

The Man Who Kept His Money In A Box

by

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I first saw the man who kept his money in a box in the midst of the ravine of the Via Mala. I interchanged a few words with him or with his wife at the hospice, at the top of the Splugen; and I became acquainted with him in the courtyard of Conradi's hotel at Chiavenna. It was, however, afterwards at Bellaggio, on the lake of Como, that that acquaintance ripened into intimacy. A good many years have rolled by since then, and I believe this little episode in his life may be told without pain to the feelings of any one.

His name was -; let us for the present say that his name was Greene. How he learned that my name was Robinson I do not know, but I remember well that he addressed me by my name at Chiavenna. To go back, however, for a moment to the Via Mala;--I had been staying for a few days at the Golden Eagle at Tuisis,--which, by-the-bye, I hold to be the best small inn in all Switzerland, and its hostess to be, or to have been, certainly the prettiest landlady,--and on the day of my departure southwards, I had walked on, into the Via Mala, so that the diligence might pick me up in the gorge. This pass I regard as one of the grandest spots to which my wandering steps have ever carried me, and though I had already lingered about it for many hours, I now walked thither again to take my last farewell of its dark towering rocks, its narrow causeway and roaring river, trusting to my friend the landlady to see that my luggage was duly packed upon the diligence. I need hardly say that my friend did not betray her trust.

As one goes out from Switzerland towards Italy, the road through the Via Mala ascends somewhat steeply, and passengers by the diligence may walk from the inn at Tuisis into the gorge, and make their way through the greater part of the ravine before the vehicle will overtake them. This, however, Mr. Greene with his wife and daughter had omitted to do. When the diligence passed me in the defile, the horses trotting for a few yards over some level portion of the road, I saw a man's nose pressed close against the glass of the coupe window. I saw more of his nose than of any other part of his face, but yet I could perceive that his neck was twisted and his eye upturned, and that he was making a painful effort to look upwards to the summit of the rocks from his position inside the carriage.

There was such a roar of wind and waters at the spot that it was not practicable to speak to him, but I beckoned with my finger and then pointed to the road, indicating that he should have walked. He understood me, though I did not at the moment understand his answering gesture. It was subsequently, when I knew somewhat of his habits, that he explained to me that on pointing to his open mouth, he had intended to signify that he would be afraid of sore throat in exposing himself to the air of that damp and narrow passage.

I got up into the conductor's covered seat at the back of the diligence, and in this position encountered the drifting snow of the Splugen. I think it is coldest of all the passes. Near the top of the pass the diligence stops for awhile, and it is here, if I remember, that the Austrian officials demand the travellers' passports. At least in those days they did so.

These officials have now retreated behind the Quadrilatero,--soon, as we hope, to make a further retreat,--and the district belongs to the kingdom of United Italy. There is a place of refreshment or hospice here, into which we all went for a few moments, and I then saw that my friend with the weak throat was accompanied by two ladies.

"You should not have missed the Via Mala," I said to him, as he stood warming his toes at the huge covered stove.

"We miss everything," said the elder of the two ladies, who, however, was very much younger than the gentleman, and not very much older than her companion.

"I saw it beautifully, mamma," said the younger one; whereupon mamma gave her head a toss, and made up her mind, as I thought, to take some little vengeance before long upon her step-daughter. I observed that Miss Greene always called her step-mother mamma on the first approach of any stranger, so that the nature of the connection between them might be understood. And I observed also that the elder lady always gave her head a toss when she was so addressed.

"We don't mean to enjoy ourselves till we get down to the lake of Como," said Mr. Greene. As I looked at him cowering over the stove, and saw how oppressed he was with great coats and warm wrappings for his throat, I quite agreed with him that he had not begun to enjoy himself as yet. Then we all got into our places again, and I saw no more of the Greens till we were standing huddled together in the large courtyard of Conradi's hotel at Chiavenna.

