

JUST AS OF OLD.

Just as of old! The worlds rolls on and on
The day dies into night—night into dawn—
Dawn into dusk—through centuries untold,
Just as of old.

Time lingers not. The turbid stream still flows,
Its brink or white with blossoms or with snow,
Its tide or warm with spring or winter cold,
Just as of old.

Lo! where is the beginning, where the end
Of this perplexing skein of life, my friend?
God answers with a silence of pure gold,
Just as of old.

JAMES W. RILEY.

A MOST REMARKABLE WILL.

III.

That was the bequest—as clear to the sight as it was dark to the mind. Had I been mistaken, and had Miss Molloy been insane after all? If that were so, every penny of the five-and-twenty thousand pounds would have to be divided between the Count and the Major as the husbands of her next of kin. No, surely that insanity was impossible.

I twisted the document up and down, and round and round. Those letters still obstinately remained as they were: the alphabet, at any rate, had gone mad, unless it was I who had become insane. I needed some evidence of my own senses, and carried the will straight to my co-executor, Dr. Kirwan.

"She was an odd lady!" said he at last. "But I'll bear witness in any court you like that she was as sane as anybody that ever made a will."

"But what's to be done?"

"Ah, what indeed? What's the effect of this will, as it stands?"

"I'm just hanged if I know. The will's otherwise without a flaw. And in all my practice, and all my reading too, I never heard of the alphabet's being made a residuary legatee. I don't like to say, without consideration, that there's no principle a court of equity would go upon; but I don't know of one. I don't see even how it would come within the doctrine of *Cy Pres*."

"What's that?"

"Why, that when the conditions of a gift can't be literally carried out, the Court of Chancery will decree some method conformable to the general object, and following the intentions of the donor as nearly as possible."

"Then," said Dr. Kirwan, "I should say the Court would apply the estate to the foundation of a college for the study of conundrums. But—holloa, Lake, here's something else dropped out of the envelope: perhaps it's the answer. It's a letter addressed to you."

That, also, was sealed. When I opened it, I found only these words:

"If you are puzzled, lift up the carpet in the drawing-room in the corner between the fireplace and window, under the Chiffonier.—B. M."

"Aha!" said the doctor. "A cipher and the key. Let's go at once, and see. But—how would that affect the will?"

"It is a most ridiculous thing to have done," I said, really angry and annoyed. "I wish to Heaven I had known that that was what she was up to. I'm afraid there may be trouble."

"Won't a will in cipher be allowed?"

"I hope so. The Court of Chancery will rectify a clear mistake or omission in a will if it is apparent on the face of the will. And even parol evidence will be admitted in case of mistake in the name or description of a legatee. We shall have better than parol evidence in a written key; and the mistake of naming and describing the legatee, whoever he or she may be, by *Cy Pres*, and so forth, is as apparent on the face of the will as a misdescription can possibly be. The key will, I hope, be evidence enough to show what Miss Molloy intended. But I'm sadly afraid that into Chancery it will have to go, and our friends the Count and the Major will have a few words to say to it if it once gets there. Of anything really wrong I'm not afraid; but of trouble I am. I'll have a good read in Jarman when I get home. But now for the drawing-room corner."

We went together straight to the house of the late Miss Molloy, and, according to our instructions, turned up the carpet in the corner of the drawing-room. Sure enough we found another sealed note addressed to me.

"Look," we read, "at page 173 in the second volume of Gibbon's 'Decline and Fall.' It is on a shelf in the breakfast-room.—B. M."

I was too vexed at all this folly and mystification to smile.

"By Jupiter!" exclaimed the doctor, "this accounts for that midnight ramble over her house just before she died. She was writing these notes and hiding them. Poor old lady, it's not an uncommon thing, though, for people on their death-beds to fancy themselves surrounded by spies and enemies. It isn't lunacy, though, eh?"

"But it's the cause of lunacy in others," grumbled I. "Well, now for Gibbon."

And there exactly on page 173 of volume ii., was yet a third sealed note for me. And this ran:

"Key behind wainscot three inches towards cupboard from dressing-room window.—B. M."

"At last!" said I. "I was afraid we were going to be sent up all the chimneys before we'd done."

"By Jupiter, Lake, just think what would have happened if there'd been one link missing;

if one of these pillar-to-post notes had been lost or gone out of the way!"

"It's too terrible a chance to talk of. It would have cost one of those young people near twelve hundred a year. Come, here's the dressing-room; let's be quick and have done with the whole thing."

