The Return of Cyril Webb

With a painful struggle for breath Sir Basil shuffled quickly out of the conservatory into the library and, shutting the door, dexterously turned the key in the lock.

White and trembling—seeming to have aged by years in a single moment—he paused in the middle of the room and glanced round him despairingly, like a man momentarily expecting attack from any side. The farther door, which led into the hall, was closed, the windows were shuttered and barred, and he was alone.

He moved quickly, though with faltering steps, and unlocking a drawer of the writing-table took out a revolver, which he laid on the blotting-pad. Then walking close to the wall, so that he was screened from view of anyone outside the conservatory, he drew the heavy curtains across the half-glass doors. Even above the rattle of the curtain rings upon the pole he heard the tapping on the pane of the conservatory.

He stumbled back to the writing-table and, falling into the chair, took up the revolver and examined it. Satisfied that it was loaded in all five chambers, he threw himself forward on his face on the table and wound his arms about his head to shut out the sound of the spasmodic tapping, tapping on the glass of the conservatory.

It was an impressive picture— the big, dignified old man, surrounded by almost every luxury money could provide, bent in body and broken in spirit by abject fear come suddenly upon him. If some of his clients could have seen within the library of Sulton House at that moment there would have been a second run on the bank next morning, but one very different from the first, which occurred the day following the arrest of Cyril Webb, the cashier, on a charge of embezzlement, now a twelve-year-old event; for Sir Basil's whole attitude typified ruin, and the destinies of himself and Sturton's Bank were so inseparably linked that one could not fall and leave the other standing.

Presently he became aware that the tapping had ceased. He raised his head and listened intently. He listened long. There was no sound but the soughing of the wind among the trees of the garden, above which the throbbing of his pulse seemed loud. Then he heard a bell ring in the servants' quarters, and he started, a look of exaggerated alarm contorting his fine features. But it was in just such emergencies as this that he was strongest, and recovering quickly from the shock of the fear that the bell might arouse some of the servants he lit a candle and went out into the dark hall. Despite the flickering light he carried, he saw through the glass panels of the hall-door that a man stood in the porch. Seeing the light, the man tapped upon the glass.

"Who are you?" inquired the banker, speaking through the letter-flap

"Open the door," replied a cold, even voice.

"What do you want?"

"Open the door, Sturton," saih the voice, dropping to a slightly lower key. "Open the door or I shall ring until the servants come."

Quietly Sir Basil pulled back the bolts and turned the key; slowly he opened the door; noiselessly the man in the porch stepped in, when the banker closed the door and nervously led the way to the library.

The visitor closed the library-door and turned the key in the lock.

He was a tall, thin man of middle age, with a narrow face, hollow cheeks, deep-set eyes, and thin lips, set in a straight line of bitter determination. He wore no hair upon his face, and that upon his head was thin and short.

As Sir Basil stood the candlestick upon the writing-table and blew out the light, with a quick movement he laid a paper over the revolver upon the blotting-pad.

"Sit down and tell me what you want," he said, softly.

"You have courage, and I admire courage, even in a scoundrel," replied the visitor.

"Don't waste your breath in abuse but explain why you have come here," said Sir Basil, dropping into his chair and stroking his forehead nervously with his hand.

"Surely that would be waste of breath," the other returned. He took a chair on the opposite side of the table and sat down facing his host. "Ask yourself what it was you feared when you saw me watching you through the conservatory window! You feared that Cyril Webb had come back to ruin you, to strip you of all the honors that have fallen to you since the day the bank, by wonderful good fortune, weathered the storm which was caused by you and paid for—by me! You thought your thief of a cashier had returned to force you to confess your guilt and treachery and thus establish his own innocence. Those were the thoughts which took the breath out of your body, the color out of your face, the strength out of your limbs. And you were right, Sir Basil Sturton—you were quite right."

The banker's head drooped and he uttered a few inarticulate words.

