

The Tin Box

HERBERT KEEN

'If I were you, Perkins,' said Mr Booth one evening in the smoking-room, 'I should take care what I was about with that little widow.'

'You mean Mrs Williams?' I enquired.

'Oh! Is that her name?' remarked my friend, carelessly, refilling his pipe with deliberation.

'Why, you know it is!' I returned, rather sharply.

'I have a bad memory for names,' said Mr Booth, with a slight shrug; 'you seem to be getting quite intimate.'

'I'm decently civil to her,' I replied, significantly.

'And I have avoided her? Yes; that's quite true,' said Mr Booth, smiling. 'Perhaps I instinctively share Mr Weller senior's antipathy to widows. Anyhow, I don't like the face of this one.'

I was astonished and rather disturbed at this. I had great confidence in my friend's judgement, but when I recalled to mind the refined and delicate features, the soft trustful brown eyes, the gentle voice, and the timid shrinking manner of the unfortunate lady he referred to, I was filled with indignation at his cynical attitude. Mrs Williams had resided at Elvira House for about a week or ten days, with her only child, a pretty little girl of five years old, and, owing to the accident of being placed next to her at the dinner-table, I had struck up an acquaintance with her. But she was neither remarkably good-looking nor particularly young, and my predilection was rather due to sympathy and good-nature than to admiration for her personal charms. Besides, she was apparently the last person to court attention, for her whole thoughts seemed centred upon her child, whom she evidently adored.

'I fancy she manœuvred a little to get put next to you at table,' said Mr Booth, watching me quietly.

'You wouldn't say that if you knew her better,' I retorted, hotly.

'You think it was an accident? Well, perhaps!' said my companion, in his enigmatical way.

'I'm sure of it,' I said, emphatically. 'Mrs Nix arranged it.'

'All right, old fellow. It's no concern of mine,' said Mr Booth, good-humouredly. 'Only I shouldn't lend her any more money if I were you.'

'How do you know I have done so?' I enquired, reddening.

'You asked me to change you a cheque the other day. It is a mere guess, but putting two and two together——'

'You happen to be right for once,' I interrupted, with some vexation. 'I lent her ten pounds, till her dividends fall due on Tuesday next. I suppose you are going to suggest that the money is lost?'

'It depends upon her circumstances,' he replied, nodding his head.

'Well, do you know anything about her? Come, Booth! Out with it!' I exclaimed, irritably.

'I? How should I?' said he, raising his eyebrows. 'I've never seen her before in my life.'

'She is the widow of a Mr John Williams, who died about two years ago. He lived at Gateshead, and was a wholesale tobacconist. He left everything to her by his will,' I explained, to show that I was not wholly ignorant of the lady's affairs.

'How do you know?' enquired Mr Booth.

'She showed me a probate,' I replied. 'I didn't ask her, but when she requested me to accommodate her with that trifle of money, she volunteered to explain how she was situated.'

'I see,' observed Mr Booth, apparently impressed.

'Unfortunately the poor lady was left very badly off,' I went on, mollified by the change in my friend's manner, which was now more sympathetic, 'and that is what now brings her up to town. She has a fixed belief that her husband, who seems to have been somewhat eccentric in his later days, deposited some money or securities at some bank in London or elsewhere.'

'Has she any clue?' enquired Mr Booth, manifestly interested.

'Not that I know of. She is very reticent,' I replied.

'She hasn't asked your assistance then?' said my friend.

'No. Of course I should be pleased to help if I could,' I said, with a touch of defiance in my tone.

Mr Booth did not gainsay me this time; either he was tired of the subject or else he perceived that I rather resented his interference. At all events he relapsed into one of those silent moods in which he was wont to indulge, and sat puffing at his pipe with his eyes fixed on the

fire for the remainder of the evening, without joining in the general conversation which presently ensued as other guests strolled in.

I was annoyed with him because I thought that his opinion of poor little Mrs Williams was unreasonably prejudiced and very unjust; nevertheless, his warning was not quite thrown away upon me, for I determined to observe her with closer attention. The only result of this, however, was to convince me more firmly than ever of her absolute good faith, though I confess that I began to realize that her refinement of speech and manner was partly assumed. In unguarded moments, she occasionally dropped an aspirate, and when she grew a little excited in speaking of her efforts to trace her husband's missing estate, she sometimes made use of expressions which were suggestive of a humble origin.

