The GENTLE GRAFTER By O. HENRY

"ABOUT 100 A DAY WAS WHAT CAME IN."

"MR. PETERS, I'M IN LOVE."

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"AS I HAVE told you before," said Jeff Peters, "I never had much confidence in the perfidiousness of woman. As partners or coeducators in the most innocent line of graft they are not trustworthy."

"They deserve the compliment," said I. "I think they are entitled to be called the honest sex."

"Why shouldn't they be?" said Jeff. "They've got the other sex either grafting or working overtime for 'em. They're all right in business until they get their emotions or their hair touched up too much. Then you want to have a flat-footed, heavy-breathing man with sandy whiskers, five kids and a building and loan mortgage ready as an understudy to take her desk. Now there was that widow lady that me and Andy Tucker engaged to help us in that little matrimonial agency scheme we floated out in Cairo.

"When you've got enough advertising capital, say a roll as big as the little end of a wagon tongue, there's money in matrimonial agencies. We had about $6000 and we expected to double it in two months, which is about as long as a scheme like ours can be carried on without taking out a New Jersey charter.

"We fixed up an advertisement that read about like this:

"Charming widow, beautiful, home-loving, 32 years, possessing $3000 cash and owning valuable country property, would remarry. Would prefer a poor man with affectionate disposition to one with means, as she realizes that the solid virtues are oftenest to be found in the humble walks of life. No objection to elderly man or one of homely appearance if faithful and true and competent to manage property and invest money with judgment. Address, with particulars, LONELY, Care of Peters & Tucker, agents, Cairo, Ill.

"'So far, so pernicious,' says I, when we had finished the literary concoction. 'And now,' says I, 'where's the lady?'

"Andy gives me one of his looks of calm irritation.

"'Jeff,' says he, 'I thought you had lost them ideas of realism in your art. Why should there be a lady? When they sell a lot of watered stock on Wall street would you expect to find a mermaid in it? What has a matrimonial ad got to do with a lady?'

"'Now listen,' says I. 'You know my rule, Andy, that in all my illegitimate inroads against the legal letter of the law the article sold must be existent, visible, producible. In that way and by a careful study of city ordinances and train schedules I have kept out of all trouble with the police that a $5 bill and a cigar could not square. Now, to work this scheme we've got to be able to produce bodily a charming widow or its equivalent with or without the beauty, hereditaments and appurtenances set forth in the catalogue and writ of errors, or hereafter be held by a justice of the peace.

"'Well,' says Andy, reconstruing his mind, 'maybe it would be safer in case the postoffice or the peace commission should 'try to investigate our agency. But where,' he says, 'could you hope to find a widow who would waste time on a matrimonial scheme that had no matrimony in it?'

"I told Andy that I thought I knew of the exact party. An old friend of mine, Zeke Trotter, who used to draw soda water and teeth in a tent show, had made his wife a widow a year before by drinking some dyspepsia cure of the old doctor's instead of the liniment that he always got boozed up on. I used to stop at their house often, and I thought we could get her to work with us.

"'Twas only 60 miles to the little town where he lived, so I jumped out on the 'I. C.' and finds her in the same cottage with the sunflowers and roots standing on the washtub. Mrs. Trotter fitted our ad first-rate except, maybe, for beauty and age and property valuation. But she looked feasible and praiseworthy to the eye, and it was a kindness to Zeke's memory to give her the job.

"'Is this an honest deal you're putting on, Mr. Peters,' she asks me when I tell her what we want.

"Mrs. Trotter,' says I, 'Andy Tucker and me have computed the calculation that 3000 men in this broad and unfair country will endeavor to secure your fair hand and ostensible money and property through our advertisement. Out of that number something like thirty hundred will expect to give you in exchange, if they should win you, the carcass of a lazy and mercenary loafer, a failure in life, a swindler and contemptible fortune-seeker.

