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THE CONSCIENTIOUS BURGLAR.

GUY LETHBRIDGE had got into debt. That was reprehensible, of course; but when we were *very* young, most of us did the same thing; and in Guy's case, at least, there were extenuating circumstances. When a fellow's twenty-four, and has been brought up like a gentleman, he's apt to fall into the familiar fallacy that "we *must* live;" and if he has nothing to live upon, why then he lives upon other people. Now, Guy Lethbridge was a painter, without visible means of support except his art; and he glided into debt by a natural and easy transition which even that sternest of censors, the judge of the Bankruptcy Court, might well have condoned as next door to inevitable.

The facts of the case were these. Guy had gone over to Germany with a knapsack on his back, an easel in his hands, and a pipe and a few pounds in his trousers pocket. He had no friends to speak of in those days, for his father was dead, and his mother, good lady, in her lodgings in Bayswater, could no more have sent her son a five-pound note from her slender pension, than she could have sent him the Koh-i-noor or the Order of the White Elephant. But Guy went abroad, none the less, with the reckless faith of the Salvationist or the impecunious artist. He meant to stay on the Rhine as long as his money lasted; "and then, you know, my dear fellow, I can smuggle myself across anyhow, in a cattle boat or something; and arrive with a sixpence and an immortal work at St. Catherine's Docks some fine summer day, at six o'clock in the morning." What a blessed thing it is, to be sure, to be born into this world with the easy-going, happy-go-lucky, artistic temperament!

So Guy went to Königswinter, with a glimpse by the way at Brussels, Aix, and Cologne, and settled himself down, pipe, easel, and all, to summer quarters at the bright and sunny Berliner-Hof. There, he worked really hard, for he was no saunterer by nature; his impecuniosity arose, strange to say, neither from want of industry nor want of talent, but from pure force of circumstances. There's no sillier blunder on earth, indeed, than to believe that if a man doesn't succeed in life he must needs be either an idler or a bungler. Only fools imagine that industry and ability can command success; wise men know well that opportunity and luck count at least as equally important. Guy Lethbridge's time had not yet come. He painted all summer up and down the Rhine, making Königswinter his headquarters, and dropping down by boat or rail from day to day to various points on either bank that took his fancy. As for black and white, his quiver was full of them. The Drachenfels from the North, the Drachenfels from the South; the Rheinsteine from above, the Rheinsteine from below, the Rheinsteine from St. Clement's—he sketched them all till he was well nigh tired of them. Meanwhile, he worked steadily at his grand Academy picture of "The Seven Mountains from the Summit of the Petersberg." His plan of campaign, in short, was own brother to every other struggling young artist's. He meant to do "a lot of little pot-boilers for the illustrated magazines, don't you know, or the weekly papers," and to live upon those while he devoted his energies to the real Work of Art which was to raise him with a bound to the front rank of living painters. Wyllie had done it, you see, with his great Thames picture, so why shouldn't Guy Lethbridge? The Chantrey Bequest was meant on purpose for the encouragement of such works as the "Seven Mountains from the Summit of the Petersberg." The trustees were bound to buy it as soon as they saw it hung on the line at the Academy; for they are men of taste, and men of knowledge, and men of experience; and if they don't know a good thing when they see it, what's the use of an Academy, anyway, I ask you?

Incredible as it may seem, however, the pot-boilers failed to boil the pot. Guy sent his sketches, with elucidatory remarks, to the editors of nearly every illustrated paper in Great Britain and Ireland or the adjacent islands; who declined them with thanks, and with surprising unanimity. There were the same sketches, to be sure, which ran afterwards through eight numbers of a leading art review, and were then reproduced as an illustrated gift-book, which our most authoritative critic pronounced in *The Bystander* to be "the gem of the season." But *that* was *after* Guy Lethbridge became famous. At the time, those busy editors didn't look at the drawings at all, or, if they looked at them, observed with the weary sigh peculiar to the overworked editorial organism, "Ah, the Rhine again! Overdone, decidedly. The public won't stand any more Rhine at any price." For those were the days when there was a run on the Thames and our domestic scenery; and everybody who was anybody lodged his easel in a houseboat.

