

## *A Perfect Treasure*

From *Chambers' Journal*

I am not a man to have hobbies—far from it—but everybody, I suppose, likes one thing more than another, and what I like is Plate, good, serviceable gold and silver, such as is pleasant to see upon one's table, whether by sunshine or candlelight, and which one likes one's guests to see. It is whispered by malignant persons (so at least certain good natured friends tell me), that I should not give so many dinner parties, if it were not to exhibit these costly articles. I am not conscious of such a motive for my hospitality; but if it exist, it need not surely be objected to; it is I who have to pay for the weakness, and not my friends—as happens in some cases I could name. If I possessed a selection of the most hideous china in the whole world, and filled my drawing rooms with unhappy persons *after* dinner, who were compelled to bow down before Bel and the Dragon (if I may say so without impiety), as Colonel Twankay does, for instance, *then* I grant you there would be some ground for complaint; or if I invited people to “at-homes” every Wednesday evening (a most impertinent form of invitation, in my opinion) in order that they should have the pleasure of hearing men confute Professor Piebald upon the question of the Theory of Development, as my good friend Dr. Twistie is in the habit of doing; or if I had a daughter with high notes, and inveigled the unwary with a bait of “a little music,” like my neighbor, the Hon. Mrs. Matcham—so proud and stuck up, that she is as often as not called Lucifer Matcham—who, I dare say, thinks her invitations are quite an honor to the recipients. But there; I have no patience to speak about such people. These, forsooth, are the persons—*these*, with their tea and thin bread and butter, and three-penny worth of cream, and with what they call a “light refreshment” to follow—weak lemonade and cheap ices—to charge me with the crime of Ostentation!<sup>1</sup>

It was not looking at my gold and silver plate, I suppose, which made my mother-in-law bilious; she might have stopped a long time, at some other houses I could name, without getting the quality or even the quantity, of food which would produce an indisposition of that kind. Mind, I don't blame her; she gave way to an amiable weakness (it was truffles), poor lady, and she suffered for it more than enough. Neither was it mere Ostentation, I suppose, that caused me to provide her with a sick-nurse—Mrs. Maqueechy. My wife, of course, did everything she could for her mother, but ours is a large household, and we see a good deal of company; so we thought it best to provide a person exclusively to wait upon her. We had the highest written testimonials as to character, and her behavior was everything we could wish. Instead of “interfering,” and setting the other domestics by the ears, as persons of her class are accused of doing, she kept herself to herself, and when anything was wanted, she would fetch it in person, rather than give anybody trouble. I used to meet her walking all over the house upon these little errands, and I noticed, to her great credit, that though she must have weighed nearly twelve stone, she made no noise.

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<sup>1</sup> The Earliest publication of this text, found in *The Flag of Our Union*, does not include this first paragraph. However, a later publication in the *Morning Oregonian* (citing *Chamber's Journal*) includes the first paragraph as presented here.

She so won upon me—for I am not at all a man to be familiar with my inferiors, and should certainly *not* “take pleasure in exhibiting my place to a maid-of-all-work or a crossing sweeper,” as some people have been so good as to affirm—I say I was so pleased with Mrs. Maqueechy’s quiet and respectful manners, that, finding her upon one occasion in the dining room admiring my two new shield-shaped salvers upon the sideboard I took pains to explain to her the design of the engraving, and especially the embossed cipher; with which her intelligent mind was highly pleased. In short, she was a perfect treasure, and if we had wanted a housekeeper, or a confidential servant of that sort, I should certainly have retained Mrs. Maqueechy in that position, after her duties as a sick nurse were concluded, and in that idea my wife entirely concurred. Mrs. Maqueechy was neither young nor good looking, but a more thoroughly respectable looking person in her condition of life, it was not easy to find. Although I had every confidence in Bowles—Bowles has had the charge of my plate for these ten years—yet there seemed somehow to be a double warrant for the safeguard of my property, while Mrs. Maqueechy was under my roof. She was not a suspicious person, far from it; but she once remarked to me, in a meaning way, that the charge of so much valuable plate was a great responsibility, and would be even a temptation to some people; and I saw she kept her eye on Bowles. As the event proved, alas! Mrs. Maqueechy had only too good reason to do so.

