



'WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE HE MEANS BY THIS?'
INQUIRED MR SUMMERS, HANDING ME AN OPEN LETTER.

REMINISCENCES OF A LAWYER'S CLERK.

BY HERBERT KNEB.
AN ABORTIVE PLOT.



A CURIOUS episode happened while I was acting as managing clerk to Mr Summers, who used to carry on business in Southampton-street, Bloomsbury. He was an old-fashioned solicitor who, in his palmy days, had enjoyed a very fine practice, but his health had begun to fail for some years before I went to him; he had no son or successor for whom he desired to keep up his connection; and he possessed ample private means. The circumstances combined had impaired his natural energy to such an extent that he hardly took the trouble to conceal from clients his indifference to his professional occupations, and the result was that the business had become stagnant and moribund. If he would only have taken a young and energetic partner he could have retained it all, for he was personally much esteemed and respected; but he always said that he preferred that his practice should die with him, the truth being that he was growing too old and indolent to tolerate any innovation.

Nevertheless, with the inconsistency of mankind in general, he was always a little annoyed when a client deserted him; and those were the only occasions when I ever saw him out of temper. He was a most amiable old gentleman, with snow-white hair, aristocratic features, and a fine presence, in spite of his seventy-five years; his intellect was perfectly clear, and when he chose to exert himself, he proved that he was still a capable man of business.

One morning he arrived at the office rather late, and on my presenting myself in his room to receive instructions about the day's correspondence, he said, irritably—
'Has Mr Cuthbert Chadwell called yet?'

'No, sir.'
'What do you suppose he means by this?' inquired Mr Summers, handing me an open letter.

While he turned, with transparent pretence at indifference to his other correspondence, I read as follows:—

Thexford Park,
Northamptonshire.

Dear Sir,—I regret to inform you of the death of my father. I believe his will, of which I am sole executor, is in your possession. I am coming up to town to-morrow morning, and if you will kindly have the will looked out for me, I shall be obliged, as I propose to take it away.

Yours truly,
CUTHBERT P. CHADWELL.

'I suppose you have the will, sir,' I remarked, perceiving the cause of my principal's irritation.

'Yes, I believe it is in the strong room; it must be ten years ago since the testator made it, and I have never seen him since. At one time he used to be a good client,' said Mr Summers, with a sigh. 'I suppose the son intends to go to somebody else.'

'He says that he wishes to take the will away,' I observed, with diffidence.

'Well, he is welcome to it,' said Mr Summers, sharply; 'his father was a decent fellow, though a self-made man. Began life as a shoemaker, I have heard. But I have only seen the son once, and I wasn't favourably impressed. I hear he is a skinflint.'

'Not much good as clients, that sort, sir,' I said, to soothe him.

'No. Still, it would have been more decent to— However, I don't want his business. Fetch up the will, Millicent, and make out a receipt.'

I could see that Mr Summers was annoyed at not being asked to prove the will and to wind up his late client's estate, though I knew very well that when his momentary

irritation had passed, my principal would be rather relieved than otherwise at having been spared the trouble. I descended to the strong room, and when I returned to the clerks' office, I found that during my brief absence, Mr Cuthbert Chadwell had arrived, and was already closeted with Mr Summers. I therefore wrote out a receipt for the will, and entered Mr Summers' room with the document in my hand.

I perceived at a glance that the interview between Mr Summers and his late client's heir had not been of a particularly cordial description. Mr Summers' annoyance was manifested by his punctilious politeness, while Mr Cuthbert Chadwell looked sulky and ill at ease. My principal seemed relieved when I appeared, and held out his hand for the will, with an impatient gesture.

'With your permission, Mr Chadwell, I will open the envelope,' said Mr Summers, gravely. 'I have no doubts that you are sole executor, as you say, but I cannot trust my memory.'

Mr Chadwell, by a surly grunt, signified a grudging assent to this precaution, and I had leisure to observe him while Mr Summers was glancing at the will. He was a bald-headed, corpulent, middle-aged man, with coarse, bloated face, a hang-dog look, and a very shifty expression about the eyes. He was evidently ill at ease, and when he happened to meet my gaze he appeared covered with confusion.