Thus it gradually happened that while the Great Work progressed, the pipe got smoked out, and the pounds evaporated. Guy had lived sparingly at the Berliner-Hof—very sparingly indeed. He had breakfasted early on his roll and coffee; bought a penn'orth of bread and a bunch or two of grapes for his frugal lunch on the hills where he painted; and dined *à*

la carte, when daylight failed, off the cheapest and most sustaining of the landlord's dishes. His drink was Bavarian beer, or more latterly, water; yet in spite of economy the marks slipped away with surprising nimbleness; and by the end of September, Guy woke up one morning without even the talisman of that proverbial sixpence which was to land him in safety at the Port of London.

He had delayed things too long; hoping against hope, he had believed to the last that the *Porte-Crayon* or the *Studio* must surely accept his graceful and easy Rhenish sketches. He knew they were clever; he knew they had qualities; and he couldn't believe in his innocent soul all the art-editors of his country were an amalgamated pack of Banded Duffers. Somebody must surely see merit at last in his "Royal Stolzenfels"; somebody must surely descry in the end the fantastic exuberance of his "Hundred-towered Andernach." So he waited and waited on, expecting every day some change in his fortunes, till the fatal moment at length arrived when he paid his last mark for his lunch in the mountains, and found himself face to face with an empty exchequer, and nothing on earth to get back to England with.

It was a Wednesday when the fact of his utter penury forced itself finally upon him. He paid his bill by the week, and he had still till Monday next before he would stand in urgent need of money. Monday was pay-day, and his time would be up; it would then be either stump up or go; on Monday he must confront the last abyss of poverty.

To that extent only, Guy had got into debt. So I think you will admit with me his offence was a venial one. On Thursday he went to work on the Petersberg as usual. He was outwardly calm—but he ate no luncheon. In point of fact, he hadn't a pfennig to get one with. He might have asked for something at the hotel, and taken it with him to the hilltop; but that would have been a deviation from his ordinary routine; the "arrangement" at the Berliner-Hof included only the early coffee and a simple late dinner; and Guy felt that to ask for anything more in his present impecunious condition of pocket would be nothing short of robbing the landlord. He was robbing him as it was, to be sure; but then, that was inevitable: he didn't like to add by any unusual demand to the weight of his probably insoluble indebtedness.

On Friday morning he woke up ravenous. What was a roll and coffee to a vigorous young man like him, with yesterday's unappeased hunger still keenly whetting the edge of his appetite? Unsatisfied and despondent, he toiled up the Petersberg once more—not for such as him the aristocratic joys of the cog-wheel railway; and in the eye of the sun he painted all day with unabated ardour at his "Seven Mountains." He painted with wild energy, impelled by want of food and internal craving. It suited his theme. He got lights upon the Löwenburg that he never could have got after a hearty dinner; he touched in some autumn tints among the woods on the Drachenfels too poetical for a man who has eaten and drunk of German sausage and foaming Pilsener. At the same time, Guy was conscious to himself that hunger was rapidly turning him into a rabid Socialist. Hitherto, as becomes an artist, he had believed on the whole in our existing social and political institutions—baronial castles, lords and ladies gay in exquisite paintable silks and satins, the agreeable variety imparted to life by pleasing distinctions of rank and wealth, the picturesque rags and sweet tumble-down cottages of a contented peasantry. But now, when the unequal distribution of wealth began to affect him personally, he felt where the shoe pinched, and realized with a sudden revulsion of feeling that there was something rotten in the state of our Denmark. He said to himself more than once he wasn't one of your vile Radicals who want to upset everything—the Church, the throne, the peerage, the cathedrals, art, literature, and science, at one fell blow; but he certainly *would* like to see a fresh deal of the money.

