

[Written for the Canadian Illustrated News.]

## ORA PRO ME.

I  
*Oratio pro me!* The words are dear.  
 They were the last I heard thee say:  
 And now when thou art far away,  
 I hear them as if thou wert near.

II  
*Oratio pro me!* When morning's light  
 Opens mine eyes to worldly cares,  
 These words, like parting angels' prayers,  
 Mix with my visions of the night.

III  
*Oratio pro me!* When heart and brain  
 Grow weak with unavailing strife,  
 I feel a touch of sudden life  
 If these sweet words come back again.

IV  
*Oratio pro me!* When tender lids  
 Are closing o'er the eyes of day,  
 My memory whispers "She said 'Pray!'"  
 My spirit does as memory bids.

V  
*Oratio pro me!* O strongest test  
 Of love which is by Heaven fed!  
 He wisely spake the truth who said:  
 "He prayeth best who loveth best."

\* Coleridge, *Ancient Mariner*.

JOHN READER.

## THE LEATHER BAG.

How much the bag contained, I do not know, and question whether Andrew Millar himself did. It had in it the savings of twenty years, and it was full upon the fitting-day, just three weeks before the date of my story. His wife and daughters knew nothing about it at all; they had never seen it: they knew he had money somewhere, for when it was wanted it was forthcoming; but whatever they might conjecture, they certainly didn't know where he kept it, how he kept it, or how much he had. The little gray man became quite ugly on any allusion to these subjects. He had a morbid, diseased anxiety for the security of his money—a jealousy lest any one, saving himself, should see, touch, handle, or disburse a farthing of it, that was far from conducive to domestic felicity.

Was Andrew a miser? How often his wife and daughters had debated the point within a dozen years! And if he wasn't, what were they to make of the passion that had so gradually overcome his natural feelings? The wiry little gray man had been such a soft, gentle, loving fellow, his wife used to say, till carefulness grew upon him, and he became suspicious and distrustful, and misinterpreted every act of love and dutifulness done towards him. O that weary wooden chest, with the golden secret, and the family sorrow locked up in it! No, he wasn't a miser, not a bit of him. Did he ever hesitate to pay for the housekeeping, however he might quarrel with it? or fail to order, of his own free-will, the new gowns at the proper seasons? His love of money was none of your common sort; wasn't an unreasonable desire for more and ever more of it, though it had at one time looked like that. What was it, then? How ever did he the other day, all at once, make up his mind to give up business and take the new house, cheerfully, looking more pleasant than he had done indoors for many a day? He was bewitched, that was what he was; and Molly and Kate looked grave, as if they saw no other way of explaining the matter.

And so, in a sense, he was, and I think, even had they known the history of his relation to that leather bag, they would still have persisted in their theory. It was an old satchel, a small one, in which, when a boy, he had carried his books to school. When he walked across country to be apprenticed—a walk of nearly twenty miles from his father's croft—he carried in the satchel the bread and butter which his mother's anxiety provided for his sustenance by the way. When he was an apprentice, he kept his Bible in it, and the first pound-note he ever earned he kept in the Bible.

As he advanced in life, the "guid buke" fattened with his savings; all in notes, between its leaves, till it could hold no more of them, and had to be laid aside; by which time, through use and wont, and the association of ideas, Andrew had come to prefer "bank or banker's notes" to every form of the currency. He derived more pleasure from seeing the notes stuff out the sides of that bag, than the ring of gold pieces against the walls of the safest iron box could ever have given him. For twenty years, he watched the progress of his fortunes in the stomach of the bag. Time was, he used to play with fortune, taking the notes out, one by one, "rumpling" them, to make them bulk well, and putting them in till the bag would swell as if it would immediately deliver itself of a competency; and after complacently contemplating it in this state for some time, he would put them by in even folds, and sigh over the mere embryo of an independence to which they contracted. It had been the main pleasure of his life to watch the bag, and many a struggle it had cost him to reconcile his duties to it with those which, being by nature a kindly fellow, he could not but acknowledge were owing to his family. He took a pride in it; he would sit after work-hours and smoke his pipe, and look at it as if it were a child, as it lay cradled in the wooden chest; and now and then, in later years, he would stroke its back, and wink at it—the old rogue—taking it into his confidence; but down with the lid with a bang at once at the first sound of a footfall, let it be of wife or daughter, coming towards him. At last the dream of his life was realised, and the bag that had been year by year becoming more and more dropical, was ready to burst, and Andrew declared his intention to retire from business.

