

The Ebony Box

EARLY in June, in the spring of 1855, it chanced that while enjoying my customary ride along the eastern shore of Manhattan, in the vicinity of the ferry of Astoria, I turned off through a narrow lane to the left, and came near to a cottage house, standing midway in front of a well-cultivated garden. There were indications of wealth, or at least of competency, about the place, and an air of neatness and elegance which pleased my fancy, prone as it is to look always at the prosperous, the happy, and the fair. My horse, a livery saddle hack, was struck with equal admiration at the greenness of the grass and herbage within the inclosure, and insisted upon looking at it over the paling. The house of wood, painted of a delicate cream color, with white cornices and window-frames, was neatly covered in some parts with sweetbrier, and the white climbing-rose of our grandparents, now so rarely seen.

The green blinds of the windows were open on the eastern side, and at one of these two heads of flaxen-haired children, with pippin cheeks and roguish eyes, attracted me. They leaned too far out of the window, and the mother had just caught each rather roughly behind; as she drew them back, our eyes met, and I recognized the beautiful face of my friend Alice Liston, of former years. The recognition was mutual. I heard a little scream of surprise. Alice disappeared from the window, and reappeared at the front door. I was not loath to accept the cordial invitation which she gave me to come in.

“How did you get into this pretty house? Where have you been these five years? How came little Dick and Alice by those round red cheeks? And, finally, where, in the name of patience, is that husband of yours?”

“He is within: not a word more till you see him,” she said, blushing with delight, and pressing both my hands with genuine and cordial friendliness.

I followed her through the house and into the garden, where, under a grape-arbor which he was pruning and training on the lattice, I found my old friend Liston, the wheelwright, two inches taller than I knew him, and shining all over with the hues of health and prosperity. To find the pale and stooping workman of former days transformed to such a shape gave me a shock of pleasurable surprise. He was no less gratified than I at the chance that brought us again together, and the afternoon slipped away pleasantly enough in bringing old times to memory.

Alice, assisted by a rosy serving maid, set tea for us in the porch, where we could see the sun set. The air was warm, the sky clear, and the stars came out, as we chatted pleasantly, brightening with new sympathy the somewhat faded pictures of former days. At nine Alice carried off the children to bed, after a sharp struggle with Dick, and a shower of tears from his sister; Liston meanwhile puffing nervously at his cigar.

As soon as they were out of earshot, “Alice,” said he, “is spoiling both of them, but I can’t find the heart to check her in any thing. She has suffered so many privations, it would be cruel to deny her the luxury of spoiling the children. Joking apart, however, she is a good mother, and prosperity has brought out graces and qualities in her that did not appear when we were poor.”

“Well, Liston all this is new and delightful. But to say the truth, I am positively unhappy till I hear by what chance it happened.”

“By no effort of mine; it came to us when we least hoped for it. Five years ago when you went abroad, I was earning some fifteen dollars a week at my trade, losing a third of my time too, with illness and bad luck.”

“Yes, I remember that. Little Alice was only two weeks old, and the mother quite feeble.”

“We were living, you may remember, in D— Street, in a cheap neighborhood. Our rooms were on the third floor.”

“It was there I paid my last visit.”

“You left me at ten in the evening. I had a bed for myself in the front room, just opposite the door. There was a square table by the side of the bed.”

“Yes.”

“As soon as you left me I lay down to read, placing the candle on the table.”

“An old habit of yours.”

“I have read through many hundred volumes in that way. That night about twelve, I fell asleep, and the first thing that met my eyes in the morning was a square box, resting on the table. It was of ebony, bound with brass. On the end of the box toward myself were three brass letters, S. P. L., the initials of my name. The box had no lock nor hinges. I saw that to open it the brass hoops must be cut with a file and removed. It was in size about equal to a small writing desk, such as ladies use for their gilt-edge correspondence. At each end was a strong handle, evidently for the convenience of lifting and carrying. I observed that the table had been moved about three feet from the bed. The candle, which was half burned when I fell asleep, was inverted in the socket. It was six in the morning when I waked. On rising and making a general reconnaissance, I found the door of my room leading into the passage standing ajar; the key was on the inside. I remembered locking it on the outside just after your departure.”

“And what was in this box?”

“All in good time. I passed into the bedroom, and found Alice, and the baby, and little Dick, asleep. Both the windows were open, as I had left them, for the night was warm.”

“Well, the box—”

“After a careful survey I concluded that some person must have come in by the front window, as there was no other ingress, the door of the back room being also secured, and the key in the lock, as usual.

“I grasped the handles, and found the box heavy, weighing not less than fifty pounds. Thinking, from the weight, that it might contain specie, I quickly closed and locked the door of my room, and made a careful examination of the exterior of the casket.

“The initials, S. P. L., puzzled me. They were of an odd, barbarous shape, and could not have been cut by any American artisan. These letters seemed to authorize and invite an examination of the contents. With a file I began cutting away the brass straps, and soon removed them. Under these were large screws, which turned easily. It was now only necessary to lift the cover, when the idea offered itself that this might be a torpedo, or infernal machine, placed there with a design upon my life. Not to be outwitted by such a devilish engine, I set the casket upon end, and gradually sawed away the wood in pieces about an inch square. Within I found a lining of oakum, saturated with tar, which enveloped a second smaller box, of a wood resembling cedar. I cautiously drew this out, and proceeded to saw it, as I had the other. In this second casket I found four bars of gold, weighing each some twelve or fourteen pounds, and, in a small leather bag, stuffed into a corner, twenty large diamonds, each of which could not be worth less than five hundred dollars, and two of them three times that sum.

“I searched carefully for some interior marks of ownership. There was none.

“I am by nature, as you know, cautious, slow, and unexcitable, but the handling of ingots and diamonds roused a fever of cupidity in my blood, and, for the time, I grasped them as if they were my own. Conscience did not awaken. I made a fire upon the hearth, and burned every fragment of the casket. The handles and brass hoops were not so easily disposed of. After some reflection, I went up to the trapdoor, and getting down upon the roof, threw the pieces of brass, one by one, into an open field behind the house—among bricks and rubbish.

