

The House of a Thousand Candles

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To
Margaret My Sister

The House of a Thousand Candles

CHAPTER I

THE WILL OF JOHN MARSHALL GLENARM

Pickering's letter bringing news of my grandfather's death found me at Naples early in October. John Marshall Glenarm had died in June. He had left a will which gave me his property conditionally, Pickering wrote, and it was necessary for me to return immediately to qualify as legatee. It was the merest luck that the letter came to my hands at all, for it had been sent to Constantinople, in care of the consul-general instead of my banker there. It was not Pickering's fault that the consul was a friend of mine who kept track of my wanderings and was able to hurry the executor's letter after me to Italy, where I had gone to meet an English financier who had, I was advised, unlimited money to spend on African railways. I am an engineer, a graduate of an American institution familiarly known as "Tech," and as my funds were running low, I naturally turned to my profession for employment.

But this letter changed my plans, and the following day I cabled Pickering of my departure and was outward bound on a steamer for New York. Fourteen days later I sat in Pickering's office in the Alexis Building and listened intently while he read, with much ponderous emphasis, the provisions of my grandfather's will. When he concluded, I laughed. Pickering was a serious man, and I was glad to see that my levity pained him. I had, for that matter, always

been a source of annoyance to him, and his look of distrust and rebuke did not trouble me in the least.

I reached across the table for the paper, and he gave the sealed and beribboned copy of John Marshall Glenarm's will into my hands. I read it through for myself, feeling conscious meanwhile that Pickering's cool gaze was bent inquiringly upon me. These are the paragraphs that interested me most:

I give and bequeath unto my said grandson, John Glenarm, sometime a resident of the City and State of New York, and later a vagabond of parts unknown, a certain property known as Glenarm House, with the land thereunto pertaining and hereinafter more particularly described, and all personal property of whatsoever kind thereunto belonging and attached thereto,—the said realty lying in the County of Wabana in the State of Indiana,—upon this condition, faithfully and honestly performed:

That said John Glenarm shall remain for the period of one year an occupant of said Glenarm House and my lands attached thereto, demeaning himself meanwhile in an orderly and temperate manner. Should he fail at any time during said year to comply with this provision, said property shall revert to my general estate and become, without reservation, and without necessity for any process of law, the property, absolutely, of Marian Devereux, of the County and State of New York.

“Well,” he demanded, striking his hands upon the arms of his chair, “what do you think of it?”

For the life of me I could not help laughing again. There was, in the first place, a delicious irony in the fact that I should learn through him of my grandfather's wishes with respect to myself. Pickering and I had grown up in the same town in Vermont; we had attended the same preparatory school, but there had been from boyhood a certain antagonism between us. He had always succeeded where I had failed, which is to say, I must admit, that he had succeeded pretty frequently. When I refused to settle down to my profession, but chose to see something of the world first, Pickering gave himself seriously to the law, and there was, I knew from the beginning, no manner of chance that he would fail.

I am not more or less than human, and I remembered with joy that once I had thrashed him soundly at the prep school for bullying a smaller boy; but our score from school-days was not without tallies on his side. He was easily the better scholar—I grant him that; and he was shrewd and plausible. You never quite knew the extent of his powers and resources, and he had, I always maintained, the most amazing good luck,—as witness the fact that John Marshall Glenarm had taken a friendly interest in him. It was wholly like my grandfather, who was a man of many whims, to give his affairs into Pickering's keeping; and I could not complain, for I had missed my own chance with him. It was, I knew readily enough, part of my punishment for having succeeded so signally in incurring my grandfather's displeasure that he had made it necessary for me to treat with Arthur Pickering in this matter of the will; and Pickering was enjoying the situation to the full. He sank

back in his chair with an air of complacency that had always been insufferable in him. I was quite willing to be patronized by a man of years and experience; but Pickering was my own age, and his experience of life seemed to me preposterously inadequate. To find him settled in New York, where he had been established through my grandfather's generosity, and the executor of my grandfather's estate, was hard to bear.

But there was something not wholly honest in my mirth, for my conduct during the three preceding years had been reprehensible. I had used my grandfather shabbily. My parents died when I was a child, and he had cared for me as far back as my memory ran. He had suffered me to spend without restraint the fortune left by my father; he had expected much of me, and I had grievously disappointed him. It was his hope that I should devote myself to architecture, a profession for which he had the greatest admiration, whereas I had insisted on engineering.