Chiavenna is the first Italian town which the tourist reaches by this route, and I know no town in the North of Italy which is so closely surrounded by beautiful scenery. The traveller as he falls down to it from the Splügen road is bewildered by the loveliness of the valleys,--that is to say, if he so arranges that he can see them without pressing his nose against the glass of a coach window. And then from the town itself there are walks of two, three, and four hours, which I think are unsurpassed for wild and sometimes startling beauties. One gets into little valleys, green as emeralds, and surrounded on all sides by grey broken rocks, in which Italian Rascals might have lived in perfect bliss; and then again one comes upon distant views up the river courses, bounded far away by the spurs of the Alps, which are perfect,--to which the fancy can add no additional charm. Conradi's hotel also is by no means bad; or was not in those days. For my part I am inclined to think that Italian hotels have received a worse name than they deserve; and I must profess that, looking merely to creature comforts, I would much sooner stay a week at the Golden Key at Chiavenna, than with mine host of the King's Head in the thriving commercial town of Muddelboro, on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire.

I am always rather keen about my room in travelling, and having secured a chamber looking out upon the mountains, had returned to the court-yard to collect my baggage before Mr. Greene had succeeded in realising his position, or understanding that he had to

take upon himself the duties of settling his family for the night in the hotel by which he was surrounded. When I descended he was stripping off the outermost of three great coats, and four waiters around him were beseeching him to tell them what accommodation he would require. Mr. Greene was giving sundry very urgent instructions to the conductor respecting his boxes; but as these were given in English, I was not surprised to find that they were not accurately followed. The man, however, was much too courteous to say in any language that he did not understand every word that was said to him. Miss Greene was standing apart, doing nothing. As she was only eighteen years of age, it was of course her business to do nothing; and a very pretty little girl she was, by no means ignorant of her own beauty, and possessed of quite sufficient wit to enable her to make the most of it.

Mr. Greene was very leisurely in his proceedings, and the four waiters were almost reduced to despair.

"I want two bed-rooms, a dressing-room, and some dinner," he said at last, speaking very slowly, and in his own vernacular. I could not in the least assist him by translating it into Italian, for I did not speak a word of the language myself; but I suggested that the man would understand French. The waiter, however, had understood English. Waiters do understand all languages with a facility that is marvellous; and this one now suggested that Mrs. Greene should follow him up-stairs. Mrs. Greene, however, would not move till she had seen that her boxes were all right; and as Mrs. Greene was also a pretty woman, I found myself bound to apply myself to her assistance.

"Oh, thank you," said she. "The people are so stupid that one can really do nothing with them. And as for Mr. Greene, he is of no use at all. You see that box, the smaller one. I have four hundred pounds' worth of jewellery in that, and therefore I am obliged to look after it."

"Indeed," said I, rather startled at this amount of confidence on rather a short acquaintance. "In that case I do not wonder at your being careful. But is it not rather rash, perhaps--"

"I know what you are going to say. Well, perhaps it is rash. But when you are going to foreign courts, what are you to do? If you have got those sort of things you must wear them."

As I was not myself possessed of anything of that sort, and had no intention of going to any foreign court, I could not argue the matter with her. But I assisted her in getting together an enormous pile of luggage, among which there were seven large boxes covered with canvas, such as ladies not uncommonly carry with them when travelling. That one which she represented as being smaller than the others, and as holding jewellery, might be about a yard long by a foot and a half deep. Being ignorant in those matters, I should have thought it sufficient to carry all a lady's wardrobe for twelve months. When the boxes were collected together, she sat down upon the jewel-case and looked up into my face. She was a pretty woman, perhaps thirty years of age, with long

light yellow hair, which she allowed to escape from her bonnet, knowing, perhaps, that it was not unbecoming to her when thus dishevelled. Her skin was very delicate, and her complexion good. Indeed her face would have been altogether prepossessing had there not been a want of gentleness in her eyes. Her hands, too, were soft and small, and on the whole she may be said to have been possessed of a strong battery of feminine attractions. She also well knew how to use them.

"Whisper," she said to me, with a peculiar but very proper aspiration on the h--"Whisper," and both by the aspiration and the use of the word I knew at once from what island she had come. "Mr. Greene keeps all his money in this box also; so I never let it go out of my sight for a moment. But whatever you do, don't tell him that I told you so."

I laid my hand on my heart, and made a solemn asseveration that I would not divulge her secret. I need not, however, have troubled myself much on that head, for as I walked up stairs, keeping my eye upon the precious trunk, Mr. Greene addressed me.

"You are an Englishman, Mr. Robinson," said he. I acknowledged that I was.

"I am another. My wife, however, is Irish. My daughter,--by a former marriage,--is English also. You see that box there."