"You are a man of riper years than I," Webb continued, "and must have tasted sorrow. I have heard it said that a woman came into your life once, and left behind her one of those gaps which ache incessantly. But you cannot conceive what I have suffered during the past twelve years."

"You are wasting time, and I have business to attend to," said Sir Basil, with a feeble effort to speak sternly. "You have no justification for coming here so late at night. The penalty you suffered was the penalty prescribed by law for the offence of which a British jury—not I—found you guilty. If the object of your visit is to get me to help you to a fresh start in life, I will remind you that your crime nearly ruined the bank. If you have come with the idea of blackmailing me by suggesting that I was a party to your crime, I assure you that you are not in a position to threaten me. You are a convicted felon, and that fact would make your oath of less value in a court of law than my simple word."

Webb buried his face in his hands and wept, his bowed shoulders trembling with the strength of his emotion. But no sound escaped him for some moments. Then suddenly he dashed the tears from his eyes and started to his feet, shaking with passion.

"Give me back my name, my character, the respect of my fellowmen!" he cried, with a gesture of passionate appeal. "Give me back my right to hold my head erect and to speak with honest people! Give me back the happiness which agony has stolen from the last twelve years of my life, and my wife and my child! Give—can you do this? Can you even make amends to me? Living in the lap of luxury, saved from utter ruin by the crime you pinned on me that you yourself might escape—have you ever thrown a thought to me tied down in prison? Have you ever thought of my wife, murdered by grief? Have you ever thought of my little girl, cast upon the world, homeless, friendless, ruined for life by bearing her father's name? Think well of what you have robbed me, and marvel that I have not come for vengeance, but for justice—just for simple justice!"

"What is your idea of justice in this matter?"

"You cannot give me back the best years of my life, nor my wife; but you can restore me to respectability and help me to find my child. To begin with, I want a written confession from you that you, and you alone, committed the frauds and applied the money to saving the bank—that you robbed the bank to save the bank—and that when he found discovery was inevitable you contrived to throw it on me. I want a full history of the whole affair, giving every detail."

"Good heavens!" cried the banker, feverishly. "Do you realize what that would mean? I—I might be willing to—to help you; but not that way! That way's impossible! It would ruin me, and send me, grey-headed as I am, to prison! I should never come out, even if I wished to show my face again to the outside world!"

Webb leant forward suddenly and took up the revolver from under the paper, which had failed to hide it from his eyes.

"I can't help that," he said. "Without such a confession from you my life is not worth sixpence, and my child is irretrievably lost to me. I shall stop at nothing to gain it, nor abandon hope of forcing it from you until I have rendered you incapable of making it."

"I cannot do it—I cannot do it!" murmured the banker, anxiously eyeing the revolver in the other's hand. "Be careful; it is very light at the trigger."

"Don't toy with destiny, Sturton," replied Webb, sternly, lowering the weapon. "I have not come here to discuss the situation with you or to utter hollow threats; I have come for your confession, which shall re-establish me as an honest man, enable me to get some sort of an honest living, and gather what sweetness I can out of the remaining years of a ruined life. And I'll not leave this room until I have obtained your confession or exacted the penalty from you with one of these bullets. Take paper and pen and write."

"No, no; I cannot do it!" cried Sir Basil, piteously. "Money I will give—freely, generously—only name a sum. What good can you do in this country? Mud sticks, and you are suspected. Where and how could you earn a living? Go abroad— to France, to Italy—anywhere you like, and an ample allowance shall be sent to you regularly to meet all your requirements."

"You are trifling with me," Webb replied, hotly, raising the revolver again and resting the barrel over the back of his hand so that its muzzle pointed directly at the banker's head. "I have no mind to spare you. Why should I?" Think of what I have been through. Think of my dear ones—one dead and the other Heaven knows where—perhaps worse than dead. In my failing years I have only her to count on; she alone can impart a little happiness to the frayed end of my ruined life. To count on her I must establish my innocence, or one day her heart may be broken, as her mother's was, by hearing that her father was a criminal."

