

MY TWO WIVES,

By GEORGE R. SIMS.

A feeling of sorrow came over me as I gazed on the spot where my parents had lain in the grave side by side so long, while I had been far away in a strange land and beyond the sea.

The tears came into my eyes, and the mist before them prevented me seeing very clearly at first.

I saw my father's name and immediately under it my mother's:

Also of JANE.
Wife of the above,
Who entered into her rest,
August, 188—.

Poor mother? I made up my mind to come again to the cemetery before I left and lay a wreath of immortelles upon her tomb.

It would at least be a sign of my having remembered her when I was far away.

I was just turning to go and bring my wife to the grave when I saw there was a further inscription beneath my mother's. I looked at it for a moment, then I started back with a wild cry of astonishment.

Did my eyes deceive? Was I the victim of some extraordinary illusion? No, there were the big black letters on the marble slab before me:—

Also of
WILLIAM HENGIST SMITH
Son of the above,
Who died September the—, 188—,
Aged 24.
And is here interred.

Son of the above. I was their only son. My name was William Hengist Smith.

I was looking at my own tomb. I was dead and buried, and my body lay beneath that marble slab in Highgate Cemetery.

CHAPTER II.

As soon as I had recovered from the shock which the sight of my own name upon our family grave at Highgate caused me, my first thought was for Cora.

She was waiting for me on the gravel path some little distance away. I determined to go to her at once and make some excuse for not showing her my mother's grave.

My brain was in a whirl. Even after the first shock of horror and surprise had passed away I could hardly realize that I was not dreaming.

But there before me was the inscription. It could not mean anyone else but myself. I was the only child of William and Jane Smith, and my name was William Hengist Smith.

At first I imagined some story of my death had reached England, and some one had placed my name upon the tombstone as a memorial. But the words, "and is here interred," made that theory untenable. I was alive—alive and looking at the place where my lifeless body was supposed to be resting.

Some one therefore, must have been buried who was supposed to be me.

But who had supposed such a thing, and who was the dead man who had my name upon his coffin lid?

With my mind full of this strange and awful mystery I mechanically made my way through the tombs until I came to the place where Cora, my wife, was patiently waiting for me.

"Well, have you found it, dear?" she said.

I had not been able to make up my mind what I would say to her. I was too confused, too excited to invent a plausible story, and so I told a deliberate lie.

"No, my dear," I said. "I must have mistaken the part of the ground. Let's go away now and come on a brighter day. The sight of all these tombs has upset and depressed me."

I don't think in her heart of hearts Cora had ever relished the idea of a visit to the cemetery, and she very readily fell in with my views.

The drive, back to the hotel was a long one, but I scarcely spoke a word. Cora saw that I was thoughtful and depressed. She fancied it was the cemetery which had upset me, and she tried to lead my thoughts to other subjects.

But all her efforts were in vain. I answered her only in monosyllables. Do what I would, I could think of but one thing, the fact that I, William Hengist Smith, was buried in the family grave at Highgate.

The idea haunted me. We had engaged to go to the theatre that evening, and we went, but I saw and understood very little of the piece. I looked at the stage mechanically, but right through the painted scenery there rose up before me a monument to the dead, and upon it, in great black letters in bold relief, stood out the name of William Hengist Smith.

I slept very little that night. I lay with wide opened eyes, and let my mind grope blindly in the darkness for some clue to the great mystery.

I determined that at all risks and hazards I would investigate the matter. I absolutely declined to be buried alive.

On the following morning I told Cora that I had some important business which would take me to the city and detain me there for the greater part of the day, and I went to Somerset House in order to get a copy of my death certificate.

I filled in the form, paid the fee, and after a short time the book was brought to me. To describe my feelings as I saw

my name among the registered deaths would be impossible. My blood ran cold, my knees trembled; I felt as if I should fall to the ground.

But by a violent effort I pulled myself together, and read as in a dream the meagre details given.

I had been found drowned. A coroner's inquest had been held upon my body.

The certificate of my death, registered at the Somerset House, had been received from the coroner, and I was buried by his authority. That was all the information.

I produced a copy of the certificate, and thus armed with the dates I went out into the Strand wondering what I had better do next.

I was determined to fathom the mystery and know the truth.

I wanted some one to help me, and yet I was afraid to trust anyone with my secret. I did not want to identify myself too closely with the deceased gentleman. I was naturally nervous, seeing that I was staying in London with a lady whom I had married.

According to the certificate I had been dead six years. It was four years since I married Cora. At the time of my marriage, therefore, I had been dead two years.

Horrible as the whole business was I could hardly repress a smile when I thought of the extraordinary complication in which I found myself involved.

One thing was certain. I could walk about now without fear and hold my head high. Nobody could punish me for bigamy, because I was dead before I contracted the second marriage—dead and buried.

Still I felt far from comfortable. I remembered the inscription on the grave at Highgate. I felt that there was an intruder in the tomb of my ancestors, that an impostor was lying under false colors by the side of my father and mother.

The first thing I had to find out was under what circumstances my body had been identified. To do that I should have to make inquiries; to find an account of the inquest, perhaps to make inquiries at the coroner's office or of the police.

I didn't relish doing that myself. I had a strange fear that I might in some way or other betray myself or be accidentally recognized. I should have to give my name and address—to furnish proof, perhaps of my right to investigate the matter, and this was exactly what I didn't want to do. I could hardly go to an office and say, "I want to find out under what circumstances Mr. William Hengist Smith died and was buried, because I am Mr. William Hengist Smith."

The man who has something to conceal is always loath to start enquiries concerning himself, and I had a good deal to conceal.