Tourists strolled up, jingling the nickels in their pockets; they sat down at the terrace of the hotel on the hilltop—the inevitable "restauration" of every German point of view—and ordered beefsteaks and Rhine wine with a lordly carelessness which to Guy, in his present straits, seemed positively inhuman. Why should these pampered creatures thus flaunt their wealth before the eyes of more deserving though less successful fellow beings? To be sure, in the days of his own opulence, when he still had a five-pound note of his own in his pocket, Guy had often done the same sort of thing himself, and thought no ill of it. But hunger is a great teacher of advanced political economy to men. As he painted and starved, with the vision of Monday's bill floating ever before his eyes, Guy Lethbridge felt he was sinking by rapid and uncontrollable stages into abysses of pure unadulterated Communism.

Friday's dinner served only to make him feel more conscious than ever on Saturday of an aching void. He was tired as well as hungry when he reached the hilltop; his hand was far from being steady enough for purposes of painting. Nevertheless, he worked on, those autumn tints glowing brighter than ever as the afternoon wore away. About four o'clock, an Englishman, whom he had seen more than once at the Berliner-Hof, strolled casually up to him. Guy disliked that Englishman; he was tall and blustering, and had an ineffable air of wealthy insolence, which in Guy's present mood

seemed peculiarly offensive to him. He was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every night off roast pheasant and Heidsieck's dry monopole. But this afternoon he came up with his hands in his pockets, and inspected Guy's picture with the air of a connoisseur. "Jolly good light on the Thingumbob-berg" he said, shutting one eye and surveying it critically. "You've caught the colour well. If you go on like that, in the course of a century or so you ought, I should say, to make a painter."

Guy was annoyed at the man for this complacent speech; for in his own opinion, though he was by no means conceited, he was a painter already. So he drew himself up, and answered stiffly, "I'm glad you like the light; I've spent some pains on it."

"Pains!" the stranger echoed. "I should think you just had. It surprises me, the trouble you fellows will take over the corner of a picture. It's the right way, of course; that's how pictures are made; you can't make 'em any other way; but I couldn't do it, bless you—I'm such a jolly lazy beggar—fiddling and faddling for a week at a time over a tree or a trinket. I never did a stroke of work in my life, myself, and I admire you fellows who can; you must have such a precious reserve of energy." And he took out a first-rate cigar from his case as he spoke, and proceeded, with elaborate dawdling, to light it. To Guy, whose poor pipe had been stopped for three weeks, the mere smell of that cigar was positive purgatory.

The stranger, however, was in no hurry to go. He sat down on a rock, and began conversing about Art, of which, indeed, Guy was forced somewhat grudgingly to admit he wasn't wholly ignorant. Little by little, after a while, the talk glided off into other channels. True, Guy's part in it was mainly monosyllabic; but the stranger, who had been put into conversational cue by a bottle of good wine at the restauration hard by, made up for all deficiencies on his neighbour's part by a very frank garrulousness. In the course of conversation, it gradually came out that the stranger was a landed proprietor of means, in the horsey interest. His talk was of races. He wondered fellows could spend such a lot of time doing a really good picture like that for a miserable hundred or so—how it made Guy's mouth water!—when he himself had won twenty ponies last week, over a special tip for the Leger, as easy as look at it. He went on to talk of so many winnings and so few losings, that Guy's newly-kindled democratic fire blazed up fiercer than ever.

That evening, at the Berliner-Hof, Guy watched the stranger from his modest table in the corner, hobnobbing over a couple of bottles of sparkling Moselle, with two German officers, whose acquaintance he had picked up quite casually in the restaurant. He was talking German fluently at the top of his voice, laughing loudly between whiles, and offering to bet everybody a hundred marks even, on whatever turned up, with hilarious inconsequence. A hundred marks would have relieved poor Guy from all his embarrassments. He was almost tempted to take the man on spec. more than once, and pocket it if he won, or owe it, if he lost, to him. But that would be mean—nay, more, would be robbery.

