

A Study in Bereavement

WRITTEN BY MR THOMAS PARKER IN 1954

AN old man, looking back on life, usually remembers a few scenes of really striking irony, and probably the most striking irony is that of almost unconscious hypocrisy. There was more of this in the unenlightened though eminently virtuous generation of the first decade of this century than there is now. Perhaps this was due to their not having seen, like ourselves, any really practical application of medical science to what was in those days called the "mystery" of life and death. My readers may possibly remember that it was not till 1904 that Lord Treadwell discovered how life might be prolonged until senile decay had set in, and in this way completely revolutionized the scientific aspect of what is still called "death"—a term which then had a very different meaning. But the old ideas lived on, and it was not until 1915 that the community began to adapt itself to the altered requirements of a more stationary population. It is curious to remember how my elders talked of cancer as an incurable disease, and of suicide as a deplorable aberration, if not as a crime.

But I am wandering, and must return to my reminiscence. In the autumn of 1904, when I was a young man of forty-seven, I remember attending the "funeral" of a distant cousin, called Mrs Mitcham. In those days comparatively few people were cremated, and owing to the uncertain tenure of life it was thought correct on such occasions to simulate an almost unseemly grief, instead of accepting the natural close of human activity in a spirit of rational resignation. The following narrative may interest the younger generation as showing the odd mixture of knowledge and ignorance, sentimentality and insensibility, displayed by their ancestors. My memory of the episode is so vivid that I have been able to reproduce almost exactly the remarks made by the persons then present. Though I have lost sight of most of them, the probability is that some are still alive, and I have, therefore, preferred to use fictitious names.

There was, as I remember, at this "funeral" a certain Mrs Sophia Cardew, the only sister of Mrs Mitcham, with three more or less young daughters; a Mr John Matheson, a stockbroker; a pathetic-looking old woman, called Mrs Boles; and two philanthropic ladies of the parish, Miss Molesworth and Miss Honiton.

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Even in those days there lingered the Victorian custom of making the family solicitor read the will of the person who had been buried, and this function was accordingly performed by a solicitor of the name of Binks, who recently died at the age of 103.

The will began more or less in the common form of the time. The testatrix had left her "faithful landlady," Mrs Boles, £75 a year so long as she looked after the pug and three canaries, and three small legacies to Binks and her two co-district visitors, Miss Molesworth and Miss Honiton respectively. Mrs Cardew was to have the life interest in £7,000, which at her death was to be equally divided among such of her daughters as should be married by April 1, 1907, when the eldest would be thirty-seven, and the youngest twenty-nine. Mr Matheson, the deceased's son-in-law, was residuary legatee. He was a widower with one child, and Andrew Mitcham, his brother-in-law, had died a reputed bachelor some years before.

The will was, on the whole, satisfactory to all parties. The landlady sat reflecting on what would best conduce to the longevity of pugs and canaries, and the Misses Cardew were quite old enough to realize that their aunt's bequest was the best of all possible excuses for open dalliance with gentlemen, who, according to the absurd fashion then in vogue, reserved to themselves the monopoly of courtship. Mr Matheson and Mr Binks most imprudently drank a quantity of "brown sherry," a poisonous liquor which had not then been condemned by any Minister of Hygiene.*

The decorous torpor of the scene was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the local doctor in a garment called a "frock coat" and *pince-nez*. An early marriage had forced him into a country practice, but had not entirely destroyed a really intellectual curiosity of a kind then comparatively rare.

"I have come," he began abruptly, "on a very urgent matter. I was up in town very early this morning, and with great luck managed to see my old contemporary, Julius Treadwell, whom you may recently have seen boomed in the halfpenny papers. I had thought he was a complete charlatan, and wished, if so, to have the means of exposing him. But he took me off to Bart's,†

* If I remember right, this ministry did not exist till 1908.—T.P.

† A big London hospital.

and in the presence of a most distinguished company succeeded in restoring life to a man who had been dead two days. He sets the heart going after four hours' work, and calculates that in such a case life may continue quite five years more, or conceivably until senile decay sets in. We did this with closed doors, but no doubt the evening papers will be full of it. He showed that even after four days he has a reasonable chance of success, as he has now discovered a means of combating any organic changes that may have set in."

The company began to look more and more scandalized, and Mr Binks suddenly drew himself up with great solemnity.

