

"You shall not be so sure, Monsieur. I shall know your Christian name, and I shall know the Christian name of the sister of your wife, because I am Ferentz Steldl, Monsieur O'Birn! Aha! you shall have the tremblement perceptible, Monsieur O'Birn!"

"What!" cried the Major, leaping to his feet, with a shout and a glare. "Ye sit there in cold blood, and ye tell me, Major Fitzgerald O'Birn, ye're that—miscreant—that blagyard—that snake in the grass—that drinkin', swindlin', mane-spirited, under-handed, slandering, murderin', on-respectable thief of the whole world, Ferentz Steldl? And ye think to escape from the fist of a gentleman this dee!"

"Patience, patience, *mon beau-frère*," said Steldl, without the slightest change of tone. "Fine words shall not butter what you call the *painis*. It is you who shall escape from me. You shall leave this town, I shall guard Mlle. Molloy, sister of my wife, aunt of my son, from you. For that I am here."

Something in the significant calmness of his foreign brother-in-law calmed the Major down. He returned to his chair, shifted his glass on the table, and said,

"An 'tis for that I'm here too," said he. "I'm here to defend me own sister, an' me wife's sister, an' me gurl's aunt, from all the Counts out of Hungary, an' the Seven Dyles. An' ye'll move from your sate if ye dare."

"I shall not desire," said Steldl. "I am well where I am. I desire to have the eye on you, my *beau-frère*. While you shall sit there, I shall sit here, if it shall be to the death, Monsieur O'Birn. It shall be the duel à la mort, Monsieur, and we shall fight with the bottoms of the chairs."

"Then, faith, I'll sit like the hen of Banagher—an' she sat till the sod and her began to crow. So ye think Miss Biddy'll open the crack of her door to the likes of you?"

"Why not! She is sister of my wife, and aunt of my son."

"Aunt of my daughter, ye mane. Poh! what'd she know of a son of yours?"

"You mock of yourself, my *beau-frère*. Have she not buy my son Ferentz the commission of the Foot, and keep him, so long he sees not me?"

"Then ye lie in your throat, Ferentz Steldl! 'Tis me own daughter, an' her own goddaughter an' niece, Lucis Bridgita, that she's kept at school at her own charge, an' keeps in pocket-money as long as I don't see her more than woont a year."

"She do that for your daughter! Impossible, Monsieur!"

"She do that for your son? Mr. Steldl, ye lie!"

The way in which these two gentlemen quarrelled, without showing the least sign of coming to blows, gave the waiter, who was not far off, an altogether fresh view of the possibilities of human nature. Obviously there was a world in which gentlemen cared more for their physical than their moral skins.

"Take yourself off, my *beau-frère*. In effect, she adopt Ferentz, my son. She leave all to him."

"Ye're a fool, Steldl—that's what she's been makin' of ye, the old screw of the world! As if she'd have a penny to any but her own niece Lucis, either doin' all she has for the darlin' child!"

Steldl was the sort of man who would be given to shrugging his shoulders, like a Frenchman in a play; so he no doubt did so now. "She cannot have done so much for Miss Lucis, or I shall have heard. I know not till now she have done so much for the daughter of the black sheep; but what shall a school bill be, after all! Bah!—a bagatelle. But a commission in the Foot—ah, that is another shoe! And you consent not to see your own flesh and blood for the sake of a bill of a school!"

"I'm a better sort of a father than to stand in me own child's wee of a fortune. And ye sit there an' tell me she's spent the price of a commission on your son—unless 'tis in the Marines, where they'll believe the tale."

"*Parole de gentilhomme*, Monsieur O'Birn, I am father of Ferentz Steldl, Lieutenant of King George."

"And I of Lucis Bridgita O'Birn, that'll be in the shoes of Miss Molloy."

The two fathers emptied their tumblers, and the Major rang for more. Neither meant to lose this sitting match if he could help it, that was clear.

"If I didn't know," said Steldl slowly and impressively, "there is no school in the land who shall teach for no pay, I shall not believe. But she shall but toss one bone to one hungry dog—that shall be all."

Now Major O'Birn, though he had never met his brother-in-law in the flesh before, was a citizen of that world which knew that the refugee had taught fencing in his time, and had won several bets that he would make a bullet mark out a pack of cards. So, instead of retorting with a charge of hot whisky into his brother-in-law's yellow face, he contented himself by saying, with an angry grin,

"An' what'll ye say when I tell ye my wife is with her own sister this very dee, as thick as bees in a hive!"

The Irishman, though he had kept his temper the worst, won the match after all. Steldl leapt from his chair with a volley of language that proved his own temper to be no deeper than the thinnest part of his skin.

