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THE ROMANCE OF A COUNTING HOUSE.

It came about in this way. I had married and was going to make my fortune, and therefore (having that laudable end in view) left a good situation in Yorkshire to settle down in Liverpool as a merchant 'or my own account, and commence to make it without delay. I had not much capital, and so resolved to economize at first. In course of time I imagined the tidy brougham and house across the Mersey would certainly come; and one serene September evening, many years ago, I was walking up and down St. George's landing stage, building castles in the air, wondering whether rents were high at New Brighton, and whether Kate would prefer a pony phaeton to a brougham. I am not sorry to add that I still reside in a modest house up Edge Hill way, and that I come to business as Cesar went to Rome, according to Joe Miller, "summa diligeotia," on the top of an omnibus. I was waiting for Mr. Moss to return to his office in a street hard by—call it Mersey street—and for the reason that Mr. Moss had a furnished place to let, which his advertisement called "two spacious counting-rooms"—goodness knows I never counted much there in the shape of coin; and I did not like the situation; nor the narrow, dark stair-case; nor the look of the Hebrew extraction who bawled "Cud id," when I knocked, and told me "Mr. Boses would be id at eight o'clock," but twenty-five pounds a year was very cheap, so I told my young friend I would call at that time, and look at the "counting-rooms."

How well I remember that night! The ferry-boats from the Cheshire shore gliding along with their lights twinkling like glow-worms, the vast hull of the Great Eastern just visible in the Sloyne, the square yards and all-a-taut look of a seventy-four of the old school, showing black and distinct against the daffodil sky, and the lap of the swell against the under timbers of the stage—I was inclined to be sentimental; but Mr. Moss Moses claimed my attention, and once more I entered his office and found him awaiting me. He was a little, fat, good-tempered Jew, who spoke fluent English; and who afterwards found out, was constantly affirming, in season and out of season, that he was no descendant of Abraham. "Hillo, Brunton!" he cried, jumping from his chair. "My lad told me you had been here; where have you been these two months and more? Look here, old fellow, I've advertised your place; but you can have it on the old terms."

"Some mistake, sir, I believe," and I handed him a card bearing the inscription "Charles Harker." He took it and held it to the gas-light, looked at the back, considered it endwise, and pondered over it upside down. Then taking the candle his clerk had brought, held it close to my face. "If you are not disposed to proceed to business, I will bid you good-night," said I, greatly annoyed at his manner. "It's him, and it ain't him," he said aloud; "Carl could never look a man in the face as this one does. And yet I don't see my way through the features."

"There is no necessity for you to trouble yourself about my features!" I exclaimed, opening the door—"good night!" "Stop, stop, my good sir! and don't be offended. It was a mistake. All Isaac's mistake upon my honor."

"All a mistake," echoed young Isaac. My curiosity was excited, and besides, I really wanted the offices; and I therefore allowed myself to be persuaded into mounting the narrow staircase, until we faced a door bearing the name of Brunton on it in white letters, and having the two upper panes glazed, more, I should imagine to supply light to the staircase, than for admission of light into the office. Mr. Moss produced a key, and turning to me with a good natured smile, said, "I would have sworn you were Brunton five minutes ago, but I am sure now that I was wrong. Carl always swore when he came up stairs, and you haven't. It's Brunton's face all but the eyes, and I'd swear to the eyes anywhere. That is to the twinkle of 'em, you know."

And he unlocked the door and invited me within. Walking to a table on which he had placed the light, I took a chair and produced my pocket book. "Before we go further, Mr. Moss, let us quite understand each other, I have no wish to derive my benefit from any virtues Mr. Brunton may possess, and I am going to convince you that I am what I represent myself to be. Be good enough to read that letter."

It was one from a merchant in the north, only relieved that morning, mentioned circumstances which were sufficient to settle any doubts as to my identity. Mr. Moss read it, folded it up briskly, and presented it to me with a bow. "Sir, I apologize. I confess that up to this moment I fancied it was Carl; but what puzzled me was, that such a surly fellow should take to laughing and play the fool. You are very much like my last tenant, sir, that is all."

table would have right opposite to him, and it had no door. It was a clerk's office," Mr. Moss said, "and you wanted your eye on such chaps." I suggested that the principle might sometimes want privacy, whereupon he said, "he had the door down stairs and should be hung at once if I wished it." But having no intention of engaging a clerk at present I told him it was of no consequence.

The room was about half the size of the outer one, and contained a desk and stool. There was a large closet for coats and such like matters, and a good allowance of dust and cobwebs all over. "I'll have it cleaned up to-morrow," said Mr. Moss. "It looks beautiful when clean, and you'll find the desk to be real Spanish Mahogany."

They would suit me well enough and I told Mr. Moss so; paid him a quarter's rent in advance and rose to depart. "Oh! by the way, Mr. Moss," I exclaimed, a sudden thought striking me: "I will send a man to paint my name on the door, and on the wall down stairs."

"Very good, sir; I would do it at once if I were you. Carl was a loose fish, and if you'd lay until you get here you might be annoyed."

"How so? what was he?" "Take a cigar first, Mr. Harker, you'll find no better in Liverpool. Dear! how like him you do look when I don't see your eyes."

