Robbing Miss Horniman

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I am getting very tired of sitting in the Café Royal without Fée. However, she may be back any day now; and thank God! her health is all right. But people are pointing me out as the lonely poet, which I bar. It must be nearly six months. We had certainly been setting the pace even to Hilda Howard and Campbell and Izeh and John and Euphemia and Shelley and Little Billie and that crowd; and one day Fée just dropped. I took her round to old Jensen. Milk all day, said he, by the gallon; lie about on the grass; general massage an hour every day; no love affairs; no books. When you can't stick it a day longer you'll know you're better. I gave her a monkey — just half my last thou. — and started to earn some more. I'm still starting. What the devil can I write about?

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Talk of the devil, dere diry! Just as I wrote those words in came Harry Austin, and said he owed me a lunch. I let him pay. Over the coffee he said: Do write me something, cher mâitre! What? said I. Oh, there's a story in that Spalding business, only the journalists have hacked it about. Do it like a tale, only stick to the facts. "How many words, and how many quid?" I asked him, as a business poet should. Fifty pounds, said he; I'll trust you to do me your best; your wit must tell you how long to make it. He left me a tenner on account, and went off. Jolly decent. Well, here goes for the first draft: I'll call it:

Robbing Miss Horniman.

The life of the little market town of Spalding in Lincolnshire is as flat as its situation among the fens. In consequence of this circumstance, death and its approaches do not seem to the inhabitants of any importance, since the states of life and death have no such sharp dividing line as in less favored spots. Miss Anne Horniman, although quite an important inmate, if one may use the word, of Spalding, by reason of her considerable wealth, excellent family, and personal refinement, aroused little attention by falling into a decline and going "abroad" for her health. The town was, however, slightly shocked at hearing of her return, especially as the announcement came in the shape of the arrival of a brisk young architect from London, with orders to make the house up-to-date for her reception. "Up-to-date," thought Spalding dully, "What's wrong with 1066?" However, the activities of the new-comer were not unduly revolutionary. He merely knocked the two main rooms of the ground floor into one, installed an acetylene gas system, and turned the steps that led into the garden and orchard into an inclined plane by the application of a little cement. He explained his object to the local builder. "Miss Horniman is a permanent invalid," he had said, "she lives between her bed and her bath-chair. So it must be easy to wheel her to and from the garden. There is just one other feature of the improvements; she is nervous of robbers, having lived for some years in South Africa; and she has asked me to establish a very complete and elaborate system of burglar alarms." Ten days later the house was ready, and Miss Horniman arrived with her nurse.

She was a little old lady laid up in lavender from the early days of Queen Victoria, timid and yet positive in her manner, a gentlewoman from her neat bonnet and gray ringlets to the mittens on her wrists and ankles. She covered her poor thin body with a charming grey

silk dress, and over her shoulders she wore a shawl of such lace as Venice used to make a century or so ago. The nurse was a stalwart woman, big yet gentle, as is needed where the patient has constantly to be lifted. Miss Horniman had written to the vicar of the parish, a chubby cheery old fellow, asking his assistance in finding servants. He had found her a capable cook, an industrious housemaid; also an honest yokel for the garden, and to wheel her chair should she deem it fit to venture far beyond the grounds of the house, which extended for about an acre, and were devoted to vegetables for use, and tulips for ornament, while some old apple-trees served to combine profit with pleasure.

Miss Horniman welcomed the vicar to tea on the day after her arrival. "I went to South Africa to seek health," she said in her soft faint voice, "but I was unsuccessful. So I thought that I would rather lay my bones beside those of my own people." "I trust indeed, under Providence," replied the vicar, "that the day may be far off for that; but we are all in His hands, dear lady. And we know that all things work together for good." But the old lady turned the subject to less distressing themes; she spoke almost brightly of her experiences in South Africa, where she had taken up the hobby of buying diamonds, and had indeed invested a great part of her fortune in them. She drew the attention of the vicar to a varnished chest that stood beside a walnut chiffonier. It was about eighteen inches square, and three feet high. "Here is where I keep my toys," she said to the clergyman; "perhaps you would like to look at them?" She wheeled her chair slowly across, with the aid of her visitor. "This case is of a special steel," she explained; "though thin, it would take a good deal of time and trouble to force it. But I am not afraid of thieves; surely there are none in dear old Spalding, of all places. And I have an efficient system of burglar alarms. Besides this," she added with a tightening of her thin lips, which showed the vicar that the spirit of

Lincolnshire, the last stronghold of resistance to the Normans, was far from being extinct even in this charming old maid, “in South Africa one learns to protect oneself. Day and night for five years I have had this under my hand.” And she produced from her chair an exceedingly deadly cavalry revolver of old pattern. “My hand and eye are still true,” she said softly, “and I think I could hit an apple every time at thirty paces.” She proceeded to open her little safe. The vicar fairly gasped. Tray after tray of perfect shining stones! Each bore a ticket, with the name of the mine where it was found, the date of the finding, the date of the purchase, the price paid, and the name of the seller.