“The next step was to discover a secure hiding-place for the treasure. Trunks, closets, the ceiling, the spaces under the floor, and a multitude of ordinary places of concealment, successively occurred to my thoughts, and were rejected.

At length, after an hour of painful and agitating reflection, I asked myself the question, whether, if the real owner of this treasure were to present himself, and make good his claim, or whether, if I had reason to believe that, by dint of advertising and inquiry, he could be discovered, I would confess to its possession?

“The question, literally translated into the vernacular, was, indeed, ‘Liston, are you a thief?’

“I was indignant, and felt insulted by the suggestion.

“‘In that case,’ continued Conscience, ‘will you be good enough, Mr. Liston, to give your reasons for burning and otherwise hiding and destroying the pieces of the casket? Nay, more. What pretext had you for opening the box at all?’

“I answered briskly, ‘that my initials on the box, and the fact of its being left in my chamber, were a sufficient authorization; that, in fact, I had no intention of appropriating the treasure, and should, that very morning, make a special deposit of the whole in a bank, reserving only enough

to pay the expenses of advertising.’

“Conscience appeared to be well satisfied with my answers; and not to break my promise with one so exacting and inflexible, I took one of the smallest diamonds to a jeweler, and sold it for four hundred dollars, deposited my treasure and the money, and inserted a standing advertisement in three daily newspapers, as follows:

FOUND IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF D— street, corner of Avenue —, early on the morning of the 10th of June, a box containing several thousand dollars in gold, and other valuables. The treasure is in the keeping of a bank, and will be restored to the owner, or agent, after satisfactory identification and charges paid. —Address Z. Y., Post-office.

“Within a week after the publication of the notice I had received three hundred and thirty letters, each giving a different description of some imaginary box— or casket. It was, of course, my duty to read each one of these letters. Some of them were written in cramped, illegible hands; others in the bold, practised style of clerks’ writing.

“I soon became weary and disgusted with the perpetual reading of fraudulent epistles; and to rid myself of as many as possible, added a few lines to the advertisement as follows:

“N.B.— The advertiser will pay no attention to communications which fail of a full and accurate identification of the box and its contents.’

“Five months and seven days after the publication of this second notice, on returning from my shop, I found a well-dressed, rather handsome young man with shining black hair, and mutton-chop whiskers of the same hue, waiting for me at my rooms. He was engaged in lively conversation with Alice, to whom (if you choose to believe it) I had not communicated the story of the box. Alice, you know, is painfully conscientious, and if I had made a confession of my first weakness, she would have grieved immoderately. But I must tell all or nothing.

“The stranger inquired, with a smile, if I was the party advertising a box of treasure; and at the same moment handed me a card with the initials S. P. L. written on the border in pencil, and the name ‘J. R. Langdon, Cincinnati,’ printed in the middle.

“A thrill of disappointment shot through the marrow of my bones. I had communicated the initials to no person living. The man before me had made one step toward the identification of the property by his knowledge of them. I regarded him with positive hatred. Happily, it is not what we think or feel, but what we do and say, that is of moment. With a desperate effort I gulped down my disappointment, and from that instant the thieving sentiment did not again visit the secret recesses of my heart.

“I received the stranger with affability; and as Alice had fortunately not understood the question, as the stranger spoke to me in an undertone, I requested him to walk out. We crossed the street to a small coffeehouse, and retired into a private room. ‘Now, sir,’ said I, cheerfully, ‘let us have a description and identification, and the property is yours.’

“The stranger seated himself, and called for liquor and cigars; but as I neither drank nor used tobacco, this point of sympathy was interrupted. He seemed disappointed.

“‘The box of treasure,’ said he, ‘which you have been advertising since June is not my property. I am sent by the owner to know what portion of the whole you will consider yours.’

“‘Are you prepared to identify?’

“‘Certainly; it was a box of ebony bound with brass; weighed perhaps fifty pounds: the initials S. P. L. on one end; brass handles; size about twenty inches by twelve, and seven deep.’

“‘And the contents?’

“‘Unfortunately I can give you no information on that point. The true owner of the box and all that it contains is Mrs. Danton, a widow lady in Flatbush. As a friend of Mrs. Danton, I have visited you in the hope of recovering the property.’

“‘I shall certainly restore to Mrs. Danton whatever of hers may be in my keeping. She has then only of late seen my advertisement?’

“‘About a month ago her attention was first drawn to it by the merest accident; and even then she would not have known that the affair concerned herself so nearly, had it not been for a letter which she had just received from a relative in Batavia. The letter,’ continued the stranger, ‘came by the way of Amsterdam.’ So saying, he produced a sea-letter, stamped with the several foreign postmarks, and the name of a Dutch merchant-ship, the *Shonvrow* Batavia, in writing. The envelope was a strong paper of foreign make. As I could not read French, and the letter was in that language, he volunteered a translation. The purport of this communication, so interesting to myself and the Widow Danton, was as follows:

“S. Paul Lavernaque, a native of Marseilles, after an adventurous life as mariner, consul’s agent, and finally ship-owner and buccaneer in the Indian archipelago, had at length settled, in his old age, at Batavia, master of a considerable fortune. Thinking that his younger sister, Louise Lavernaque, married to a Danton, and soon after a widow, in Amsterdam, might not utterly have forgotten him, he resolved to send her, by the hand of a friend, a small portion of his wealth. A buccaneer by profession, this worthy brother had acquired a better insight than most men into human nature; and on the strength of his knowledge, had intrusted his treasure, hidden in a box of ebony bound with brass, to the care of an American sailor—who wished to return home—to be delivered to the Widow Danton at Amsterdam. The messenger, on his arrival, learned that Mrs. Danton had emigrated. He sailed immediately for the United States, arrived safely in New York with his charge, but failed in discovering the residence of the widow. After several months of ineffectual and anxious inquiry this man had put a letter into the post-office directed to the person he was in search of, inclosing also the letter of Lavernaque. Why he had not done this sooner was unexplained.

