

The Storyteller.

A DEALER IN ANTIQUE.

OLD Jacob Drew was as his father and grandfather had been before him. Year in year out with scarcely a break for well-nigh three generations, a Drew had sat in the blackened old chair near the doorway of the little shop in the grim old back street and peered wistfully out at the passers-by from the gloom and shadows within. To his occupation Jacob had brought an hereditary fervor of devotion; added to this a long and careful apprenticeship under the kindly guidance of his father, and while still a young man Jacob found himself second to none in the cult of the antique. As a child he had grown to love the quaint old curios, the queer, fantastically-carved old rarities, and the vague, flickering, ill-defined shadows that went to make up the essential features of the curious old shop that was some day to be his heritage. And when Jacob's father had gone the way of all flesh, and was laid to rest beside the mother and the grandparents far away on the outskirts of the city, the young man had slipped into his father's place and taken his seat in the ancestral chair by the doorway, and all unconsciously adopted the habits and simple, childlike ways of its former occupants. But in one respect did Jacob differ from his immediate progenitors. They had, each in his day, attained a certain local celebrity by reason of their wide and deep knowledge of all things relating to ancient lore. But Jacob's knowledge was far beyond theirs. The little they knew had come to him almost naturally. Beyond that his studies had broadened out, including every branch of the vast subject of antiquities, till he had grown saturated with the knowledge of all things pertaining thereto, and had become, in fine, a veritable master of his craft.

And his love for the dim, shadowy past was greater than that of his sires, even as his knowledge of its products was far beyond theirs. The cruel, rusty old weapons, the faded fragments of old-fashioned tapestry, the many multi-shaped relics of a by-gone age, he loved them every one. In a word, he worshipped at the shrine of antiquity, and it only needed the accident of age in anything to cause him to look on it as something sacred, venerable, to be preserved undefiled.

Gradually at first, but none the less surely, he found himself becoming noted for the accuracy and keenness of his judgments on all matters relating to the valuation and age of curios and things of a like nature. His pronouncements were respected and sought after in proportion as their correctness became realised. He found himself soon set up as a judge of a higher standing than ever his father or grandfather before him had been. As the days went by his crowd of visitors went on increasing. They flocked to him from everywhere. His opinions were sought in difficult cases where others who had posed as experts had failed. And he was never wrong. It was a source of gratification to him to watch these men hanging on his every word. Seated in the historic chair by the door he gave forth his judgments to all and sundry who cared to seek them. He demanded no payment; the pleasure it gave him was sufficient requital. When shams were brought him he simply shook his head. He was never mis-understood. But occasionally when something of real value, some rare old article of vertu, came into his hands he revelled in the keen enjoyment it afforded him. At such times it not infrequently happened that the curio changed hands, and the judge thus showed his belief in his own infallibility by purchasing the article at the outside limit of its worth. Though his purchases were few, his sales were fewer still. Happily however, he was not dependant on the profits. Those who had gone before, good thrifty souls that they were, had seen to that. Besides, he had no luxurious tastes to gratify, save his passion for acquiring antiquated valuables. Nor had he any wish to marry—his quaint old oddments afforded him companionship enough.

And thus passed Jacob Drew's youth and middle age, and as he grew in advancing years his fame waxed greater, and his word became law in all things relating to the dead past.

One day there came to the dealer a tall, gaunt, hollow-cheeked man, with grim, famished, hunger staring from out his lack-lustre eyes. In his hand he carried a small, wrapped-up parcel. Carefully he undid the string, and removed the paper, disclosing to old Jacob's eyes a small, curiously-wrought blackwood casket. Jacob seized it eagerly and examined it attentively, turning it round and round, and peeping into its tiny interior with gradually increasing interest. For once it seemed as though the old dealer was non-plussed. At last he gave a little start and looked searchingly at the mark on the lid. Then he looked up suddenly at the stricken, anxious face watching him, and his heart smote him. For Jacob Drew was a conscientious man, and spoke truth on all occasions, even when he saw that by doing so he inflicted a stab of disappointment that was both cruel and bitter. He looked hard at the man, and said slowly:—

'I am sorry for you, but it's worthless—that is, it's comparatively worthless—only worth at most a few shillings or thereabouts.'

The stranger, strong man though he was, drew back with something between a gasp and a sob. It was plain that he had set great store by the tiny black casket, and the disillusionment pained him keenly.

'I had hopes,' he said huskily, 'that it was of value. I've had it for years without thinking much of it, when suddenly I got an idea that it was precious, and—'

'And you came to me,' said the dealer. 'Ah, I see. I am sorry for your sake that it is valueless. It would mean a lot to you were it otherwise. I presume?'

The stranger nodded.

'However,' Jacob went on, 'I'll let you have half-a-sovereign for it if you care to part with it.'

The man's eyes expressed his gratitude. He saw clearly the motive that prompted the other to offer him such a sum for a worthless object, and he was not ungrateful. He took the piece of gold Jacob handed him, and was leaving the shop when the dealer stopped him.