Not such the stuff of which to make a successful burglar.

As Guy went upstairs to his room that night, he paused to ask the landlord the rich stranger's name. German as he was, the landlord gave it with the bated breath of an Englishman: "Sir Richard Lavers," he answered, in a most deferential tone. A man who can drink champagne like that, of course, secures the respect of every right-minded landlord.

Guy sat up late in his room, full of mingled perplexities. He couldn't go to bed; but about half-past ten the moonlight on the river was so exquisitely beautiful that he stole down to the balcony on the first floor to admire it. He stood there long, making notes for future pictures. The balcony runs along the whole south side of the Berliner-Hof, looking out on the Rhine and the Seven Mountains. Guy paced it to the end about half-past eleven. The last window towards the west stood open down to the balcony; Guy glanced in as he passed, and heard loud, stertorous breathing. He recognized that stout snore. It was the English baronet's.

Some nameless curiosity made him peer into the bedroom. The moonlight was flooding it, so that he could see everything almost as well as if it had been day. In the corner stood the bed, and the stranger's clothes were flung carelessly on a chair; but on the table close by Guy observed, at a glance, his watch, a purse, a few tumbled papers.

That purse contained, no doubt, what remained of those ponies he had won on the St. Leger. It contained the ill-gotten wealth of those nights at the club, of whose baccarat he had spoken that afternoon with such unholy gusto. A loan of a fiver would just then be of incalculable benefit to Guy. When he sold the Seven Mountains for that paltry two hundred, as

the baronet called it—though fifty pounds would have exceeded Guy's utmost expectations—he could repay the unwilling loan with twenty per cent. interest. To borrow in dire distress from a man who confesses he never did a stroke of honest work in his life, and who lives like a canker on the earnings of the community, was surely no crime. It would do this fellow good to be stinted in his drink for three days in a week. Just a hundred marks! And he would never miss them!

The artistic temperament must not be judged too severely by the stern moralist. It acts upon impulse, and repents at leisure. Next moment, Guy found himself six paces in the room, his hand on the purse, his heart beating high, then standing still within him.

He meant to open it and take out a hundred marks. He would pay his bill next day, set out for Cologne, and send Sir Richard a written acknowledgment of the sum abstracted. The fellow, though blustering, was good-humoured enough. He would understand this move; nay, sympathize with its boldness, its slight tinge of the adventurous.

Just as he thought this, the stertorous breathing grew suddenly less regular. Something turned heavily in the bed in the corner. It was now or never—and the purse wouldn't open! It had one of these nasty new-fangled clasps. Why do people always try to make life more complex for us? Do what he would, he couldn't open it. More rustling in the bed; Guy grew nervous and ashamed. Great heavens! What was this? The man would awake, and take him for a burglar!

And a burglar he was, in truth and deed! As he realized that idea he recoiled with horror.

Before he could collect himself, however; before he could drawback from this half-uncompleted crime; before he could let conscience get the better of impulse—why, the man in the bed gave another sharp turn, and, scarcely knowing what he did, Guy, instead of dropping the incriminating purse, clutched it tight in his hand, and darted back on to the balcony. Thence, maddened by the wild sense of some one unseen pursuing him, he dashed away to the passage door, along the dim, dark corridor, stumbled up the great stairs, and groped his way, in an agony of horror, into his own bedroom.

Once arrived there, he locked and double-locked the door, flung that hateful purse on the table in the dark, and sank on to the sofa in a tumult of remorse, alarm, and terror. If he hadn't been an artist, indeed, he would never have dreamt in the first instance of taking it. It was that impulsive artistic nature that misled him into translating his new political theories from the domain of abstract hypothesis to the solid region punishable by the Revised Criminal Code of Germany. For many minutes he sat there, wondering, doubting, fearing: had the man in the bed perceived him? had he recognized who it was? would he raise the whole house against the amateur burglar? And, oh, whatever came of it, let consequences alone, what hateful thing was this he had been so hastily led into? He held his brow in his hands and looked blankly into the dark. He felt himself a thief! He despised his own act with all the contempt and loathing of which his nature was capable.

