

Story of a Vase

The Tragedy with Which It Was Connected

George S Goodwin stood with his back to the fire-place and one hand in his pocket, thinking. When his two hands were strong he usually had them both in his pockets, but on this evening one hung in a sling, broken. Half an hour before his wife had departed for church with Mr. and Mrs. Whittier, their next-door neighbors, and shortly afterwards the servants had gone, presumably to church, too. So for once the master of the house was in complete possession. And every few moments he reached over with his left hand and gently stroked the one in the sling and muttered: "It's jolly painful, I know," and then fell to thinking again.

Although late in the autumn, no fire burned in the grate. But Goodwin felt just a little lonesome, and second nature drew him to the fire-place for comfort. When a man is lonesome a fire, if it does not actually cheer him, at least is very companionable, and when there is no fire a person must just put up with the place where a fire should be. So Goodwin backed up to the empty grate, looked at the ceiling, gazed slowly round the room for something to interest him, then down at his toes and leaned back against the mantel-piece. Then there was a crash. Behind him stood a handsome Dresden vase, reflected in a mirror, and as Goodwin leaned back the weakly supported mantel-shelf partly gave way under his weight, and the vase— an heirloom and to him priceless – toppled over, fell against the shoulder of his broken arm, slid an inch or so and stuck in a wrinkle of the coat he was wearing, and there it stuck while numerous small ornaments clattered and smashed on the fender below. Goodwin stood perfectly still and gazed for a moment ruefully at the smashed articles on the floor, then slowly turned his head and looked at the vase. There it stuck, a delicate pink flower caught insecurely on the wrinkle of the coat— a hold that any move, however slight, might unloose and then for a smash on the mantel-piece and fender. He looked for a moment without breathing, then said: "Well, I say," and looked again. Cautiously raising his left hand across his breast until the finger tips were up to his shoulder, but there stopped, for without moving his injured arm he could get no farther and to move the limb meant certain destruction to the vase. He thought of all the schemes that would come into his mind, whether by a quick turn he could catch the vase before it hit the mantel-piece— or he could catch it by putting his hand behind his back and letting it fall into the hand. But all the schemes he felt certain would end in the breaking of the one ornament in the house that he could not afford to spare.

"No," he muttered to himself, "There's nothing to do but stand right here like a statue till Gracie comes home. That's all about it. As General Grant said: 'I'll fight it out on this line if it takes all summer.' When Gracie comes and relieves me I'll probably sit down. Stand bravely with my back to the foe."

The clock behind him struck seven. The house was now quite dark and a fog hung low over the ground outside.

As George Goodwin stood, as still as a man without a cigar can be expected to stand, he thought he heard a grating sound in the kitchen. There was a rasp and the back door seemed to be opened

quickly and shut softly. As he strained his hearing he caught the sound of muffled footsteps. Instantly the thought of burglars flashed through his mind. Church burglars without a doubt. He had read repeatedly of men who watch for those houses left untended by occupants and servants, all going out of a Sunday evening. What if the fact that no light burned and everything was so quiet in the house had caused some of those ruffians to believe the house untenanted. It was more than likely. What to do he did not know. To move was out of the question. Yes, even though they stole the house from over him he would not break that vase. If he shouted he was afraid the motion necessary would unlodge it from its frail hold. Anyhow, his nearest neighbor he knew had gone to church. The only thing to be done was to keep as still as he could, and, if possible, get a glimpse of the burglars so that he might make it interesting for them afterwards. If they caught sight of him doubtless they would decamp a good deal quicker than they came. If they didn't he might get evidence sufficient to capture and convict them. The noise in the kitchen increased. There was now no doubt of the character of the visit.

Into the hall they came, two men with a dark lantern throwing a small circle of light before them. The door of the sitting-room where Goodwin was stood partly open. He dimly saw them peer into the dining-room; then one of them coming towards the sitting-room door said in a loud whisper:

“Bill, let's start 'ere.”

“No,” said the other, “there ain't ever nothing in a sittin'-room. That's the sittin'-room. Let's find their bedroom. That's where they keeps their jewels and money— if they've got any.”

“Well, then, up stairs we goes,” and up they went quietly.

Goodwin knew they would be rewarded. His wife's jewelry was sure to be exposed. Some of it was valuable and some not. It was all too good to be lost, any how.

“One thing is certain,” thought Goodwin, “I can tell the height of those men, and one of them is called Bill. Both are illiterate, and one has a peculiar, rasping voice, easy of identification. A good detective will soon hunt them out. Probably that light will fall on one of their faces before they go.”

After a short time the stairs again creaked, and the circle of light again shot past the door, and as the lantern swung in the hands of Bill:

“This here is a pretty sick haul,” said he of the raspy voice, “I say them's real, don't you?”

