man. Say what you have to say quickly, and keep your tempers. I limit you to five minutes.”

Poor Miss Alice clung tight to the lad’s arm, and began to tremble and cry. The white walls and black, shining bars frightened her. They ascended a gallery, and came to a place not unlike an alcove in their own library. The superintendent and a lawyer were present, and, as they stood before the prisoner, the new visitors did not see him at first, but, as they stepped aside, they beheld him.

Corbin dropped his head; Arthur turned away; Alice, with her hand to her mouth, stared at him with terrified eyes.

He was frightfully pale and thin. His clothing lay in folds at his chest.

“Stop,” said he to his lawyer, raising his hand; “I must talk for a moment to these.—Corbin, I am guilty of every thing. I took every book that has been missed from the library, and ten that were not missed.—You found them at my lodgings, did you not, Mr. Superintendent?”

The superintendent nodded.

“Before the court, to-morrow, I shall admit every thing. You will not be required as a witness. I shall remain a prisoner for a number of years—how many, I cannot tell. I shall not be permitted to correct many things, but I demand to be allowed to make a few amends for the sorrow and pain I have made for you three. After settling my estate, there will be a considerable sum remaining, which I shall cause to be held in trust for you, the detective, providing you are of the same mind as of old regarding your companion—are you?”

He spoke to the boy, who turned red and bowed. This was all business-like. No one wept; for the professor's voice, though thin, was still forcible and unsympathetic.

"Then," he continued, "I am satisfied. My library will go to the janitor—I have no family—and, with these few words, I ask you to leave me. I explain my crime by simply saying that I was a bibliomaniac, but respected money too much to spend it unnecessarily—therefore I took what I wanted without question.—Miss Alice" (he held out his hand; it was unsteady; she stepped forward, and took it), "good-by, dear girl! I once thought I was honest to you. I was not. I shall never see you again, I think, and I would like to have you kiss me—if you will—what! no? Well, perhaps it is better. Good-by! Allow me—you were dropping your shawl."

He stood up. Corbin gave him his hand. So did Arthur. Alice, also, did so, but she hesitated, her tears rushed forth, and she raised her face to her old friend.

He leaned over for an instant.

"Good-by, good-by, dear girl! God bless you forever!"

He fixed his eyes upon the opposite wall, and never removed them until he heard the grated door clang behind the departing three.

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