But these slight solecisms were hardly perceptible, and of course a defective education is, at most, a misfortune. For the rest, she continued to interest me greatly and when, punctually on the appointed day, she repaid me the ten pounds with many fervent expressions of gratitude, I could not forbear exulting over my friend.

'That is all right,' he said, laughingly, on hearing the news, but looking a little shamefaced, as I thought. 'You needn't tell her I gave you a friendly warning.'

'Of course not,' I replied, indignantly.

'Any news about her husband's property?' he asked, carelessly.

'None. She has looked up all his London friends, and done everything she can,' I answered.

'Why doesn't she advertise in the newspapers?'

'She did so more than a year ago in *The Times* and other journals. Have you anything to suggest?' I enquired, anxiously.

'No. Don't for goodness' sake, my dear fellow, ask me to mix myself up in the lady's affairs,' he said, with more temper than he usually displayed. 'I would rather you didn't even tell her you have consulted me about them.'

I promised this the more readily because I suddenly remembered having once suggested to Mrs Williams that she should ask the advice of a friend of mine—having Mr Booth in my mind—in her difficulty, and had been met by a decided and emphatic refusal. The incident had made no impression on me at the time, but the idea now occurred to me that perhaps Mrs Williams had guessed whom I

referred to, and had been moved by resentment at the marked coldness which Mr Booth always displayed towards her.

I had assured him, quite truthfully, that Mrs Williams had never asked me to assist her in her search, nor had I foreseen that she would do so. But a few mornings afterwards, the youth who did the valeting of the male portion of the establishment, entered my room while I was shaving with an urgent message from the lady that she was waiting for me in the drawing-room, and would be obliged if I would descend there as soon as possible.

I found the little widow looking very pale and excited, with an open letter in her hand, which had arrived by the early post. Directly I appeared she flourished triumphantly a slip of blue paper, exclaiming eagerly:

'See, Mr Perkins, what I have received this morning! My sister, who is taking charge of my house at Gateshead, found it between the leaves of a book, *Boswell's Life of Johnson*, which she took out quite by chance from the bookcase in the dining-room. My poor husband was devoted to that work, and was constantly reading it during his illness. I am not much of a reader myself, and if it hadn't been for my sister, the paper might have remained undiscovered for years.'

While Mrs Williams was thus breathlessly explaining, I glanced at the document, which was a form of receipt or acknowledgment from Messrs Drake, Crump & Co., Bankers, of Fleet Street, for a tin box deposited with them by her husband for safe custody on a specified date.

'I congratulate you,' I replied, thinking how attractive she looked in her excitement. 'It is indeed a fortunate discovery.'

'I knew it! I was sure that he had done something of the kind!' exclaimed Mrs Williams, joyfully. 'But he was very secretive about his affairs latterly—it became quite a mania with him—I shouldn't be surprised to find the box contains property of great value.'

'The receipt, I see, is dated about six months before your husband died,' I observed.

'Yes. We were up in town then, staying in lodgings in Edwardes Square, Kensington,' replied Mrs Williams, reflectively. 'I brought him up to see a physician, though nobody suspected at the time the serious nature of his symptoms. He used frequently to go out alone; and I suppose he got the box from his brokers or from some lawyer.'

'Anyhow, he deposited it with Drake, Crump & Co.; there is no

doubt about that,' I remarked, feeling quite carried away by the widow's satisfaction. 'I suppose you will call upon them and claim it at once?'

'Yes, unless—I really feel quite ashamed to ask such a favour of you, Mr Perkins—but I was going to say, unless you would mind calling upon them in the first instance? The fact is, my little girl is not very well today, and besides, this delightful surprise has rather upset me; my head aches dreadfully,' said Mrs Williams, putting her white hand to her brow, but smiling bravely.

'Oh! I shall be very pleased,' I answered, readily. 'You had better give me the probate of your husband's will. The bankers will probably want to see that.'