"'Me and Andy,' says I, 'propose to teach these preyers on society a lesson. It was with difficulty,' says I, 'that me and Andy could refrain from forming a corporation under the title of the Great Moral and Millennial Malevolent Matrimonial Agency. Does that satisfy you?'

"'It does, Mr. Peters,' says she. 'I might have known you wouldn't have gone into anything that wasn't opprobrious. But what will my duties be? Do I have to reject personally these 3000 ramscallions you speak of, or can I throw them out in bunches?'

"'Your jab, Mrs. Trotter,' says I, 'will be practically a cynosure. You will live at a quiet hotel and will have no work to do. Andy and I will attend to all the correspondence and business end of it.

"'Of course,' says I, 'some of the more ardent and impetuous suitors who can raise the railroad fare may come to Cairo to personally press their suit, or whatever fraction of a suit they may be wearing. In that case you will be probably put to the inconvenience of kicking them out face to face. We will pay you $25 per week and hotel expenses.'

"'Give me five minutes,' says Mrs. Trotter, 'to get my powder rag and leave the front door key with a neighbor and you can let my salary begin.'

"So I conveys Mrs. Trotter to Cairo and establishes her in a family hotel far enough away from mine and Andy's quarters to be unsuspicious and available, and I tell Andy.

"'Great,' says Andy. 'And now that your conscience is appeased as to the tangibility and proximity of the bait, leaving mutton aside, suppose we revenoo a noo fish.'

"So we began to insert our advertisement in newspapers covering the country far and wide. One ad was all we used. We couldn't have used more without hiring so many clerks and marcelled paraphernalia that the sound of the gumchewing would have disturbed the Postmaster-General.

"We placed $2000 in a bank to Mrs. Trotter's credit and gave her the book to show in case anybody might question the honesty and good faith of the agency. I knew Mrs. Trotter was square and reliable and it was safe to leave it in her name.

"With that one ad Andy and me put in 12 hours a day answering letters.

"About 100 a day was what came in. I never knew there was so many large-hearted but indigent men in the country who were willing to acquire a charming widow and assume the burden of investing her money.

"Most of them admitted that they ran principally to whiskers and lost jobs and were misunderstood by the world; but all of 'em were sure that they were so chock full of affection and manly qualities that the widow would be making the bargain of her life to get 'em.

"Every applicant got a reply from Peters & Tucker informing him that the widow had been deeply impressed by his straightforward and interesting letter and requesting them to write again, stating more particulars and inclosing photograph if convenient. Peters & Tucker also informed the applicant that their fee for handing over the second letter to their fair client would be $2, inclosed therewith.

"WHAT'S THIS?" SAYS I"

"There you see the simple beauty of the scheme. About 90 per cent of them domestic foreign noblemen raised the price somehow and sent it in. That was all there was to it. Except that me and Andy complained an amount about being put to the trouble of sifting open them envelopes and taking the money out.

"Some few clients called in person. We sent 'em to Mrs. Trotter and she did the rest, except for three or four who came back to strike us for carfare. After the letter began to get in from the R. F. D. districts Andy and me were taking in about $200 a day.

"One afternoon when we were busiest and I was stuffing the twos and ones into cigar boxes and Andy was whistling 'No Wedding Bells for Her,' a small, slick man drops in and runs his eye over the walls like he was on the trail of a lost Gainesborough painting or two. As soon as I saw him I felt a glow of pride, because we were running our business on the level.

"'I see you have quite a large mail today,' says the man.

"I reached and got my hat.

"'Come on,' says I. 'We've been expecting you. I'll show you the goods. How was Teddy when you left Washington?'

"I took him down to the Riverview Hotel and had him shake hands with Mrs. Trotter. Then I showed him her bank book with the $2000 to her credit.

"'It seems to be all right,' says the Secret Service.

"'It is,' says I. 'And if you're not a married man I'll leave you to talk a while with the lady. We won't mention the two dollars.'

"'Thanks,' says he. 'If I wasn't I might. Good day, Mr. Peters.'