“After reading and explaining the letter of Lavernaque, Mr. Langdon produced the letter of the sailor, a rude epistle, conveying information to the above effect, and signed ‘John Smith.’

“‘And now,’ said the courteous Mr. Langdon, the youthful friend of Mrs. Danton, ‘will you be kind enough to state the expenses which you have incurred, and the share of the contents of the box which you consider yours? Mrs. Danton, though poor, is liberal, and will gladly sacrifice a fourth to recover the remainder.’

“I was silent.

“‘In order to convince you, Mr. Liston,’ he continued, ‘please look over this police report. The date of the paper, you will perceive, is June 14. The date of your finding the property is June 10.’

“I took the paper from him, and read as follows:

“‘On the night of the 9th instant, a fatal outrage was committed on the person of a sailor, on the roadside at the north-east corner of Avenue — and D— Street. A policeman saw two ruffians attack and knock down the man, who was carrying some heavy object, apparently a box or small valise, upon his shoulder. The policeman gave the alarm, but the villains made their escape, one of them carrying the box or valise. The sailor was taken to the station house dangerously wounded with a slung shot. He was unable to speak, and died before morning. On his person were found a long Malay kreese, a jackknife, and a silver watch worth about a sovereign. The name John Smith was written on the inside of his tarpaulin. No person has come forward as yet to identify the body.’

“I returned the paper to Mr. Langdon with a feeling of certainty that this Mrs. Danton was in truth the owner of the property. I was disagreeably affected by his proposition to give me a quarter of the treasure, and frankly told him that I should restore the whole, excepting the expenses, and a sufficient sum to pay for the loss of time and trouble—which was considerable.

“‘Would you then be satisfied,’ he said, ‘with a thousand dollars?’

“I replied that the sum would be considered by me as liberal.

“‘Well, then,’ he continued, ‘you have only to deliver the property, and the business is concluded. Will you do so to-night?’

“‘To Mrs. Danton?’ said I, ‘with pleasure I will give an order.’

“‘Unfortunately,’ he replied, ‘Mrs. Danton is at Flatbush; but here I have her order for the box and its contents.’

“‘You forget that it is in the bank, and cannot be delivered tonight.

“‘True; I will call early.’

“‘At nine o’clock you can have the order. Will you require a personal identification at the C— bank?’

“A slight change, like a summer cloud passed over the face of Mr. Langdon.

“‘I am a stranger in New York,’ said he ‘I think you had better withdraw the deposit yourself, and deliver it to me at your house, say at twelve o’clock.’

“‘Very well, as you please.’ And we shook hands, and parted with much civility.

“Now, thought I, it is proper to open this matter to Alice. She had made tea and waited for me.

“After a time she perceived that I was preoccupied and anxious. I began at the beginning, and developed the affair in its details. She was excited and agitated. I wished to have her opinion of Mr. Langdon. She believed him to be an impostor.

“‘Impossible; his proofs are complete and satisfactory. Why do you distrust him?’

“‘He is so plausible—so polite and insinuating. He played with the children—and made himself vastly agreeable—I dislike his—his—whiskers.’

“I could not forbear laughing, ‘Come,’ said I, ‘Alice, that is unfair. This Langdon is a handsome man, and he naturally wishes to be agreeable to a handsome woman like yourself.’

“‘Don’t joke with me, Liston; I feel certain that Langdon is an impostor.’

“‘Shall I consult W—d, the lawyer?’

“‘Yes; do.’

“I thought you hated him?’

“‘Well, no; W—d is a gentle man, and shrewd; I hate his disagreeable puns and jokes, but I like him personally, and he is certainly keener than you are. You are too trustful by half.’

“‘I will go and see W—d tonight.’

“I waited till midnight for W—d at his house. He came home worn and irritated; but on my explaining the nature of the business, he became interested, and gave it immediate attention. After a searching and minute examination, which lasted two hours, he let me go, promising to be at my house, as if by accident, at twelve, the hour when Langdon was to receive the order for Madame Danton.

“The next day I remained at home. W—d came in at eleven o’clock and we again talked over the business. At twelve precisely Langdon made his appearance. I introduced W—d to him as my legal adviser. Langdon shook hands with him, and W—d immediately opened the business.

“‘Mr. Langdon,’ said he, ‘will you be kind enough to explain to me by what means you learned the name and residence of Mr. Liston?’

“With pleasure. Feeling that a personal interview would be necessary, I placed myself at the post-office, and waited until Mr. Liston called for letters directed to Z. Y., I then followed him to his house, and inquired his name at the shop opposite.’

“H’m. It is singular that John Smith, the sailor, did not write sooner to Madame Danton.’

“Smith was evidently a common sailor; and you can see by his letter that writing was a labor to him. He put it off to the last moment.’

“Will you let me see Lavernaque’s letter, Mr. Langdon?’

“Langdon gave the letter. W—d, I knew, was a master of French.

“He took the letter to the window and read it carefully. He then asked for John Smith’s letter, which, I thought, Langdon gave him unwillingly.

“After a close inspection of the two, he folded them up and put them in his breast pocket. ‘Of course, Mr. Langdon, you will have no objection to my retaining these letters?’

“None whatever; they are the property of Madame Danton, but she will receive in exchange through me the property in question.’

“H’m. Strange that Lavernaque should not have named the amount of treasure contained in the box?’

“Perhaps,’ said Langdon, ‘you had better let me go for Mrs. Danton; and you can give the property to her. I presume it is in this house, as we agreed, Mr. Liston?’

“No,’ said I, ‘we thought it better to make further investigations into the claims of Mrs. Danton. I have a friend living in Batavia; I will write to him in regard to it.’

“Mr. Langdon became uneasy. He rose and asked for the letters.

“W—d smiled, and shook his head. Langdon’s brow grew dark and threatening.

“Sir,’ said he to W—d, ‘it is not the act of a gentleman for you to retain these letters.’

