

SOME WHITE ELEPHANTS.

(Adapted from James Payn.)

I know a good and honest lawyer—"rara avis in"—(no, I shall want that fine old quotation presently)—an honest lawyer who has stated it as his opinion—and his opinion is what people give dollars and dollars for—that it is a great mistake to be "much respected." His experience is, he says, that most persons who have thus been designated are dead, and that the rest suffer from their good reputations. He has himself often succored the widow and orphan, free, gratis—for nothing; and when the orphans have grown up they are apt to be grateful. They send presents to their "valued and much respected friend," even from the uttermost ends of the earth; which is what he objects to, even when they pay the carriage.

And true it is, it often happens that a present is a misfortune to one. For example, I am myself a poor man, and a rich friend sends me a haunch of venison. My larder is not big enough for it to hang in, my kitchen range is not large enough to cook it, and it has to lodge and even to board out (for it requires flour and all sorts of applications daily); thus it costs as much as a leg of mutton to begin with. Then I am obliged to ask eight or ten people to eat it, the expense of which entertainment reduces me to my last dollar. My rich friend has no wish to impoverish me, but the effect of his munificence is similar to that of the present of the White Elephant which the King of Siam gives to those whom he intends to ruin; its meat, drink and clothing (for they have to supply its trunk, of course) eat them out of house and home. Or suppose I am a rich man and a poor one sends me (his friendship's offering), some ornament for my drawing-room, which is very tastefully and elegantly furnished; what the deuce am I to do with it? If it is really handsome, I feel that I have robbed him; if it is otherwise (though one does not prize a gift according to its cost), it spoils my drawing room by its contrast with what is already there.

Again there are a lot of people in the world who are always giving one presents which are worthless. They remember one's birthday and one's marriage day and the anniversary of the day one was appointed a Queen's Council or chaplain to the lunatic asylum. They are very sure to call to mind these interesting dates by the gifts of a paper-knife, of a box of tooth-picks, or a volume of Mrs. Ross' "Legends of the Great Gordons." For my part I would much rather "compound" for all these subscriptions, and that they gave

me a twenty dollar note and have done with them.

There is a still more troublesome sort of people—generally very wealthy—who insist upon paying your fare for you when you travel with them on the street cars, or on defraying the toll when you drive outside the city limits; but to get a present of twenty-five or fifty dollars out of them in the way of composition, or any other, is a matter not to be thought of.

Then there are some excellent persons who insist upon providing us some specimens of their own particular productions; what they have themselves invented, concocted or made captive to their own gun and spear, and which in nine cases out of ten, and independently of the obligation incurred, one would infinitely rather be without.

Your friend the amateur author, for example, sends you a presentation copy of his first novel, of the usual regulation length; now what are you to do with that? Of course if you are prepared to read it, I have nothing further to say; but suppose you shrink from proceeding to that dreaded extremity; you have, in that case, to sit down, write quickly that you have received his most thoughtful present which will indeed be highly prized, and that you are "looking forward with the greatest eagerness" to its perusal; but if you think that will satisfy him, except for the moment, you are very much mistaken. He will be sure to inquire your opinion sooner or later about that immortal work—and then be on your guard; for fatal to your friendship with him will be the moment when he elicits the truth. Above all things cut the book—I mean with the paper knife—on the instant of its arrival—that is, unless it is an American production in which the leaves are always conveniently cut by the machine; no eulogy, however vague or skillful will avail you if he discover that this precaution has not been taken. Or, again, one's friend is a sportsman who having secured some prize of exceptional rarity and, perhaps not unwilling that we should bear personal testimony of his prowess, sends it to us, generally unpaid, by rail.

The last gift I received in this way was from a famous sportsman, and consisted of a black cygnet—"rara avis in terris, nigroque (here you have it, as I promised) similissima cygno." Neither I nor my cook, nor the poultry-man around the corner had seen,—except on a signboard or an heraldic emblem,—such a bird before. Its size was gigantic—much larger than that of a full grown white swan—and it had no end of a neck. How this neck was to be

cooked was a problem, while to cut it off was out of the question; for who would have been able to guess its nature, or have been by any means induced to eat it, had it come to the table without its neck? As it was, I felt that I should have to make a little speech about it to my guests in the way of introduction not to say of apology for its appearance. As the result of the plucking of it we promised ourselves an elder-down quilt, if not an entire feather bed; but at the very outset an unpleasant circumstance happened. It had arrived in apparently admirable condition; we had said to ourselves, "for once we have really got a useful present out of old Webfoot"; but directly the cook began to pluck it,—it was not "the last feather," mind, that did it, but the first—it began to smell beyond power of words to express. We talk of "knocking one down with a feather," in a metaphorical and poetical way, but one of our cygnet's feathers was literally enough to do it. Why it was so, I do not pretend to explain. It is possible that just as a gentleman of color—though a man and a brother and even in holy orders—has unquestionably a certain—well—an aroma about him, such as (I am glad to say) does not belong to you or me,—so this black cygnet had an odor that surely never belonged to any other race but its own. One has heard of sea-birds being "strong and fishy," but these are feeble adjectives to express the exhalations from that bird. As to making anything with his feathers, except a bonfire, it was not to be thought of. Of course our kitchen could not accommodate the cygnet, which consequently went to the neighboring baker's—whereby we became in a manner public benefactors. One has heard how a knife that had cut an ortolan is thought highly of as giving a rare flavor to quite a common dish,—while our bird gave a flavor (so the baker told me) to everything that he baked that day from a pan of buns to an apple pie. They had, as one may say, the impression of our signet upon them—and it was a very strong one. When it came to the table, every-one rose and fled and all the windows had to be thrown open, though it was far from summer weather. I buried it in the back garden with a fire shovel, with my own hands, and there it lies to this day, let us hope, deodorized; but if so it will be a great corroboration of the Mould theory and of earth as a disinfectant. As to our house, if you had broken a gallon jar of attar of roses in it, it could not have been more thoroughly impregnated,—only cygnet, I do assure you, is not attar of roses.