'Here is the will,' said Mr Summers, replacing the document in its envelope, and handing it across the table to Mr Chadwell. 'I will ask you to sign this receipt, which my clerk has prepared.'

The executor took possession of the will with evident eagerness, and stowed it quickly away in his pocket. He then affixed his signature to the receipt with a very shaky hand, and rose to take his departure.

'Good day, Mr Chadwell,' said Mr Summers, offering his hand; 'I hope you will live many years to enjoy your inheritance.'

'All right,' said the other, shortly, as he put on his hat and made for the door. 'If I can ever put a job in your way, Mr Summers, I'll bear you in mind.'

'Thank you. At my time of life, however, I do not expect new clients,' said Mr Summers, with quiet irony.

Mr Chadwell shuffled out of the room in rather a shame-faced way, and hurried from the building. Mr Summers glanced up at him through the wire blind as he passed the window in the street outside.

'Not a prepossessing person, eh, Millicent?' said Mr Summers, with a smile.

'Sole executor, too?' I remarked, answering the thought which was evidently in his mind.

'His father trusted him, apparently,' said Mr Summers, shrugging his shoulders. 'Besides, he practically takes everything himself.'

'Did he mention who his lawyer is?' I inquired, as I turned to leave the room.

'He does not employ a lawyer,' answered Mr Summers, smiling. 'He said when he came in this morning that he considers us useless and wasteful. He is going to prove the will himself at the local registry at Northampton.'

I guessed from this that Mr Chadwell had put Mr Summers' back up by his manner of announcing his intentions, which accounted for the coolness I had remarked. I must say that in this instance I did not consider that the business had been deprived of a valuable client.

With this reflection I dismissed the matter from my mind and I do not suppose that either Mr Summers or I would ever have given another thought to Mr Chadwell and his affairs or heard anything more about him, but for one of those singular accidents which are sometimes dignified with the name of coincidences.

There was a Chancery suit going on in the office at the time, in connection with which a series of advertisements had been inserted by order of the Court in various London and provincial newspapers. About a week after Mr Chadwell's visit, one of my fellow-clerks handed me a Northamptonshire paper, saying that he could not find the advertisement in that issue, and asking me to see whether he had overlooked it. I made an unsuccessful search, and was

folded up the paper to return it to him, when my eye alighted upon a brief paragraph containing an obituary notice of the late Mr Chadwell, of Thexford. It stated, among other details, that he had died of a paralytic stroke on the 18th instant previous.

Now Mr Chadwell had called upon us on the 16th, two days earlier; and as he had then informed us that his father had died the day before, it followed that the date of the death was the 15th. The discrepancy was apparently due to a printer's error in the paper; still, when I recalled to mind Mr Cuthbert Chadwell's peculiar manner on the occasion of his visit to the office, I began to have a vague suspicion that there might be something wrong, and I, therefore showed Mr Summers the newspaper paragraph.

'Oh! It is a mistake, of course,' said Mr Summers, when I pointed out the date of death. 'What does it matter whether the poor fellow died on the 15th or on the 18th?'

'Only that if he didn't die till the 18th, Cuthbert Chadwell was not entitled to have the will,' I replied.

'Why?' said Mr Summers, sharply.

'Because his father was alive.'

'Pooh! It is all nonsense,' said Mr Summers, getting up from his chair with a troubled expression. 'I—I must admit that I thought the son's manner was odd,' he added, after a pause. 'Anyhow, we may as well set doubts at rest; send a wire to the newspaper people drawing attention to the mistake and see what they say.'

Accordingly, after some deliberation, I drew out and despatched the following message to the Editor of the *Thexford Gazette*:

'Re Matthew Chadwell deceased.—Your issue 23rd gives date death 18th. Is not this an error? Reply paid—important—confidential.'

Although I was beginning to feel almost excited at the discovery I had made, I cannot say that I entertained any serious suspicion, and I quite expected that the reply to my telegram would be of a reassuring nature. But to my surprise, and to Mr Summers' consternation, the answer which arrived in due course was as follows:—

'18th correct date. Informant doctor—have seen certificates.'