“I believe them to be forgeries,’ replied W—d, coldly, ‘and I shall not give them up until they have been examined by some person skilled in handwritings. They are safe with me, sir, and shall be returned to you as soon as they are pronounced genuine. The handwritings of both appear to me to have been executed by the same writer.’

“While W—d was speaking, Langdon, who sat near the door, took up his hat, and escaped so quietly and quickly, he seemed to vanish.

“W—d laughed. ‘It would have been troublesome to prove,’ said he, taking out the letters, ‘that

these are forgeries; but the fellow has saved us that labor. A more experienced swindler would have defied us to the proof.'

"'His description of the casket,' said I, 'was accurate. By what means did he arrive at it?'

"'He must have been in communication with the person or persons who left it in your room. This morning I looked over a file of newspapers, and found the police report of June 14; I then applied at the station house for additional facts. There have been no inquiries for the murdered seaman. The report I found to be substantially correct.'

"'It seems to me,' said I, 'that we have blundered in allowing Langdon to escape.'

"'W—d was annoyed by the suggestion, and hurried off to the police office; but it was too late. The presumptive forger had either disguised himself too effectually for recognition, or had left the city.

"'In April of the succeeding year I moved into a small cottage in the suburbs of South B—. My business increased and became profitable. I built a large workshop, and employed several journeymen. I felt sure that the owner of the treasure would by and by appear, and establish his claim. Alice thought differently. She would never believe that the initials S. P. L. were not intended for my own name. She dreamed continually about the treasure; and in those visions the handsome swindler always made his appearance, which led me to suspect that his personal attractions had made a deeper impression upon her fancy than she was willing to acknowledge.

"'The cottage which we occupied was the last one in a row of eight, built alike, each with a garden in front. The cottage next to ours was inhabited by a respectable, quiet old lady and her son, a dark taciturn man, apparently about forty years of age. The old lady soon scraped acquaintance with Alice over the railings of the garden, and they seemed to be mutually pleased with each other. Mrs. Maxwell—that was the name of our neighbor—complained bitterly of the business by which her son, John Maxwell, a widower, earned his living. As a journeyman printer employed on a daily paper, he was absent every night until two o'clock, and sometimes until daylight. In the daytime he remained in the house, smoking and drinking beer, and reading flash novels. The old lady compared his life with that of his father, the Rev. Dr. Maxell, for whose memory she professed a degree of respect bordering on adoration. Old Mrs. Maxwell was popular in the neighborhood and reputed charitable; but, for my part, I conceived a thorough detestation for her and her son—the one as a mischievous go-between, and the other as a sullen sot.

"'I had rented this cottage for a year, and notwithstanding the aversion I felt for our neighbors, fancied it necessary to remain in it. The upper rooms were divided from Mrs. Maxwell's by a mere partition of boards, and we found the snoring, hiccoughing, and grumbling of Mr. John Maxwell so thoroughly unpleasant, we were forced to leave that part of the house unoccupied, and confined ourselves to the first floor and basement.

"'One evening while crossing the South Ferry to New York, I caught a glimpse of a face that seemed familiar. The owner of the face avoided me, but I followed and cornered him; and in

spite of the red hair and sand whiskers, no longer shining with artificial blackness, I recognized the intelligent and polite Mr. Langdon, the friend of the widow Danton.

“‘Mr. Langdon, I think?’

“‘You have mistaken the man.’

“‘Not at all; I have a memory for faces. Now, Mr. Langdon, since we are happily met, you will find it necessary to go with me to the station-house, and from thence you will be taken to a place of greater safety. Not a word; I need your services, Mr. Langdon. The less trouble you give me the less you make for yourself.’

“‘I put Langdon in charge of an officer at the landing, and rode up to W—d’s. The same night we paid the friend of Mrs. Danton a visit in his cell. The officers of the law recognized him as a notorious swindler, commonly known as Faro Bill.

“‘Faro Bill was very liberal of his promises, and agreed to tell all he knew if we would give him his liberty, and forbear to appear against him. He then stated that he left the city the night after his interview with W—d and myself, and that he was himself one of the two men who had attacked the sailor on the corner of Avenue — and D — Street; that he and his comrade ran down a blind alley with the box, which they found very heavy, and impossible to open without a file and screwdriver. While in this hiding place they both noticed the initials S. P. L. upon the casket. As the police were still in pursuit they dared not come out, but climbed over a high spiked-wall into the yard of the house in which I was living, and of which the ground floor and kitchen were unoccupied. They entered the kitchen by a window, taking with them the precious casket, which they felt sure must contain specie, from its weight, and from the fact of its being carried by a seaman.

“‘At this point of his narrative Faro Bill introduced an episodic sketch of a former adventure of the same character, in which his companion, Black Jack, had left him at a critical moment, and made off with the booty. This experience made him distrustful, and he did not quit his hold upon the casket, notwithstanding its weight, which distressed him exceedingly. While they were resting and consulting together in darkness and security, they heard the cry of an infant, and concluded that the third story must be occupied. As the neighborhood was thinly inhabited, and many robberies had been committed there with impunity in open day, Black Jack proposed that they should finish the night with a burglarious expedition to the rooms above, leaving the casket, meanwhile, in the basement. Faro Bill was averse to the proposition, but finally yielded, with the understanding that he was to continue his grasp upon the handle of the casket.

“‘This being understood, as a measure of safety in case they were obliged to make a sudden exit, they took off their shoes, came up the kitchen stairs, opened and left the front door ajar; ascended to the third story, and, finding all quiet, peeped through the keyhole of my room, where they saw me asleep with a book before me, and the candle burning by the bedside.