The simplicity and beauty of the display reduced the vicar to admiring silence. “In my will,” she said, as she shut up the trays again and closed the safe, “I have provided that you shall have the contents of whichever tray you choose, towards the rebuilding of the church. You see, I have made you my partner,” she smiled gently, “and I will ask you not to mention the existence of these stones to anybody.” The vicar was overwhelmed; he gladly promised; and presently he took his leave.

The ladies of Spalding made haste — for Spalding! — to welcome the strayed wanderer home; but Miss Horniman was too feeble to exchange more than the few polite words necessary; she seemed to sink more rapidly than ever in the chill and damp of the fens. Certainly the visitors were disappointed; for she never referred in any way to her treasures, of which the jade Rumor had whispered a good deal more than was prudent. For though the vicar had loyally and sensibly held his tongue, he could hardly conceal his exultation, and in that suspicious population any manifestation of life appears eccentric, and due to some great matter. Now as in Lincolnshire there is nothing to do, the minds of the people ponder incessantly and unfathomably, though with sobriety and even bradytudinity, so that

before Miss Horniman had been home more than two months a connection had been established in the public mind between three things; her residence in South Africa, the diamond industry of that country, and her precautions against burglars. A genius for generalizations, named Abraham Perry, at last crystallized the sentiment of the public in one sparkling phrase: "The old girl's house is chock-a-block o' di'man's," he stated solemnly before closing time, one Saturday night, at the old "Bull and Bush."

As a matter of fact, the syllogism in question had been concluded several days before by cowans and eavesdroppers from London; for on that very night certain knights of the Jimmy, moving in the very best burglarious circles in London, made the first recorded attempt to rob Miss Horniman.

Only one of them was caught, for the Spalding police have to use motor-cycles to pursue a snail; but that one, having a .45 soft-nosed bullet in his hip-joint, was not able even to emulate the humblest creatures of Miss Horniman's garden.

It was expected that further attempts would be few, but this was not the case, though none were attended with quite such disaster as the first. However, Miss Horniman victoriously expelled all assaults without loss. But there are two ways of reducing a fortress. One is to batter down its defences; the other is to induce the garrison to surrender by fair words.

Now the attention of a certain Mr. Gordon Leigh of Spalding was attracted by the fame of the adventure. He would have paid little heed to the gossip of the Lincolnshire peasants; but when the stocks of the railways serving Spalding bounded almost daily, owing to the popularity of the excursion in the Underworld of London, he concluded, as many a wiser man, that so much smoke indicated the presence of fire; and he began to angle for an introduction to Miss Horniman.

Mr. Gordon Leigh was a person of portly presence. He had amassed a considerable fortune in thirty years of pawnbroking in Conduit Street, London; and a great deal more in his secret trade as usurer. Once, however, he had lost a great deal of money; and that was by the failure of a bank. He had further observed, in common with many others, that those who had disregarded the plain warning of Holy Scripture, and put their faith in princes by investing in British Consuls, had lost half their capital in about ten years, for no visible reason. But he had never heard of anybody losing money by keeping it, except the trifle of interest, two or three per cent, which seemed little enough to him who had made his fortune by lending at as many hundreds. So he took the good old way; he built a strong room in his house at Spalding, on his retirement from business, and kept all his money there in gold. It may well be asked: why Spalding? The worthy man had a second passion in his life, almost rivalling his love of money; and the name of that passion was tulips. Now, outside Holland, there is but one soil in the world which will grow tulips to perfection; and Spalding is the centre of that welldowered district.

Gordon Leigh had not spared money in the building of his strong room; there was none safer, no, not in London or New York; and he did not spare money on his hobby. Also, there is money in tulips.