The banker threw his arms out over the table and buried his face in them, groaning.

Webb watched him with glinting eyes, but continued speaking in a lower key and rather more gently.

"The thought of my child—the one tie I have binding me to mortal life—has been the single solace of all the bitter years. She was a mere babe, a child of three, when your treachery robbed her of her father and mother. I believe that she was sent to the workhouse, as the only refuge open to her. I must find her; if she is still on earth I will find her! But I cannot go to her as what I am. No doubt the fact—the whole story has been kept from her, and she thinks her father dead. But she is a girl of fifteen now, and what would be her first question to me? Come!" he cried, his manner suddenly changing. "Come! Write the confession! Don't spare yourself, for you did not spare me. And if your imagination of what it means to you terrifies you, remember that I have suffered the actual experience and am unrevenged! Write now! Come, Sturton, bestir yourself and write!"

He pressed the muzzle of the revolver against the back of the banker's head as he ceased speaking, and Sir Basil started to his feet and, swinging round, grasped the ex-cashier's wrists with all his ebbing strength.

"I can't! I won't! I swear by Heaven I wonjt!" he cried. "And I will tell you why I won't! Don't draw back—don't touch that trigger, for I mean you no harm. But listen! I took your child from the workhouse. I took her in compassion and remorse and I adopted her."

"Is she here?" cried Webb, a strange look of mingled happiness and resentment crossing his face.

"Yes, she is here! Three years of her life are yours, but twelve are mine; and twelve years of my life hake been wholly hers. She has grown into my heart as the core grows in the apple. You were right—a woman came into my life once and flitted out as light as thistledown; but she left such a gap in my heart that the rest contracted in an effort to fill it in. So I have lived wifeless, childless, loveless. And then Ruby came, and—and——

"She knows nothing—nothing of her parentage. Ah, man," said the banker, remorsefully, "don't look like that! I know what your thought was—that I ruined you and then buried all knowledge of you from your child! I did—I did—for her sake! She is my adopted niece. We have become everything to each other, and everything I have in all the world is too little for me to offer her. Do you realize the position? To take her away would be like tearing the roots off a seedling and expecting it to flourish. To force a confession from me would be to destroy her faith in humanity, for she believes I am the most honest and upright of men. And I would sooner be shot down by you like a dog—here, where I stand, without preparation for death—than write or utter the words which would destroy her faith in me." He dropped Webb's hands and half-turned away. "Take off your boots and come with me."

There was something in the banker's manner which made the ex-cashier comply without stopping to question; and, although he was quick in throwing off his boots, he acted like a man in heavy sleep.

Having lighted and taken up a candle, Sir Basil walked feebly to the door. Webb followed; but suspicion must have flashed into his mind, for as Sir Basil passed out of the room he darted back quickly and snatched up the revolver from the chair on which he had laid it a few moments before. Then he followed the banker across the stately hall, up the wide staircase to the first landing, and a few yards down a passage. Treading lightly, their feet fell noiselessly upon the thick carpet.

As Sir Basil paused before a door and looked back warningly over his shoulder, Webb slipped the hand that held the revolver into a pocket of his thin overcoat; but he did not relax his grasp.

Slowly, and almost without sound the banker opened the door and entered. Cautiously and breathing laborously Webb followed.

The room was large, with a wide and deep bay-window at one end, a velvet carpet on the floor. Even in the uncertain light from the candle, which the banker shaded with a trembling hand, Webb could see the room was richly furnished. With the head against the wall facing the window stood a white French bedstead; and it was at this Webb turned his hungry eyes after a cursory glance round him.

In the middle of the room Sir Basil stopped.

"Could you give her all this?" he whispered, with a sweeping gesture of his arm. "Have you suffered for nothing?"

Webb did not answer, but slid past him and approached the bed.

It was a single bed and narrow, standing out from the wall; and half hidden in the soft, pink curtains, which draped from the projecting head and fell upon the pillow, the pink and downy quilt, and the lace-edged sheets, Webb beheld the head and shoulders of a girl.