I am not writing an apology for my life, and I shall not attempt to extenuate my conduct in going abroad at the end of my course at Tech and, when I made Laurance Donovan's acquaintance, in setting off with him on a career of adventure. I do not regret, though possibly it would be more to my credit if I did, the months spent leisurely following the Danube east of the Iron Gate—Laurance Donovan always with me, while we urged the villagers and inn-loafers to all manner of sedition, acquitting ourselves so well that, when we came out into the Black Sea for further pleasure, Russia did us the honor to keep a spy at our heels. I should like, for my own satisfaction, at least, to

set down an account of certain affairs in which we were concerned at Belgrad, but without Larry's consent I am not at liberty to do so. Nor shall I take time here to describe our travels in Africa, though our study of the Atlas Mountain dwarfs won us honorable mention by the British Ethnological Society.

These were my yesterdays; but to-day I sat in Arthur Pickering's office in the towering Alexis Building, conscious of the muffled roar of Broadway, discussing the terms of my Grandfather Glenarm's will with a man whom I disliked as heartily as it is safe for one man to dislike another. Pickering had asked me a question, and I was suddenly aware that his eyes were fixed upon me and that he awaited my answer.

"What do I think of it?" I repeated. "I don't know that it makes any difference what I think, but I'll tell you, if you want to know, that I call it infamous, outrageous, that a man should leave a ridiculous will of that sort behind him. All the old money-bags who pile up fortunes magnify the importance of their money. They imagine that every kindness, every ordinary courtesy shown them, is merely a bid for a slice of the cake. I'm disappointed in my grandfather. He was a splendid old man, though God knows he had his queer ways. I'll bet a thousand dollars, if I have so much money in the world, that this scheme is yours, Pickering, and not his. It smacks of your ancient vindictiveness, and John Marshall Glenarm had none of that in his blood. That stipulation about my residence out there is fantastic. I don't have to be a lawyer to know that;

and no doubt I could break the will; I've a good notion to try it, anyhow."

"To be sure. You can tie up the estate for half a dozen years if you like," he replied coolly. He did not look upon me as likely to become a formidable litigant. My staying qualities had been proved weak long ago, as Pickering knew well enough.

"No doubt you would like that," I answered. "But I'm not going to give you the pleasure. I abide by the terms of the will. My grandfather was a fine old gentleman. I shan't drag his name through the courts, not even to please you, Arthur Pickering," I declared hotly.

"The sentiment is worthy of a good man, Glenarm," he rejoined.

"But this woman who is to succeed to my rights,—I don't seem to remember her."

"It is not surprising that you never heard of her."

"Then she's not a connection of the family,—no long-lost cousin whom I ought to remember?"

"No; she was a late acquaintance of your grandfather's. He met her through an old friend of his,— Miss Evans, known as Sister Theresa. Miss Devereux is Sister Theresa's niece."

I whistled. I had a dim recollection that during my grandfather's long widowerhood there were occasional reports that he was about to marry. The name of Miss Evans had been mentioned in this connection. I had heard it

spoken of in my family, and not, I remembered, with much kindness. Later, I heard of her joining a Sisterhood, and opening a school somewhere in the West.

“And Miss Devereux,—is she an elderly nun, too?”

“I don’t know how elderly she is, but she isn’t a nun at present. Still, she’s almost alone in the world, and she and Sister Theresa are very intimate.”

“Pass the will again, Pickering, while I make sure I grasp these diverting ideas. Sister Theresa isn’t the one I mustn’t marry, is she? It’s the other ecclesiastical embroidery artist,—the one with the x in her name, suggesting the algebra of my vanishing youth.”

I read aloud this paragraph:

Provided, further, that in the event of the marriage of said John Glenarm to the said Marian Devereux, or in the event of any promise or contract of marriage between said persons within five years from the date of said John Glenarm’s acceptance of the provisions of this will, the whole estate shall become the property absolutely of St. Agatha’s School, at Annandale, Wabana County, Indiana, a corporation under the laws of said state.

“For a touch of comedy commend me to my grandfather! Pickering, you always were a well-meaning fellow,—I’ll turn over to you all my right, interest and title in and to these angelic Sisters. Marry! I like the idea! I suppose some one will try to marry me for my money. Marriage, Pickering, is not embraced in my scheme of life!”

“I should hardly call you a marrying man,” he observed.