"Oh, yes," said I, "I see it." I began to be so fascinated by the box that I could not keep my eyes off it.

"I don't know whether or no it is prudent, but I keep all my money there; my money for travelling, I mean."

"If I were you, then," I answered, "I would not say anything about it to any one."

"Oh, no, of course not," said he; "I should not think of mentioning it. But those brigands in Italy always take away what you have about your person, but they don't meddle with the heavy luggage."

"Bills of exchange, or circular notes," I suggested.

"Ah, yes; and if you can't identify yourself, or happen to have a headache, you can't get them changed. I asked an old friend of mine, who has been connected with the Bank of England for the last fifty years, and he assured me that there was nothing like sovereigns."

"But you never get the value for them."

"Well, not quite. One loses a franc, or a franc and a half. But still, there's the certainty, and that's the great matter. An English sovereign will go anywhere," and he spoke these words with considerable triumph.

"Undoubtedly, if you consent to lose a shilling on each sovereign."

"At any rate, I have got three hundred and fifty in that box," he said. "I have them done up in rolls of twenty-five pounds each."

I again recommended him to keep this arrangement of his as private as possible,--a piece of counsel which I confess seemed to me to be much needed,--and then I went away to my own room, having first accepted an invitation from Mrs. Greene to join their party at dinner. "Do," said she; "we have been so dull, and it will be so pleasant."

I did not require to be much pressed to join myself to a party in which there was so pretty a girl as Miss Greene, and so attractive a woman as Mrs. Greene. I therefore accepted the invitation readily, and went away to make my toilet. As I did so I passed the door of Mr. Greene's room, and saw the long file of boxes being borne into the centre of it.

I spent a pleasant evening, with, however, one or two slight drawbacks. As to old Greene himself, he was all that was amiable; but then he was nervous, full of cares, and somewhat apt to be a bore. He wanted information on a thousand points, and did not seem to understand that a young man might prefer the conversation of his daughter to his own. Not that he showed any solicitude to prevent conversation on the part of his daughter. I should have been perfectly at liberty to talk to either of the ladies had he not wished to engross all my attention to himself. He also had found it dull to be alone with his wife and daughter for the last six weeks.

He was a small spare man, probably over fifty years of age, who gave me to understand that he had lived in London all his life, and had made his own fortune in the city. What he had done in the city to make his fortune he did not say. Had I come across him there I should no doubt have found him to be a sharp man of business, quite competent to teach me many a useful lesson of which I was as ignorant as an infant. Had he caught me on the Exchange, or at Lloyd's, or in the big room of the Bank of England, I should have been compelled to ask him everything. Now, in this little town under the Alps, he was as much lost as I should have been in Lombard Street, and was ready enough to look to me for information. I was by no means chary in giving him my counsel, and imparting to him my ideas on things in general in that part of the world;--only I should have preferred to be allowed to make myself civil to his daughter.

In the course of conversation it was mentioned by him that they intended to stay a few days at Bellaggio, which, as all the world knows, is a central spot on the lake of Como, and a favourite resting- place for travellers. There are three lakes which all meet here, and to all of which we give the name of Como. They are properly called the lakes of Como, Colico, and Lecco; and Bellaggio is the spot at which their waters join each other. I had half made up my mind to sleep there one night on my road into Italy, and now, on hearing their purpose, I declared that such was my intention.

"How very pleasant," said Mrs. Greene. "It will be quite delightful to have some one to show us how to settle ourselves, for really--"

"My dear, I'm sure you can't say that you ever have much trouble."

"And who does then, Mr. Greene? I am sure Sophonisba does not do much to help me."

"You won't let me," said Sophonisba, whose name I had not before heard. Her papa had called her Sophy in the yard of the inn. Sophonisba Greene! Sophonisba Robinson did not sound so badly in my ears, and I confess that I had tried the names together. Her papa had mentioned to me that he had no other child, and had mentioned also that he had made his fortune.