“‘Faro Bill put the casket upon the floor and sat down upon it, at the head of the stairs, while his companion quietly unlocked the door from the outside with a tool ingeniously formed for such

an exploit. After this they waited, watching to see whether I had been awakened by the noise, which, though slight, was inevitable. The door was then opened by the elder robber, and the two entered together. Seeing nothing of value in the apartment, they concluded that, as the waistcoat of the sleeper was nowhere visible in the room, it must be under the pillow, and consequently contained either a watch or money. It was necessary to raise the pillow; in order to do this they must move away the table. Faro Bill first put out the light to avoid recognition in case of my awakening, and to ease his left hand, which was weakened and sore with the galling handle of the heavy casket, he raised the latter and placed it upon the table. A ray from the moon gave light enough for the purpose they had in view. They then moved the table carefully away about three feet from the bed, Faro Bill standing at the bed's head, facing the entrance of the room in which Alice was asleep with the children. This entrance was through a deep closet or bedroom, both the doors of which were open.

“He offered to make oath to the fact, that in raising his eyes after they had moved the table, he saw a white apparition coming toward him through this passage; that no sound proceeded from it; and that the eyes were open like the eyes of a corpse. He fled horror stricken, and Black Jack followed him; nor did the two cease running until they were far out of sight and hearing of the scene of this dreadful occurrence.

“The narrative of Faro Bill accounted for the presence of the casket in my room, but we were still to seek as to the right ownership. W—d cross-questioned him in regard to the assault upon the sailor. At first he refused to communicate any further particulars, but the promise of money, and the application of a few lively threats, brought him to a better sense of his own interest. He admitted that Black Jack had found time to plunge his hand into the pockets of the seaman, and that he drew out a large wallet. That he thought no more of the matter. Though there might have been money and papers in the wallet, but had secretly resolved to appropriate the ebony box for his own share, and let Jack take his chance with the wallet. Had been looking for Jack in Brooklyn, when I arrested him on the ferry-boat; thought he might find him, and would undertake the search if we made it an object.

“After some reflection I offered one hundred dollars for the production of Black Jack, and nine hundred more to be paid in case the two together could produce the owner of the casket, or furnish papers that should lead to the discovery. W—d approved of the offer, and Faro Bill, after being set at liberty and furnished with a little money, promised to lose no time in earning the reward. I returned home that night confirmed in my confidence of finding, at no distant day, the real owner of the treasure.

“When Alice had listened to my account of the adventure of Faro Bill and his companion with the casket, she explained the story of the apparition by confessing that on several occasions, at intervals of a month, she had walked in her sleep, and wakened to find herself at a distance from the bed, or even in another room. She had concealed her knowledge of this habit from me to avoid giving me needless anxiety.

“It must have been three weeks or more after our interview with Faro Bill, when W—d sent word to me that the burglar had called upon him, and given information that he had discovered the hiding-place of Black Jack; that the wallet taken from the sailor was still in possession of the

latter, but would not be given up unless three hundred more were added to the reward. I retired to bed that night well satisfied with the progress of the affair.

“In the small hours of the night I was awakened by a sound of voices in high altercation. It seemed to proceed from Mrs. Maxwell’s, and I could distinguish the rasping and nasal voice of her son, abusing the good old lady in a style truly shocking, if applied to the widow of a clergyman. Forgetting my dislike of the old woman, whose tattling propensities had annoyed me, I felt a violent desire to step into the house and administer a sound thrashing to Mr. John Maxwell for his unfilial conduct. To be better satisfied in my opinion of him, and finding it impossible to sleep while the noise continued, I went up into the attic, or third story, where, as the houses were very small, and if the doors happened to be open in either house, one could hear loud talking on the first floor, I sat down near the partition, and finding it difficult to hear, loosened one of the boards a little, and passed my head through into the son’s room. The voices came up distinctly.

“‘A pretty mess you’ve made of it,’ screamed the good lady, ‘with your novels and your beer, smoking, drinking, and idling away the whole day and half the night, when other men of your size are making fortunes at an honest business!’

“The reply was indistinct, but I approved the sentiments of the Rev. Mrs. Maxwell, and I felt a violent indignation against John.

“‘Where is the money you got for the Casey job? Lost at cards, I suppose; none of it came to me. Or perhaps that abominable Mary Jane—I’ll stick a knife into her if ever I get within reach. She might as well keep away from my hand, John.’

“Although the proposition to stick a knife into Mary Jane, who, I had not the least doubt, was an idle coquette, was too severe, I pardoned it as a liberty of expression.

“‘She’s better at that game than you are, Mother Bandy,’ replied the son; ‘and if you try it on she’ll serve you as she did Billy Brogan. He got e’en enough from her; they didn’t come out even at all, Mother Bandy.’

“From the sounds that followed I was obliged to think that the good Mrs. Maxwell, exasperated by the language and behavior of her son, had flown at his throat. After a short struggle came a voice—

“‘There, mother, that will do.’

“Then followed a succession of sobs, groans, and ‘Oh my’s.’ The old lady appeared to be in despair of bringing her obdurate son to a sense of his wickedness. When she had recovered breath, she changed her tone, and seemed to be quite cheerful. John had said something conciliatory which I did not hear.

“‘Ah!’ said the old lady, ‘never call me by that odious name again. And so it appears that this fool, Liston, and his silly woman, are the advertisers. I could have thought as much. But is Bill

sure of getting this money? Liston may be a sharp, you know, for all he looks so proper and steady.’

“‘Bah! am I a flat? If it hadn’t been for that lawyer, W—d, Faro Bill would have got the whole of the gold. Lucky for me he failed.’

“The language of Mrs. Maxwell and her son gradually changed into a flashy dialect. I heard enough English, however, mingled with this horrid slang, to satisfy me that the respectable old lady and her son were people of the vilest character, and had formerly been, if they were not still, in association with the common thieves of the city; John Maxwell, the printer, was evidently a burglar, and identical with Black Jack.

“I felt no anxiety for the personal safety of myself and family, notwithstanding the proximity of Mrs. Maxwell and her son. I took it for granted that on the morrow the tattling old woman would betray her knowledge of the secret to my wife, and I was not disappointed. When I came home to dinner from the shop, Alice informed me that Mrs. Maxwell had entertained her with a prolix account of a younger son of hers, who had made a fortune in the East Indies; that she had heard nothing of him for several years; that she was afraid he might be dead; that he ran away to sea during the life of her revered husband, the Rev. Dr. Maxwell, and had taken the name of Livingston, which she thought was a disgrace to the family, as Maxwell was a name much more respectable than Livingston.