Last Wednesday, we happened to have a rather large dinner party; I had been dining out a good deal at various clubs lately, and of course it was necessary to invite my entertainers in return. It is not that I will ask *anybody* to come and admire my plate, but certainly some of the men were not intimate friends of mine, but only acquaintances. However, I suppose the fact of persons belonging to such clubs as I frequent is a sufficient [guarantee] for their social position. They were quite good enough, in my opinion, to meet Mrs. Lucifer Matcham at all events, and they met her. The dinner had gone off uncommonly well. The shield-shaped salvers had been very much admired, and so had my new tureen. The ladies had retired to the drawing room, and I had just passed the vine-leaf claret-jug to Colonel Twankey, (on which the old hunks did not pass the slightest remark, by the by) when Bowles stooped down and whispered in my ear that a person wished to see me in the Hall, upon very important business.

“Ask him what it is,” said I. “It is impossible that I can leave my guests.”

“I did ask him, sir, and he refused to state,” replied Bowles, confidentially. “It is my opinion he’s a begging-letter imposter; but he says he must see you in person.”

I was upon the point of saying, “Tell him to leave the house,” when something or other in Bowles’ manner struck me so decidedly that I resolved not to do so. Why should he say a man, about whom he could know nothing, was a begging-letter imposter? Perhaps I place rather too much confidence in my butler, as Mrs. Maqueechy had hinted that very morning. Actuated by a vague presentiment of distrust and danger, I rose from the table, made a hasty apology to my friends, and went with Bowles into the hall. A shabby-genteel sort of person, answering, indeed, very tolerably to my man’s description of him, was standing by the umbrella stand.

“What is it you want of me, sir?” said I, in a magisterial tone.

“One minute’s private conversation with you,” replied he; with a glance at the butler.

“You may leave us, Bowles,” said I; and he withdrew accordingly, although, I am bound to say, very unwillingly. The thought flashed across me like lightning, “Bowles has something to fear from this man’s disclosure,” and the next words of my visitor confirmed me in the suspicion.

“I am a member of the detective police force,” said he, “and I came to warn you that there is something wrong in your house.”

“Nothing to do with my plate, I hope?” said I, with considerable anxiety.

“Very much to do with it, sir,” returned he, grimly. “There is a thief harbored here; and by this time tomorrow you will not have a silver spoon in any possession, unless I find him out. I must see every soul you have got under your roof.”

“A thief!” said I; “Impossible! I never have even so much as a strange waiter. That butler has lived with me for ten years, and my two footmen, even longer. I will answer for their honesty.”

“Let me see ‘em, sir, that’s all *I* want,” was the decisive reply.”

“It is not Bowles?” said I, appealingly; “don’t say it’s Bowles;” but although it agitated me beyond measure to think that I should have to trust a new butler with all my plate, I confess that I had a horrible idea that it was Bowles.

“I think not,” said the detective, quietly. “Let me see the other men.” I turned the gas light over the door as high as it would go, and called them both into the hall.”

“It in not them,” said he. “What other men have you got in the house?”

“None but my guests,” said I, “here in the dining room.”

“Do you know them very well, sir? Are none of them mere acquaintances or neighbors?”

“Well,” returned I with hesitation, and feeling very glad that Mrs. Matcham was not a third party to this interview. “I know some, of course, better than others.”

“Just so,” said the detective quietly; “then I must see them.”

This was a shocking proposal, and made me feel hot all over; but still I was not going to run any risk with those shield-shaped salvers. Major Pinkey, I now remembered, had expressed a great wish to examine them, and perhaps that fact had had some weight in my inviting him to dinner. Who the deuce Major Pinkey was—except that he belonged to the club—I certainly knew no more than the detective, and perhaps a great deal less. Still it seemed a very base thing to open the dining room door, and let this fellow scrutinize my guests, in hopes to find a scoundrel among them.

“Upon my life,” said I, “Mr. Detective, I can’t do it.”