"And yet I have not been thought to resemble a loose fish before, Mr. Moss." "I didn't mean that. Have you never seen an ugly person resemble a very handsome one? I have many a time."

"Well, about Carl; he was here about two years, and call me a Jew if I could reckon him up. He used to come here about noon, and work up to eight or nine o'clock at night; but what business he worked at I never could find out. I know he had a ledger and two or three such books; but a big ledger won't make a business any more than a big carpet bag will, and he always carried one. He would come and smoke a cigar with me now and then; but I never came up here all that time, and he kept his door locked all the time. He always seemed to be expecting a blow, did poor Carl, more like a rat in a corner than anything else, poor beggar! Well, sir, one morning I found the key on the mat, and found the place just as you see it, and have never seen Carl since. One or two queer looking men have enquired about him, and asked if he was coming back, and I said most likely he would, and likely enough he will."

"Not at all an interesting story," I thought; and felt inclined to yawn in Mr. Moss's face; but I thanked him for his information, and promised to take possession in three days, which I spent in presenting my letters of introduction, and making other arrangements for the persecution of my plans. At length the eventful day arrived, and I stood in my own office with my name emblazoned on the door and passage wall. I was waiting for a friend to call on me (who, by-the-way, had promised to put me in the way of doing some business that very day), and felt impatient for his arrival in consequence.

The office was clean and tidy, and the floors had been well scrubbed. Why hadn't they emptied the waste paper basket of all that lumber? The office keeper had lighted a fire, and I took up the basket to perform the operation myself; but from some cause or other I placed it on the table and began idly to burn the scraps one by one. I had nearly disposed of them all when a scrap attracted my attention and I read it. It was torn so as to leave a few words intact, and it ran thus: "Louise has given your description, and you may rely on our finding you. Forward the plates or—"

less on the floor, with the cold muzzle of a pistol pressed to my head, I was bound and dragged into the outer office, thrust into my chair and confronted by two quiet-looking men, one of whom laid his revolver on the table, saying, at the same time, with an ugly sneer: "So, Brunton, we have caught you at last!"

The speaker was a mild, intelligent looking man of about thirty-five. His companion was evidently a foreigner, and I imagine a German. He was about fifty years of age, and wore spectacles, and a profusion of beard and whiskers covered more than half his face. But he had a winning smile and good teeth, which he often took an opportunity of showing. "We have found you at last!"

"I am thankful to say I am not nervous when I see a danger, and I boldly replied: "My name is Harker and not Brunton; Mr. Moss the landlord of these premises has noticed my resemblance to his late tenant, and is satisfied that I am not the same. Depend upon it that I shall make you repent this outrage."

I tried to rise to call for help from the street, but the pistol was cocked and pointed at me, and there was that in the man's face which cautioned me against rashness in my helpless position. "I will sit down," I replied, "and hear what you have to say; but if I choose to do it I shall do my best to raise an alarm in spite of your revolver."

"Now then, Brunton," whispered the other, "let us have no nonsense. We have not met before, it is true, but Louise has so well described you, that putting another name on your door was simply idiotic. Besides one of ours has watched for your return, and we communicated with him directly we landed. Go free if you like, but we will have the plates!"

"I know nothing of any plates," I cried, "nor of Louise, nor of you. All I know is, that you will see the inside of a prison very shortly."

Here my two friends held a whispered conference. Then he of the revolver turned sharply towards me. "Will you marry Louise? Will you give up the plates and marry my sister?" "She looks like old boots," added the German.

"I am sorry I cannot oblige you," I replied. "I am flattered by the lady's preference; but having one wife already, I fear I must decline taking a second; and as for the plates, please explain what you mean."

The answer to this flippant speech was a blow on the face, which sent the blood streaming on the floor. "You'll remember insulting the sister of Louis Orloff! Here, Baron, let us gag him and search; he will be raising an alarm presently!" They thrust a piece of rope between my teeth, compressing the wind-pipe to make me open my mouth; and there I sat helpless while they turned out the contents of my desk and drawers, not forgetting my cash-box, which was opened with a key from my waistcoat pocket, and the contents appropriated. Knowing that the two scraps of paper I had found in the waste-paper basket, and placed in my drawer, must have reference to their visit, I watched very anxiously when they opened it. But they escaped notice, and I felt that I had some clue to the mystery, even if those men escaped; and I had quite determined that they should not escape; for I was insecurely bound, and had been working hard to get my right hand free, and thanks to having a very narrow one, I now found myself able to slip it through the loop which encircled the wrist; but I "bided my time," for I saw that a false move might bring a bullet through my head. "De plates is in ze oder room, Carl Brunton, mon ami," said the Baron smiling and patting my shoulder. "I said yes with my eyes. See now, my Louis, you were too rough. So see him amiable." Then turned to me. "And you will marry Louise, who looks like old boots?" My other hand was free now. I tried to speak and implored with my eyes for the gag to be removed. The Baron removed it, and while doing so I resolved on a plan of operations. "You will marry Louise and give us the plates?" "I will give every satisfaction."

[CONCLUDED ON EIGHTH PAGE.]