She was lying almost upon her back, with one arm thrown lightly across her bosom, the other—bare to the elbow—drooping over the edge of the bed. Her dark hair streamed over the pillow; long lashes lay upon her cheeks, and her lips were parted in a faint suggestion of a smile.

As Webb stood and gazed down at her his thin, white face seemed to pucker up, and his chest expanded as a great sigh swelled in his heart, but he stifled it ere it took sound. His eyes were preternaturally bright.

Neither of the men spoke.

Presently Webb dropped down on his knees and kissed lightly the hand which hung at the side of the bed.

The girl moved restlessly and turned right on her side, drew away her hand with impatient quickness, and laid it on the pillow half under her cheek.

Webb leant more forward, and his white face dipped into the pink quilt. For a few moments he remained thus. Then he rose and, looking neither at the girl nor Sir Basil, moved towards the door on tip-toes.

With greater firmness in his steps and straighter carriage of his body the banker followed him out of the room and back to the library.

Webb walked straight to the writing-table and, laying down the revolver, picked up his hat.

"Well?" said Sir Basil, in a low voice, which quivered.

Webb walked round the room slowly, biting his lips and glancing over the ornaments arranged upon the mantelshelf and the low bookcases lining the room. Presently he stopped and took up one of half-a-dozen photograph frames. Unhesitatingly he opened the slide at the back and drew out the portrait of the girl in the bedroom upstairs; and without a word, or casting a look of inquiry at Sir Basil, he slipped the photograph into his breast-pocket. Then he turned and approached the door.

"Webb," said the banker, who had been furtively watching him, wondering. The old man's tone was soft and his manner exceedingly gentle as he moved towards the other. "You will let me help you? Some—some money? Let me make you an allowance—for my own sake! You have lost much by me——"

"Everything," said Webb, harshly. "But she has gained as much."

"For my own peace of mind—let me," urged Sir Basil. "At all events until you find work."

Webb paused, turned half-round, and threw a baleful look on the banker. The next instant he looked dully at the door, squared his shoulders, and left the room.

Sir Basil steadied himself by leaning on the edge of the table, and stared after the man. He heard the front-door open and shut quietly. Still he leant on the table and stared into the dark hall. . . .

Sir Basil went slowly and heavily into the hall and bolted the door.—London Tit-Bits.

GLORY OF ANOTHER KIND.

Sir John Furlbert, who has been identified with the National Red Cross Society since its organization in 1868, and is said to know more about Red Cross and ambulance work than any other man in Europe, is also an old experienced volunteer.

Some years ago, as he relates in his recent book, "In Peace and War," Sir John accompanied the British volunteers to Belgium, where, encouraged by the sight of many Belgian comrades with bemedaled breasts, some of the Britons were inclined to follow their example, and consequently required to be closely inspected.

One day Sir John spotted a man on parade who astonished him by the number of his medals. He was evidently flattered by Sir John's notice, and swelled out his chest quite noticeably.

"You seem to have seen considerable service," observed the knight. "In what wars have you engaged?"

Bless you, I've never been in a war," returned the resplendent member of the citizen army. "My father and I were awarded these medals at agricultaral shows for a special breed of pigs, for which we are famous"

A DELICATE TOUCH.

"Paw, what's the light-fingered gentry?"

"Did you ever see the corner grocer repacking a box of berries that got jolted down?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, he's one."

AN UNUSUAL CASE.

Prisoner—Yes, I'll admit I killed my mother-in-law—but I'm sorry I done it!

His Lawyer—You are? Then perhaps I can get you off on the grounds of insanity.

"Father," said a little boy to his parent the other day, "are not sailors very, very small men?": "No, my son," answered the father. "Pray what leads you to suppose that they are so small?" "Because," replied the young idea, "I read the other day of a sailor going to sleep in his watch."

Canvasser—"Don't let me disturb you, sir—" Busy Merchant—"I won't. Williams, show the gentleman out."