“Not daring to let Alice into the knowledge of Mrs. Maxwell’s real character, I told her to hear all that the old lady might say, and report it to me. The next day Mrs. Maxwell showed several letters, purporting to be written by her son in the first years of his sea life. These were signed ‘S. P. Livingston.’ Alice begged to have the letters to show me, as she began to fancy that this Livingston might be in fact the owner of the treasure. The letters were of various dates, at Batavia. The old lady would not trust them out of her sight. A day or two later, during my absence, as usual, she produced another letter, purporting to have been written at Amsterdam, in which her son, Maxwell (*alias* Livingston, *alias* Bandy), informs her that he is waiting for a vessel to come on to New York, but writes, by way of London, that he shall bring with him money enough in gold ‘and valuables’—the language of my advertisement!—to make his mother, his dear brother John, and himself, quite comfortable for life.

“That evening I went to a number of stationers’ shops in Brooklyn, and purchased single sheets of letter-paper of every variety. I laid these before Alice, and called her attention to the quality, texture, and the maker’s stamp. She immediately, having a quick memory and observation, identified one of these sheets as the same in quality and make with the paper used by the pretended son. Alice was dreadfully shocked when it flashed across her mind that the letters were forged. I had much trouble to exact from her a promise that she would continue, for a time, to treat Mrs. Maxwell with the same cordiality as before.

“A day or two after, as I expected, the old woman came in, while I was at breakfast, with a morning paper in her hand. The tears were streaming from her eyes. She burst into a paroxysm of grief, so well feigned that it melted the heart of poor Alice, notwithstanding her knowledge of the fraud. After sufficiently recovering herself, she showed us my standing advertisement, and

begged me to write a letter for her to the person advertising. She said that she was sure the gold which that person had found must be her son's; that she remembered, in one of his letters, he described a very curious box of ebony which he had had made to carry gold and 'other valuables' in, at Batavia; that she was afraid the letter might be lost, but she would look diligently for it.

"I congratulated the good lady on the hope that possibly she might recover the property. Day after day, for more than a week, she pretended to have searched for that letter, which, as I was to see it, must be got up in unmistakable East Indian fashion. Hence the delay. At length, however, it was produced, and would have defied the scrutiny of much abler detectives than Alice and myself. The date, post marks, texture of the letter, written on India paper, stains of salt water, and a remarkable appearance of age in the ink and the creases, were unexceptionable. I concluded that this document must be the work of Mr. Langdon, *alias* Faro Bill. It contained a good description of the casket, in which the owner intended to convey his fortune from Batavia to New York, and also contained a brief eulogy of one Smith, a shipmate and bosom friend, who was to return home with him.

"W—d agreed with me in believing that this complicated piece of forgery must have been devised and carried on by the *soi-disant* Langdon. That ingenious person had intimated to W—d that he thought it not at all unlikely that some clue might be found to the real ownership of the treasure, and that he believed, if Black Jack could be persuaded to give up the papers which he took from the pocket of a sailor, they would be found to contain important information. Faro Bill admitted that he had seen two papers; that one of them was a parchment, and might have been a deed or a will; but that the other was certainly a letter. He had casually read the direction, but had forgotten it.

"Although it was unnecessary for the completion of the evidence, W—d, in order the more effectually to deceive the forger, suggested to him the propriety and convenience of a personal interview between ourselves and Black Jack. This was of course refused, as it would have identified him with John Maxwell. At this point the whole affair came to a dead lock; the forger and his chum afraid to move for fear of some mistake or accidental discovery, and we on our part waiting for the slow but sure operation of natural cupidity to bring the rascals to terms.

I was quite willing to give the required thousand dollars for the papers, because I felt sure that they would lead to a solution of the problem. W—d was not so sanguine. 'Let us wait,' said he; 'these men have not yet finished the net in which, meaning to catch a fortune, they will be entangled.'

"In compliance with the wishes of the good Mrs. Maxwell, whose daily lamentations over the probable loss of her dear son Livingston were becoming tiresome, I addressed a letter to the advertiser of the treasure—that is, to myself.

"This letter the good lady signed with a trembling hand and many tears. It was a highly pathetic epistle, setting forth the history of her dear son, supposed to have been killed; giving a good description of the casket, and ending with a brief and touching obituary of the lamented Smith, 'the friend of my dear son.' I took pleasure in composing this letter, Alice looking sad the while

to see me engaged in so gross a piece of deception, and the meritorious Mrs. Maxwell painting in glowing colors the beauty and innocence of her dear boy, at the time when he ran away from the lash of the reverend and adored, but too stern and unbending father.

“After the departure of the old woman with the letter, I explained to my wife the necessity of concealing from our neighbors the fact that I was myself the advertiser. It would have been necessary to let them know our opinion of them and their proceeding; and by that means we should make enemies, who, as next-door neighbors, and living almost under the same roof, would lose no opportunity of doing us an injury. Alice was much troubled, and urged me to move away. I promised to do so as soon as we could find a tenant who would take the house off our hands.

“This was not the only reason of my conduct, but it was sufficient for my wife, who feared nothing so much as an *exposé* and a quarrel. Meanwhile, I saw that Mrs. Maxwell, knowing that I was the advertiser, would perceive that I suspected their integrity, from the fact of my writing this letter to myself, and not making a frank avowal of the fact. This suspicion had an immediate effect. The next day Faro Bill made his appearance in W—d’s private office, and declared that he was ready to deliver the papers taken from the sailor by Black Jack, on the payment of the promised thousand dollars, and the signing of an agreement to pay the balance as soon as the owners should come forward and establish their claim.

“W—d assented in my name to the proposition, but required a previous inspection. Faro Bill reminded him that on a former occasion he (W—d) had retained certain papers. W—d promised that if he was not satisfied with the genuineness of the documents he would immediately return them, but told the forger that as he was too busy to examine them at the time, he should come the next day and the money would be paid.