At last he summoned up courage to light the candle, and in a mechanical sort of way, out of pure curiosity, began to examine the contents of the purse he had stolen. Worse and worse! This was horrible! German gold, English bank-notes, letters of credit, foreign bills of exchange, bankers' cheques—untold wealth in every form and variety of currency. The man must have carried some seven or eight hundred pounds about his person. And that wasn't all, either. There were letters in the purse, too—letters which, of course, Guy couldn't dream of looking at; for he was a gentleman still, even though he was a criminal. Letters and memoranda, and little knick-knacks and trinkets, and—what touched Guy to the heart like the thrust of a sharp knife—one lock of a child's light hair, half-protruding from a paper. Stung with worse remorse than before, the conscience-stricken burglar bundled them back into the purse, feeling hot in the face at this unwarrantable intrusion on another man's privacy. To effect an involuntary loan upon a sleeping fellow-citizen, overburdened with too much wealth, and unduly surfeited with more than his share of our unearned increment, seemed to Guy in his present communistic mood a very small matter; but to go prying into another man's letters, his documents, his keepsakes, his most sacred deposits—that was unpardonable crime, which his very soul shrank from.

It was impossible for him, then, to keep Sir Richard's belongings. He began to reflect with deep regret on the inconvenience it would cause any man to be suddenly deprived, at a single swoop, of eight hundred pounds, his passport, and his visiting cards. For it was a big, fat purse, of most capacious dimensions; and it contained almost everything of a mercantile or identificatory nature which Sir Richard took about with him. Besides, there were the letters, the lock of hair, the knick-knacks. To hit a fellow in the purse is all very well in its way, but to hit him in the affections is

unjustifiable meanness. Come what might, Guy felt there was but one thing now left for it. He must go straight downstairs again, in spite of shame or exposure, and restore that purse, ill-gotten gains and all, to that blood-sucker of an evil and inequitable social system, its lawful owner.

He opened the door once more, and peered out grimly into the passage. With head on one side, he strained his ear and listened. Not a sound in the house; not a creature stirring anywhere. With the purse in one hand, while he held his beating heart to keep it still in the other, Guy crept along the dark passage, and stole stealthily down the stairs, that creaked as he went with those pistol-shot creaks peculiar to stairs in the night when you're trying to tread softly. In the corridor below he could see his way better, for the moonlight from the open window at the end of it guided him. He stepped out on to the balcony, and walked with a throbbing breast to Sir Richard's window. Oh, mercy! it was closed. No chance of restitution. He tried it with his hand; it was fastened from within. The sleeper must have risen, roused by his flight, and shut it.

For a minute or two Guy hesitated. Should he rap at the panes, and try to attract the man's attention? But no; to do that would be to expose himself unnecessarily to assault and battery; and if purses are sacred, our persons are surely a great deal sacreder. After a brief debate on the balcony in the cold, Guy came to the conclusion that it would be wisest now to return to his own room and wait for the morning before making restitution.

He didn't undress that night; he flung himself on the bed, and tossed and turned in a fever of doubt till morning. Very early he rose up, and washed and dressed himself. Then, as soon as he thought there was any chance of Sir Richard being about, he walked boldly down the stairs, and, with trembling steps, made for the man's bedroom.

He knocked at the door twice, rather loudly. No answer. Was the fellow asleep still, then? Hadn't he dozed off the effects of that sparkling Moselle yet? Guy knocked a third time, still louder than before, and got no response. He turned the handle slightly, and peeped into the room. The bed was empty. Sir Richard must be up, and must have missed his money.

