

ly dote on all the parrots belonging to the aged spinsters of my acquaintance. Alas! if I had only done so in the days of my youth, how different would have been my fate.

At last my Aunt Jemima died. How she managed to hold on to life so long, has ever been a mystery to me, but on this point she was, as in everything else, inconsiderate toward other people. I attended her funeral, and as heir apparent tried to wear a becoming expression of grief. Once or twice I fancied that the old family lawyer looked at me with a pitying eye, half warning, half sorrowful, as if to say, "young man, beware;" but as far as I could see there was nothing to beware of, not even the customary dog, for Pompey, my Aunt's black poodle, wore a huge crape bow under his chin, and was too much engaged in trying to bite it off to pay attention to anything else.

What a solemn convale it was, which sat in a stiff circle round the dining-room table in Halstead Hall, an hour after the funeral was over. The party consisted of all the relatives of my deceased Aunt, I, in the post of honor at one end, and Mr. Budge, the lawyer, at the other. Of course there were the usual number of cousins, some near, some very distant, so distant indeed that they were hardly cousins at all; and truth to tell most of them had but small expectations, and agreed in looking on me as the inheritor of the greater part of our relative's money. It was one of the proudest moments of my life. There was I, Adolphus Montgomery Vane, about to become the possessor of ten thousand a year and Halstead Hall. My bosom swelled with pride and I smiled condescendingly upon those around me, as one who is conscious of his superiority.

"Ahem," Mr. Budge was cleaning his throat preparatory to the important duty of reading the will. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, rising to his feet, "I am about to read you part of the last will and testament of my deceased client, Miss Jemima Vane, and considering the extremely unusual circumstances attending this will, I think it best to say a few words beforehand."

A hush which was almost painful in its intensity fell on us all, only broken by the thin voice of the lawyer as he continued:

"This will, which I now hold in my hand, is a perfectly legal document, and was executed in my presence and that of two other witnesses about three months ago by Miss Vane, who was at that time in the full possession of all her faculties, and though the conditions of it are most unusual, I may almost say unparalleled, still it is my duty to see that they are carried out to the letter, and I can only trust that Providence will watch over Mr. Adolphus Vane and save him from the fate which may at any moment overtake him."

As the old man finished speaking, I felt the beads of cold perspiration standing out on my forehead. Was I to be disinherited after all? No, no, again Mr. Budge's voice sounded through the rooms as he proceeded to read from the paper.

"I, Jemima Vane, do hereby declare that my last Will and Testament shall not be read for the space of one year after my decease. I desire that my nephew Adolphus Montgomery Vane shall reside at Halstead Hall during that year, in the position of master, and that my lawyer Mr. Budge shall pay to him the full yearly income of my estate, and I desire that on the first anniversary of my death my will shall be read in the presence of all my relations. I appoint Mr. Budge trustee of my estate until such times as my will shall be fully carried out, and I request him to pay the following legacies out of the moneys which I have invested in stocks."

Then followed lists of bequests to relatives and old servants, nobody was forgotten.

I sat like one stunned. What did it all mean? Was this some diabolical scheme to raise my hopes to the highest pitch, only to dash them down again, or was it just a harmless freak on the part of my Aunt? It was a regular enigma, with apparently no key to it, so I decided to put all thought of the future aside, enjoy the temporary good fortune which had befallen me, and trouble my head no further about the will.

What a year that was. Looking back on it now it seems like a feverish dream, some fantastic vision of an excited brain. I lived every moment of that year, I kept open house, I gambled, I drank, I—oh shade of Aunt Jemima! had what the Americans call "a real good time of it." Halstead Hall became a different place, all the doors and windows were thrown wide open to admit the blessed sunshine and everywhere a new order of things replaced the old.

The live stock were bestowed as presents on whoever would take them, and the stuffed animals and skeletons I ordered to be destroyed. Gobo was given to a small cousin, and Pompey died of either grief at his mistress' death, or from gormandizing on young chickens, it was never clearly proven which. Then came the question what was to be done with Polly? No one seemed



to want her, so for a few days she stayed in her cage, and was looked after by the house-keeper; but I soon got tired of her perpetual noise, and her remarks irritated me to such a degree that sometimes I could have strangled her with my own fingers.

One night things came to a climax. I was awakened from an unusually heavy sleep by hearing sounds which apparently proceeded from the lower part of the house, so jumping out of bed, I quickly put on a dressing-gown and slippers, and cautiously opened my door. Yes, there was someone moving about downstairs,—should I ring for the butler,—but no, that would arouse the whole house, so hastily snatching up the poker I started down the passage, and listened again. This time I distinctly heard the sound of silver rattling, and instantly the certainty that it was a burglar forced itself upon me.

Down the stairs I crept, my woolen slippers making no sound on the thick carpet, gingerly I stole up to the dining-room door and peeped in—all was black as pitch—I could see nothing; only a slight rustle betrayed the whereabouts of the robber.

"Here! Wilkins! James!" I roared, "Help!" and making a rush for the corner of the room whence the sounds proceeded, I grabbed at something which I could faintly distinguish moving near the sideboard.

Scarcely had I done so, when a violent pain in my fingers caused me to give a howl of agony, and immediately a voice I knew but too well screamed: "Ha, ha, Polly want a cracker," as the odious bird perched upon my head, fixing its claws firmly into my hair. It was at this identical moment, that the servants, alarmed at my outcries, came flocking into the room with lamps, just in time to behold their lord and master arrayed in distinct undress, his feet encased in woolen shoes, a poker in his hand, and a bird like the celebrated raven "perched and sitting" on his head, standing in the middle of the dining-room, for no ostensible reason whatsoever, at the unearthly hour of three o'clock in the morning.

What a fool I felt to be sure. It was just like a scene out of a melodrama,—"The Haunted Man or the Parrot's Curse"—it only needed the "blue light" and "rolling thunder" to complete the situation.

Well, that settled the fate of the parrot. The next day hearing that some distant cousins of mine, the Sympersons were going to emigrate to America, I requested them as a special favor, to take Polly away, far across the foaming billows, from whence she should never return. The small Sympersons, (there were only eleven of them), seemed overjoyed at the possession of such a "lovely bird" as they called her, so Polly went to a new home across the wide Atlantic, and I at length was left in peace.

The year of waiting passed, and on the appointed day, the family again met to settle the affairs of Aunt Jemima. All who had been at the first gathering were present, except the Sympersons, who by that time were comfortably settled in their American home. Mr. Budge, looking just the same as he had done the year before, was seated in the large leathern arm-chair, and as I sat opposite to him, I fancied I saw again that pitying expression pass across his features; but my mind was too fully occupied with its own thoughts to be very observant of other people. I was literally trembling with excitement. Was I to be the happy possessor of Halstead Hall and ten thousand a year, or not? That was the question.

Mr. Budge rose, I grasped the arms of my chair, and with dilated eyes, and shaking limbs watched him as he unfolded the document which contained my fate.

Slowly and distinctly the words reached my ears, falling like lumps of ice on my fevered imagination.

"I, Jemima Vane give and bequeath all my property, real and personal, my house Halstead Hall and adjoining lands, all shares, debentures and stocks, all cash, moneys, in short everything of which I do possessed, (with the exception of some minor legacies,) to the person who shall have cared for and given a home to my parrot Polly, during the year succeeding my death."

Witness my hand this second day of August, 1865.

(Signed) JEMIMA VANE.

Witnessed by  
JAMES WILSON  
AND

ROBERT GORDON.

The little Sympersons gambol on the lawn of Halstead Hall, and I, Adolphus Montgomery Vane am their impecunious relative.

Fool, fool that I was,—but who could have foreseen such an extraordinary event. Surely no man was ever before cursed with such a crazy Aunt.

JULIAN DURHAM.