SOME CURIOUS LEGACIES

WILLS WITH STRANGE CONDITIONS ATTACHED.

A Testator Left His Wife a Large Legacy If She Would Wear a Widow's Cap.

The Frenchman who died recently in Constantinople leaving the comfortable legacy of $45,000 to his nephew, M. D'Albi, who lives in Paris, was evidently determined that his relative should exert himself a little to qualify for his fortune, for he imposed a strict condition that the young man should cycle all the way from the French capital to fetch his legacy; while Miss Charlotte Sage, of Philadelphia, another recent testator, left her entire estate to her sister on condition that she "allows her father to smoke all the cigars and wear all the fancy waistcoats he desires."

These stipulations are easy enough of performance compared with those of a Vienna testator who bequeathed all his property to his six nephews and as many nieces "under the sole condition that every one of my nephews marries a woman named Antoine, and that every one of my nieces marries a man named Antoin." The dozen legatees were further obliged to name their first-born child Antoin or Antoine, according to its sex; every wedding was to be celebrated on one of St. Anthony's days, January 17th, May 10th, or June 13th, and was to take place before July 31st, 1896; and any nephew or niece remaining unwed after that date was to forfeit half of his or her

SHARE OF THE PROPERTY.

Mr. Henry Budd had such a strong aversion to moustaches that he could not die peacefully without ensuring that no one with such a "facial disfigurement" could possibly enjoy any part of his estate. "In case my son Edward shall wear moustaches," his will ran, "then the devise herein before contained in favor of him, his appointees, heirs, and assigns, of my said estate called Pepper Park shall be void"; and similarly he deprived his son William of another estate, Twickenham Park, if he dared to defy his father's prejudice against wearing hair on the upper lip.

Dr. Hallus, a wealthy American physician, who wrote his will in green ink, left a large sum of money for the building and endowment of an Incurable's Resthouse, "where incurables may rest for a season on their way to heaven"; and made it a rigid condition that no visitor, employe, guest, or official should smoke or play cards in the house. Among other eccentric provisions in his will was the following: "I will them to do first of all things, to test my toes with a candle and blister them, and try my hands also to see if there is any circulation of the blood the third day after I am dead."

A WEALTHY MALTSTER

who evidently had no great desire for posterity made the following remarkable conditions in his will: "Should my daughter marry and be afflicted with children, my trustees are to pay out of the said legacy $10,000 on the birth of the first child to a hospital specified, $20,000 on the second, $30,000 on the third, and an additional $10,000 on the birth of each fresh child until the $150,000 is exhausted. Should any portion of the sum be left at the end of twenty years, the balance is to be paid to her to use as she thinks fit."

Another testator left his wife a legacy of $60,000, to be increased to $120,000, if she would wear a widow's cap. "She will please me greatly by doing this," he wrote, "as I think it will suit her." For six months the good lady wore the cap of bereavement, and then claimed the larger legacy, payment of which was refused. In the lawsuit that followed, judgment was given in her favor, on the ground that if the testator had intended her to wear the cap always he should have said so in the will. The very day after the decision was given the triumphant widow made a second pilgrimage to the altar.

Less amiable, however, was the testator who, after expressing in his will his disappointment in his only son, declared that he must qualify for his fortune by proving himself a man of grit and perseverance, which so far he had failed to do. The test, which the executors were to see properly performed, was to pass a certain difficult examination; and having done this he was to repair to a specified spot in a field and dig down to a depth of 15 feet, when he would discover the fortune his father had designed for him.

The son set to work industriously, and after a couple of failures passed the examination. Then, in the presence of the executors, he repaired to the field and began to dig for the buried treasure. After many hours of hard labor he disclosed an iron-bound box, which he recognized as having been his father's. The box was brought to the surface and forced open in a state of feverish excitement; but, alas! for the digger's glowing expectations, it contained nothing but a note from the testator to say that the empty box was the son's whole fortune, and that this disappointment would be to him what his whole life had been to his father.—London Tit-Bits.