With heart on fire, the unhappy young burglar hurried down the front stairs, expecting to find the police already on his track. The man must have missed his purse, and risen early in search of it! As he went, a jovial voice sounded loud in the office. "It's my own fault, of course," the voice was saying, good-humouredly, in very bluff English. "I don't blame anybody else for it. I'm afraid I got a little too much of that jolly good Moselle of yours on board last night, Herr Landlord; and the German officers and I took to bally-ragging in the billiard-room; and by the time I went to bed, I don't deny I was a trifle top-heavy. But I wanted to pay my bill and go off this morning, for I have a serious appointment on Monday in London. It's awkward, very."

The landlord was profuse in his protestations and apologies. Such a thing had never happened in his house before. He couldn't understand it. He would communicate with the police, and do everything in his power to have the purse recovered. Furthermore, if Sir Richard wished to go to London, the landlord (rubbing his hands) had known him so long and so well, it would give him the greatest pleasure on earth to let the bill stand over, and to lend him twenty pounds till the cash was restored and the thief was punished.

"I don't say there's any thief, though, mind you," the jovial voice responded most candidly. "I expect it was all my own stupid carelessness. I'm such an ass of a fellow always for leaving money about; and as likely as not I pulled the thing out with my handkerchief in the billiard-room. I don't doubt it'll turn up, sooner or later some day, when you're cleaning the house up. If it don't"—the jovial voice sank for a moment to a lower key—"it's not so much the money itself I mind—that's only a few hundred pounds, and some circular notes which can't be negotiated—it's the letters and papers and private mementos. There were things in that purse"—and the voice still sank lower to an unexpected softness "that I wouldn't have lost—well, not for a good many thousands."

Guy's heart smote him at those words with poignant remorse. He thought of the child's hair, and blushed crimson with shame. Erect and solemn he strode into the office. "Sir Richard Lavers," he said slowly, "I want to speak with you alone one moment in the salon."

"Eh?" Sir Richard said sharply, turning round. "Oh, it's you. Why, certainly." And he followed the painter into the room with a somewhat sheepish air, like a detected felon.

Guy shut the door tight. Then he laid down that cursed thing with a shudder on the table. "There's your purse," he said curtly, without one word of explanation.

Sir Richard looked at it with distinct pleasure. "You picked it up," he said, smiling.

"No," Guy answered, disdaining to tell a lie; "I stole it."

Sir Richard sat down on a chair, with his hands on his knees, and stared at him curiously for ninety seconds. Then he burst into a loud laugh, and exclaimed, much amused, "Well, anyhow, there's no reason to pull such a long face about it."

Guy dropped into a seat opposite him, and told him all his tale, extenuating nothing, in frank self-accusation. Sir Richard listened intent, with a smile on his mouth and a twinkle in his eyes of good-natured acquiescence.

"Then it was you who woke me up," he said, "when I went to shut the window. Well, you're a deuced brave chap, that's all I've got to say, to come this morning and tell me the truth about it. Why didn't you say you picked it up in the passage? I led up to it straight. That's what beats me utterly!"

"Because it would have been a lie," Guy answered frankly. "And I'd rather own up than tell you a lie about it."

Sir Richard opened the purse and turned the things over carefully. "Why, it's all here right enough," he said, in a tone of bland surprise. "You haven't taken anything out of it!"

"No, of course not," Guy replied, almost smiling, in spite of himself, at the man's perfect naïveté.

Sir Richard eyed him hard with a curiously amused glance. "But, I say, look here, you know," he remonstrated quietly; "you are a precious inefficient sort of burglar, aren't you? You won't have anything now to pay your bill with on Monday." For Guy had not concealed from him the plain reason for his onslaught upon the sacred rights of property.

"No, I must do without as best I can," Guy answered, somewhat glum. For he stood still face to face with that original problem.

Sir Richard stared at him once more with that same curious expression. "Tell me," he said, after a short pause, "did you look at any of the letters or things in this pocket-book?"

