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Old Prebble's Money

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The two men had certainly been having high words. Jack Lanbury's lips were white. A blaze of fury was in his dark eyes. The emotions of Mr. Gregory Grigsby were not so much in evidence. There was not the ghost of an expression in his broad, pallid, flabby face, not a scintillation of feeling in his fishy orbs.

"Well, young man, you have selected your own path, and I presume you intend to pursue it. I have warned you over and over again, and now that the period of your probation is nearing its termination I wash my hands of you."

"They need it," rejoined Jack Lanbury, sarcastically.

"No, sir, they do not," retorted Mr. Grigsby, raising his voice. "They are not soiled by extravagance, by dissolute living, by dissipation, by improvidence. I have, I hope, always done my duty, and that, however unpleasant that duty may be, I've never shirked it. I don't think, John Lanbury, you have any reason to complain of any shortcomings on that score."

Lanbury's reply was a shrug of the shoulders.

"Had you been only ordinarily prudent nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to further your interests with Catherine Vernon, but I had to do my duty to my dear friend, to her, and to yourself."

"I wish you'd leave me out of your duty, Mr. Grigsby," jerked Jack, angrily.

"No, sir, I will not. I am not to be turned either to the right or the left. The justification of the course I have been compelled to pursue is around you—at this very moment."

Mr. Grigsby accompanied his solemn adjuration with a wave of his fat hand.

The room was unmistakably luxurious. Everything showed the owner to be a man of taste. The general air of litter and the suspicion of tobacco smoke indicated bachelorhood, to say nothing of the tautology, the syphons, the cigar box on a side table and the stack of pipes on the wall by the side of the fireplace. The most noticeable article in the room was perhaps the overmantel. It was profusely decorated with folded papers, mostly of an ominous blue colour, stuck behind the frame, in between the china, thrown carelessly in the divisions devoted to miscellaneous articles.

"Is it worth while pursuing this conversation any longer, Mr. Grigsby? It's not very entertaining," rejoined Jack.

"I quite agree with you, sir—nor instructive."

"Don't say that—surely everything you say must be instructive—though perhaps—you won't mind my pointing out—a trifle dull."

"To the frivolous-minded and the light-headed no doubt it is. We will waive that point. Before I leave I want to have a definite answer to the question I put to you a few minutes ago when you very rudely told me to mind my own business. As your trustee and as Miss Vernon's trustee it is my business to ask you whether you, in pursuance of the terms of my dear friend Prebble's bequest, intend to ask Catherine Vernon to be your wife?"

The answer came like the pellet from a popgun.

"No."

"Very good. Miss Vernon is to be congratulated on your decision."

Mr. Grigsby rose to go, when his eye settled on a violin case lying on a settee.

"Is that your last piece of folly?" said he, pointing a stubby forefinger at the case.

"Yes."

"I'm told you gave £600 for the instrument."

"Yes."

"A wicked, wicked waste," almost groaned Mr. Grigsby. "To think that my hard-earned money should be squandered on fiddles!"

Jack Lanbury did not reply. He rang the bell instead.

"Show Mr. Grigsby to the door, Simmons."

It was a polite intimation to get out. A venomous light flashed in Mr. Grigsby's eyes.

"You may like to know, sir," said he, "that I'm going straight to my lawyer."

"You may go—anywhere you like."

"The stinky old rascal. I'll wager that within twenty-four hours I shall have a writ for that £100 I owe him," exclaimed Jack Lanbury. "Anyhow, it'll be the chef d'oeuvre of my collection," he added, with a reckless laugh.

He went to the violin case and took out the instrument gently and lovingly.

Jack Lanbury was an accomplished amateur, and he could not resist buying the Strad, though the £600 he paid for it would have gone a long way towards paying off his pressing liabilities.

He swept the bow across the strings. The rich full resonant tones of the lower notes, the sweetness of the high ones, set his nerves vibrating with exquisite pleasure. He soon became absorbed, and did not hear the entrance of Simmons.

"A gentleman, sir, to see you."

Simmons handed his master a card. "Christopher Stocks," was the name it bore. Jack Lanbury did not know Mr. Stocks, but he would see him.

A little old gentleman with a yellow, dried up complexion and wearing an obvious wig, came excitedly into the room and almost ran to Jack, who was still holding the violin.

"Ah," cried the visitor, "I heard you playing, and I said no violin but a Strad could produce such a tone. But you will permit me to examine it to make sure."

"To make sure of what?" asked Jack, rather taken aback by this unceremonious proceeding.

"That it is a Strad, of course," answered Mr. Stocks, sharply. "I am a collector, and already possess one Strad, a Guarnerius, a

Stainer, and two Amatis, but my Strad is not so perfect as this."

The camaraderie of the musician was aroused. Jack handed the violin to the visitor, who went over its points with feverish anxiety.