"Your wife, you fortune-hunting Irish beggar! Your wife with Miss Molloy! So that's why you've been keeping me here!" He threw

the rest of his liquor into the fire, and sent a blaze up the chimney. Then he buttoned his coat defiantly, saying, "I will see Miss Molloy."

"An' that's what I call mighty waste of good drink," said Major O'Birn, gulping down the remainder of his own. "Yes, ye may go, Steldl. I won't bother even to see her door shut in your face—though, faith, it would be fun."

"And I tell you, Monsieur," cried Steldl, raising his voice into a sort of scream, "that it is my wife which is now with Miss Molloy!"

The two husbands glared at one another fiercely. And, short of running the risk of being knocked down by the other, that was all left them to do. Words had done their worst; and they were evidently not men of deeds.

"No; Miss Bridgita Molloy had not turned out a bad sister after all. She would never even acknowledge so much as the existence of the Major and the Count, and had an odd way of speaking of the married Miss Molloy as if they were widows; but she did not visit the sins of the fathers upon the children. At a very early age, too early for them to make a deliberate choice between their father and their fortunes, she had sent both the little Ferentz and the little Lucis Bridgita to good schools, and, as they grew bigger, sometimes had them to Chatterbury for the holidays to meet their mothers, who accepted the arrangement more reasonably than mothers always will. For that matter, neither Count nor Major cared to be bothered with a baby, nor always with a wife, so that the two young children were removed from evil influence as much as lay in Miss Molloy's power. She was a very strict aunt and a terribly exacting patroness; but she meant to be kind, and was really kind in her own way. I never saw much of the children, but I liked what I did see. Ferentz was a fine, frank, high-spirited young fellow, without any of his father's vices, as is often the way with the sons of prodigal fathers, and Lucis was almost as pretty as her mother had been when she eloped with the Major. Rather a quiet girl. I used to think, but amiable and with a dash of her aunt Biddy's good sense about her way of speaking. But it was one of Miss Molloy's caprices that the left hand which she held out to one sister should know nothing of how the right hand was held out to the other. Neither mother, neither child was ever her guest at the same time as the other mother and the other child. I doubt if Ferentz knew that he had a cousin Lucis, or she that she had a cousin Ferentz. Most assuredly each of the mothers believed that she alone was favoured with her sister's bounty. That reserve was one of Miss Molloy's very strongest foibles, if one may properly call a foible strong. She would never tell even me, her lawyer, more than she thought absolutely necessary about anything; and so of course even she, with all her good business qualities, would sometimes make little mistakes out of which I found it difficult to help her."

And the same course that she pursued with her lawyer she followed with her doctor too—that is too say, with a certain doctor who happened to be a personal friend; for she used to boast that she had never had a medicine-bottle in the house but once, and that she had thrown out of window. She often said that she had nothing of a coffin about her but the strength of its nails; and yet the very first time she was compelled to send for her medical friend in a professional capacity, he found that she must have been suffering for years from a most painful internal and organic disease, and a fatal one. How do hungry relations always hear such news! Had she made her will? If not, would she recognize the fact that the nature of her disease admitted of no delay? And so, for the first time, Mrs. O'Birn and Mrs. Steldl, at the expense of their husband's creditors, flew on the wings of sisterly affection, and met together at Miss Molloy's bedside. And with the instinct of vultures, the Count and the Major had been unable to keep from hovering, as near as they dared, within the shadow of a death that meant so much to them. Neither, I firmly believe, had until that meeting the faintest suspicion that, if only a proper will were made, he would not become the father of Miss Molloy's sole heir. That discovery that her generosity had not been monopolized by either must have been a deservedly bitter moment for both the greedy blackguards. And, for all their brag, each knew that he dared no more knock at Miss Molloy's door than he dared commit assault and battery; while, for aught each could tell, the other might be high in the favour of the poor lady who was dying a few streets away.

It was—for it must have been—a strange meeting between the two forlorn, faded, worse than widowed, half-childless woman by the deathbed of one who to them had for many years represented strength, health, comfort—all that they had wanted since they were girls together long and long ago. There they had to sit, one on each side of the bed, conscious of a question she had been commanded by her tyrant to ask, conscious that the other was similarly burdened, unable to ask it in the other's presence, not daring nor knowing how to ask it had she been alone by the bedside. For I declare that even myself would sooner have led a forlorn hope than have asked Miss Molloy what she meant to do with her money. I like to think of the dismay of the two husbands, but I don't in pity like to think of what the two poor wives must have suffered in silence that afternoon.