"All right; here's a loose board, just where we were told to go. Come, out with you! Hold a match down, this is rather a dark hole. There—and here's—holloa!"

Dr. Kirwan pulled out a fragment of an envelope to which the red sealing-wax still clung, and on which I could read a part of my own name. There were also some odds and ends of blank paper scattered round. We pulled out all that was there. Alas, the fate of the key was only too plainly to be learned from the torn and half-eaten scraps of envelope and note-paper we found.

A scuttering and scrambling behind the wainscot mocked us with the certainty that the mice had swallowed the key!

IV.

What was to be done now? The mice alone knew to whom Miss Bridgita Molloy's money belonged. Try to realize the circumstances now, as I had to realize them then. There was a will—a good will—and yet a will of which all the Equity lawyers on earth would be unable to make head or tail. And not one breath or sign of her intentions had Miss Molloy let fall even to Dr. Kirwan or to me. And there were the Count and the Major waiting for their prey.

The letters of the alphabet took to waiting with the multiplication table in my dreams. I did not know what to do. I got a box of ivory letters and tried all sorts of anagrams, but could make nothing out of five-and-twenty letters, with only four vowels among them, and with so many z's and x's. I proved the will in fear and trembling, fully expecting that the question of the soundness of the mind of the testatrix would be immediately raised by one or both of her brothers-in-law, who had of course been made aware of the contents, and were in possession of those letters without meaning. But, strange to say, no steps were taken whatever. It was not for a week, at least, after the will had been proved that I received a visit from Steldi the elder, accompanied by a dapper and smartly-dressed young man, whom he introduced to me as Mr. Withers, from the office of Withers & King. I supposed he was the legal adviser of the Steldi claim.

"You shall wonder, Mr. Lake," said the Count, "why I not think Miss Molloy what you call mad woman. Not at all. I think of that once; but then that give half the money to that vermin, Fitzgerald O'Birn, who shall lose it in every vile way. I say it shall be a good will. I take advice, I; and I demand you pay all what shall be left to my son, Ferentz Steldi."

"Wait a bit," said I. "He has already received his legacy of a thousand pounds."

"Bah! what shall be one thousand pounds? He is what you call Residuary Legatee of Miss Molloy."

"I wish he were, with all my heart! But we must go to Chancery. There's nothing else to be done."

"No. He shall not go in Chancery. He shall have his right and his due. I am his father, Monsieur."

"When you can read those confounded letters into Ferentz Steldi, I'll pay him every penny with all my heart, and take the consequences; but not a minute before."

"Very good, Mr. Lake. Then I shall read them into Ferentz Steldi, and without magic; and then you shall pay. Now, Mr. Withers, if you please."

"Mr. Withers is your solicitor, I presume."

"I have not the honour," said Mr. Withers glibly, "to be in the profession—in your profession, sir, that is to say. We are a firm of professional experts, sir. We practise the science of autography, and we collect and deal in the autograph letters of celebrated historical persons. Naturally our business has occasionally included the branch of cryptography—of the construction and solution of ciphers, which, though requiring a certain special aptitude as well as experience, is not so difficult as laymen might suppose, and is as certain in its results as arithmetic itself—beautifully certain, sir. Our friend Mr. Steldi has applied to me for the missing key of this little puzzle, and it took me barely half an hour's study to find."

"You mean you can read this jumble into sense?" asked I. "You must be a clever fellow, Mr. Withers. How am I to know it isn't guess-work? The correctness of your reading will have to be proved, you see."

"Up to the hilt, sir. The beauty of a cipher or cryptograph, is that, if you once hit on the right key, it can only mean just that one thing—no doubt, no ambiguity. And as the discovery of the key is a logical process, and as no cipher can possibly have more than one key, why, sir, *solvitur ambulando*—the result is proved by the process, sir; or rather, result and process prove one another."

"Then I must have your process, if you please."

"To be sure. No patent. Anybody can do it. This cipher, sir, is even absurdly simple. Did you ever read the 'Gold Bug' of Edgar Allan Poe? No! That's a pity, because I shall have to explain from the beginning. I have rather a contempt for that story—the cipher he makes his hero discover would have been found out by a child in half the time. And this cipher

before us is of precisely the same kind—the very simplest form of cipher known."

"Well?"

"A person like Miss Molloy, presumably ignorant of the beautiful science of cryptography, would be almost certain to adopt the plan of making one letter do duty for another. Of course she has left no spaces between her words. Now, you know that the commonest English letter is e; so that, ten to one, the commonest letter in the cipher will e. That letter is d. It comes no fewer than five times in the twenty-five. So, ten to one, d stands for e. You perceive?"

