

LITERATURE, &c.

The British Magazines.

From Chambers's Edinburgh Journal.

A PARISH CLERK'S STORY.

I am not a garrulous old man, though young folks think me so, and pay no heed to what I say. Young men are not now what they used to be when I was young. I was brought up among old people, and learned old people's caution and steady habits. I profited by the experience of others. I had no need to squander my health and money in learning wisdom, to starve in after life, and drivel of what I would do if I had the world to begin again. My old uncle taught me to be careful, and saving of money, and repeated to me the maxims of 'Poor Richard' till I got them by heart. He warned me, too, of all the cunning devices of the evil heart of man; and when artful rascals who look upon youth as a prize, sought to inveigle and bring me to ruin, they found me a match for them, and left me to seek easier prey. I saw through the lying stories of those who live upon the industry of others. I knew the worth of their boasts who call themselves 'jolly fellows,' with which they would have enlisted me in their devil's army. Social companions forsooth! I have seen them meet an old acquaintance in the street—a lank, shabby, pale-faced, fishy-eyed specimen of what they were coming to themselves—and slink away; or if they could not do that, stare him in the face, as if they had never seen him before, and pass on. God forgive me, if I chuckled at the sight, to think I had no need to wait for years to know the result of such a life, but could see at once the boaster and the humbled side by side. As to women, although I have never married, I once looked forward to the time when I should be able to keep a wife. I was not poor, but I was too prudent to marry and run the risk of a family to support, till I had ample means, and to spare. I did not run after the girls as some young men: I had my living to get. I minded my own business. If a steady virtuous woman, likely to have made me a good wife, had come in my way in the course of business or otherwise, I should have been glad to marry her; but I never found one, and so I was never married. However, that does not grieve me: I have a contented mind; I have much to be thankful for: I was never a grumbler.

When I look back upon my life, I don't think I have more sins to answer for than my neighbors—nor so many perhaps. I can only remember one very grave fault that I have committed, and that tormented and haunted me enough; indeed I think it nearly drove me mad for a time. I have expiated, and done all in my power to repair it; and it did no harm to any one in the long-run, as we shall see. Except this, I do not find much to reproach myself with. I have always paid my way, to the farthing and to the day; and I have expected others to do the same. I have shown respect to authorities; I have never got into trouble by breaking the laws. I was a regular attendant at church before I was a parish clerk, and after that, it became my duty in a double sense to do so. I have been a charitable man, though I never gave to whining beggars and impostors, like a fool with more money than brains; however, I gave many a guinea to charitable institutions, where I knew that committees of intelligent gentlemen would investigate, and sift the truth from the lies, and bestow my money on worthy objects.

I repeat I am not a garrulous old man. If I happen to talk much, I mean much. I do not mumble over and over one thing. I am eighty years of age, but I have more life in my old body than any two young men I know. My memory is as strong as ever it was, and so is my eyesight. I remember what I am going to relate as well as if it all happened yesterday, although I speak of forty years, and everybody who knew me then intimately is dead and buried.

My uncle left a sum of money between me and my sister—enough to keep us both pretty comfortably. I was not on friendly terms with any other relative but her. I know what relatives are; I have seen enough of them. She was a widow, without children; but she and her husband had adopted a little girl. I don't know where they found her; I never asked. I never took much interest in children. All I know is, that they both seemed intent on spoiling the child, and making her unfit for everything, which they would have done, no doubt, had they lived. But they didn't: they died—he first, and she afterwards. I was very sorry for both of them. I didn't know any one I liked better; but, however, it was not for me to repine at the decrees of Providence. I was with my sister constantly in her illness. I cannot say what was her complaint; some say she fretted after her husband. She was only eight and twenty, and, if I am any judge of beauty, she was a nice-looking woman. She was more grieved to leave the child than anything else on earth. She loved her better than me, her own brother. This is generally the way with people who have no children of their own, and adopt a strange one—it is a play-thing for them. Let them have nine or ten, and slave to keep them, and they will tell a different tale. The girl sat by her day by day—read to her from the New Testament—gave her the medicines, and prepared what food she could eat. She was a sensible child enough for ten years old, and a pretty child too. The day my sister died, she told me she had provided for her, and intreated me to be a friend to her: and I said I would. She held her in her thin arms, and played with

her hair, and kissed her; and some time afterwards leaned back upon her pillow, and spoke no more. We listened, but we could hear no breathing. We put a mirror against her mouth, but it was not tarnished: she was dead. The doctor wrote his certificate, and went for some one to lay her out. Meanwhile I opened her drawers and found a will, which I put into my pocket for safety, and then sealing up all boxes and drawers, I roused the child. I had to drag her from the body like a soldier's dog. I took her home with me.