'Certainly, I will go and fetch it. I am so very much obliged to you, Mr Perkins,' said the widow, grasping my hand as she left the room.

Our interview thus terminated. Mrs Williams brought down the official parchment, and armed with this, I hastened after breakfast to call upon Messrs Drake, Crump & Co., feeling quite interested and excited about the affair. I did not have an opportunity of telling Mr Booth of my errand; he was late for breakfast, I remember, and I was impatient to be off so as to look in at the bank on my way to business. I merely mention this because, as will appear later, he afterwards blamed me for not having confided in him at this juncture.

The banking establishment of Messrs Drake, Crump & Co., was a small private concern which has long since been absorbed by one of the big joint-stock undertakings. In those days its affairs were conducted in a dingy old house with barred windows about halfway down Fleet Street, in a leisurely, sleepy kind of way. The cashier's office was in the front room, the staff consisting of only three or four elderly clerks, and on presenting my card I was ushered into a gloomy little apartment at the back, where sat a quaint white-headed old gentleman in knee-breeches, who was evidently one of the partners.

'Dear me! That is very strange,' he exclaimed, when I had explained my business. 'Mr Williams is dead, is he? Well, well, we were wondering! We haven't heard anything of him for quite a long time.'

'He has been dead more than two years,' I replied.

'Two years, eh? Let me see,' he observed, as he rang a hand-bell upon the table. 'Mr Jameson,' he added, as a clerk appeared, 'when did we last hear from Mr John Williams?'

'He has not drawn on his account for upwards of two years. His pass-book is here,' answered the Clerk.

'Oh! then he had a current account as well?' I exclaimed.

'A small one—yes,' replied the old gentleman. 'What is the balance, Mr Jameson?'

'About £130,' said the clerk.

'You see, the pass-book being here, and the receipt for the box mislaid, his widow had no clue,' I explained, eagerly.

'Quite so! Quite so! And this is the probate of his will, eh?' said the old gentleman, taking it up, and holding it close to his nose.

'I wonder you didn't see the advertisements in the papers,' I remarked. 'His widow knew he had property somewhere, and she advertised.'

'Extraordinary that they should have escaped us. We always keep a lookout,' said the old gentleman, glancing through the probate. 'When did the advertisements appear?'

'I cannot tell you the date. Mrs Williams will,' I answered.

'And you are a friend of the widow's,' enquired the old gentleman, looking at me pretty keenly over his spectacles.

'Yes.'

'H'm! The probate seems all right. She is the sole executrix, I see. Of course, if she wants to withdraw the money and take away the box, she must attend in person. You can identify her, I suppose, and verify her signature?'

'Certainly.'

'H'm! You are Mr John Perkins, of the Monarchy Insurance Office?' he said, scrutinizing my card. 'Who is your present manager?'

'Mr Middleton.'

'To be sure. I have the pleasure of knowing him. Make him my compliments,' said the old gentleman, quaintly.

'I will. I suppose Mrs Williams can draw on the account, and have access to the box when she chooses?' I enquired.

'H'm! H'm! I see the testator was described in his will as of Gateshead,' said the old gentleman, doubtfully. 'That isn't the address in our books.'

'He lived there, and his widow lives there still,' I replied. 'Mrs Williams tells me that at the date of that deposit receipt they were residing in lodgings in Edwardes Square, Kensington.'

'Quite right. That is the address he gave. Well, sir,' he added,

replying to my former question; 'as everything seems satisfactory, if you will leave the probate for registration, and call here with the lady any time after twelve o'clock tomorrow, the box can be given up. Good morning!'

I was very pleased, for Mrs William's sake, to find that everything was straightforward; and the fact of there being a substantial sum of money to the dead man's credit, which the widow evidently knew nothing about, would, I thought, be some compensation in case the contents of the box should turn out to be less valuable than she anticipated. Later in the day, my chief, Mr Middleton, surprised me by coming up to my desk at the office, and saying:

'Mr Perkins, I have just answered an enquiry about you.'

'An enquiry!' I exclaimed, rather startled.