“Perfectly right, my friend! Sister Theresa was considered a possible match for my grandfather in my youth. She and I are hardly contemporaries. And the other lady with the fascinating algebraic climax to her name,—she, too, is impossible; it seems that I can’t get the money by marrying her. I’d better let her take it. She’s as poor as the devil, I dare say.”

“I imagine not. The Evanses are a wealthy family, in spots, and she ought to have some money of her own if her aunt doesn’t coax it out of her for educational schemes.”

“And where on the map are these lovely creatures to be found?”

“Sister Theresa’s school adjoins your preserve; Miss Devereux has I think some of your own weakness for travel. Sister Theresa is her nearest relative, and she occasionally visits St. Agatha’s—that’s the school.”

“I suppose they embroider altar-cloths together and otherwise labor valiantly to bring confusion upon Satan and his cohorts. Just the people to pull the wool over the eyes of my grandfather!”

Pickering smiled at my resentment.

“You’d better give them a wide berth; they might catch you in their net. Sister Theresa is said to have quite a winning way. She certainly plucked your grandfather.”

“Nuns in spectacles, the gentle educators of youth and that sort of thing, with a good-natured old man for their prey. None of them for me!”

“I rather thought so,” remarked Pickering,—and he pulled his watch from his pocket and turned the stem with his heavy fingers. He was short, thick-set and sleek, with a square jaw, hair already thin and a close-clipped mustache. Age, I reflected, was not improving him.

I had no intention of allowing him to see that I was irritated. I drew out my cigarette case and passed it across the table,

“After you! They’re made quite specially for me in Madrid.”

“You forget that I never use tobacco in any form.”

“You always did miss a good deal of the joy of living,” I observed, throwing my smoking match into his waste-paper basket, to his obvious annoyance. “Well, I’m the bad boy of the story-books; but I’m really sorry my inheritance has a string tied to it. I’m about out of money. I suppose you wouldn’t advance me a few thousands on my expectations—”

“Not a cent,” he declared, with quite unnecessary vigor; and I laughed again, remembering that in my old appraisal of him, generosity had not been represented in large figures. “It’s not in keeping with your grandfather’s wishes that I should do so. You must have spent a good bit of money in your tiger-hunting exploits,” he added.

“I have spent all I had,” I replied amiably. “Thank God I’m not a clam! I’ve seen the world and paid for it. I don’t want anything from you. You undoubtedly share my grandfather’s idea of me that I’m a wild man who can’t sit still or lead an orderly, decent life; but I’m going to give you a terrible disappointment. What’s the size of the estate?”

Pickering eyed me—uneasily, I thought—and began playing with a pencil. I never liked Pickering’s hands; they were thick and white and better kept than I like to see a man’s hands.

“I fear it’s going to be disappointing. In his trust-company boxes here I have been able to find only about ten thousand dollars’ worth of securities. Possibly— quite possibly—we were all deceived in the amount of his fortune. Sister Theresa wheedled large sums out of him, and he spent, as you will see, a small fortune on the house at Annandale without finishing it. It wasn’t a cheap proposition, and in its unfinished condition it is practically valueless. You must know that Mr. Glenarm gave away a great deal of money in his lifetime. Moreover, he established your father. You know what he left,—it was not a small fortune as those things are reckoned.”

I was restless under this recital. My father’s estate had been of respectable size, and I had dissipated the whole of it. My conscience pricked me as I recalled an item of forty thousand dollars that I had spent—somewhat grandly—on an expedition that I led, with considerable satisfaction to

myself, at least, through the Sudan. But Pickering's words amazed me.

"Let me understand you," I said, bending toward him. "My grandfather was supposed to be rich, and yet you tell me you find little property. Sister Theresa got money from him to help build a school. How much was that?"

"Fifty thousand dollars. It was an open account. His books show the advances, but he took no notes."

"And that claim is worth—?"

"It is good as against her individually. But she contends—"

"Yes, go on!"

I had struck the right note. He was annoyed at my persistence and his apparent discomfort pleased me.

"She refuses to pay. She says Mr. Glenarm made her a gift of the money."

"That's possible, isn't it? He was for ever making gifts to churches. Schools and theological seminaries were a sort of weakness with him."

"That is quite true, but this account is among the assets of the estate. It's my business as executor to collect it."

"We'll pass that. If you get this money, the estate is worth sixty thousand dollars, plus the value of the land out there at Annandale, and Glenarm House is worth—"

"There you have me!"

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