I was at this time clerk of a parish in the heart of London. I had given up all other business, for this and the collecting of rates occupied all my time. My employment was an agreeable and a respectable one. The church was situated up a long yard, as silent and retired as if it had been in the country. Moss gathered between the pebbles round about, for seldom any one came up there except on Sundays, and then the church was never more than one third full. It was a heavy building, erected soon after the great fire of London. There was a small churchyard, in which, in spite of the sprinkling of grass seeds, only a few thin blades ever made their appearance. Here and there were a few dilapidated tombstones, their inscriptions obliterated with soot and rain. We had long ceased to bury any one there; all coffins were placed in the vault, a few steps down from the level of the ground. This was a stone chamber under the whole extent of the church. Here we piled up the coffins, one above the other, like clients' boxes in an attorney's office. The place was damp and they rotted fast. However, when a funeral was coming we put all the new coffins on the outside for show, and burned some lime to purify the air; and when we had sprinkled the ground with sawdust, it looked very clean and comfortable. The undertakers used to tell the mourners that it was as nice a little vault as ever they had seen. Inside, the church had a mouldy smell. The pulpits and pews were oak, with much carving about. From the roof was suspended a long brass candelabrum, with innumerable candleholders branching out. Round about the organ there hung several banners and old garbancets. I do not know their history; probably they were saved from the old church before the fire. Only the minister and myself lived up this yard. Mine was an old-fashioned house, of which I only occupied a part. The rest was empty for I had not been able to let it. It was thither that I took the child to live with me.

She continued to sob, so I sent her to bed with my housekeeper. I sat down to read the will, although it was past midnight, for I was curious to know its contents. The dispositions were rather strange. First it appointed me executor, with nineteen guineas for my trouble. Nineteen guineas to me! I must confess I felt rather angry. As to my trouble, I should have thought nothing of it; I did not want any recompense for that. Who would not undertake such a duty cheerfully for his own sister? It was only the look of the thing. To leave me, her only brother, about enough to purchase two suits of mourning! This prevented my being put to any expense for her to be sure, but I thought it was cutting rather close. I was not in want of money, it is true, but that did not justify her in forgetting her own flesh and blood. There was something unnatural in it. Next she left all the residue of her property to me in trust, to apply the interest in bringing up the child until she was twenty-one, or until her marriage, when the principal was to be vested in her. There was no restriction whatever—nothing to prevent her property being taken to pay a spendthrift husband's debts. I reflected on the dangers to which the child would be exposed if the will were suffered to be proved. She would grow up into a beautiful woman; there was no doubt of that. Before she was seventeen some fellow would fall in love with her, or pretend to have done so. I had no power to prevent his marrying, and dragging her down to ruin; and if she escaped that, and reached twenty-one—I should like to know who fixed twenty-one as being years of discretion—he knew little of life whoever he was. On the other hand, if I destroyed this will, I was my sister's only next of kin, and her estate would be mine. I had no wish to wrong but to protect the child. I could still expend the income in educating and maintaining her, as my sister intended, and I could bequeath the interest to her if she behaved well. I ask any man if there was any great crime in all this? Some people would have done it like a matter of business, and never have thought of it again. Yet because I had the boldness to carry out my resolution, I have been fool enough to torment myself for years, and to the verge of madness.

My determination was fixed. I looked round the room, turned the key till it covered the keyhole, and drew down the curtain, though the shutters were fastened on the outside. Then I took the will and flung it on the fire; but before the paper had time to ignite a thought struck me, and I snatched it off again. I had had a brother and sister, who emigrated many years before. We had heard of their deaths, and I believed they were dead; but might they not have some representatives, who would one day perhaps claim and carry away two thirds of this money? To be sure they might. I had no right to endanger the poor child's fortune like that. Now, if I kept the will, I could at any time pretend to have found it, and shield myself against any such claims. So I resolved not to destroy but to secrete it somewhere.