"Not one," Guy answered honestly, with the ring of truth in his voice. "I saw they were private, and I abstained from touching them. Only," he added, after a second's hesitation, "I couldn't help seeing there was a lock of light hair in a paper in one place. And of that, I felt sure, it would be wicked to deprive you."

The baronet said nothing. He only gazed at his man fixedly. A suspicion of moisture lurked in his blue eyes. "Well, as long as I've got the papers," he murmured at last, after a long pause, "I don't mind about the tin. That was really a secondary consideration."

"And now," Guy said sturdily, "if you'll send for the police and tell the landlord, I'll give myself into custody on the charge of robbery."

Sir Richard rose and fronted him. For one moment he was serious. "Now, look here, young man," he said, with an air of paternal wisdom, "don't you go and be a something-or-other fool. Don't say one word of this to the landlord or anybody. You are a deuced clever fellow, and you can paint like one o'clock. That's a precious good thing of yours, that view of the ramshackled old Schloss on the Drachenfels. You're sure to rise in the end; you've the right cut of the jib for it. Now, you take my advice, and keep this thing quiet. If *you* don't peach of it, *I* won't—word of honour of a gentleman. And if you'll allow me, I'll lend you fifty pounds. You can pay me back right enough when you're elected to the Academy."

Guy Lethbridge's face grew red as fire. That the man should forgive him was bad enough in all conscience, but that he should offer him a loan was really dreadful. It's all very well for a virtuous citizen to relieve the overweening aristocrat of his superfluous wealth with the high hand of confiscation; but to take it as a gift from him—for a gift it would practically mean—and that at the very moment when one had to acknowledge an attempted crime, revolted every

sentiment of Guy Lethbridge's nature.

He drew back with a stammered "No, thank you. It's very kind of you, but—of course, I couldn't." And then there arose between them the most comic episode of expostulation and persuasion that the rooms of the Berliner-Hof had ever yet witnessed. The baronet almost lost his temper over the young man's obstinacy. It was ridiculous, he urged, for any gentleman not to accept a loan of fifty pounds from a well-disposed person in a moment of emergency. A fellow who could paint like *that* could never want long; and as for the passing impulse which had led Guy to take charge of the purse for an hour or two—why, the upshot showed it was *only* a passing impulse; and we all make mistakes in moments of effusion, late at night, after dining. Besides, a man in Guy's position must be really hard up, and no mistake, before he thinks of relieving other people of their purses. And when a fellow's hard up, well, hang it all, my dear sir, you can't blame him for deviating into eccentric action. As for the fifty pounds, if Guy didn't take it, it'd go upon a horse, no doubt, or a supper at the Gaiety, or something equally foolish. Let him be sensible and pocket it; no harm in a loan; and to be quite frank, Sir Richard said, he thought better of him for owning up to his fault so manfully, than he'd have thought of him if he'd never yielded at all to temptation.

Guy stood firm, however, and refused to the bitter end.

Sir Richard consulted his watch.

"Hullo," he said, starting, "I can't stand here squabbling over fifty pounds with you all the morning. I've got to catch the 9·25 to Cologne; my things are all packed; I must have my coffee. Now, before I go, for the last time, will you or won't you accept that little loan from me? Mind, you're a conscientious kind of chap, and your bill's due on Monday. You've got no right to defraud your landlord when a friend's prepared to help you tide over this temporary difficulty."

That was a hard home-thrust. Guy admitted the logic of it. But he stood by his guns still, and shook his head firmly. All sense of sullenness and defiance was gone from him now. The man's genuine kind-heartedness and sympathy had conquered him. "Sir," he cried, wringing his new friend's hand with unaffected warmth, "you're a brick; and you make me ashamed of myself. But *please* don't press it upon me. I *couldn't* take it now. Your kindness has broken me." And he burst into tears with a sudden impulse as he rushed to the window to hide his emotion.