As was natural, with Andrew's pride in his store, his anxiety for its safety increased till it became, as I have said, a disease. It was so in the old days before the fitting; but now the complaint increased in virulence. Then, if he ever took a note out of the bag—which, in spite of his keeping a few in reserve that had never been put in, he was sometimes obliged to do—next day it would look, to his regretful eyes, as much thinner as if he had taken two; but now that it was all taking out and no putting in, he so fretted and worried himself, and tried the temper of the family, that they were disposed to leave him, house and all, and begin life again, "any how, no how," as Mrs. Andrew put it, rather than put up with him. About the time that they were brought to this pass, Andrew, after much bad logic and a great struggle with his

better nature, made up his mind that in some way his lock-fast-places were being tampered with, and that out of the chest and out of the house the bag must go, and that immediately; and so he cast about for a place in which to conceal it.

At the head of the garden, behind the house, was an old stone-wall, on the top of which—now he had nothing better to do—he used to sit and smoke his after-breakfast pipe; and there he was as usual one morning soon after the above resolution had been formed, with his legs dangling over the dike on the side of it facing the house, and musing with puffs, fast and slow, according to the current of his thoughts, on the best thing to be done. Suddenly he removed his cutty from his mouth, leaned his head a little towards his left shoulder, screwed down the lid of his left eye, and winked, while the smoke curled round his knowing old pate, till his right eye, too long exposed to it, winced and ended the wink that might otherwise have lasted for ever. It was the wink of a discoverer of something under his very nose, and as much as said: "O you old fool! how didn't you think of it before?" He hitched himself on to the ground, and paced up and down, slowly, alongside the old wall, looking stealthily at it, occasionally nodding to it, and smoking steadily all the while with much joyousness in his old face. The wall was full of odd crannies, letter-box holes all along the side of it, and looked just the sort of wall that a man would like to look upon who had a bag of money to hide. Before finishing his pipe, he made up his mind as to the very place to put it in—a hole that turned to the one side, and widened into a perfect little chamber, two feet below the top, and in the very heart of the masonry.

It remained to put the bag in its place without being seen; nor was Andrew long in finding an opportunity for doing so. On Sunday, the great Mr. Thumpantbawl was to preach in the parish church—there was only one church in the little village of A—in those days—and Andrew calculated that every one who could would go and hear that "powerful preacher." So, when Sunday morning came, Andrew had a shocking headache. He communicated the fact to his spouse in bed, and she told Molly and Kate, who were astir, and made tea for him in a short time; they were all so sorry and attentive, and indeed so anxious, that he felt half ashamed of his hypocrisis. Yet when he got up, he shammed that he could take no breakfast, and nearly spoiled his game altogether by holding his head on one side and groaning. He was greatly terrified by Molly putting on her shawl to go for the doctor, and Kate protesting that she would—they all would—stay at home with him in spite of the attractions of Mr. Thumpantbawl. Before the breakfast-things were removed, however, his headache was almost gone. He still felt too poorly to go to church, yet was not too unwell to look after himself; so when the hour came, and the bell rang, the family set out with many expressions of hope and trust that he might be better when they returned. Andrew chuckled, as he stood at the window and "saw them out of sight." Great was his excitement when the bell ceased; yet he held to his plan, allowing twenty minutes for the congregation fairly to assemble; after which, opening the back-door carefully, he stole with his treasure up the garden, looking about him with the circumspection of guilt, lest any one should see him. Having hid the bag, and torn himself away from it with difficulty into the house, he lighted his pipe in the front-kitchen—as if wholly to disconnect himself from recent transactions at the back of the house—and sat in the ingle with the "guid buke" close at hand in case of a surprise.