At the end of a week the vault under the church was again swept and sprinkled with sawdust. My sister's coffin was added to the number of outsiders. Only myself, the little child, and the old woman who laid the body out, were present. Our worthy relatives understood that no will had been made, and did not trouble themselves to attend. However, they were not done with me. The next day they came down in a body and insisted on the house being searched from top to bottom. I did not refuse their request. I had the place thoroughly searched, and they were convinced, and departed, after plentifully reviling the deceased and her next of kin. Soon afterwards I obtained letters of administration, which, as my sister had no debts, put me in possession of all her property.

No one suspected me—my character was above suspicion. I had been executor and trustee, and had often held large sums of other people's money. My honesty had stood every test. Forty years I had lived in that neighborhood, and nobody had breathed a word against my honor. I was universally known as a grave and upright man, and had the confidence of the parishioners, who elected me to the office almost unanimously. I was not wanting in boldness; I had the consciousness of a good purpose to sustain me. As to my relatives, will or no will, they would get nothing; I had not robbed them of a half-penny. I knew that, and could look them in the face.

However, no sooner had I passed the excitement of the first fortnight, and got, as I may say, out of danger, than thoughts of what I had done began to torment me. I could not find a spot which seemed to me safe enough for depositing the will. Little children are very curious. I always suspected my housekeeper of prying, though I never caught her at it; but I know what old women are. They must have something to gabble about. How did I know that she had not a key to fit the very place in which I had put it? She would find it perhaps one day, and spread the intelligence throughout the neighborhood, or perhaps retain it, and threaten me with exposure, and extort money from me, and make me her slave. I resolved not to keep it at home.

In the church, on a spiral stone staircase leading to the belfry, was a closet in the wall, in which I kept the rate books and vouchers for safety against fire. It was double-barred and studded with nails, and had a massive lock with intricate wards, of which I only kept a key. It was here that I finally deposited it.

I felt a little more easy, for it was no compunction of conscience that troubled me. I feared only the result of my act becoming known. So long as I carried the key about me, I knew no one could open the closet but myself. However, a little incident soon afterwards arrived to disturb my returning tranquility.

I was sitting one evening alone checking the receipts torn out of my collecting book with the cash in hand, when my housekeeper announced a stranger, who wanted to speak with me. I desired her to show him in. He was a little man in black; and he introduced himself to me as having acted as solicitor to my late sister. If I had had any colour in the cheeks, I believe it would have left them at that moment. I begged him to be seated, which gave me time to collect myself, and ask him what his business might be with me?

'Your late sister,' said he, 'died rather suddenly. I have only this day heard of her death, and I understand that no will has been found.'

'None,' I replied. 'My sister died intestate.'

'It is strange,' said the lawyer. 'I can say that I prepared a will which she executed about two years ago, leaving all her property to that little girl she had with her. Now she might have added a codicil to that will without consulting me, but I think she would not have destroyed it without having another prepared.'

He looked at me intently, but I did not shrink. I felt sometimes like a coward before imaginary terrors; but under the pressure of an actual necessity for boldness, my courage seldom forsook me.

'Every search has been made,' I replied in an open manner, 'in presence of my relatives but without success.'

'It is remarkable,' said the little man, musingly. 'Unfortunately a duplicate was not made. I remember the terms were rather unusual by reason of her instructions. She appointed you executor, but would not make your permission necessary to the marriage of the infant. She said, laughingly that an old bachelor was not a fit judge on such matters.'

'Ha!' I exclaimed. 'She perhaps repented of leaving the child thus unrestricted, and destroyed the will, intending immediately to make another, and not expecting to die so soon.'

'It is possible,' replied the lawyer; 'but I can hardly believe that she would allow her little favorite to remain an hour exposed to the possibility of being left unprotected.'

'As to that,' I returned, 'women are not so cautious as lawyers. However, I had myself frequently heard my sister say that she had amply provided for the child. Indeed, I was so convinced that such was her intention that I have taken her under my care, and intend to charge myself with her maintenance and education, as well as providing for her by my will.'