“Very right, sir; very natural,” replied he, smiling in his quiet way. “It would never do, would it? But look you sir; I’m a waiter, a hired waiter. Who is to know that I have not business at your sideboard? In one minute I could run my eye over the whole lot, and spot my man, if he’s there, as sure as taxes.”

I did not like even this arrangement, but still it seemed the only thing to be done. So, sending for Bowles, I arranged with him the plan of proceeding, and then returned to the dining room. My feelings are not to be described, when, a few minutes afterward, sitting at the head of my table, I heard the door open, and knew that the detective was in the room. He was much longer at the sideboard than he had promised to be, and every hair on my head seemed to stand upright all the time. Suppose he should suddenly fall on Major Pinkey, and cry, “This is my man!” Nay, suppose Colonel Twankay himself should prove to be the offender. I seemed to have lost all confidence in my fellow-creatures. After a period of anxiety no measure of time could indicate, the supposed waiter took his departure.

“You’ve got a new man, I see,” said Dr. Twistie, carelessly; “with so much plate about, I hope you are satisfied about his honesty.”

I was exceedingly glad to find old Twistie was honest, and had not been taken by the shirt frill and walked off to Bow street; but of course I could not tell him that.

“Please, sir, you’re wanted again,” whispered Bowles, as he brought in another bottle of claret.

“If the chimney is on fire, I am glad we have dined,” observed the Major, good-humoredly. “If I can be of any service, pray command me.”

I did not inform him what a relief it was to me that he was not wanted, but, remarking that it was only a little domestic matter, I once more sought the inspector.

“The one I’m after is not among them, sir, so far as I know,” observed the official, jerking his thumb in the direction of the dining room. “Are you sure there are no more men in your house besides those I have seen?”

“Yes,” said I; “there are no more.”

“Then, now I must have a look at the ladies.”

“The ladies!” cried I, aghast at this proposal. “You don’t want to go into the drawing room?”

“It would be more satisfactory,” observed the detective, coolly. “My information is very reliable. But, at all events, who is there?”

“Well,” said I, “my wife is there, for one; you have no information against her, I suppose?”

He nodded satisfaction so far.

“Then there’s the Honorable Mrs. Matcham and her daughter.”

“Safe!” rejoined the detective, checking them off on his fingers.

“Mrs. Twistie, of Regalia Square, and Lady Bobbington.”

“I suppose they’re all right,” remarked my inquisitor, doubtfully, “Are you sure there are no more?”

“There’s my mother-in-law, but she’s in her own room, and exceedingly unwell.”

“Very good,” observed the detective, inconsequentially. “There’s a plant somewhere in this house, however; you may take your oath of that, and very likely in the last place where you would ever look for it; so now I must see the maids.”

It was astonishing even to myself in what complete subjugation this man had placed me. Once, and only once, a terrible misgiving seized me—I was as full of suspicions by this time as a porcupine of quills, and darted them in as many directions—that the detective himself was a “Plant” that would presently blossom into a burglar; but my overtaxed mind refused to bear this burden. If it was so, I would trust to his clemency—just as an inhabitant of Dubernitz, deserted by Feldregmeister von Benedek, might have trusted to a Prussian—to leave me a silver fork or two to carry on the business of life. If this man turned out to be anything less than what he described himself to be, all authority would henceforth lose its effect with me. If Solomon had ever had to do with a metropolitan detective, he would never have spoken so slightly of mankind. I had read of the “grasp of the law” in works of fiction, but I had never understood the tremendous nature of that figure until I felt this gentleman’s knuckles (metaphorically) inserted in my white cravat. He had to repeat, “So now I must see the maids,” in his undeniable manner, before I could collect myself sufficiently to lead the way to the kitchen—a spot to which I should not alone have ventured to penetrate. To say that the cook and the kitchen-maid stared at the phenomena of our presence, is to underrate their powers of vision.

“Now I dare say you have no charwoman nor any temporary assistant, my good lady, even on an occasion like the present,” observed my companion urbanely; “but you and this young woman do all the work yourselves.”