'Yes, from Messrs Drake, Crump & Co., of Fleet Street. Have you some private business with them?' he asked, curiously.

'Not of my own, sir. A lady in whose affairs I am interested——'

'All right, Mr Perkins. I don't wish to enquire details,' he said, smiling at my embarrassment. 'I was of course pleased to vouch for your respectability and integrity.'

'Thank you, sir,' I replied, secretly annoyed at the banker's inquisitiveness.

I now perceived that I had been of more service to Mrs Williams than I had anticipated, having unconsciously acted as a sort of reference for her, and thereby saved her, perhaps, some little trouble with regard to identification. This gave an additional zest to the pleasure of being able to make such a satisfactory report to her on my return, and I am bound to say that the widow was duly grateful. She overwhelmed me with expressions of thanks, and was really disposed to exaggerate my small civility. I wrote a letter, at her request, to Messrs Drake, Crump & Co., fixing an appointment with them for two o'clock on the following afternoon, and appending a specimen of Mrs Williams' signature; and of course I rapidly agreed to accompany her.

When I told Mr Booth all this, he manifested considerable irritation which, in my surprise, I was foolish enough to attribute to a sort of jealousy, since I could imagine no other possible cause for his ill-humour.

'What the deuce do you want to go meddling with this woman's affairs for, Perkins?' he said, sharply.

'What harm have I done!' I exclaimed.

'Harm! H'm! That remains to be seen,' he growled, puffing angrily at his pipe.

'I cannot understand your prejudice against this poor lady' I said, getting angry in my turn.

'I take no interest in her whatever,' said Mr Booth.

'That's no reason why I shouldn't,' I retorted.

'Oh! Go your own way, only remember that I warned you,' said Mr Booth, dismissing the subject with an impatient shrug.

We might almost have quarrelled, but I was really more amused than angry, and my friend soon recovered his temper. Nothing more was said between us about Mrs Williams, and I attached so little importance to Mr Booth's vague warnings, that it never even occurred to me to cancel the appointment I had made.

Accordingly the next day, at two o'clock, I was waiting for the widow at the door of Messrs Drake, Crump & Co.'s bank as arranged, and, being rather pressed to get back to my office, I began to grow impatient as she did not appear. Ten, twenty, forty minutes passed without any sign of her, and I was on the point of leaving, thinking the lady had made some mistake, when I suddenly espied her on the opposite side of the way; coming up the street from the direction of St Paul's. She looked pale and fatigued, and, as I hastened to her assistance, I saw her glance nervously over her shoulder at a slouching, white-bearded, ragged old beggar man who appeared to be following her.

'What is the matter? Has anything happened?' I enquired.

'Oh no! I lost my way, that's all,' said Mrs Williams, with a nervous laugh.

'Has that fellow been annoying you?' I asked, lowering my voice as the old beggar slunk by hurriedly.

'That man!' exclaimed Mrs Williams, glancing after him, 'Oh no! I hadn't noticed him.'

I gave her my arm, and escorted her across the crowded road into the bank. In the parlour at the back we found old Mr Crump awaiting us, and on a side table was a good-sized tin box with Mrs Williams' name inscribed upon it on a paper label.

'There it is,' exclaimed the widow, as her eyes sparkled. 'I remember it now! I always wondered what had become of it.'

'Have you the key, madam?' enquired Mr Crump, after greeting us

with old-fashioned courtesy, and bowing very low to my companion.

'I think so; at least I have one or two keys here, which I haven't been able to account for,' said Mrs Williams, producing her purse eagerly.

She selected one of the keys, and, crossing over to the box, succeeded in opening it immediately. I only had a glimpse of the contents before Mrs Williams shut down the lid and relocked it; and as they were done up in brown paper parcels or packages I could form no idea of their nature or value.

'I have prepared a cheque so that you can draw out the money if you wish,' said Mr Crump.

'Thank you,' replied Mrs Williams, seating herself at his desk, and affixing her signature to the draft.

'Will you take it in cash?' asked Mr Crump.

'Yes, please. In notes and £20 in gold?' said the widow, with business-like promptitude, as she drew on her glove again.