"At any rate, I follow, so far."

"Very good, sir. Now look at the cipher well, and keep it before your eyes. We'll assume for the moment that d may mean e; and if d means e, it's likely that a would be b, b would be c, and so on, and so on, taking the letter following. Let's try that dodge with m, because there's more than one m. And because n (which m ought to stand for) is a commonish sort of letter. Very well. Putting e for d and n for m and dots for the other letters, we get, . . . e . . . n . . . o . . . e . . . n . . . Now, Mr. Lake, the question, as I understand it, is—Did Miss Molloy leave her money to Lucis Bridgita O'Birn, or to Ferentz Steldi? Assuming that one of those e's must fall into where the name of the legatee must come, it will strike you at once that there isn't one single e in the lady's name. It will also strike you that the young gentleman is a nephew, and that we've got already ne—coming together. Let's chance it. Let's write nephew right out, and see if we get sense that way. It'll come like this, putting p for y, h for b, w for o: . . . nephew . . . e . . . Now, what strikes you next, sir?"

"Nothing whatever, Mr. Withers. Nothing at all."

"No! I'm surprised. Doesn't it strike you that en comes in Ferentz; that the cipher and the name of Steldi both end in a letter between a pair of letters—zxx; ldl? A most remarkable hint, indeed, for it interferes with no former assumption—z would mean l; x would mean d. Now look how it reads:

. . . e r nephew f r e n t z s t e l d i . . . Only one thing bothers me. Where the dot comes now in f r e n t z there ought to be a d to represent an e. In reality there's a j. But that's a trifle; doubtless a clerical error. The whole thing's as plain as a pikestaff. Substituting letter for letter, and never mixing them, here you are: my dear nephew Ferentz Steldi, and there you are."

I was certainly surprised at the fellow's ingenuity. Except for that missing e the process was without a flaw; and when we see a logical and faultless process arriving at a probable conclusion, what are we to say? And, by Jove! Miss Molloy had made a particular point of spelling Ferentz, Ferentz—with an i. Look back at the draught of the will, and see. That was downright proof, if any was needed; the j in the cipher, hitherto unaccounted for, would be i. The very simple little process had all the air of a miracle to me. I knew nothing then of the far greater marvels wrought by antiquarians in rougher and larger fields, or I should, perhaps, have been less surprised."

"It is read, Monsieur," said Steldi père, with a bow.

I was a little sorry for Miss Lucis; but I didn't grudge her cousin his good luck, and I was intensely relieved. I was thinking of the effect of all this as evidence, Steldi was looking at me in dignified triumph, Mr. Withers was regarding his success with artistic pride, when my clerk brought in a card—Major Fitzgerald O'Birn.

I thought best to have everything out and over then and there; so, without considering the presence of his brother-in-law and enemy, I had him ushered in.

"Good-dee to ye, Mr. Lake," said he, without deigning to notice, or even to see, Mr. Steldi, who, for his part, threw a double dose of benignity into his smile. "I suppose you've been wonderin' why I didn't go in for provin, poor Miss Biddy *non compos*—wake in the top ye know. As if I'd consent to go halves with a dirty, mane, intriguing baste of a fellow that she'd cut off with a shilling with her own hand! All or none—that's the war-cry of the O'Birns! So I've just dropped in on my wee, to ask ye for that twenty-five thousand that's due to Lucis, my daughter; and I'll take it hot with—I mane short, if ye please. Or, if ye haven't it all in your pocket, a thrifle on account 'll do for to-day."

"I'm sorry for Miss O'Birn," said I. "But—she's had her thousand pounds."

"—her thousand pounds! I wouldn't give sixpence for a beggarly thousand pounds. 'Tis an insult to spake to a gentleman of such a sum."

"Her thousand pounds, and—I'm afraid—this gentleman, Mr. Withers, will explain—there is no longer any doubt of Miss Molloy's intentions. Lieutenant Steldi is residuary legatee."

"An' who's Mr. Withers? Is it in a conspiracy ye'll be, with your heads as thick together as pays in one shell? Why, 'tis plainest than blazes that gpx stands for Lucis O'Birn. What do ye see to that, sir, eh?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't," said I.

"You're a pretty fellow for a lawyer! But I suppose ye'll have to believe what's proved. Higgins, ye're wanted!" shouted he.

He too, it seemed, had brought a friend with him—a little, pinched, shabby, elderly man, with red squinting eyes.