When his people returned from church, he wore the air of one coming round, and "verra much better, an obliged t'ye." At the same time, he had great difficulty in repressing a tendency to chuckle over the success of his plan. His efforts at maintaining the composure of indifference and the air of an invalid, were as ridiculous as they were fatiguing, and, as the day advanced, proved a new source of alarm to his wife and daughters, who were startled by the novelty of his behaviour. In the evening, he became fatigued with acting, and, at the same time, extremely nervous, and desirous to satisfy his senses of the safety of his money; the more so, as he could invent no reasonable pretence for going into the garden. He tried to convince himself by arguments that it was all right—and if it was all wrong, how, at that time of night, could he mend it? Thus he saw-sawed between fear and confidence till the hour came for worship, which he conducted so incoherently as greatly to alarm the family. As it would happen, the chapter that fell to be read that night was the sixth of Matthew, in which the verse occurs: "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal." Reviewing his sensations of that day, and recalling the many miserable days in past years which his money had brought him, he paused and groaned. He felt the wisdom of the recommendation; he returned on the verse, and read it again slowly, while his wife, with a queer interrogative air, looked up at him from her book, and over her spectacles. He didn't like it, and had never felt so uncomfortable. "The thieves in the verse didn't improve it! And then followed the words: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Could anything be more true? Wasn't his heart at this very moment, when he was on the point of kneeling to make a pretence of prayer, out in the hole, two feet from the top, and near the middle of the old stone-dike? Oh, could he only be sure that his treasure was there also! Before bedtime, he was twice on the point of stating the whole case to them, making a clean breast of it, and getting the bag in; but he couldn't screw himself up to that point. Weren't they all anxiety about him and the illness of the day? and was he to tell them it was all a sham? He couldn't do it. And by this time, his old feet were being washed by Kate in a tub of hot water; and Molly was lowering with a wooden spoon the temperature of a large bowl of gruel—spiced, buttered, and qualified with whisky, which, according to his wife's recipe, he was to drink "immediately he got in among the claes."

When he went to bed, he couldn't sleep; he could only think; and his thoughts wandered back to the day when he won the heart of his old partner Jessie—that proud day; and on and on to the day Molly was born; and then on and on to the day Kate was born; and he remembered a hundred little happy scenes that had happened before that unhappy bag received the first miserable note into his stomach; and then, on and on till suspicion and distrust sprung up between him and those he loved, and all the old happiness passed away, and he saw himself become—ay, and he now described himself to himself in so many words—a mean, old miserly rascal! It surprised him to catch himself thus libelling himself. What

had made the change? Had he not just succeeded in putting his money safe, just beyond—Ah! was it safe? How he wished he could know that. And against whom had he desired security? Against Jessie, and Molly, and Kate. Poor dears! How anxious they had been about him in the morning; how they kissed him when they went out, hoping to find him better when they came back. Why, they hadn't kissed him for years; but then he had never before thrown himself on their sympathies. He had chuckled then to think how easily they were deceived. He saw now what a miserable, old, hypocritical wretch he had been. How tenderly they had nursed him, and looked at him, not doing kind things without meaning them. O yes, they loved him—ay, better than his bag; for let him only sicken and die, and wouldn't they have it among them to do with it as they liked. And, after all, what in the world was the use of it but to give pleasure to himself and them? And when, at this stage of his reflections, his wife asked her "dear, auld guidman" how he felt himself now, and, with a kiss, turned away for the night, he nipped his old legs and fixed his teeth at himself, as at a perfect brute; and that same moment, he resolved he'd take the bag into the house next day, and live an open-handed life, to the best of his ability, henceforward. With this came a degree of mental composure, and at last, far towards morning, he fell asleep, and into dreamland.