Mr Crump summoned a cashier, to whom he handed the draft, with the necessary directions, to which I added a request that the porter might be permitted to call a cab. During the absence of the clerk Mr Crump observed, in course of conversation which naturally turned on the late Mr Williams' eccentric conduct with regard to his property:

'By the way, I've looked through the files of *The Times* for the advertisement but I couldn't find it.'

'What advertisement?' enquired Mrs Williams.

'I understood from Mr Perkins that you had advertised in the papers for information about your husband's missing estate,' said Mr Crump, looking at me.

'Oh, yes, so I did,' answered the widow colouring slightly.

'What was the date?' asked Mr Crump.

'Really, I cannot at the moment recollect. I can send you a copy of it when I get back, if it is of any moment,' said Mrs Williams, rather sharply.

'It is of no consequence, of course,' replied the old gentleman, evidently perturbed at seeing that the lady showed signs of resentment. 'I merely asked out of curiosity.'

Mrs Williams appeared, from her manner to resent Mr Crump's enquiry as insinuating some doubt upon the accuracy of her statement, but, fortunately, the return of the cashier with her money

caused a welcome diversion. While she was stowing away the notes and gold in her purse, the cashier looked at me and said:

'There is a cab at the door, sir. Shall I ask the porter to carry the box down?'

'I think I can manage it; it is not heavy,' I replied, as I prepared to lift it.

'I've been thinking, Mr Perkins,' said Mrs Williams, reflectively, while putting her purse away, 'that perhaps it would be wiser to leave the box here for a day or two till I return to Gateshead. That is,' she added, turning to the old gentleman with her pleasantest smile, 'if Mr Crump will kindly allow me?'

'You are welcome to leave it, madam—at your own risk, of course,' replied Mr Crump, a little stiffly.

'You see, I have nowhere to keep it while I am in town,' the lady explained. 'It would be safer here.'

'It is a little irregular, as you are no longer a customer,' said Mr Crump; 'but still——'

'Oh! but if I find I can afford it I shall probably come to live in London, and in that case I should certainly keep my account here,' interrupted Mrs Williams, graciously.

'In any case I am very pleased to oblige you, madam,' said the old gentleman more politely.

Though surprised that Mrs Williams was able to restrain her curiosity about the contents of the box, it was obvious that her suggestion was prudent, and, therefore, we left the box in charge of the bank. Mr Crump bowed us out of his room very civilly, and the porter ushered us to the street door, in front of which was a four-wheeled cab. Just as we reached it the old grey-bearded beggar man, whom I had before noticed, rushed forward and obsequiously turned the handle. Mrs Williams sprang lightly into the vehicle, and again, I thought, she glanced nervously at the cadging old rascal.

'Here, you be off, my man,' I said to him, sharply.

'No, no! Here, my poor fellow, is something for you,' said Mrs Williams, and before I could prevent her she put her hand over my shoulder and gave the beggar a sixpence.

'You shouldn't be so foolish,' I said, laughing, as the old fellow shuffled off with his prize.

'Think of my good luck, Mr Perkins,' laughed the widow.

I gave the cabman the address of Elvira House, and lifted my hat

to Mrs Williams from the pavement as she drove away, little imagining that she would have left London before I returned in the evening. But so it happened, for when I reached Elvira House at the end of the day, I learnt that the widow had received a telegram an hour or so previously summoning her down to Bath on account of the illness of her mother.

'She left many kind messages for you,' added Mrs Nix, when she gave me the information. 'She said she would write to you in the course of a day or two. She was dreadfully upset, poor thing, at the sad news.'

'I did not even know she had a mother living,' I remarked.

'You were the only person she confided in,' said Mrs Nix, playfully.

'I suppose the little girl has gone too?' I observed, a trifle abashed.

'Yes. A sweet child. Everyone is so sorry to lose them. Mrs Williams was a universal favourite,' said Mrs Nix.