Sir Richard hummed an air and left the salon abruptly. Guy went up to his own room, locked himself in all alone, and had a bad half-hour of it with his own conscience. He was roused from his reverie at the end of that time by a double knock at the door. It was the German waiter. "Wit' Sir Richard's compliments," he said, handing a letter to Guy. The painter tore the envelope open. It contained—fifty pounds in English bank notes, and accompanying them this surprising letter:—

"DEAR MR. LETHBRIDGE,

"You *must* accept enclosed few notes as a loan for the present. You see, the fact is, I'm not a baronet at all, but a bookmaker and bank swindler. The letters you didn't examine in my purse would have put the police on my track; and I therefore regard this trifling little sum as really due to you. You need have no compunction about taking it, for it isn't mine, and you can't possibly return it to its proper owner. Take it without a scruple, and settle your bill—you can repay me whenever you next meet me. You're a long sight a better man than I am, anyhow.

"Yours faithfully,
"RICHARD LAVERS."

Guy crumpled it up in his hand with an impatient gesture. Take a swindler's money! Inconceivable! Impossible! He seized his hat in his haste, and rushed down to the office.

"Where's he gone?" he cried to the landlord.

And the landlord, taking his sense, answered promptly—

"To the station."

Guy tore down the road, and rushed into the building just as the Cologne train was steaming out from the platform. He ran along its side, disregarding the vehement expostulations of portly, red-banded German officialdom. Soon he spied the dubious baronet alone in a first-class compartment. Crumpling the notes into a pellet, he flung them back at him fiercely.

“How could you?” he cried, all on fire. “More than ever, now, when I know who you are, I can’t touch those notes—I can’t look at your money!”

In another second that jovial face leaned, all smiles, out of the window.

“You confounded fool!” the loud voice burst forth merrily, “you’re the hardest chap to befriend I ever yet came across. Do you think, if what I said in that letter was true, I’d be ass enough to confess it—and in writing too—to a casual acquaintance? Take your tennis-ball back again!” and the pellet hit Guy hard on the cheek at the words. “Settle your bill like a man; and if ever you want to pay me back in return, you can find my address any day in Debrett or Foster.”

By this time even Sir Richard’s stentorian voice was almost past bawling-point. There was nothing left for it now but to pick up the notes and return to the Berliner-Hof. Though whether he should use them or not to pay his bill was a point of casuistry he had still to debate upon.

Next morning’s post, however, brought him a note from Cologne, which placed the whole question in an unexpected light for him:—

“DEAR MR. LETHBRIDGE,

“We’ve both been fools. My ruse was a silly one. How extraordinary the right way out of this little difficulty didn’t at once occur to me! I was awfully taken by your picture of the ramshackled old Schloss; in fact, I thought when I could look up its price in the Academy catalogue I’d probably buy it, if it wasn’t too dear for me. But the heat of the moment put this idea altogether out of my head. Shall we say £200 as the price of the picture? The balance to be paid on delivery in London. Now think no more of the rest, and remain well assured that if ever this little episode gets abroad in the world it will *not* be through the instrumentality of—

“Yours very sincerely,
“RICHARD LAVERS.”

Sir Richard has settled down now as a respectable county member; and, except when occasionally exhilarated with champagne, is really a most useful pillar of society. He’s very proud of a picture in his dining-room of Sorrento from the Castellammare-road—a companion-piece to that exquisite autumnal view of the ruin on the Drachenfels and the Seven Mountains. Both are from the brush of that rising young Associate, Mr. Guy Lethbridge, whom Sir Richard discovered and introduced to the great world; but the frame of the Sorrento bears a neat little inscription:—“For Sir Richard Lavers, from his ever grateful and affectionate friend, the painter.” The owner has been offered five hundred down for the Drachenfels more than once—and has refused the offer.



Transcriber's Note

This text has been preserved as in the original, including archaic and inconsistent spelling, punctuation and grammar, except that obvious printer's errors have been silently corrected.

[The end of *The Conscientious Burglar* by Grant Allen]