“Course them's real all right, they're big glitters too. Shall we look for any silver, or have we got all as we want?”

“Well, I'm for some of their silver if we can find it.”

“If you ask me,” said Bill, “I'm for off with this as we've got. It's all we can handle. I say we go.”

“All right. We’ve got plenty of time and we’ll divide here. Then you’ll go your way and I’ll go mine. We can’t both be nabbed.”

“What? Divide ’ere? It’s dangerous. This ain’t no place to divide. I’ve got ’em all safe in my pockets, and we’ll divvy when we gets home. Let’s go.”

“No, you don’t,” said the raspy voice, “I’m for a divvy right here and I’m goin’ to have it. Then we can go our own way. Sit down here. Give me the light. That’s it – now bundle the things out on the floor. There you are.”

The two men sat down near the open door with the light between them and Bill slowly began to disgorge. There were the wife’s diamond rings, two of them; Goodwin’s watch, which he had laid aside when his arm was broken; a fine gold necklace and locket, a diamond for the hair, four gold bracelets, jeweled; a number of smaller articles and then there was a stop. As the light shone on Bill’s fingers Goodwin noticed his index finger on the right hand was gone. But both had worn a mask.

“Where’s them gold studs and that there gold brooch I saw you take,” said the raspy voice.

“Oh, yes, them studs, I forgot,” said Bill as he put his hand in an inside pocket and took them out.

“Where’s the brooch?”

“There wasn’t no brooch as I got.”

“Yes, there was. It’s the best thing of the swag. Out with it.:

“I say I haven’t got no brooch.”

“Yer tryin’ to sneak it. You can’t fool me. Out with it, or by the Lor’ I’ll make ye.”

“I haven’t got – stand off, Tom. Don’t you lay hands on me.”

“Out with it.”

Both men were now on their feet.

“Stand off Tom. I warn ye. I hain’t got” —

“Give it up.” said Tom, in a low, savage voice as he sprang at the throat of his companion.

There was a sharp, quiet struggle, a few gasps of exertion, a gleam in the air. The sitting-room door flew open. A man staggered backward into the room with his hands to his breast.

“I warned” —

“You’ve done for me, Bill,” gasped the man as he sank to his knees.

“I warned you,” half shouted Bill, with terror in his voice as he stared at his companion.

The stricken man shuddered and gasped, stood up, staggered and fell backwards with a heavy crash on the floor. His arms spread out, his head rolled to one side and he lay dead. The lantern, now on its side, streamed on the uncovered face of the murderer, and stamped the likeness on Goodwin’s mind. The murderer clutched the door and stood for a second glaring in terror at the dead man. Goodwin stood transfixed with the awful scene.

“My God!” muttered the man, “I’ve killed Tom.” Then he looked at the knife held in his hand. Holding it at arm’s length from him he threw it at the prostrate form. Felt in his coat, tore from its lining the fatal brooch and cast in from him. With one last look he stole out of the room and was gone.

Then the strength faded from George Goodwin. His knees gave way, his senses reeled, his head sunk on his breast, and as he fell to the floor the heavy vase toppled over, smashed on Goodwin’s head and lay in pieces in the dark room beside the senseless spectator and the murdered man.

Months after the time, George Goodwin recovered from the terrible fever that followed the night when the servants found him lying on the floor. He lay delirious from the injuries to his head caused by the vase he had tried so hard to protect. Every person supposed that in a desperate struggle he had killed the burglar, and when the spring time came and he got stronger in health, and the wound had almost healed his wife and friends realized that he was hopelessly insane. He rapidly gained in strength, but his face bore a troubled look, and for hours he sat brooding – always refusing to enter the sittingroom and insisting that all the mantle-pieces be taken down and that his wife put on no jewelry. Not until May was he able to take short walks.

One bright morning Mrs. Goodwin put on him a heavy coat and sent him for his usual walk in charge of a servant. The path lay over one of the many heaths that surround the great city of London and past a row of houses in course of erection. As the invalid and his attendant approached one of these houses a hod carrier came down a ladder and commenced filling his hod with bricks. When the invalid was almost opposite him the man looked up and shouted to a fellow laborer on the half built wall.

This companion looked over the side and the bright sunlight, reflected from a piece of tin roofing, fell strongly on his face. Goodwin stopped short. Then with a bound he reached the ladder, and before the servant could stop him almost flew up. In an instant he had the man by the throat.

“You murdered the man Tom,” he shouted.

“Stand off; you lie; back!” shouting the man, recoiling aghast.

Then springing forward and putting forth all his strength he hurled the weak man to the ground below.

For a moment the double murderer stood still. Then, buttoning his coat over his breast and stepping forward he said:

“Men, I killed Tom Britton.” – *E. W. Sabel, in Detroit Free Press*

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