This was evidently the case, to judge from the expressions of regret which were uttered at the dinner-table when her departure became generally known. We had rather a reduced company that evening, there being several vacant places. The Major had gone to attend some races at York, whither Mr Booth was understood to have accompanied him; and two or three of our guests were dining out. I was surprised to hear of my friend having yielded to the Major's persuasions, for when the latter had broached the subject of the expedition in the smoking-room on the previous evening, Mr Booth had flatly refused the invitation. But horse-racing was a form of sport which seemed to possess extraordinary attractions for him; and I supposed he had been partly influenced by the desire to keep his companion out of mischief.

I must confess that I felt a little depressed at the widow's unexpected absence. It was quite untrue that I admired her, but her confidences had heightened my platonic regard, and her personality undoubtedly attracted me. I therefore awaited the promised letter with some impatience, and she was good enough not to leave me long in suspense, for by the next evening's post I received from her the following epistle, dated from Lower Pultenay Street, Bath.

MY DEAR MR PERKINS,

Alas! my poor dear mother is dying! So shocking, and so totally unexpected! Of course I must remain by her side till the end, and she may yet linger for some weeks, the doctor says!

I hope Mrs Nix gave you my message. I can never thank you sufficiently for all your kindness dear Mr Perkins, and yet I have a further favour to ask of you!

You know what sick people are! I told my dear mother, who is perfectly conscious, about the box at the bank. Nothing will satisfy her but to know what it contains, as she is anxious to be assured that my little girl and I are sufficiently provided for.

How I regret that I did not examine the contents that day at the bank! And now, what am I to do? I dare not leave my poor mother, even for an hour. I wonder whether you would undertake a journey here and bring the box with you?

I know it is *too* much to ask, yet I have ventured to write to the bank to say that you might call. I am sure your kind heart with prompt you to do this if you possibly can.

Yours most faithfully and sincerely, Dear Mr Perkins,

AMELIA WILLIAMS

I was rather startled by this request and yet—well, in short, I decided to comply with it. I wonder at myself now; most of us have experienced similar astonishment at past foolish actions.

My chief objection, at the time, was that I could not very well get away from the office. However, on consulting a railway timetable, I found that Bath was a much more accessible place than I had imagined. A half-holiday would be all that I required, for I could travel down there and return the same evening. The next day was a Saturday, so that all the indulgence I need ask of my employers was a single hour in order that I might get to the bank before two o'clock to obtain the box.

I therefore wrote immediately to Mrs Williams to say that I would travel down by the train which left Paddington at 3 o'clock, arriving at Bath at 5.15, and that I should return by the express which would bring me back to town about nine. I had no reason for remaining at Bath, and I thought I might accomplish my journey before Mr Booth came back. I think I must have had a vague idea of keeping my trip a secret, both from him and from the other guests, for I was a little sensitive of remarks which had been made about my attentions to the widow.

I duly carried out my programme; the box was handed over to me at the bank without the slightest demur, in consequence of a letter they had received from Mrs Williams; and I arrived at Bath punctually at the time named. I hired a fly, and drove straight to the

widow's address in Lower Pultenay Street, but the servant who opened the door said, to my surprise, that the lady was out, and handed to me a brief pencilled note from her, saying that she had been called away unexpectedly owing to her mother's condition, and asking me to leave the box.

'The poor old lady is not in the house, then,' I remarked, casually.

'What old lady, sir?' enquired the girl, opening her eyes.

'Mrs Williams' mother. Do you know where she lives?'

'No, sir, I don't. Never heard her mention she had a mother here, in Bath, sir,' added the girl.

'But Mrs Williams is in constant attendance upon her mother, who is dying,' I exclaimed.

'Mrs Williams has hardly left the house since she has been here, sir,' said the girl, evidently struck by my surprise. 'She and her little girl went for a drive in a fly about an hour ago. I don't know where they went to. She said if a gentleman came and left a tin box, I was to take great care of it.'

'Did Mrs Williams say when she would return?' I enquired, with an uneasy feeling.

'She said I was to have tea ready at six o'clock sir,' replied the girl, glancing back at the clock.

'I will come in and wait,' I said, with sudden resolution, as I stepped inside the hall.