"My dear sir!" he remarked, "I am surprised that you should burst in upon us in this way. Such topics are scarcely seemly on an occasion of this kind, and I have not yet finished explaining the will to the beneficiaries."

"Come, come," said the doctor, "you don't seem to see what I'm driving at. I arranged with Treadwell that I would wire to him immediately on obtaining your consent to try his skill. He will have innumerable applications from all parts of the country to-morrow, and, having regard to the startling circumstances of his position, he says he must have a thousand guinea fee even if he fails."

"I think," replied the solicitor, most emphatically, "that you misapprehend the situation. My clients are, I am sure, not at all prepared to allow such sacrilegious experiments to be tried on their beloved relative. I must also point out that the whole procedure seems to me grossly illegal, and, in any case, no body can be exhumed without the leave of the Home Secretary."

At this point I remember that Mrs Cardew went off into a fit of hysterics, which brought the nerves of the whole party to extreme tension.

"Dr Mills," remarked Mr Matheson, "I entirely agree with my solicitor in thinking that this subject should not have been broached in the presence of the ladies. But, apart from any other consideration, I think it would be cruel to restore life to anyone who has gone to his last rest. I go further, and maintain that it is utterly contrary to the dictates of the Christian religion, however unimportant you may think it."

"You had better call in the parson on that point," retorted

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the doctor, becoming slightly heated; "but here I see you all in deep mourning and presumably afflicted by the loss of the lady who has just died. In all seriousness I hold out a prospect of restoring her to you, and you immediately flout it. I can hardly imagine that you are influenced by the question of expense."

"The fee," said Mr Binks, with awakened interest, "would, I suppose, be paid by the executors* as a part of the funeral expenses; it would therefore be deducted from the residue, and would ultimately fall on the residuary legatee—that is of course *you*, Mr Matheson."

"Of course, if I thought there was anything in the idea, I should have nothing to say against it," was Mr Matheson's rapid comment.

"Properly speaking," continued Mr Binks, "nothing should, in my opinion, be done without the consent of the deceased—but I feel slightly bewildered by the proposal. In any case, the fee should, I think, be apportioned among the beneficiaries. I should add that, even if Mrs Mitcham was alive again, she would have no means of replacing the income of a thousand guineas."

"Interesting as these details may be to the legal mind," said the doctor, addressing himself to the whole company, "the question now before all of you is whether or not any of you wish to see Mrs Mitcham alive again. The man I saw this morning is now lying in bed in a perfectly normal condition, and talking as anyone might who had emerged from a long catalepsy. I see myself no reason for seriously doubting that the same result might be achieved here."

Mrs Cardew had, meantime, slightly recovered, and suddenly observed:

"You know perfectly well, doctor, that this is sanctioned by no law, human or divine."

Her daughters did not seem to know quite what to say, but the eldest, whose share of the £7,000 seemed unpleasantly contingent, turned to her mother:

"You must remember, mamma, that modern science does wonderful things. As Mr Fulton said in his sermon last week,

* In those days the State had not yet taken over these functions, and even solicitors were allowed to act in this capacity until 1921, when the great principle of "compulsory administration" was inaugurated by the centenarian Lord Chancellor.

scientific discoveries are often providential. In that case they are like new Acts of Parliament, and become a law in themselves. Think of having dear Auntie back again! We needn't see her till she has recovered."

The landlady who, as far as I remember, cared more for the dead woman than her relations, here showed a strong inclination to tears. At the same time Miss Molesworth and Miss Honiton rose, and said they thought that Mr Fulton should be consulted before any decision was arrived at. I understood Miss Honiton to add that she had never thought she would live to see those beautiful words, "Earth to earth, dust to dust," entirely lose their meaning.*

At this moment there was a knock at the door, and the doctor's servant entered with a telegram. The doctor opened and read it.

Can no longer come down, booked for next fortnight.—Treadwell.

A visible relief came over everyone.

"I wonder if the remarks of Lazarus's family were correctly reported," muttered the doctor, as he closed the door behind him.

Lazarus, I may add, was a personage whose name, though now only familiar to scholars, was commonly cited at that time to illustrate what was then considered a miraculous recovery of consciousness.

E. S. P. HAYNES

* A quotation from a liturgy then in use at "funerals."