And then there was a little family contest as to the amount of travelling labour which fell to the lot of each of the party, during which I retired to one of the windows of the big front room in which we were sitting. And how much of this labour there is incidental to a tourist's pursuits! And how often these little contests do arise upon a journey! Who has ever travelled and not known them? I had taken up such a position at the window as might, I thought, have removed me out of hearing; but nevertheless from time to time a word would catch my ear about that precious box. "I have never taken MY eyes off it since I left England," said Mrs. Greene, speaking quick, and with a considerable brogue superinduced by her energy. "Where would it have been at Basle if I had not been looking after it?" "Quite safe," said Sophonisba; "those large things always are safe." "Are they, Miss? That's all you know about it. I suppose your bonnet-box was quite safe when I found it on the platform at--at--I forget the name of the place?"

"Freidrichshafen," said Sophonisba, with almost an unnecessary amount of Teutonic skill in her pronunciation. "Well, mamma, you have told me of that at least twenty times." Soon after that, the ladies took them to their own rooms, weary with the travelling of two days and a night, and Mr. Greene went fast asleep in the very comfortless chair in which he was seated.

At four o'clock on the next morning we started on our journey.

"Early to bed, and early to rise, Is the way to be healthy, and wealthy, and wise."

We all know that lesson, and many of us believe in it; but if the lesson be true, the Italians ought to be the healthiest and wealthiest and wisest of all men and women. Three or four o'clock seems to them quite a natural hour for commencing the day's work. Why we should have started from Chiavenna at four o'clock in order that we might be kept waiting for the boat an hour and a half on the little quay at Colico, I don't know; but such was our destiny. There we remained an hour and a half; Mrs. Greene sitting pertinaciously on the one important box. She had designated it as being smaller than the others, and, as all the seven were now ranged in a row, I had an opportunity of comparing them. It was something smaller,--perhaps an inch less high, and an inch and a half shorter. She was a sharp woman, and observed my scrutiny. "I always know it," she said in a loud whisper, "by this little hole in the canvas," and she put her finger on a slight rent on one of the ends. "As for Greene, if one of those Italian brigands were to walk off with

it on his shoulders, before his eyes, he wouldn't be the wiser. How helpless you men are, Mr. Robinson!"

"It is well for us that we have women to look after us."

"But you have got no one to look after you;--or perhaps you have left her behind?"

"No, indeed. I'm all alone in the world as yet. But it's not my own fault. I have asked half a dozen."

"Now, Mr. Robinson!" And in this way the time passed on the quay at Colico, till the boat came and took us away. I should have preferred to pass my time in making myself agreeable to the younger lady; but the younger lady stood aloof, turning up her nose, as I thought, at her mamma.

I will not attempt to describe the scenery about Colico. The little town itself is one of the vilest places under the sun, having no accommodation for travellers, and being excessively unhealthy; but there is very little either north or south of the Alps,--and, perhaps, I may add, very little elsewhere,--to beat the beauty of the mountains which cluster round the head of the lake. When we had sat upon those boxes that hour and a half, we were taken on board the steamer, which had been lying off a little way from the shore, and then we commenced our journey. Of course there was a good deal of exertion and care necessary in getting the packages off from the shore on to the boat, and I observed that any one with half an eye in his head might have seen that the mental anxiety expended on that one box which was marked by the small hole in the canvas far exceeded that which was extended to all the other six boxes. "They deserve that it should be stolen," I said to myself, "for being such fools." And then we went down to breakfast in the cabin.

"I suppose it must be safe," said Mrs. Greene to me, ignoring the fact that the cabin waiter understood English, although she had just ordered some veal cutlets in that language.

"As safe as a church," I replied, not wishing to give much apparent importance to the subject.

"They can't carry it off here," said Mr. Greene. But he was innocent of any attempt at a joke, and was looking at me with all his eyes.

"They might throw it overboard," said Sophonisba. I at once made up my mind that she could not be a good-natured girl. The moment that breakfast was over, Mrs. Greene returned again up-stairs, and I found her seated on one of the benches near the funnel, from which she could keep her eyes fixed upon the box. "When one is obliged to carry about one's jewels with one, one must be careful, Mr. Robinson," she said to me apologetically. But I was becoming tired of the box, and the funnel was hot and unpleasant, therefore I left her.

I had made up my mind that Sophonisba was ill-natured; but, nevertheless, she was pretty, and I now went through some little manoeuvres with the object of getting into conversation with her. This I soon did, and was surprised by her frankness. "How tired you must be of mamma and her box," she said to me. To this I made some answer, declaring that I was rather interested than otherwise in the safety of the precious trunk. "It makes me sick," said Sophonisba, "to hear her go on in that way to a perfect stranger. I heard what she said about her jewellery."