The servant, whose good faith was manifest, ushered me into a neat parlour, and then left me, after again asseverating, in answer to pressing enquiries, that Mrs Williams was certainly not in attendance on an invalid. Indeed, it was impossible to doubt, from the girl's detailed account of the widow's movements since her arrival in Bath, that the story of the dying mother was a complete fiction.

I felt very much like a person who has unexpectedly received a douche of cold water. At first sight it seemed as though the story had been merely a device to work upon my feelings in order to induce me to bring the box down to Bath. Even so, however, it was extraordinary behaviour on Mrs Williams' part to absent herself just at the hour of my arrival. She had evidently counted upon my leaving the box, and returning at once to London, as I had planned; but why this sudden reluctance to meet me, to say nothing of the ungrateful discourtesy?

I grimly resolved to await an explanation, and when I recalled to mind that Mrs Williams had given the alleged illness of her mother as

an excuse for a hurried departure from Elvira House, my mystification increased. The repeated warnings of Mr Booth rose unpleasantly to my mind, and I had worked myself into a state of mingled indignation and resentment, when a ring at the street door bell announced, as I imagined, the return of Mrs Williams.

I awaited her with considerable trepidation, for I felt that my position was both painful and embarrassing. I heard the servant respond to the summons, and the next moment the room door was thrown open, and who should walk in but—Mr Booth!

I started, and stared at him as though I had seen a ghost; while he seemed equally surprised at seeing me, though he recovered himself quickly. He glanced at the box on the table, and his eyes twinkled.

‘Hullo! I thought you were at York!’ I gasped.

‘And I thought you were in London,’ he said, smiling at my astonishment.

‘I’m waiting to see Mrs Williams,’ I explained.

‘She’s a very clever little woman,’ he said emphatically. ‘You came down by the 5.15 train, I suppose, with that?’

‘Yes.’

‘While she, to put me off the scent, seeks to lead me a wild goose chase, so as to leave the coast clear,’ he added, nodding his head.

‘I found a note from her asking me to leave the box,’ I said resentfully.

‘Yes. She didn’t mean to be impolite to you,’ said Mr Booth, slyly. ‘The fact is, she has been so closely shadowed that if she had stayed at home for you, your arrival with the box would have been noticed. I suspected a trick, though I must own that my calling here in her absence was nothing short of an inspiration,’ he added with great satisfaction.

‘Perhaps you’ll kindly explain it all,’ I exclaimed, with a show of indignation which was intended to disguise my increasing confusion.

‘Not now,’ he said, coolly taking possession of the box, ‘unless you want an awkward scene with the woman which might end in my having to call in the police. In that case, my friend, you would figure somewhat unpleasantly before the public, as an innocent accomplice in an awkward affair. We had better clear out before she returns.’

‘But the box belongs to Mrs Williams!’ I exclaimed, horrified.

‘Well, it does and it doesn’t! I’ll explain going along. Meanwhile,

possession is nine points of the law,' he said, putting the box under his arm and moving to the door.

I was scared by the suggestion of a public scandal, and I had complete faith in my friend. I, therefore, put on my hat and followed him, and by rushing through the streets until we met a fly which drove us at full speed to the station, we just contrived to catch the 6.5 train back to town as it was beginning to move away.

'Well?' I enquired eagerly, as soon as I had recovered my breath.

We had, fortunately, and quite by chance, secured an empty first-class compartment. Mr Booth was leaning back with an air of calm triumph, lighting a cigar, with his feet resting on the tin box.

'Mrs Williams,' he said quietly, 'is the wife of an accomplished forger and swell-mobsmen, who is at present undergoing the felicity of fourteen years penal servitude.'

'The wife!' I gasped.

'Yes; his real name is Bolton, but he called himself Williams among other aliases. In that name he opened an account at Drake's Bank, and deposited the box, a few months before he was arrested.'

'It *was* her husband's property then?' I exclaimed, slightly relieved.

'It contains the proceeds of a very ingenious robbery in Hatton Garden. He was known to have hidden a good bit away somewhere, but he kept his mouth shut, and the police were nonplussed. So was his clever little wife, whose ingenuity and pluck I can't help admiring.'

'Didn't he tell her?' I enquired, interested in spite of my unenviable feelings.