“That’s true, sir; we don’t mind hard work now and then,” returned the cook, tossing her head; “and besides, I don’t like strangers in my kitchen,” added she, with meaning, “especially when I’m busy, and would rather have their room than their company.”

I could have given that woman five shillings on the spot (and I did so the next morning) for that rapid discharge of words; the detective’s tongue, although I had found it so terrible a weapon, was silenced by my domestic needle-gun, and he retired much discomfited, I could see, notwithstanding that he strove to conceal his defeat beneath a contemptuous smile.

“Now, if I’d been an ordinary policeman, and in uniform,” whispered he to me, as we reached the hall again, “I could have come over that cook in no time.”

Without remarking upon this confession of defeat, I led the way up to the nursery. The servants in that department were not unused to visitors, and evidently imagined that my companion was some family-man among my guests, who had expressed a wish to see the “dear children” in their cribs. He, on his part, immediately understood the *role* he was expected to play, and walked admiringly from cot to cot, as though he were a connoisseur in babies.

“Charming children, and well taken care of, I can see,” observed he, with rather a familiar nod (I thought) toward the under nurse. “It’s neither of *them*,” he added in a low whisper. “You have got a housemaid or two, I suppose?”

Hi stone was exactly that which an ogre might have used in making inquiries concerning the larder at a Cannibal inn.

The housemaids were inspected and pronounced to be free from suspicion. “But I cannot have seen everybody,” said he decisively.

“Yes,” said I, “everybody except Mrs. Maqueechy.”

“Friend of the family,” inquired the detective, with a disappointed air.

“Well,” said I, “I might almost say so. She came to us only with the best of written characters, but my wife had an interview with her late mistress, a Mrs. Ogilvie, who pronounced her a perfect treasure; and we ourselves have found her all that could be wished.”

“I should like to see the ‘perfect treasure,’” quoth the detective, smiling grimly; “we often find them to be the very people we want.”

“Nay,” said I, “but in this case your suspicions are quite groundless; Mrs. Maqueechy is a superior person, and takes an interest in us which you seldom find in a domestic, except after years of service. Besides, she is my mother-in-law’s sick nurse, and most likely they have already made their arrangements for the night. It would be a pity to disturb them.”

“I must see said Mrs. Maqueechy,” returned my companion, gravely; “she seems altogether too charming to be missed.”

“You detectives are clever fellows,” replied I with irritation; “but you often spend your time very fruitlessly. It is a pity that a man can’t be determined, and yet avoid being obstinate. However, since you have gone so far, you shall go through with the business.”

With that I knocked at the door, and, admitted to the sick-room, informed my mother-in-law briefly of what was taking place; while the invaluable Maqueechy retired with her usual delicacy to the dressing room. Perhaps I spoke a little too loud—for that Mrs. Maqueechy could stoop to eavesdrop, it is hard to believe—but, at all events, that intelligent woman must have possessed

herself of the substance of what I related, for when I opened the door to admit the nurse, I found her already outside, and in his custody. She had endeavored to escape through the second door of the dressing room—"bolted like a rabbit," said the detective—but had run into the very danger she would have avoided, and there she was with a couple of handcuffs over her neat mittens.

"We know one another very well, me and Mrs. Maqueechy," observed the detective, grimly, "I was told I should find an old friend in this house, although I had no idea who it would be until you mentioned Mrs. Ogilvie. She is very charitable, she is, in getting fellow creatures situations in respectable families where there happens to be a good deal of plate. It was this very night that this lady here had engaged to open her front door to her husband and a friend of his, who keeps a light cart in the mews yonder. Being a sick nurse, you see, nobody would be surprised at her being about the house at all hours. Wasn't that your game, Mrs. Maqueechy?"

"Well, I suppose it's a five-year touch?" observed the lady with philosophic coolness.

"Well, I'm afraid it is, ma'am; since that other little business in Carlton Gardens still remains unsettled. Good by, sir; you will see Mrs. M. again, once or twice, before you have done with her; and in the meantime, you take my advice, sir, and in hiring another sick nurse for your mother-in-law, don't you apply to Mrs. Ogilvie."

And off he walked with our "perfect treasure."

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