“W—d notified me that my presence would be necessary, and when the accomplice of Black Jack made his appearance, we were ready to receive him.

“Faro Bill came in, dressed elegantly in sporting costume; talked in an easy off-hand style, and laid his documents on the table, carefully enveloped, with an air of confidence.

“W—d opened the conversation.

“‘We wish, Mr. Langdon, that under no circumstances, even if these documents, like the others, should appear to be forged, that you would run away as you did on a former occasion. If you have made a second effort to deceive us, and it fails, we are still under the necessity of dealing further with you, in the hope of securing the real documents. Promise that you will not run away, and I engage that you will not be arrested or otherwise annoyed.’

“The forger, though astonished and disturbed, laughed involuntarily at the suddenness of the attack. He agreed not to run, and seemed to be very confident.

“‘And now, Mr. Liston,’ continued W—d, ‘before we open these papers, please tell us what they are?’

“‘The parchment,’ said I, slowly opening the envelope, ‘is a will, purporting to have been made by S. P. Livingston, *alias* Maxwell, in favor of his mother, Mrs. Maxwell, of Brooklyn.

“‘The letter accompanying the will is from the same S. P. Livingston, *alias* Maxwell, to the same Mrs. M., written at Amsterdam. Of its contents I am not certain; but this much I may guess, that it alludes to the property which came into my possession by favor of our friend here, and to a certain John Smith, who is declared to have it in his keeping for the benefit of the said Mrs. M.’

“So saying, I unfolded the parchment and the letter. They were as I had described them. Their intent was obvious. They were a part of the system.

“The forger’s lip quivered, and his eyes became bloodshot with vexation and rage. He was again baffled. But his presence of mind did not forsake him.

“‘By what means you obtained this information, Mr. Liston,’ said he, ‘it is not necessary for me to inquire. The documents are genuine, and if you happen to know the parties so much the better. I have earned my thousand dollars.

“‘Not so fast—not so fast,’ said W—d. ‘This Mrs. Maxwell is the famous Mother Bandy, whom I remember to have seen years ago as one of the witnesses in a celebrated criminal case; and the son, S. P. Livingston, is a creation of your own brain. In short, the failure of this second attempt will perhaps bring you to reason. It is worse than useless to trifle in this manner. Here are your forged documents—take them back to your comrade, and say from me that I give him his choice—the real papers for the money, or the Penitentiary for nothing.’

“The forger was more astonished than humbled by the exposure of his tricks, and hardly knew what answer to make.

“‘Are you prepared,’ said W—d, after giving the other a little time for reflection, ‘to bring us the documents, or will you compel us to make war upon you? Here is a check for the sum agreed—money easily, though not honestly earned—we offer this for the papers, and you will be certain to receive it if you bring them.’

“At length, after a great deal of reflection and a long silence, during which he looked constantly upon the floor, Faro Bill rose and went away, saying that he would come and give an answer the next day.

“It was late in the afternoon when I left W—d’s office, and, having business in the city, I did not reach home until late in the evening. I found Alice waiting for me, greatly alarmed.

“About dusk she had seen a well-dressed man go into Mrs. Maxwell’s. That after an hour or more a noise of rummaging and moving furniture commenced, and was continued for a long time. That about an hour before my return John Maxwell came home intoxicated, and soon after she heard the voice of Mrs. Maxwell and her son quarrelling. Then there was a third voice, and a violent altercation of all the three, ending in a scream; and all was quiet. After this she saw John Maxwell and the gentleman go out, taking with them a trunk, which seemed to be heavy.

“Not doubting that the quarrel had been about a division of the money which was to be paid for the papers, I went immediately to the front door of Mrs. Maxwell’s house, and finding it open, I passed into the front room. The old woman, with her hair hanging wild, and a huge gash in her forehead, from which blood was flowing, sat up in the middle of the floor, as if she had just risen from a swoon. The furniture of the room was thrown over and about, and there was every indication of a fight, in which she had been an active and vigorous combatant. Her clothes were torn, exposing many parts of her person, which showed the vigor and proportions of an Amazon.

“Well, Mrs. Maxwell,’ said I, ‘you have been having a brisk time with that son of yours, and Faro Bill I suppose?’

“No son of mine, no son of mine,’ said the old woman sullenly, ‘but a murderous villain—a dog—’

“I do not care to repeat the language which followed; but never in my life had I conceived it possible for a woman to make such a terrible exhibition of profanity and wickedness. After she had eased herself somewhat by this tirade, she laughed a little, and getting up went to a closet and quieted her nerves with a draught of gin; after which, covering her half-naked shoulders with the skirts of her dress, she sat down, inviting me to a chair. Her face was covered with blood, and altogether she was as repulsive and disagreeable an object as I had ever seen.

“Those fools,’ said she, returning from her slang and profanity to good and decent English, ‘thought they could bully and frighten an old woman; but I am good for a dozen such boys.’

“You have an ugly cut over the brow, Mrs. Bandy.’

“Bah! that is nothing. I have stabs and blows enow on this old body to have killed a dozen women like that one of yours. Look at this,’ she said, baring one of her brawny shoulders; ‘that scar is a bullet wound, and the ball is in my body—that is Bandy’s mark.’ She laughed long and heartily. ‘To think,’ said she, ‘that I, with that mark on me—Bandy’s mark—I, that had stood fire, could be frightened with a threat and a blow! Fools, fools, both of ’em.’

“What were you fighting about?’

“Papers, man, papers; they want those papers you were to pay for. Simple in you to trade with them about them. Why, man, the papers are mine. Didn’t Black Jack sell ’em to me? Haven’t I fed and clothed him for ’em? Don’t I know the vally of ’em? – Bah! You decent, quiet folks are all fools; you think because a fellow is a thief he must know something.’

“Quite the contrary, Mrs. Bandy. Dishonesty is a proof of ignorance.’

“So; is it? Well, I’d like to know! Then there’s a plaguy big crowd of rogues, for the most part know nothing at all.’