'Yes; but she couldn't get at it. It was lodged at the bank in the name of Williams for safety, and she dared not claim it. But she bided her time, and at length she heard of the death of a Mr John Williams at Gateshead, which showed her husband's prudence in having adopted a common name. Of course, this was her opportunity. The dead man, a complete stranger, was made to represent the actual depositor, and Mrs Williams pretended to be the widow.'

'How did she get hold of the probate of another man's will?' I asked.

'Probably bribed the clerk of the solicitor who had the custody of it. You see, probates are no good when once an estate is wound up. This one was probably kicking about the office, and wouldn't be missed.'

'What of the real Mrs Williams of Gateshead?'

'She is dead.'

'And the advertisements said to have been inserted in the papers?'

'All a lie. There were no advertisements. My dear fellow, she made you serve her purpose beautifully,' laughed Mr Booth.

'It was very unfriendly of you not to have given me a hint,' I exclaimed, furiously indignant.

'My dear Perkins, didn't I warn you over and over again?'

'Yes, but you didn't tell me what you knew.'

'Because at first I knew absolutely nothing. I simply mistrusted her from a kind of instinct. But when you told me the woman's story I went round to Scotland Yard, where I have a friend,' said Mr Booth, delicately flicking the ash from his cigar with his little finger, 'and was shown some photographs. That same evening you told me you had been to the bank on her behalf. You may remember that I was annoyed with you?'

'Even then you might have been more explicit,' I replied angrily.

'Well, the fact is, my dear Perkins, as you had already committed yourself, I couldn't resist the temptation of undertaking this little coup. You played into my hands as it were. But there is no harm done,' he added, laughing at my discomfiture. 'It is entirely a private venture of my own, carried out single-handed.'

'Why didn't she take the box away from the bank that day?' I enquired, after a sulky silence.

'Because she discovered she was being watched,' replied Mr Booth, with imperturbable good-humour. 'Do you remember an old grey-bearded man?'

'Yes.'

'She spotted him, and that sent her out of London.'

'You followed, I suppose?'

'Yes; I knew she would contrive to get the box sent down to her. I thought she would probably have it brought down by one of the bank messengers. I never thought she would have the cheek to——' Mr Booth checked himself abruptly, evidently out of consideration for my feelings; then, after puffing at his cigar for a few moments, he added in a conciliatory tone, 'You mustn't mind, my dear fellow. Only two people besides yourself will ever have even a suspicion of how it has all come about. *I* shan't tell, and you may be sure *she* won't.'

'You forget the grey-bearded man,' I groaned despondently.

'True! Yes, I forgot him,' said Mr Booth, smiling; 'but I'll answer for his discretion as I would for my own.'

'I wouldn't have had it happen for a thousand pounds!' I exclaimed in deep dejection, after we had travelled for twenty miles in complete silence.

Mr Booth looked at me for a few moments with friendly concern; then he leant forward and touched me lightly on the arm.

'My dear fellow, since it *has* happened, I can offer you half the sum you mention as compensation.'

'What do you mean?'

'The owner of the property in this box will no doubt be glad to pay me £500 as a reward. I am sufficiently repaid by the satisfaction of having accomplished a very neat job, entirely off my own bat. As a matter of fact, I owe my success entirely to you.'

'Thanks, no! I'm not a detective,' I interrupted, more rudely I dare say than I was conscious of.

'At least let me offer you a little memento to hang on your watch chain,' he said, wincing at the rebuff but not the least resenting it.

He produced as he spoke, from his pocket, a six-penny piece, and handed it to me.

'What is this?' I asked.

'The identical coin which the fair widow bestowed upon the grey-bearded beggar,' he replied.

'How did you come by it, then?' I asked.

But Mr Booth only smiled, and I then recollected how he had boasted that he had managed his part of the business single-handed.

I have only to add that though my friend always declared that the 'widow' did not entertain the least suspicion of his identity, she never came to Elvira House again, nor even wrote a line of remonstrance or enquiry to me; and as I have heard nothing whatever from that day to this, I conclude she made no complaint but accepted philosophically her bitter disappointment, probably considering herself lucky to have escaped worse consequences.