"It is natural she should be anxious," I said, "seeing that it contains so much that is valuable."

"Why did she bring them?" said Sophonisba. "She managed to live very well without jewels till papa married her, about a year since; and now she can't travel about for a month without lugging them with her everywhere. I should be so glad if some one would steal them."

"But all Mr. Greene's money is there also."

"I don't want papa to be bothered, but I declare I wish the box might be lost for a day or so. She is such a fool; don't you think so, Mr. Robinson?"

At this time it was just fourteen hours since I first had made their acquaintance in the yard of Conradi's hotel, and of those fourteen hours more than half had been passed in bed. I must confess that I looked upon Sophonisba as being almost more indiscreet than her mother-in-law. Nevertheless, she was not stupid, and I continued my conversation with her the greatest part of the way down the lake towards Bellaggio.

These steamers which run up and down the lake of Como and the Lago Maggiore, put out their passengers at the towns on the banks of the water by means of small rowing-boats, and the persons who are about to disembark generally have their own articles ready to their hands when their turn comes for leaving the steamer. As we came near to Bellaggio, I looked up my own portmanteau, and, pointing to the beautiful wood-covered hill that stands at the fork of the waters, told my friend Greene that he was near his destination. "I am very glad to hear it," said he, complacently, but he did not at the moment busy himself about the boxes. Then the small boat ran up alongside the steamer, and the passengers for Como and Milan crowded up the side.

"We have to go in that boat," I said to Greene.

"Nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, but we have."

"What! put our boxes into that boat," said Mrs. Greene. "Oh dear! Here, boatman! there are seven of these boxes, all in white like this," and she pointed to the one that had the

hole in the canvas. "Make haste. And there are two bags, and my dressing case, and Mr. Greene's portmanteau. Mr. Greene, where is your portmanteau?"

The boatman whom she addressed, no doubt did not understand a word of English, but nevertheless he knew what she meant, and, being well accustomed to the work, got all the luggage together in an incredibly small number of moments.

"If you will get down into the boat," I said, "I will see that the luggage follows you before I leave the deck."

"I won't stir," she said, "till I see that box lifted down. Take care; you'll let it fall into the lake. I know you will."

"I wish they would," Sophonisba whispered into my ear.

Mr. Greene said nothing, but I could see that his eyes were as anxiously fixed on what was going on as were those of his wife. At last, however, the three Greens were in the boat, as also were all the packages. Then I followed them, my portmanteau having gone down before me, and we pushed off for Bellaggio. Up to this period most of the attendants around us had understood a word or two of English, but now it would be well if we could find some one to whose ears French would not be unfamiliar. As regarded Mr. Greene and his wife, they, I found, must give up all conversation, as they knew nothing of any language but their own. Sophonisba could make herself understood in French, and was quite at home, as she assured me, in German. And then the boat was beached on the shore at Bellaggio, and we all had to go again to work with the object of getting ourselves lodged at the hotel which overlooks the water.

I had learned before that the Greens were quite free from any trouble in this respect, for their rooms had been taken for them before they left England. Trusting to this, Mrs. Greene gave herself no inconsiderable airs the moment her foot was on the shore, and ordered the people about as though she were the Lady Paramount of Bellaggio. Italians, however, are used to this from travellers of a certain description. They never resent such conduct, but simply put it down in the bill with the other articles. Mrs. Greene's words on this occasion were innocent enough, seeing that they were English; but had I been that head waiter who came down to the beach with his nice black shiny hair, and his napkin under his arm, I should have thought her manner very insolent.

Indeed, as it was, I did think so, and was inclined to be angry with her. She was to remain for some time at Bellaggio, and therefore it behoved her, as she thought, to assume the character of the grand lady at once. Hitherto she had been willing enough to do the work, but now she began to order about Mr. Greene and Sophonisba; and, as it appeared to me, to order me about also. I did not quite enjoy this; so leaving her still among her luggage and satellites, I walked up to the hotel to see about my own bed-room. I had some seltzer water, stood at the window for three or four minutes, and then walked up and down the room. But still the Greens were not there. As I had put in at Bellaggio solely with the object of seeing something more of Sophonisba, it would not do for me to quarrel with

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