'Tell me,' he said, 'did much depend on the value of this little casket?'

'Yes,' said the stranger slowly, 'a great deal.'

'Ah,' said the dealer thoughtfully 'I thought so. How is it? You have a family or a wife at home?'

'I have both,' was the response. 'My wife is ill, my children go hungry, and myself—well, I'm both ill and hungry. But this,' he added, holding up the gold piece, 'this will soon mend us all.' He walked a few steps towards the door, then turned and said earnestly, 'I've another request to make of you.'

'Name it,' said the dealer.

'I want you not to put that little casket in some old store-room among the rubbish. It's too dear to me. Promise me you will not treat it like that. You will keep it out here where it will not be lost or forgotten. Some day,' he said wistfully, 'I may be able to get it back again. Who knows?'

'Very well,' said Jacob, touched at the appeal, 'I'll do as you ask.' Then an idea seemed to strike him. 'What is your name?' he questioned.

'Richard Tadsley,' was the response.

'And your address?'

'No. 3 Cradly's Court, off the next street; you know it.'

'Yes,' said Jacob, and he made a note of the information. When he looked up the man was gone.

Jacob Drew took up the tiny black casket and turned it over in his fingers. 'Strange,' he mused, 'I don't think I've ever quite seen anything like it before, and yet it's hardly a decade old.'

He laid it aside and fell to thinking of the sad story he had just heard, and wondered to himself what the fate of the unhappy family would be, and made a mental resolve to pay them an early visit with charitable intent.

But Jacob Drew reckoned without his weight of years and its effect on the memory; be the intent for good or evil the memory cares not; like a faulty knitter that slips a stitch here and there and passes on unconcernedly because unconsciously, even though the fault of omission be great and its effects far-reaching, it goes its way untroubled. And so it happened that the old dealer's errand of mercy slipped from his mind and the Tadsley family received no visit from him, certainly not then, nor, indeed, ever.

Months after there stood in the little shop one whose knowledge of ancient lore was inferior to Jacob Drew's in some things only. He chatted with the old man and examined with interest the quaint old objects strewn around. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise and delight.

'What's the matter?' asked the old dealer querulously.

'Look at this,' said the other enthusiastically, holding up the little black casket that had lain forgotten among the other things. 'Where did you pick it up? It's a treasure.' And he went on to eulogise the article as something unique, wonderful, everything in fact that Jacob Drew had thought it not to be.

At first the old man sceptically shook his head. It was hard to believe that this modern-looking little trifle was really of such great value, harder still, that he whose judgment had never erred before should be mistaken. But the other held to his opinion, explained it, reasoned it out, and ultimately convinced the dealer that for the first time in his life he had formed a wrong judgment. And as the conviction of his error gradually dawned on him, Jacob Drew's self-confidence went forth from him, leaving him irresolute, weak, incapable of trusting his own judgment. The more he pondered over his mistake, the more his belief in himself waxed less till he determined to pose no longer as an authority in those things in which heretofore his word had been as the law. The infirmity of his years was coming on him, he told himself sorrowfully, and the powers of his judgment that had so long and so faithfully stood him in good stead were beginning to fail him. But this consideration could not entirely relieve him from the chagrin and regret he felt for his blunder. The little black wood casket that he valued at a few shillings was he knew now really worth hundreds. And then his memory brought up before him the circumstances under which he had become possessed of the little casket. Again he saw the gaunt, hunger-stricken man with the famished look in his staring eyes, and he recalled the sad story of the dying wife and little ones at home. The recollection was fraught with bitter, self-accusing memories that increased the old man's sorrow tenfold. He sought out with feverish fingers the address the man had given him.

He found it, and lost no time in making his way round the grimy court off the street hard by. The address he sought was a great, many-windowed tenement house, filled to over-flowing with poverty-stricken inmates. Everywhere was the hallmark of wretchedness and misery that caused Jacob Drew to utter an involuntary prayer that he had not come too late. He asked several of those he met on the stairs as to the whereabouts of the Tadsley domicile, but they could tell him nothing. At length he met a woman more intelligent or more loquacious than the others.

'If it's coming to do them a good turn you are,' she said, with a wag of her head, 'you're too late. Mrs. Tadsley, poor thing, was ailing for a long time, and nothing would have cured her but delicacies—and them we hadn't to give her. So she died, poor thing, one might say, of starvation, and her two little ones didn't stay long after her. When they were all gone from him the husband went away somewhere—anyway he has never come back here since. And that's the last of them all, poor souls,' concluded the kindly-hearted woman, 'and I'm sorry for them that you're come so late.'

Jacob Drew listened to her story with moist eyes, and went forth from the place with his head bowed low on his breast, for the shadow of a great grief was over his heart. Sadly afflicted in spirit he went back to his accustomed seat by the doorway and fell to