I had already—I need not tell anybody who knows places like Chatterbury—been put in the

position of being able to report the conversation between the two gentlemen in the coffee-room. They had not spoken in whispers, and the Old Swain had key-holes and its waiter had ears. So I was not very much surprised when, in the course of the evening, I received a summons to attend Miss Molloy.

"Ah!" said her doctor, who was dining with me when the summons came. I report the exclamation, because it was meant to mean a great deal.

"I hope and trust I find you better, Miss Molloy," said I, when I was shown into her bedroom, which she had not left for some weeks now.

"No, Mr. Lake, you don't," said she. "I didn't believe I was a dying woman three hours ago, but I do now. Don't say anything stupid. I've not lived such a bad life that I'm afraid; and I've never been afraid to face anything in my life, except marriage, and I'm not going to begin now." She was right; with all her little oddities she had been a really good, if somewhat hard-mannered woman, and always a singularly brave one. "I know I'm dying, because the hawks and kites are abroad. We used to keep a banshee in the old time, and it's something between a Count and a Major. Those poor silly sisters of mine have been here bothering me to make my will. And if you don't know what that means, Mr. Lake, I do. It means death, as sure as I'm lying here."

"You mean to say that your sisters have mentioned such a thing?"

It was really not a case for common phrases. Miss Molloy was—Miss Molloy.

"Not in words—no, poor things. But there they sat and cried, and there was nothing but will—will—will, in every tear. 'Tisn't them I blame, though 'tis not nice to be cried over that way. 'Twas as much as I could do not to say 'won't'—'won't'—'won't'; but I've always had the wit to hold my tongue. Ah, Mr. Lake, since then I've been thinking how maybe 'tis better to have somebody to drop a real tear over your own self, if 'tis half brandy, and from a Count or a Major, than to have lived in peace only to die all alone. But that's fool's talk; and I didn't ask ye to talk like a stupid that ye might listen the better to a fool."

"Surely," said I, "you are not alone. Lieutenant Steldl—Miss O'Birn—"

"Pooh! who remembers a dead aunt for a whole day, I'd like to know? Would I want to make a boy and a girl cry before their own troubles come? 'Tis business I sent ye for. There's pens and paper. I am going to make my will."

"I am sure you are right in that. I am entirely at your service, Miss Molloy."

"Then," said she, "I want you to draw my will now. No instructions, mind, to be drafted to-morrow. I might be dead by then—who knows? My pain's almost left me; and that's a bad sign, if death's a bad thing. It will be very short and very simple. Take a sheet of the big foolscap—that'll be plenty. Now write, this is the last will and testament of Bridgita—mind ye spell it with a t, not a d; and with only one t, mind; for I'm particular about that way, for 'tis the way my mother spelt it, right or wrong—of Bridgita Molloy, of Chatterbury, in the county of—whatever it was—spinster; praise glory for that, anyhow! But ye needn't put that in—the glory, I mean.—Spinster: I give and bequeath to Rachel Andrews, my housekeeper, the sum of three hundred pounds, free of legacy duty, and I request her to take charge of my dog Dash, knowing that she will fulfil my request according to the intention wherewith I make the same. I give and bequeath to every person who shall have been in my service for one month preceding my decease the amount of one year's wages. I give and bequeath to my friend John Kirwan, of Chatterbury, Doctor of Medicine, the sum of five hundred pounds, free of legacy duty. I give and bequeath to my brother-in-law, Ferentz Steldl the elder—is it all right, so far?"

"Quite. But how do you spell Ferentz?" asked I.

"F-e-r-e-n-t-z—Ferentz Steldl. The boy's name is Ferentz, with an i. I won't have him bear his father's name.—My brother-in-law, Ferentz Steldl the elder, the sum of one shilling, free of legacy duty, to buy a mourning ring. I give and bequeath to my brother-in-law, Fitzgerald O'Birn, the sum of one shilling, free of legacy duty, to buy a mourning ring. I give and bequeath to my dear nephew, Ferentz—with an i—Steldl, Lieutenant in the Army, the sum of one thousand pounds. I give and bequeath to Lucis Bridgita O'Birn, my niece, the sum of one thousand pounds. And all the residue of my property, whether real or personal, I give, bequeath, and devise to—"

She paused. Up to this point she had not needed my help, so expert she seemed in the art of the testator.

"Devise to," echoed I. "Well, Miss Molloy! The residuary legatee was to be the important personage; for he or she would come in for at least twenty-five thousand pounds, and perhaps a good deal more, after all debts and legacies were paid."

But still she paused. All the rest had been mere child's play.