"Perfect—perfect," he muttered. "I must have it. Mr. Lanbury, I will give you £1,000."

"But it's not for sale."

"Aha, you know its value and you are a man of business. Quite right. Come—£1,100."

"No. I repeat I'm not going to sell it."

"Because I have not offered you enough. Name your own price, Mr. Lanbury, and I'll meet you if possible."

"It's no good. I tell you I've fallen in love with the violin and I'm going to keep it. As a violinist you ought to understand what I feel."

"Ah, but I'm not a violinist. I'm a collector. I cannot play a note."

"And you would keep the poor thing in a glass case and condemn it to dumbness," cried Jack, indignantly. "No, a thousand times no."

Mr. Stocks gasped for breath. He ceased to pester, however, any more.

"Very well, Mr. Lanbury. If you change your mind you must give me the refusal. I am disappointed—but since you are determined—well, good-day, sir."

And Mr. Stocks departed as dejected as before he was excited.

Jack Lanbury soon forgot Mr. Christopher Stocks. It seemed to him as though he had never played upon a violin before, so immeasurably superior was the Strad to any other of which he had had experience. At the end of an hour he laid by the instrument with a sigh. He had to descend from the clouds and think over his earthly affairs.

Without a doubt he had been very foolish, but the artistic temperament must have its fling. Certainly he had enjoyed life since he was twenty-one, and did not regret flinging away £5,000 in four years and getting into debt to the tune of £1,000 more, but for one thing, it had made marriage with Kitty Vernon impossible.

But for his extravagance he might have carried out the absurd injunction laid down in the will of Mr. Grigsby's "dear friend" Prebble. He wasn't quite sure, however, for that injunction imposed a restriction on his independence which he resented.

The will was certainly very ridiculous. Prebble was an old bachelor, and a lifelong friend of the fathers of Jack Lanbury and Kitty Vernon. They had started in business about the same time, Prebble soon distancing the other two in the race for wealth. James Lanbury and Henry Vernon married and spent all they earned, and died poor.

The conditions were: First that Jack was to have £5,000 on his reaching his 21st year, Kitty receiving a modest allowance of £150 a year. Second, if by the time Jack was twenty-five he had proposed to Kitty and they were married, they were to divide the residue between them. Third, if Kitty refused to marry Jack, the residue was to go to the young man. Fourth, if on the other hand he did not propose, then the young woman would take the whole of the fortune.

Of this utterly unreasonable will Mr. Gregory Grigsby was the sole executor, and of old Prebble's money the sole trustee.

The position when Jack was within a fortnight of reaching his twenty-fifth year, with Kitty still unproposed to, is best expressed in Jack Lanbury's own words.

"My only objection to Kitty Vernon is that she is herself. If she were anybody else I think I should fall in love with her. Old Prebble's will I suspect is the obstacle. She irritates me and I irritate her. Marriage would mean a cat and dog life. We generally snarl at each other, and if I asked her to marry me she'd suspect my motive—money. On the other hand I can't risk a refusal—that would lose her every farthing, and I'm not going to be mean and despicable enough to ask her hoping she'll say no. I'd rather hold my tongue and let the fortune go to her."

But another reason prevented him from proposing to Kitty. There was a man in the case. He had seen her with the Honourable Sidney Carnforth, and in his judgment (or jealousy) he decided that the Honourable Sidney's attentions were acceptable to the young lady.

It was very galling. Everything had gone so as to place him in the worst possible light to Kitty.

"I know I'm a silly fool," he muttered, biting his lips. "I know I'm a spendthrift. I know I've been going the pace that kills. But why on earth should old Grigsby din it into Kitty's ears?"

Ten days went over. In four days more the time appointed by the eccentric Prebble would expire. Jack Lanbury would then be twenty-five.

During those ten days the situation had not changed. The outlook was as black as ever. The collection round the overmantel had increased, and nothing but bankruptcy could extricate him from his web of difficulties.

For one small mercy he had reason to be grateful. Grigsby had not issued a writ, as he expected, to recover his £100. Indeed, Grigsby had not troubled him in any way.

And the violin? Well, he had devoted himself to it incessantly, but it had not displaced Kitty. In its sweetest tones he heard Kitty's voice, in its most pathetic passages he saw her pleading eyes.

He resolved to exorcise the sorceress.

"I won't endure it any longer," he exclaimed angrily. "I'll write to her and formally renounce my claim. It's the proper thing to do. I ought to have thought of it before. I was a brute to keep the poor girl in suspense. When she gets my letter she'll be free to marry Sid Carnforth, and I shall be easier in my mind—much easier."

He wrote a formal epistle after about a dozen attempts, and decided he was easier. Trusting the letter in his pocket he went out to post it. The afternoon was delightfully tempting for a stroll. He went towards Hyde-park Corner; the letter lay peacefully in his pocket. He had forgotten all about it.