But when it came to diamonds! He could smell a diamond across three counties when the wind was in the right direction. But he always took his profit at once when a diamond came into his hands; for he never knew whether de Beers might not suddenly unload and put a hole in the bottom of the market. Such was the amiable and farseeing individual who was warily and adroitly approaching Miss Horniman. When the introduction was at last affected, through the good offices of the vicar, Miss Horniman proved unexpectedly cordial. Leigh had never been to South Africa, but many of his friends had been in the I. D. B. business, and he had a wealth of

stories to exchange with the old lady. Their passion for tulips, too, was a bond. In short, the heir of all the Leighs (poll-deed, ten pounds, and well worth it) got on much better with her than he had any just reason to expect. For in temperament they were decidedly opposite. Mr. Gordon Leigh was a gross and florid person, thick-set and heavy-jowled, with a nose as fleshy and protuberant as Miss Horniman's was delicate, aristocratic, and tip-tilted. However, as the novelists assure us, it is between two just such opposites that the spark of love frequently springs up. But let us not insist too closely upon electrical or chemical analogies.

Mr. Gordon Leigh pursued his suit with extreme tact. He brought rare tulip bulbs; he read aloud to the old lady by the hour; he often made her simple meals brighter by his presence; and he never referred by so much as a wink to the rumors about treasure, save in the jocular way which had made the affair the staple jest of the district. It had become proverbial to announce the non-success of an enterprise by saying, "I've been robbing Miss Horniman!" It even became a catch-word in London itself. But one dark afternoon in December, after a peculiarly determined attempt on the previous night, the lady broached the subject herself. "I don't see why I shouldn't treat you as a friend, Mr. Leigh. You must be curious to see what it is that they are after." And she wheeled over to the little safe and opened it. Nonchalantly she drew out tray after tray, and closed them again. "This," she said suddenly, picking out the central stone from the lowest drawer, "is the best in the little collection." She put it in his hands. "Wonderful!" he exclaimed, and asked permission, readily accorded, to take it to the light. It was indeed a diamond! Mr. Leigh looked at it with keen professional eyes; he even whipped out a glass which he had brought with him every day on the chance of this occasion. It was of the first water; cut in an unusual and most effective shape, it was the finest stone of its

size he had ever seen. He would have been glad to lend a thousand pounds on it in his pawnbroking days. And it was only one of many! With many murmurs of congratulation, he returned the stone, and delicately transferred the conversation to tulips.

It was on the following afternoon that Miss Horniman fainted in her chair from weakness. Leigh saw his opportunity, and took it. When she recovered, she could doubt neither the refinement and respect of his conduct, nor the generous warmth of his affection.

He did not press the advantage, and her maidenly spirit thanked him also for that courtesy. But on the Sunday following, after church, whither Mr. Leigh had accompanied her, she asked him to stay for lunch, and after lunch, the day being bright and sunny, she ventured to wheel her chair into the garden. "Alas!" she said, with ineffable sadness, looking upon the westering sun, "it is the sunset of life for me." "Say not so, dear lady," cried the now impetuous lover, "please God, there are many years of life and happiness before you." "It cannot be, sir," she answered simply, lowering her head. "I am a doomed woman." "If you had someone to love you and care for you," cried Leigh, " 'twould be a new lease of life." "I pray you," she answered, "not to speak in this way to me; I will not pretend to be ignorant of your chivalrous attention; but I cannot accept it." However, Leigh pressed on, and won at last a promise to think of the matter at leisure. He explained that he was no fortune hunter, that he had eighty thousand pounds in his strong room at Spalding. "That is a great sum," answered the invalid, "it is more than all my pretty toys are worth. But I know your spirit," she went on, "it is a noble and chastened one. I could never suspect an unworthy motive in you, Mr. Leigh."

The lover went home in high spirits; he felt sure that she would yield. Ultimately she did so. "I cannot be a true wife to you, Gordon," she said, "we must be resigned to the will of Heaven that we did not meet thirty years

ago. But I offer you what I can, and it may be that Heaven will in some way ratify these true vows exchanged on earth."

And thus the woman who had defied the greatest crooks in South Africa and London stepped blindly into the net of the wilier scoundrel.

She was to live in Leigh's house, of course; it was far finer than her own, and he had made the necessary alterations for her convenience.

She sent over to his house only two trunks, for she needed few clothes, poor lady; but the little safe went with her on her chair to the church. She would not let it out of her sight, even with Leigh to take the responsibility for its safety. And indeed, the attendants at the wedding included a couple of private detectives paid by him to look out for the London contingent.