"Mr. Lake," she said at last, "I may be dying, but I'm not an old woman, and I might live for years. Now my sisters are gone, I feel less like dying than I did when I sent for ye to make my will. I've done all the justice I need do; and I don't want a handsome property split up—that would be a sort of a shame. Neither Ferentz nor Lucis has any expectation of getting what I leave, whatever others may. It's for the sake of the property that it must go into one

hand. And, Mr. Lake, I daren't trust the very walls of my bedroom with the name I choose. If I was to ask you to write the name in my will, I should have to speak it to you, and for aught I know the Count or the Major may have bribed the nurse to listen at that very door."

"Write it down for me, then; here is the pen."

"No. The paper might get dropped about, and—no; I'd rather you wouldn't know the name. It isn't that I don't trust ye, but ye might say it out in a dream, and your wife might hear it, and she might let it out by chance to somebody who might talk about it in a place like Chatterbury, and then the Count or the Major would get at the secret as sure as ye're alive. And then there's no counting the villainies that wouldn't be done; they'd be trying to get me shut up in a mad-house, and forging and murdering some one maybe; anyhow, there'd be no comfort in living, if I am to live any more. I've thought of a way to keep off all danger, and to make it everybody's interest to support the will, and to save every bit of bother. I'll write the name myself in the will with my own hand, and then cover it over while you write the rest, and ye'll give me your word of honour ye won't try to see what I've written till I'm dead and gone."

The whim was a stupid one, I thought, for a testator who was in other respects proving herself so clear-headed; but there was certainly no apparent harm in indulging her. "But," said I, "as you wish to take such extreme precautions, does it not strike you that it is easier for an expectant heir to overhaul a will than for a solicitor to break confidence in a dream?"

"I've thought of all that," said she. "Of course they'll try to overhaul, and where there's a will there's a way—but there's more ways of killing a dog than hanging him. I'll manage so that if every servant in the house is in the Count's pay or the Major's, they shall earn their money for nothing at all. So I'll take the pen, if ye please, and the will; give me a dip of ink, and any scrap of paper ye find handy."

I gave her all she asked for. She first of all, very slowly, wrote down upon the scrap of paper what was presumably a rough draft of what she was going to enter in the will. Then she copied it into the document, dwelling upon every letter. Her hand must have grown feeble before her brain, or else, like all testators of this fussy sort who look on will-making as a solemn function, she could not bring herself to let a paltry minute settle the destination of five-and-twenty thousand pounds. I have known men and women who would have made the labour of writing the two or three needful words last the better part of a day.

She thrust the scrap of paper on which she had made her first memorandum under her pillow, and then carefully folded the will itself so that I could see nothing without deliberately breaking my word. Dr. Kirwan and myself were appointed executors; and the execution of the will was witnessed by the nurse and a neighbour. There was certainly nothing remarkable about Miss Molloy's will so far but the excessive care she had taken that its principal provision should not even be guessed at until she died.

Nor did Miss Molloy die quite so soon as everybody had expected. The Count and the Major, finding a protracted stay at the Old Swan beyond their means, had parted, deadly enemies—all the more deadly because each inspired the other with a feeling of mortal terror. I am very much afraid that both Mrs. Steldl and Mrs. O'Birn had to bear, each at her husband's hands, the burden of punishment for the sins of her brother-in-law. But, however that may be, the day came at last when I heard from Dr. Kirwan the long-expected news that my client, Miss Bridgita Molloy, was alive no more.

"She couldn't have lasted another week," said he. "But, all the same, I might have kept her going for another day or two, with care. Would you believe it, but the obstinate old lady, only the night before last, gave her nurse the slip, and, weak as she was, went all over the house to see if everything was in order! Death was a relief to her, and she was a queer old lady in some ways—and the worst patient in all the town—but I'm sorry she's gone."

And that, I am afraid, was the only note of honest mourning which Miss Molloy, with all her many virtues and her singularly few weaknesses, was privileged to receive. She had always hidden her good qualities out of public sight; and hardness of manner, like charity, covers a great deal.

To the last she had stuck to her will. It was found under her pillow when she died, sealed up in a large blue envelope, and endorsed "My Will—B. M." I own that it was with some curiosity that I opened it; for she had made such a mystery of what should have been a very simple piece of business, that I had some misgivings lest she should have disinherited niece and nephew alike, and made her dog Dash or some Anti-Matrimonial Society her residuary legatee. My own sympathies were with Miss Lucis; my wife's with Lieutenant Ferentz Steldl. That was a little matter of human nature; as a matter of reason, we felt that they had equal claims, and that twenty-five thousand pounds would have borne equal partition very well.

So I broke open the envelope, unfolded the will, and read:

" And all the residue of my property, whether real or personal, I give, bequeath and devise to F E R E N T Z M O L L O Y D O V J W D M I H T I D Z X Z."

(To be continued.)