He entered the park and strolled on to the Row, and did not remember the letter until he had reached Kensington-gardens.

In spite of his having as he thought made up his mind he found himself revolving the question anew.

"I'm right—I'm sure I'm right," he murmured. "Directly I come to a pillar-box I'll—I beg your pardon!"

In his abstraction he had nearly cannoned against a lady. He lifted his hat; their eyes met.

"Kitty!"

"Jack!"

"I—I was just thinking about you," he blurted out in confusion.

"Thanks. That must be a novelty."

He had no reply in readiness for this sarcasm. He turned and kept pace with her in silence.

"I'm de trop as usual," muttered Jack. "I reckon she's going to meet the other man. I'd better clear out."

"Kitty—"

"Well?" said she, without turning her head.

"I made a stupid mistake just now."

"Is that anything new?"

"Of course not," he replied hastily, his face flushing. Kitty's tone was even more bitter.

"And your latest blunder?" she calmly inquired.

"It's obvious. I was going in the opposite direction when I met you. I'll repair my mistake as soon as possible. Good-bye."

"Wait a moment, Jack, I want to talk to you. I'm not going to say anything spiteful so you may as well listen."

"I never thought anything you said to me was spiteful," he returned, gently.

"Jack, I'm in a horrid predicament," at last Kitty broke out, in a sort of desperation.

"I know, of course, you can't help me personally, but I feel I must tell someone, and as you've been as silly as myself, why at least you'll sympathise."

"Sympathetic, Kitty, of course. As for your being as silly as myself—well, you don't know what an idiot I've been. But what's the matter, darling?"

"It's just this," replied the young lady, taking no notice of the word of endearment which in view of the determination Jack had come to was wholly superfluous. "I've been playing a good deal at bridge lately, and I've got frightfully into debt. I—I owe fifty pounds."

"And I owe twenty times as much. We're companions in misfortune," said Jack dismally.

"Yes, I know you've been frightfully extravagant, but you haven't gambled."

"I'm not so sure. But, Kitty, I wouldn't, if I were you, let such a trifle as £50 worry you. In four days time you know you'll be entitled to £100,000."

Kitty looked solemnly straight before her. Nothing could be gathered from her expression.

"That just reminds me," went on Jack, a little nervously. "I have a letter in my pocket for you. I was going to post it, but as I've met you I—I shall save a penny, which is something in these hard times," he added, with a ghastly attempt at a smile.

He pulled the letter out of his pocket and handed it to her.

"I'm not obliged to read it now, am I? It'll do when I get home, won't it? Not very important, I suppose?"

"Well—er—it is rather important. It has to do with—with the money you're entitled to when I'm twenty-five if—"

He couldn't complete the sentence. Something stuck in his throat.

"Oh—then perhaps I had better look at it."

Jack Lanbury turned his head away. He clenched his hands till the nails were nearly in the flesh in the effort to control himself.

A minute—sixty awful seconds of suspense.

"Thanks, Jack, for your letter, but it doesn't help me out of my difficulty."

Jack looked round furtively—a little disappointed maybe. Kitty did not seem very much disturbed.

"Dash it," he murmured. "When a man tries to be generous to a woman his generosity's never appreciated."

"No," she repeated, "it doesn't help me. It's quite true that when you're twenty-five I shall, since you've refused to marry me, have plenty of money, but I shall have to wait. To-day is Monday, it's four days to Friday, your birthday, and goodness knows how long Mr. Grigsby will take to hand me my fortune. In the meantime this horrid gambling debt is hanging round my neck. It wouldn't matter so much if I didn't owe it to a man to whom I won't be under an obligation—I dislike him too much. You can understand my anxiety, can't you, Jack?"

"Of course. Who is the man—but perhaps I oughtn't to ask."

"Yes, you may. I don't mind your knowing. Now that we're nothing to each other—after your letter you know—I can take you into my confidence. It's Sidney Carnforth."

"The deuce it is," exclaimed the startled Jack. "You owe the boulder £50 and—and you dislike him?"

Kitty said nothing. She only screwed up her lips and nodded.

Jack drew a long breath, and his face flushed for a moment and then went very pale.

"Look here, Kit, you shall have the money in two hours' time," he burst out, hastily.

"But, Jack dear, you haven't got it. You're up to your neck in debts, and no one will lend you a farthing," cried Kitty.

"Who told you that—Grigsby?"

"Ye—yes."

"I thought so—and I dare say he's told you a few other pleasant things about me. For once both he and you—I apologise for coupling his name with yours—are wrong. I've no need to borrow. A week or so ago I refused an offer of £1,100 for a Stradarius for which I only gave £600. I've only to take the instrument to the collector who wants it and I get his cheque."

"You mustn't sell your Strad. Why, it would be like selling your own flesh and blood."