"I'll introduce ye to my friend Higgins—a gentleman and a scholar, that'll rade ye off Hebrew into Chinese for a glass of punch, an' back into Hebrew for two. Faith, I'd like ye to find a question that Higgins wouldn't answer ye off-hand. Says I to him, 'Higgins, what does gpx spell?' An' says he, 'Just Lucis O'Birn.'"

A smile of amused contempt came into the face of smart Mr. Withers.

"An expert?" asked he.

"An' pray who may you be, sir?" asked Major O'Birn. "D'ye mane to tell me ye haven't heard of Higgins—that ought to be a dochtor of divinity and a member of Parlimint, and could see ye under the teebles whenever ye please?" Having thus annihilated Mr. Withers, "Higgins, do your duty," said he.

"There's nothing in it—nothing in it at all," said Mr. Higgins, in a queer squeak, and in a shuffling sort of tone. "What's the difficulty in reading that cipher I am at a loss to conceive. Do you mean to tell me there is anybody on earth, except Major O'Birn, who has found the slightest difficulty in reading what couldn't puzzle, for more than half a second, anybody but a born fool?"

"You are pleased to be complimentary, Mr. Higgins," said I. "Mr. Withers, as an expert, assures us that a cipher can only be read in one way."

"It didn't want an expert to tell you that," said Mr. Higgins testily. "Of course you can only read a cipher in one way. How can one set of symbols stand for two different sets of words?"

"Then you will agree with Mr. Withers?"

"No doubt. If Mr. Withers has read the cipher he will agree with me. A cipher is made to a particular key, and it can't be fitted with two. When old women make cipher, they mostly change the letters by counting forwards or backwards. So first I counted one forwards, and made g mean h; that came to nothing. Then two forwards, and made g mean i; nothing again. J—no. K—no. Then I tried the fifth letter forward—l. According to that rule, g would be l; p would be u; x (making a follow z) would be c. Next comes d which would be i; then n, which would be s—the true letter being always the fifth letter from the cipher forwards. Follow it out, gentlemen, and see for yourselves."

I did as he bade me. And the cipher read, letter by letter, as follows, with the peculiar spelling of the name of the testatrix and all:

GFXDN WMDYBDGV JWDMI HT
LUCIS BRIDGITA O'BIRN MY

HOZZZ.
NIECE.

There was no more doubt that the cipher was this than it was "My dear nephew, Ferentz Steldi. It meant both equally, and both at the same time!"

I put it to every cryptologist in the world, is it within the bounds of credibility that a cipher of twenty-five letters should be readable in two exactly opposite and inconsistent ways, and that its two irreconcilable solutions should be gained by following two simple principles, both equally obvious and equally sound? Incredible—nay, impossible! will be the unanimous answer. And yet the impossible, by a marvellous chain of coincidences, was effected in that will of Miss Molloy. She could not intentionally have brought about such a result, even if she had tried. The i for the e in Ferentz, or rather Ferentz, left no room for doubt that Withers' solution was true. On the other hand, the peculiar spelling of Bridgita was an unanswerable argument in favour of Mr. Higgins. Withers had started on the principle which has amused so many readers of Edgar Poe, and is in itself a perfectly true and sound one. Higgins had started on the principle favoured by simpletons who correspond in cipher in the agony columns, and imagine that their silly secrets are not open to anybody who takes five minutes' trouble to read them.

What was to be done—now?

Clearly the situation was not realized by either of the fathers of the rival legatees. But a gloom came over the face of Mr. Withers. He took up the paper on which Mr. Higgins had written his solution, and examined it intently.

"No sane woman would have used such a simple cipher as that," said he. "It is just the solution that would satisfy an amateur."

"True," said Mr. Higgins, with a slight sneer. "Jurymen are in the position of amateurs, I believe, and judges too."

"A cipher can't have two solutions," said Mr. Withers, throwing the paper down.

"True again," said Mr. Higgins. "Happily for Miss O'Birn."

"Have you studied cryptography as a science, Mr. Higgins?" asked Mr. Withers, with a wild effort at elaborate courtesy.

"I'm not such an ass," said Mr. Higgins, with no pretence of courtesy at all. "I'd as soon set up a science of handwriting as a science of whims."

"You are insulting, sir! There is a science of handwriting—ay, and of character in handwriting; and I shouldn't like to write like you, judging from what it's like to be."

"I always make it a point of insulting quacks and humbugs," said Mr. Higgins. "It's the first duty of man. I've read that cipher in the way that would satisfy anybody but an expert, and there's an end."

"Whom do you call a quack, sir? Let me tell you that when a man deliberately insults