"Toward the end of three months we had taken in something over $5000, and we saw it was time to quit. We had a good many complaints made to us; and Mrs. Trotter seemed to be tired of the job. A good many suitors had been calling to see her, and she didn't seem to like that.

"So we decides to pull out, and I goes down to Mrs. Trotter's hotel to pay her her last week's salary and say farewell and get her check for the $2000.

"When I got there I found her crying like a kid that don't want to go to school.

"'Now, now,' says I, 'what's it all about? Somebody sassed you or you getting homesick?'

"'No, Mr. Peters,' says she. 'I'll tell you. You always was a friend of Zeke's, and I don't mind. Mr. Peters, I'm in love. I just love a man so hard I can't bear not to get him. He's just the ideal I've always had in mind.'

"'Then take him,' says I. 'That is, if it's a mutual case. Does he return the sentiment according to the specifications and painfulness you have described?'

"'He does,' says she. 'But he's one of the gentlemen that's been coming to see me about the advertisement, and he won't marry me unless I give him the $2000. His name is William Wilkinson.' And then she goes off again in the agitations and hysterics of romance.

"'Mrs. Trotter,' says I, 'there's no man more sympathizing with a woman's affections than I am. Besides, you was once the life partner of one of my best friends. If it was left to me I'd say take this $2000 and the man of your choice and be happy.

"'We could afford to do that, because we have cleaned up over $5000 from these suckers that wanted to marry you. But,' says I, 'Andy Tucker is to be consulted.

"'He is a good man, but keen in business. He is my equal partner financially. I will talk to Andy,' says I, 'and see what can be done.'

"I goes back to our hotel and lays the case before Andy.

"'I was expecting something like this all the time,' says Andy. 'You can't trust a woman to stick by you in any scheme that involves her emotions and preferences.'

"'It's a sad thing, Andy,' says I, 'to think that we've been the cause of the breaking of a woman's heart.'

"'It is,' says Andy, 'and I tell you what I'm willing to do, Jeff. You've always been a man of soft and generous heart and disposition. Perhaps I've been too hard and worldly and suspicious. For once I'll meet you halfway. Go to Mrs. Trotter and tell her to draw the $2000 from the bank and give it to this man she's infatuated with and be happy.'

"I jumps up and shakes Andy's hand for five minutes, and then I goes back to Mrs. Trotter and tells her, and she cries as hard for joy as she did for sorrow.

"Two days afterward me and Andy packed up to go.

"'Wouldn't you like to go down and meet Mrs. Trotter once before we leave?' I asks him. 'She'd like mightily to know you and express her encomiums and gratitude.'

"'Why, I guess not,' says Andy. 'I guess we'd better hurry and catch that train.'

"I was strapping our capital around me in a money belt like we always carried it, when Andy pulls a roll of large bills out of his pocket and asks me to put 'em with the rest.

"'What's this?' says I.

"'It's Mrs. Trotter's two thousand,' says Andy.

"'How do you come to have it?' I asks.

"'She gave it to me,' says Andy. 'I've been calling on her three evenings a week for more than a month.'

"'Then you are William Wilkinson?' says I.

"'I was,' says Andy."

WILL SHAKESPEARE'S BONES REMAIN UNDISTURBED?

Curiosity of Modern Vandals May Become So Great as to Cause Poet's Ashes to Be Uncovered.

HOW much longer is Shakespeare to be allowed to sleep on unmolested in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-on-Avon?

In London, recently, that question came up for discussion. A private meeting was being held by one of the many societies that exist for the study of the bard's life and works, and something more than a mere bid for idle talk and speculation was intended by the author of the query.

As an earnest Shakespeare lover and student, he made some surprising statements and stirred his sobersided audience by openly expressing the melancholy opinion that the time is fast approaching when Shakespeare can no longer be bracketed with Moses and Merlin as one of the few heroes whose tombs remain respected and inviolate, says a London correspondent of the New York Sun. Merlin, of course, admitted this pessimistic club member, was buried under a spell, and his grave, like that of the leader of Israel's exodus, on Nebo's lonely mountain, defies discovery and desecration.