In this dilemma I determined to go to a professional enquiry agent—to tell him nothing about myself, but offer him a substantial sum for the information I required. He could make the enquiries, and that would save me going to an official source.

I went into a restaurant to get some lunch and asked for a Daily Telegraph. I looked down the advertisements of the private detectives and selected a firm whose offices were in the Strand. To them I went and giving no name asked to see the principal.

I was ushered into a small room and a tall, thin, middle-aged man rose, bowed to me and motioned me to take a chair.

I stated the object of my visit in a few words.

I handed Mr. Dash the certificate of my death.

"I want you to get me a full account of the inquest held on this gentleman if you can," I said; "it is a very simple matter, I expect, but I am leaving England in a day or two, and I want it at once."

The agent looked at the certificate and began to say that it would take a little time.

I stopped him.

I knew enough of these agencies to know that the longer the job takes the greater the profit, because the expenses and fees are run up, so I replied that I would give a lump sum, to be agreed upon, directly the information was in my possession.

Eventually Mr. Dash agreed that for the sum of £25 he would get me full particulars in a couple of days.

He asked me my name and address. I told him that for private reasons I preferred not to give them, but I would call personally and hand him the £25 in return for his written report.

"Very good," he said, and leaving the certificate with him I took my departure.

As I went out of the room he touched a bell on the table.

I had to pass through the outer office. As I did so one of the clerks rose. I thought he was going to answer his employer's bell, but he put on his hat and went down the stairs in front of me.

I at once jumped to the conclusion that the touching of the bell was a signal to the outer office that I was to be followed. I had declined to give my name and the private enquiry agent was anxious to know it.

Once outside in the street I crossed the road and pretended to look into a shop window.

I wanted to see if the clerk was watching me. I gave a furtive glance to the left and to the right—he was nowhere to be seen.

Then I looked across the road and saw

him calling to a paper boy for a Globe.

He bought a paper and went back upstairs.

I had been over suspicious. I was not to be followed, so I went straight back to my hotel.

Cora was very glad to see me. It was the first time since we arrived in London that I had left her for so long a time.

Now that I had put matters in train I felt a little relieved in my mind, so I determined to forget the mystery as much as possible and wait for the denouement. Cora found me quite my old self that afternoon, and the next day, in order to distract my mind, I devoted to her and a round of sight seeing.

On the morning after that at twelve o'clock I went to the office of Messrs Dash & Co., and had to wait for some time as Mr. Dash was engaged.

When I was shown in to him my first question was, "Have you got the information?"

"Yes," was the reply, and unlocking a drawer in his writing table he took out a big envelope and handed it to me.

"You had better read it here," he said. "You may have some questions to ask me on it."

I opened the envelope and read the following statement:—

On May 28, 18—, the body of a well dressed gentleman, aged about twenty-three, was found floating in the Thames near the Temple stairs by the river police. It was taken to the police station and examined by a medical man. No marks of violence were found on the body, and no papers. In the waistcoat pocket there were two sovereigns and in the trousers pocket some loose silver. There were no initials on the clothes. A full description of the body and the clothing was given in the daily papers, and the police issued the usual notices. Several people came to see the body, but failed to identify it until a Mr. Garston, a merchant in the city, called one day and said that the description answering that of a clerk lately in his employ, he would like to see the body.

He said it was very like a clerk formerly in his service named William Hengist Smith, but he had not seen him for twelve months, and could not swear to the remains.

This statement appeared in the papers, and the following day a lady called and said she was the wife of William Hengist Smith, but was separated from him. He had inherited a small sum at his mother's death, which she believed he had spent in dissipation. He had often threatened to commit suicide. Confronted with the body she at once identified it as that of her husband, and claimed it.

At the coroner's inquest she gave evidence to this effect and swore positively that it was her husband. Mr. Garston also gave evidence that he was struck by the similarity, and thought there was no doubt it was his late clerk. The medical evidence went to show that there were no marks of violence, and eventually a verdict of "found drowned" was returned. The widow claimed the body and it was buried at Highgate.

There were other details in the report, but they were not important. I had read sufficient to understand how it was I came to be buried with my father and mother.

For the first time a ray of light dawned upon me. But I could not understand why my wife, my legal wife, who had resumed her maiden name at our separation, had suddenly reassumed the status of a married woman in order to identify a drowned man as her husband.

As soon as I had read the report I folded it up and put it in my pocket. I then handed Mr. Dash five and twenty pounds in bank notes.

He gave me a receipt for the money. I took it and glanced at it mechanically, and then uttered an exclamation of astonishment. The receipt ran as follows:—

"Received of Mr. William Smith the sum of 25 pounds for particulars of the death and the inquest held on William Hengist Smith."

"How did you know my name?" I exclaimed angrily, the hot blood rushing to my face.

The agent shrugged his shoulders. "I found out," he said, quietly. "We can never work well in the dark, you know."

Then, noting my confusion, he smiled and said, "There is no necessity for you to be alarmed. I always like to know the names of my clients. Once we start an inquiry we often come upon information which may some day be of great value to them. If we didn't know who they were we couldn't communicate with them."

I accepted his explanation. It wouldn't have done for me to appear alarmed or seriously angry. That would, perhaps, have aroused the agent's suspicions.

I was about to leave when the agent called me back.

"You are sure this is all the information you want?" he said.

"Quite sure, thank you."

"I suppose the subsequent career of the widow of Mr. William Hengist Smith is of no interest to you."

I hesitated.

"Well, I—er—I should like to know what had become of her."

"I can tell you, but not of course for the £25. Thinking you might like the inquiry completed I followed the case up

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