Everywhere was the bag. In one dream a lot of boys were playing football with it, tossing it about, giving it kicks that sent it far up into the air, to "flop" down again with a dead, heavy sound; till at last it "flopped" into a duck-pond, and sank; and all the boys wading in the duck-pond, and himself with them, searching ever so anxiously, could get no trace of it. From this dream, Andrew awakened with a smile. Then he saw it lying in the wooden chest, as of old; and the chest was locked, and down in the front-parlour, as of old; and there came a cry of "Fire! Fire!" and the house was burning, and he and his wife and daughters just escaped with their lives, but with nothing else; and no one could be found to venture in to take out the old chest, and he stood afar off seeing it burn, and tearing his gray hair in rage and grief. He awakened from this dream also with a smile, for he knew the bag was not in the chest, but safe out in the dyke. Then came two little boys, in a dream, playing out in the back-garden; he knew them quite well the moment they appeared; and they began to play at hiding toys in the wall and searching for them; and lo! they found the bag, and opened its great mouth, and took out such heaps of papers, and wondered what they were; when suddenly the wind arose, and caught the heap, and whirled away the whole, and the air was as white with bank-notes as ever it was with snow-flakes in a storm. Andrew awakened gasping; he could stand this sort of thing no longer. The gray dawn was coming in at the window, cold and cheerless. He got up quietly, and with nothing on him but his trousers and shirt, made for the back-door, up the garden, to the wall, to the hole; and there—"The bag was gone!"

I am not going to analyse Andrew's feelings on missing the bag—the blankness of his despair as he stared, with drooping head and hanging arms, at the damp, old wall in the dull twilight. He returned to bed, after a time, to find his spouse asleep, and quite unconscious of his desertion. For some time he couldn't think rationally of his loss; after the first paroxysm, however, his good sense gradually asserted itself, and the more he reflected, the stronger grew his hope of getting back his money. Two things were almost quite certain: whoever took the bag must have seen him hide it, and missed, like himself, the discourse of Mr. Thumpantbawl; and being satisfied that the absentees from church were few, and could be discovered, he began to lay his plans so as not only to detect the thief, but regain the bag without exposing his own domestic relations, which had led to its concealment, and of which he was now heartily ashamed.

After breakfast, he walked slowly down the main street towards Tibby Johnstone's—the half-way house. Tibby, the leader of the village gossips, was standing at her door as he approached it, and at once proceeded to interrogate him as to his illness.

"Man, I was sorry," said Tibby, "ye weren't in church yester-morn, more because o' your no being able. Awed, auld folks a' auld folks, an' we hae a' the same gate to gang—though a' folk dinnae hae to travel sae far's yoursel', Andrew Millar, to reach the end o' it. And what was the matter wi' you, now?" she continued, pressing home her inquiries without giving time for answer. "Was it the rheumatism or the headaches? There was Johnnie Swan was bad, too, yester-morn, an' had to hide at home like yoursel', poor body; he had the megrims very sair."

Andrew gave no answer to her question as to the nature of his malady, save by another—put in the tone of one passing: "I fancy almost everybody was in church but me an' Johnnie."

Tibby assured him the kirk was "crammed," that it was hotter work for the minister than "mawin' hay in July," and that he "watted twa napkins wi' the sweat o' his brow."

Andrew passed on, as if the conversation had related to matters of perfect indifference. Casual inquiries made elsewhere in the village in the course of the forenoon, satisfied him that Johnnie Swan, the shoemaker, was the thief; at least, that he was the only man who hadn't been at church, and was at all likely to have done the dishonest thing. How, now, to get round Johnnie without exposing himself? Andrew brooded over this problem during three pipes, after which he went straight to the house of the shoemaker.

Johnnie Swan was a dour, ill-favoured, avaricious body of a shoemaker, the leader of the pot-house politicians of the village, and reputed a great theorist and original speculator in morals and philosophy. On the Sunday forenoon, when Andrew hid the bag, our philosopher, who was really indisposed, and unable to go to church, was behind the old wall in a position to see—without being seen—all Andrew's extraordinary proceedings, from the first cautious peep of his nose out of the back-door, to his stealthy slipping into the house again. What Andrew was about he couldn't exactly see, nor did he see the bag; but he thus argued with himself as to the probable meaning of the phenomena which he had witnessed:

"Folks may differ, but, in ma opinion, 'Usn't for naething the mice come oot. When a sober body like Andrew Millar plays the fule, and syne takes to a hole in an auld dyke, like a weasel, there's mair intill't than the air o' the mornin'. Had ye een 't the back o' your head, man, Andrew, ye'd hae missed me yon time, wi' your want o' gumption; as look alint the dyke wad ha' done mair for your secret than twenty glowerins over it. Atweel, there's something in the wind ye'd as weel