"That's nothing to do with you, Kitty. I'd sell anything to help you and—and to spite Sid Carnforth."

The expression of Kitty's eyes changed once more—they were wonderful eyes for reflecting her varying moods. They seemed now half distressed, half amused.

"It's wrong to have a spite against anybody, Jack. Anyhow, I'm not going to let you part with your violin. I'm quite sorry I told you about my scrape."

Jack in his impetuosity had hurried Kitty, so that by this time they were in Kensington Gore. A news-vendor on his bicycle was opposite the Albert Hall, distributing his stock to a crowd of ragged urchins. Some had already sped away to find customers, bawling at the top of their voices, "Panic in the City!"

For the moment Jack's attention was arrested. He bought a paper and opened it. He uttered a cry of astonishment. This was what he read:

"Panic on the Stock Exchange. The bears caught in a market rig. Arrest of Mr. Gregory Grigsby."

"What's the matter, Jack," cried Kitty. "Have you lost any money?"

His face had suddenly gone white, and the hand that held the paper trembled a little.

"No—I—oh, Kitty—Kitty—the detestable scoundrel!"

The girl eagerly questioned him. Bit by bit the truth came out. Mr. Grigsby, the City financier, has speculated with trust money, old Prebble's included, and had lost every penny. Kitty's fortune had gone.

"Poor Kitty—oh, I am sorry."

"I'm not quite sure I am," said she, quietly. "I always hated that dreadful money. It was like a stone wall between us. Don't let's talk about it any more. I want to make a confession. I haven't been playing at bridge and I haven't lost any money to Sidney Carnforth, so you needn't sell your Strad."

"I'm glad," rejoined Jack drily. "But why did you invent the thing?"

"It wasn't all invention. That part about disliking Sidney Carnforth was quite true."

Jack's eyes brightened. But for all that he couldn't see through Kitty's puzzle. Why did she invent the story, he asked again.

"Because Mr. Grigsby said that besides being a spendthrift you were heartless, selfish, and all that a man shouldn't be. I wanted to find out a little about you; and—and your letter and your offering to sell your Strad told me that what I had heard was false. I can see now why that wicked old gentleman did not want you to marry me. He was in difficulties and thought perhaps if I didn't marry he could put off paying me, whereas if you said you would marry me you might have insisted upon going into matters, and you'd have found out his wickedness."

"I believe you're right, dear. Perhaps when the old rascal's affairs are wound up there may be something out of the wreck for you, but in the meantime? Certainly that that Strad must go."

"Certainly it mustn't," retorted Kitty, energetically. "I shall take a situation."

Jack had his eyes fixed on the column containing an account of the "panic." Grigsby's collapse and the reasons which had led to it. He had sold heavily various stocks which had gone up instead of down as he expected. The immediate cause was, however, a certain gold-mining company, the shares of which had gone up by leaps and bounds, especially during the past week. Three months ago they could have been purchased at half-a-crown; they were now near five pounds apiece.

"Great Scott," suddenly shouted Jack. "Hi! hansom! Jump in Kitty—quick!"

Never had Jack Lanbury been so excited. Kitty dared not ask what had happened. She could only imagine a fresh misfortune.

"Where—where are we going?" she asked, hesitatingly, when they were inside the cab.

"To the City. I've just discovered I've got £10,000 I didn't know I possessed. Three months ago an old friend who was hard up, persuaded me to buy 2,000 shares he held in the Great King Gold Mining Company. He didn't mean to part with them, but he was cornered and had no alternative. Anyhow, I planked down £250 to oblige him and—and, what do you think, Kit—they're now worth £10,000, and what's more it's the rise in price that has done old Grigsby. You don't understand these things, but you'll know a little when you see me with a cheque for the money. We're off now to sell out and—hurrah! I'll keep the Strad."

"Oh, Jack—Jack, how glad I am."

He could feel her trembling slightly. His arm went round her waist immediately. It was only natural.

"Kitty," he whispered. "Give me back my letter. I want to write you another—and yet that would be stupid. No, you shall hear at once what I want to say. It's the simplest question in the world and all you've got to do is to say yes."

Is there any necessity to quote Jack's question or Kitty's answer?

In order to teach Berlin children how to stand and sit correctly, skeletons have been introduced into the classrooms at some schools. They are shown in a variety of wrong postures, thus demonstrating the harmful effects of unhealthy attitudes on the human frame.

A well-known American, Mr. George T. Case, of New York, has bought an inn in the village of Haslemere (Surrey), with the intention of running it himself. He confesses that it has been his life-long ambition to become "Mine Host" of an English hostelry.

1,393 certificates of naturalisation were granted by Britain last year. The four nations who contributed the greatest number of men and women were Russia, Poland, Italy, and the U.S.A., in that order. Austria and Germany supplied only one new citizen each.

Oh, how peaceful in their sleep,
They who "Keatings" always keep.

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