“I did not say that ignorance was a proof of dishonesty, but dishonesty of ignorance.’

“It’s all the same—only open the chances; fine talk for you, Mr. Liston—a mechanic; you’re one of the missionaries, aren’t you! No matter for that; you want the papers, and can pay for ’em; I’ve got ’em, and ha’ paid for ’em; that’s the point. Talk, man, talk!” cried the lady, holding out one hand in a balancing manner, as if there was a weight of coin to be dropped into the palm. Mrs. Bandy then took a Dutch pipe out of the closet, filled and lighted it at the candle, which burned dimly on the mantelpiece, and began smoking.

“You have those papers? You are confident Jack and Bill did not carry them off?”

“She laughed in a disagreeable manner. ‘I have them where Jack and Bill will never find them; nor you either; nor all the p’lice of New York. The boys thought the papers were in the trunk they carried off with them. I let Jack see me put ’em there yesterday; the trunk is full of trumpery and rags.’ The old woman chuckled. ‘The game is played out; I mean the respectable gag. Now I’m Mother Bandy again; it’s more comfortable. Come, now, you shall give me half the treasure for the papers. I like you, Liston, though you be a mechanic in a low way; you’re going to be rich; you’ll keep the treasure.’

“You may believe so; but I shall restore every shilling of it to the right owner, except what I have paid and shall pay for the expenses.’

“The old woman laughed, and rocked herself to and fro.

“That’s a good ’un. You’re a man, Liston; but soft—very soft. Come, now; give me half, and I’ll burn the evidence.’

“Mrs. Bandy, I hope you won’t make me angry.’

“You’re bad when you’re cross, ain’t you?” said she, scanning me from head to foot. ‘I told the boys as much. Do you really mean to give up the gold?’

“I need not have waited so long if I had any other design.’

“You daren’t use the money till you see the evidence safe in the fire. I want half.’

“You are hard to convince.’

“It does one good to talk to a regular out-and-out fool once in a while.’ This remark was followed by a monstrous chuckle.

“I began to be impatient, and rose to go.

“Sit down. Liston—sit down. I like you. Now, come; say a quarter.’

“I will give you two thousand dollars or nothing.’

“Say five—that’s a sixth.”

“I was startled; this woman knew the value of the property.

“Do *they* know?”

“Who? Jack and Bill? They? Wouldn’t I a been a greeny to let on to them! Bill and Jack know what I chose to tell ’em. Jack brought the papers to me the night they left the box in your room. Neither of them have read them, or seen them. I had my reasons. They wanted to grab the whole. Jack quarrelled and left me; he thought I would peach. Faro Bill had been a lawyer’s clerk; he wheedled and wheedled till I would help him to get up the letter from Lavernaque, or some such name.’

“You then were the Widow Danton?”

“Yes.’ Another violent chuckle.

“And Jack does not know the history of that affair?”

“A little of it. He came back to me and was sorry. Your advertisement was going on, and I was willing to let the boys trap you if they could; but I held the papers, and knew the true owners; and when it came to giving them up, I could trade with you over their necks.’

“You intimated as much to them, I suppose, tonight?”

“Yes, more fool I for doing it. They made a fuss, and Jack floored me with a chair.’

“Well, to conclude this matter, Mrs. Bandy, will you or will you not accept the terms I offer?”

“Yes, yes,’ she answered, good-humouredly. ‘I’ll not be hard with you.’

“Will you come to Mr. W—d’s office tomorrow at 9 o’clock and exchange the papers for the money?”

“Yes.’

“Good-night, then, and pleasant dreams.’

“The old woman was punctual to her appointment. She was dressed like a beggar, and so thoroughly disguised that I did not recognize her till she spoke.

“She waited till the door was closed and locked, and then drew forth a greasy wallet, and held it in her lap.

“W—d laid a bundle of bank-notes on the table before her. She gave no heed to them, but directed all her attention to myself.

“Isn’t your name Simon Paul Liston?”

“It is.’

“Have you, Mr. Liston, any relatives, an uncle, a brother, or the like, that lived in India?”

“None. I had a brother who died in infancy. No uncles by the father’s side; the only brother of my mother is living in New York.’

“Had you ever a friend, a lad of your own age, who left you long ago, when you were both boys?”

“I reflected; there was such a friend, whom I had almost forgotten.

“One Potter?”

“The same; poor Sam Potter, a good-hearted lad; he was a fellow-apprentice of mine, and we shared every thing. Potter was a foundling, a sad, miserable boy, moping and pining. Our master, old Jackson, the wheelwright, was very harsh with him, and he ran away.’

“You have never since heard from this Sam Potter?”

“No.’

“Sam Potter went to sea. In this letter,’ said the old woman, handing me a sea-letter, the *fac-simile* of the one which purported to have been written by Lavernaque, ‘you will find what you ought to know.’

“With a trembling hand I took the letter and found myself unable to see the writing through mental excitement. W—d snatched it from me, and after a hasty perusal,

‘Now, Mrs. Bandy,’ said he, ‘the will, and you may take the money and go.’

“The old woman next handed me a will made by Sam Potter, who dying at Amsterdam on his way home from Batavia, in token of the kindness I showed him during his wretched apprenticeship, and because on the day he ran away I had kept his secret and divided with him the money I had, made me his heir, with a small legacy to John Smith, his sole executor. In the letter written at the beginning of his illness he gave a sketch of his life, which nearly resembled that of the fictitious Lavernaque. Then followed the letter of the veritable John Smith, with a schedule of the property, valued at twenty-eight thousand dollars, gold and diamonds, and the evidence was complete. While we were reading the papers, the old woman disappeared with her money.

“On reaching home that day, I found she had been there before me, and after informing Alice of her good fortune, had left the premises, furniture and all. Nor have I since heard any news of Mother Bandy or the two burglars.

“By Alice’s desire I bought this cottage. We have been two years in it, and are becoming attached to the place.”

“Are you still in the old trade?”

“I have a shop, but of late I grow idle and aristocratic. Come, let us go in; the dew is falling.”

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