After the wedding they went to the house of the bridegroom. Leigh heaved a sign of relief as he pushed to the door of the strong room on the precious little safe. "Now everything is in good keeping, little wife!" he cried cheerfully, "I won't reveal the combination, even to you."

It has previously been remarked that Mr. Gordon Leigh had not neglected the study of Holy Scripture in the matter of putting trust in princes; but he should have gone further, and read attentively that passage which advises the wayfaring man not to lay up treasure upon the earth, where rust and moth do corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.

For the night had not passed without event. In the morning Mrs. Leigh expressed a desire to see her diamonds; she wished to choose a brilliant for her husband's hand. But on arriving at the strong room, the door was found wide open; the little safe had disappeared bodily; and so had Mr. Gordon Leigh's Eighty Thousand Pounds.

The police were, of course, notified; London was telegraphed; everything possible was done; but to the hour of this writing no clue has been found.

I wish I could end my story here. But I must add that Leigh's behavior was insufferably brutal. Marital recriminations became acute, though the bride's health hardly permitted her to raise her voice above a whisper. But she told the Scotland Yard people flatly that she had no evidence of the existence of the gold beyond her husband's word, that she believed the whole affair to be a plot between Leigh and one of his Illicit Diamond Buying Friends to rob her of her property. I doubt whether the Yard dissented very strongly from this view. But when the inspector had gone, Leigh said roughly; "get out of here, you ——" I shall not soil my pen with his epithet. The poor lady burst into tears. Half fainting, she was wheeled back to her own house by the indignant nurse.

The next day the vicar called to condole with her — and, incidentally, with himself.

"You shall not lose," she said, "by this affair. On my death I shall see to it that an equivalent sum reaches your fund. I have still some private fortune. As for me, after this loss, and what is more to me, this humiliation, I cannot remain in Spalding. I will rest my bones elsewhere. This blow has broken me."

The good vicar did his best to cheer her.

"No," she sighed, with yet a sweet and subtle smile that bore witness to her resignation to the will of heaven, "no. I feel myself fading imperceptibly away."

Here, in tragedy and pathos, ends the record of a true Englishwoman.

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Virtue rewarded! I had just finished my diligent account when Fée came into the cafe. With her was our friend Sid Sloper, known to the world of racing as The Mite, in allusion to his stature, on the one hand, and his fondness for cheese, on the other. He shook hands with me; Fée embraced me before all the multitude. "Journeys

end in lovers' meetings," she cried. "Now, Sid, you be off; don't dare miss the boat!" "He's riding at Monte Carlo," she explained, when he had gone. "But you, sir? Did I kiss you too soon? Have you been faithful to me?"

"I have, Cynara, in my fashion," I evaded.

"Well, I've been faithful in the old fashion, by the simple process of fidelity," she laughed. "And, I say, let's get married this very afternoon as ever is, and go off round the world!"

"We will not," I said. "I don't know what you've been doing, but I've been 'robbing Miss Horniman.' Ten is all I have in the world!"

"You shouldn't have robbed the poor old lady," she pouted. "Now, I did better. I *was* Miss Horniman!"

"Your rest-cure seems to have done you no good!"

"I'm serious, boykins dear. You know what the doctor said — milk — complete rest — massage — no love — no books. You see, Miss Horniman really happened to be my aunt, and she left me the house when she died, two years ago. So I made up like her, and had duplicate safes, one with a nice nest for the Mite, the other with trays and paste diamonds, and the one real one that Erphemia lent me to fool Mr. Gordon Leigh, of whose little idiosyncrasies I had wind. So all I had to do was to get Sid into the strong room; at night he just walked out, and let in two pals, and they took all the gold to a car, and O! to see London once again! They took a quarter; I've got ten thousand in notes sewn in my frock; and the rest is in your name in about twenty different banks. So come along right down to the Strand and marry me, dear! It's not tainted money!"

"The money's all right," I said, "though I must say it's playing it rather low down to spring all this Wooden-Horse – Ali Baba stuff on us in the twentieth century."

"You told me to read the classics!" she chirped. "Now for the Wedding March!"

"But I can't marry you — you're the wife of that ass Leigh!"

“Wife — I don’t think!” she laughed, dragging me from my settee, “I kept my fingers crossed!”

I felt that the Café Royal was no place for a difficult legal argument with one’s intended wife. Time enough for that on the way to Biskra!