My visitor seemed satisfied from my manner that there had been no foul play, and after some apologies, he took his departure. But

he left me alarmed. It was the first time that any one had breathed a suspicion that a will was in existence. I did not know where such a suspicion might end. I sat till a late hour brooding over it. The possibility of my secret being discovered, and myself dragged to prison, stood up vividly before me. I saw myself pointed at by my neighbors; forty years of integrity gone for nothing; every little harmless act of my life raked up and misrepresented, to fit the theory that I had been all along a cool rascal and a profound hypocrite. And I was suffering all this on account of a remote possibility of some one, whose existence no one but myself had imagined, suddenly coming from the other side of the world to claim a share in the money! It was too much. I resolved to destroy the will.

An accident diverted me from my purpose for a while. The rector, who had been some time ill was taken worse, and I was to and fro at his house constantly. He was a young man, but was much liked in the parish. He was attacked with consumption. Some said his house was too near the vaults to be healthy. I do not know how this may have been. I lived on the other side of the church, as close to the churchyard as he did for twenty years, and I never felt any the worse for it. He died at last. It was near Christmas, and the weather was cheerless and bitter cold, with snow upon the ground. I was with him at the time. I have seen many deathbeds, but I never saw any one die so hard as he. He rose up in the bed with agony, struck his head violently with his fist, and died with his eyes staring half out of their sockets.

The sight had moved me. I had no sickly sentiment; but I was a man and had a man's feelings. I returned home in a thoughtful mood, inclined to be more kind than usual to all about me. I met the girl upon the stairs going up to bed, with the candle in her hand. Having been much occupied I had scarcely spoken to her since my sister's death, and my heart half reproached me with having neglected her. She bade me 'good night' quickly and would have avoided me; but I called her back, and patted her on the head, and bade her enter my room and sit and talk to me by the fire. I saw she feared me, but I attributed it to her not knowing me yet. I sat beside her; but she shrunk from me. I spoke kind words to her; but she hung down her head and cried. I felt angry to find my kindness repelled.

'What is the matter with you?' I asked sharply.

She still continued to cry. A thought struck me.

'Some one has been speaking to you about me, I said. 'Some one has been poisoning your mind against me—saying you would have a great deal of money but for me, or some other falsehood.'

'Oh, no, no, uncle!' she exclaimed sobbing violently. 'I know you are very kind to me. I know you are my only friend, and I am grateful. But my life is so different to what it used to be when mamma was alive. I never see any old faces now; I stay all day in this great house, and I wander about alone, and sit in the empty rooms, and think of poor mamma, till my heart is almost broken like hers. This is all that makes me cry—indeed it is.'

Notwithstanding her explanation, I felt sure that there was something more lurking at the bottom of her heart. It was not probable that an infant should grieve incessantly for two months. Besides, having lost every friend in the world, it was natural she should feel a love for a new benefactor, who fed, and clothed, and housed her, while other beggar children shrank in doorways from the inclement season.

'Go,' I said, 'you have some secret which you will not tell me; but I shall find it out. Go and pray for a better and more thankful spirit.'

She rose and went, without saying a word. My suspicion was confirmed. This was, as it were, another cloud in the horizon! I was excited: the events of the day, the dreariness of the weather, and, above all, the baseness and ingratitude of the world, had wrought me almost to a frenzy. I reproached myself with my tardiness in neglecting to destroy the will. I went to bed, and brooded long over these things till I fell asleep; my dreams were vivid and terrible. Every possible evil which could arise out of my act passed before me in fearful reality—the altered faces of my old friends and parishioners; myself arrested and dragged through the streets; the trial and the terrible reprimand of the judge, pointing to my previous good character, and contrasting it with the degraded position into which I had brought myself. And all this to a man who had done nothing that he could not justify to his own conscience—who had wrought a little harmless evil only that good might come—who at most had been guilty of an imprudence. Forty years of age is not so far removed from youth that every trace of its indiscretion and erroneous judgment should be expected to be entirely obliterated. The little lawyer was the witness who had found the will. I heard him relate the suspicion which induced him to bribe the pew opener to show him all the closets in the church to which I had access; how the very strength and security of the one on the stairs induced him to think that I had chosen that for my hiding-place; and how they had procured another key, and obtained the evidence of my guilt. I reproached myself bitterly for allowing the fatal document to exist. I clenched my fists and teeth in anger with myself. I could have dashed my head against the duck with vexation at my folly.