Shakespeare, however, enjoys no such advantage. For nearly 300 years he has maintained his last sleep undisturbed, and for the most part in an unguarded grave, but it is a growing and disconcerting conviction among his most faithful worshippers that the days of the preservation of his post mortem privacy are practically numbered.

Until about 65 years ago he was safe. But times have changed; the Shakespearean controversy has reached almost a critically intense stage, and it is hardly to be expected that "Hamlet's" creator will continue undisturbed when kings and conquerors have fallen victims to the insatiable modern curiosity.

All the great folk of Westminster Abbey have experienced the dismal humiliation of being turned out of their leaden winding sheets. In Victoria's reign Dean Stanley systematically exhumed every body in the Abbey, and even the royal bones in Windsor's famous Chapel of St. George were dragged to the light.

Over in France and Italy the irreverent treatment of the remnant left of the heroes and heroines of history has been quite as pronounced as in England. The German Emperor thought it no impiety to disturb mighty Charlemagne at Aix. Even Agamemnon has suffered at the hands of the modern excavator of the ruins of Troy, and the Pharoahs and Ptolemies of Egypt would be disgusted could they but know what flimsy protection vaults in the living rock and gigantic pyramids prove for helpless dead folk when the twentieth century intruder is up and doing.

But while Cleopatra and the great Rameses, Henry VIII, Pythagoras and even Abraham have been hustled ruthlessly back to the light, Shakespeare has benefited by the dignity of a noble repose. It is true that until a comparatively recent date his grave remained unhonored, unvisited and almost unnoticed.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries nobody was gnawed by a desire to gaze upon his ashes, and his famous epitaph was all the defense he required. But in those simple old days the pyramids kept their secrets and nobody dreamed any more of trying to prove that Shakespeare was Bacon or the Earl of Essex than of maintaining that January was June.

When, however, the first doubts as to the identity of the writer of the plays and sonnets arose, an astonishing effort was almost immediately made to remove the graven slab lying over him in Holy Trinity chancel. Just when occurred the first attempt to open the poet's tomb no man is able to say, for there is an old crack across the slab. This sign remains unexplained, yet it may indicate that an assault on dead Shakespeare had been made before that inspired by the faith and curiosity of an American woman.

The amazing enterprise and conviction of the frail lady from New England who 40 years ago crossed the Atlantic for the purpose of exposing the Swan of Avon as a common impostor was the means of rousing the rector of Holy Trinity to the realization that Shakespeare was not quite as safe as he thought him.

Nevertheless Miss Bacon, when she went to Stratford with a view of braving the curse of the poet's epitaph, dealt in no underhand methods. She suffered from the obsession or gift for discovering ciphers from the plays that has made Ignatius Donnelly and scores of others famous, but she was among the first to nourish the conviction that Shakespeare wrote his epitaph with a view to protecting something more than his bones.

By the aid of her ciphers she had arrived at the conclusion that in the dramatist's grave were hidden documents of a character to prove direful things against his title and fame, and she frankly went to the rector of Holy Trinity and asked him to permit the tomb to be opened. It is to Miss Bacon's credit that she was aboveboard and most persuasive. The rector was actually half won by her fire and faith. He even went so far as to think seriously over her urgent plea and her theories and ciphers, but he never could bring himself to give her the permission she asked.

At the ninth hour the spell of the epitaph, which has overawed so many, fell upon him and he probably repented his weakness in even listening to the doughty little American woman.

It was to no less a person than Nathaniel Hawthorne, then Consul in England, that Miss Bacon confided the tale of a secret effort she eventually made to come by the documents she believed were in the tomb. One night she actually spent alone in Holy Trinity Church.