'Good gracious, Millicent, this is most grave!' exclaimed Mr Summers, on seeing the telegram. 'It is obvious that Cuthbert Chadwell lied to me. What could his object have been in getting hold of the will in his father's lifetime?'

'Perhaps he persuaded his father to destroy it,' I said.

'He was residuary legatee, and—h'm!—his true share were some annuities and one or two big legacies,' said Mr Summers, thoughtfully.

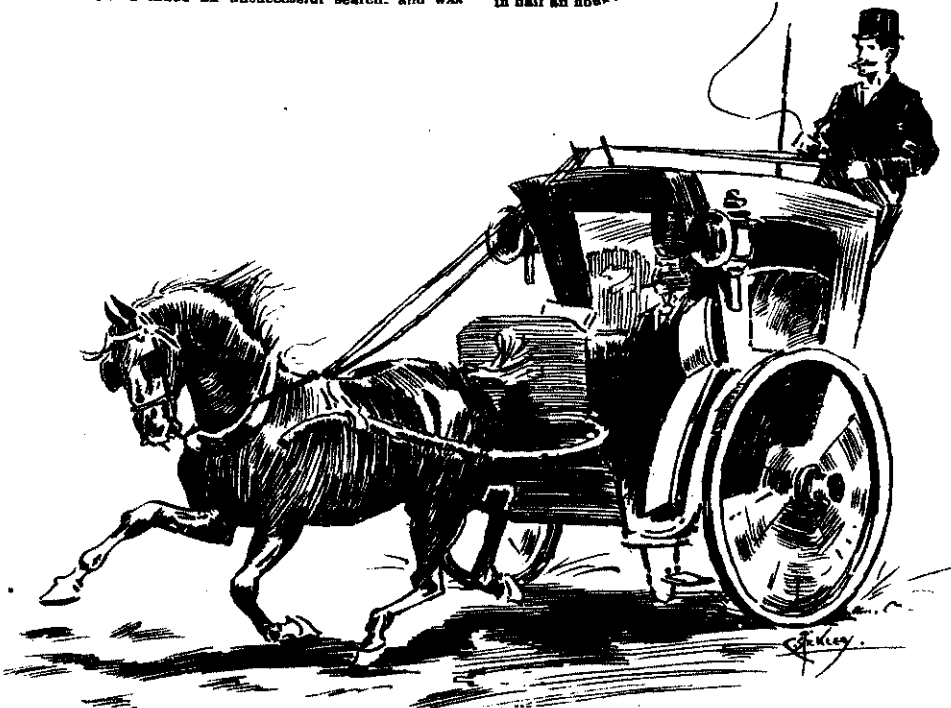
'He was an only child, wasn't he?' I inquired. 'If so, everything would come to him in the event of an intestacy.'

'We mustn't jump hastily at conclusions, Millicent,' said Mr Summers, evidently greatly disturbed; 'the point must be cleared up. If there is anything wrong, I shall feel in a measure personally responsible. I don't know what to do exactly, but I will think it over, and we will talk about it to-morrow.'

It was then Mr Summers' usual hour for leaving, and he went home in a state of considerable agitation. For my part I began to think it quite possible that Cuthbert Chadwell meditated some fraud, and I had the curiosity to look up the draft of his father's will. Assuming that Cuthbert Chadwell was grasping and unscrupulous, the amount of the legacies and annuities seemed to offer quite sufficient incentive to him to suppress it, or at least to induce him to endeavour to get it revoked. He had certainly not acted straightforwardly in obtaining possession of the will by means of a subterfuge, and this made me doubt the honesty of his intentions.

The next day Mr Summers arrived at the office earlier than usual, looking pale and determined, and after glancing through the letters, he took out his watch and said to me:—

'Millicent, I have decided to go down to Thexford, and I think you had better accompany me, as you were present when Mr Chadwell called the other day. We must start in half an hour.'



WE HIRED A FLY AT THE INN, AND DROVE TO THE PARK, WHICH WE REACHED AT TWO O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON.