



A TRAGEDY IN THE LIFE OF A BOOK-HUNTER.

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were fulfilled, and he found himself, so far as could be seen, the master of the situation, certain qualms began to pass over his mind. The casuistical question of what was the right thing to do troubled him a little. If he had come across the quarto on a stall and the bookseller in charge,—presumably a man who knew at least the elements of his trade—had asked a ridiculously small price for it—well, Gibbs would not have thought it necessary to enlighten another man as to his business; he would have pocketed the volume and gone home with it rejoicing. But if on a casual call on a poor and infirm widow he had espied it lying on a shelf, and had gathered that, if he gave the owner half a sovereign, he would not only rejoice her heart but be held up to the neighbours as a man who had done a kind and generous deed for the sake of the poor, the question would have presented itself in a much more difficult light. Gibbs hoped in this case that he would have the courage to tell the old lady that her book was a great deal more valuable than she imagined, and that he would give her at any rate a fair proportion of what it was worth. But here was quite a different affair. The old laird had left no family; his property went to a distant relation whom he had cared little about; he, of course, must have known the value of his treasures, but he had left no will, no paper saying how they were to be disposed of. Could it be possible (thought Gibbs with a shudder which ran all through him) that it was his bounden duty to go to the manager of the sale and say: "Here is a priceless edition of Shakespeare, of whose value you are evidently ignorant; it is worth £200, £300, for aught I know, £500; it is absolutely unique. Take it to Sotheby's—and let my reward be the consciousness that I have put a large sum of money into the pocket of a perfect stranger." If this were so, then Gibbs felt that on this occasion he would not do his duty; he felt so sure that the attempt would be a failure that it seemed to him better not to make it, and he could, moreover, always make the graceful speech and hand the book over after the sale. So he put the quarto carefully back and went off in search of the auctioneer. As he left the room a thrill of virtuous self-satisfaction suddenly came over him, which went far towards allaying the qualms he had felt before. He might have put the Grimms into one pocket, and "Hans of Iceland" into the other, and buttoned the quarto under his coat, and it was ninety-nine to one hundred that no one would be the wiser or feel the poorer. And he knew that many men would have done this without thinking twice about it, and in some queer way or other have soothed their consciences for the wicked act. It was with a swelling heart that Gibbs thought of his trustworthiness and honesty. But lest there should be others about with hands not so much under control as his, he resolved to take up his quarters in the room, or at any rate never be very far from it, so as to be in a position to counteract possible felonies.

The auctioneer was a stout, moon-faced man, with no doubt a fair knowledge of cattle and sheep and the cheaper kinds of furniture. His resonant voice could be heard all over the house: "For this fine mahogany table—the best in the sale—with cover and extra leaves complete—will dine

twelve people—thirty shillings, thirty-five shillings, thirty-seven and six! Who says the twa nots?" And when he had coaxed the "twa nots" out of the reluctant pocket of the Free Church minister, he unblushingly produced another table superior to the first, which was bought by the doctor for five shillings less, and which was the means of causing a slight coolness between the two worthy men for a week or two. There are few more dreary ways of spending a day than in attending a sale of furniture when you don't want to buy any.

At last the books were reached. The bedsteads, the chairs, the kitchen things, the bits of carpet on the stairs and landing were all disposed of, and the auctioneer seated himself on a table in front of the shelves, while his assistant handed him a great parcel just as they had stood in line. Gibbs had satisfied himself that everything that was of any value to him was in the furthest corner of one of the lowest shelves: but now at the last moment a fear crept over him that his examination had been too casual and hurried, that lurking in some cover, or bound up perhaps in some worthless volume, there might be something too good to risk the loss of. Some books, too, had been taken out by the country people, and might not have been put back in the same places. So he decided that for his future peace of mind it was necessary to buy the whole assortment.

It is related in the account of the ever-memorable sale of the Valdarfer Boccaccio that, "the honour of firing the first shot was due to a gentleman of Shropshire . . . who seemed to recoil from the reverberation of the report himself had made." No such feeling seemed to possess the mind of the individual who first lifted up his voice in that room. He was a short, stout, red-faced man, the "merchant" of the "town," as the half-dozen houses in the neighbourhood were called, and being also the postmaster and the registrar for the district, he had something of a literary reputation to keep up. In a measured and determined voice he started the bidding. "I'll give ye—ninepence," and then he glared all round the room as if to say, "Let h'm overtop that who dares!" "A shilling," said Gibbs. "And—threepence," retorted the merchant, turning with rather an injured face to have a good look at his opponent. "Half a crown," went on Gibbs—how he longed to shout out, "Twenty pounds for the lot!" But he feared to do anything which would make the audience, and still more the auctioneer, suspicious. This hundred per cent. of an advance secured him the first lot, and the young clerk pushed over to him a collection which a hurried examination showed to be three odd volumes of the "Annual Register," three volumes of "Chamber's Miscellany," and the third volume of "The Fairchild Family."

The second lot were by this time laid on the table; there seemed to be something more of the Register in it, and a dull green octavo gave some promise of a continuation of Mrs. Sherwood's excellent romance. The postmaster again began the fray with the same offer as before. "I'll not bid on that trash," said Gibbs to himself, and it seemed as if the government official was to have his way this time. But just

HERE was his "Hans in Iceland," with its strange, wild etchings, his "Life in Paris," a large paper edition in the salmon-coloured wrappers just as it was issued. Interested and excited as Gibbs would have been at these discoveries at any other time he had no thought now but for the quarto. It was not among the illustrated books, and he searched again among the larger volumes in the bottom shelf. There stood

Penn's "Quakers," as it had stood for perhaps a hundred years, defying dust and damp and draughts in its massive binding. There were old French and Spanish dictionaries, a good edition of Tacitus in several volumes, the genuine works of Josephus, and Gerarde's "Herbal." What was this dingy, half-covered thing lying on the top of the rest, more in folio than in quarto size? Gibbs drew it out, and when he had opened it he gave a kind of gasp, and looked round to the door to see if he was alone. The quarto was merely loosely stitched into the calf binding, which had evidently been made for a larger book; it had been kept with the greatest care, and seemed without a flaw or blemish; it was quite untouched by the knife, and some leaves at the end were still unopened,—left so probably to show the perfect virginity of its state. It was not the history of the Merry Wives which lay embedded in its pages, nor yet that of the Danish Prince, but—"A Pleasant and Conceited Comedie called Loue's Labors Lost. As it was presented before her Highness this last Christmas. Newly corrected and augmented by W. Shakespeare."

It was manifest to Gibbs that those who had the management of the sale knew nothing of the value of this book or of the few other treasures in the room; they were all to be placed on the same footing as Josephus, or Dickinson's "Agriculture," and sold for what they would fetch. He had been hoping and trusting that this would be the case ever since he heard of the quarto, but now, when his wishes