She was a valiant spirit; she always called Shakespeare the "old player," or "Lord Leicester's groom." She looked upon him as a vulgar thief of other men's fame, and she believed that night that she had a free hand to deal as she liked with his grave. However, after a trying vigil she too fell a victim to the spell of that doggerel verse graven on the tomb of that master magician among poets.

She could not quite bring herself to defy the curse; she became indeed almost terrorized, and so ended a scheme for exhumation all but put into execution by one of the most virulent enemies dead Shakespeare has ever had.

To some superstitious believers in the Stratford poet it is a significant as well as pathetic fact that Miss Bacon eventually died in a retreat for the insane.

Her convictions, like John Brown's body, go marching on, and she is by no means the last person to insist that the one and only way to settle the controversy, raging every year more furiously, over the authorship of the plays is to open the tomb in Holy Trinity Church. Worse still, she is not alone in having tried to violate the six feet of earth that Shakespeare claims.

Of course if you go to Stratford and listen to the townsfolk, or the police, or the present rector of Holy Trinity, they will one and all insist that Shakespeare is as safe as Captain Kidd's treasure and that talk of violations of his tomb is the yellowest kind of journalism. Nevertheless there are to be found sober English folk who credit the rumor which says that in all there have been five attempts upon the poet's grave and that one was frustrated only last Spring.

This latest indignity was perpetrated about the time when the birthday festival at Stratford was in full swing. Somebody then discovered that the cement about the edges of the graven slab had been carefully chipped away and that putty had been forced into its place.

From this it was concluded that some enemy to Shakespeare had but done half the work of removing the slab, and that later the vandal would return to scrape out the substitute for cement and easily, with a crowbar shift the stone. Thereupon it was recalled that 25 years ago a similar trick had been discovered just in time.

Singularly discreet have been the rectors of Holy Trinity. Then as now no hue and cry was raised. A whisper of the truth got about at Oxford and so leaked out, to cause a deal of angry and uneasy comment, but as it was evident the marauders had got no further in their work than removing the cement the story of the discovery escaped the newspapers.

It is said at Oxford though that when news of the tampering with Shakespeare's grave got to the ears of Algernon Charles Swinburne that sensitive poet burst into a passion of tears. Under the inspiration of his indignation he dashed off a sonnet and a corking good one it was too, for, when warmed to the task, Swinburne is a master hand at verbal vitriol. He produced 14 lines of gorgeous rhyming curses calculated to sear the souls of the unknown gouls, but he was prevailed upon not to publish the production by those discreet persons who are responsible for Shakespeare's rest.

Recently or since the last signs of intrusion on England's most sacred spot of earth was discovered, a step in the right direction has been taken with a view to securing to the dead poet immunity from vandalistic attacks. In other words, a body of guardians for his tomb has been organized.

This is the only secret Shakespearean society in existence. The names of its members are not generally known, but King Edward is said to be honorary president, and a fund has been raised in order to keep Holy Trinity and its treasure under constant police protection.

Two American gentlemen belong to this society, but no German is permitted to join it, for on several occasions the German critics, who read any and every kind of mad meaning into the plays, have insisted that it is proper and even necessary to have the grave of Shakespeare opened.

Once upon a time a bland spectacled Herr Professor from a German university, with a ponderous tome under his arm, waited upon a rector of Holy Trinity with a round robin, signed by his fellow-professors, to demand certain documents known, he said, to be under the stone in the chancel. The rector was interested, courteous, but firm in refusing his permission. He has learned how to deal with the vaporings of the cranks who visit Stratford in numbers every year.

What Mary Said.

Putnam's Magazine.

Judge Brewer cites a striking example of the sort of spoke which the trickster can insert in the wheels of justice.

A witness testified in a certain case that a person named Mary was present when a particular conversation took place, and the question was asked: "What did Mary say?" This was objected to, and after some discussion the judge ruled out the question. An exception to this decision was immediately taken, and on appeal the higher court reversed the verdict and ordered a new trial on the ground that the question should have been answered.

At the second trial the same inquiry was propounded and elicited the information that Mary said nothing.