

*The*  
CEDAR BOX

BY JOHN OXENHAM



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*'For thee, mother,' he said. 'And I made  
it all with my own hands—all for thee.'*

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CEDAR BOX**

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**JOHN OXENHAM**

*With Frontispiece  
from a Drawing by T. Baines*

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To  
*MY WIFE*  
IN LOVING ESTIMATION

# THE CEDAR BOX

I have had a very strange experience, and as is frequently the case with the highest and most unique of one's experiences, I cannot explain it. All I can do is to tell you the facts as simply as possible and leave you to form your own opinion.

My own is settled unalterably, but then I had the advantage of seeing with my own eyes that which I can only do my best to make you see through this poor and imperfect medium of words.

If only you had seen for yourselves....

I suppose to most of us who live by the pen there is always—locked tight out of sight in that dark little chamber of the heart of which we alone hold the key—the dreadful lurking fear that the time may come when the fecund brain will cease to yield, when the power of creation—glorious even on the limited scale which has been vouchsafed to us—shall fail, and we shall become—what?

As other men? That is hardly possible. This one golden strand, entrusted to us by the Master of our Craft, we have spun with heart and brain and with infinite joy. We have given our lives to it and the best that was in us.

Can we then at the fatal word pick up the dull gray threads of life and of them weave us garments for our nakedness and a trifle for a crust?

Hardly possible. We have lived on the slopes and the hill-tops and watched the strife and turmoil all about us. We have, maybe, done our best to help and hearten, even if only by amusing, the busy ones below. But we have been out of the fight that never ceases in the plains, and how shall we now descend into it and find room to strive and live?

Do not mistake me. It is not that, under such condition of dire necessity, we would not, but simply that we hardly could.

Wise, or otherwise, we may be in our own little conceits, but our wisdom, or our folly, has turned our feet away from the market-place and set them in the by-paths of the hill-sides. We have viewed it all from the outside and turned to our own uses the reek and the clamour and the peculiar ways of it. Some of us have now and again dug out a diamond and done our best with it, and some have been content to dabble in the mud and make thereof unwholesome pies and evil stench.

But the trouble of it is that we have, of intention and of necessity, held ourselves more or less aloof from the actual world-strife. Our hands have grown unaccustomed to the ever-changing weapons of warfare. The places are all filled, and eager crowds of specially-trained supers are waiting anxiously to leap into the first gaps in the ranks that offer. A man falls, a thousand volunteers rush for his post at half his pay, and the grim fight for life goes on.

I had been ill, literally, in the good old phrase, sick unto death.

After a sudden break and a quick descent I had, for one long day, lain there looking Death full in the face. And I had found it a very tender and gentle face, with friendly, welcoming eyes.

For myself, death has never held the terrors some folks feel, for I have always believed that the change when it comes will be for the infinitely better—for the infinitely best.

For myself, then, I had no fears. But for those I must leave behind me, and leave so inadequately provided for,—for my wife and the children, my heart was sick and sore.

It would make such a difference,—all the difference between enough and less than enough. And in that, perhaps, lies the bitterness of death for most of us. For those endowed with a superfluity of this world's goods the bitterness lies—one is given to understand—in the fact that they must leave it all behind them when they go. After all, it is better to regret people than things.

Life had been somewhat of a struggle, you see. Even the by-paths and hill-sides are crowded in these days. Still the fight had been to my liking and I had enjoyed it to the full.

I had nothing to blame myself with, unless with overworking, and that may perchance be reckoned half a virtue. But it was hard to be stricken down like this, just when, at long last, the tide seemed about to turn my way; and it was

bitter beyond words to lie there unable to lift a finger to better matters.

Friend Death shook me gently by the hand that day, and then, to the visible surprise of my good old Doctor Rothie and my tenderest of nurses, with a gracious nod and a smiling 'au revoir,' he went softly away and, against all the accepted canons of the profession, I slept quietly back into life.

But apparently—and to myself without a doubt—to but a broken life which, as it seemed to me, would be worse than none.

My mind, so far as the creative faculty was concerned, was an absolute blank—a dull, vacuous darkness without a living creature in it. I did not believe I would ever write another line of my own.

And I lay and wondered dully what would be the end of it all for all of us.

What could I possibly turn my hand to? What on earth could I do that should earn even the meagrest living for those dependent on me?

One has heard of quondam race-horses degraded to the shafts of the sprightly hansom. I hope it is not true. They would be so very much better dead,—they have no one dependent on their earnings.

And one hears still ghastlier tales of men of birth and

education carrying sandwich-boards in the gutter. True, the chances are that, if it is so, the fault is their own, and as a rule it caught them by the throat out of a glass. None the less horrible to think of, however it came about.

At first I was, I suppose, too weak to think very deeply even of the future. But as I grew stronger the grim thought of it grew stronger too and left no room for any thought besides.

Stories? Books? Had I written stories and books? I? How on earth had I managed it? I? With a brain like this—dull as a ditch, empty as a drum, and a heart as heavy as lead.

And this baleful brooding did not make for health. My heart was sick, my eye was clouded with the shadow of the evil days to come, my whole body was full of darkness.

What could I possibly find to do, now that my chosen work was over? What would become of them all?

For myself, better, oh, infinitely better, if old Friend Death had gripped me tight that day and refused to let me go. But, for them...

This went on for a fortnight or so, the torment of it growing ever greater, and Rothie's kind old face pinched despairingly over me in spite of himself.

He knew all about me, and pretty well all my circumstances, and he was wise enough, and experienced enough, to fathom my depths.

He talked to me cheerfully, rallied me cheerily, told me

strange stories of his own experiences, prophesied great things for the future. Did all he could. But I *knew*. My writing days were over, and what was to be the complexion of the days to come was beyond me, except that it was black.

'Ye mustna look like that, laddie,' said Rothie, moved one day to strong expostulation. 'Ye've done splendidly and I'm prood o' ye. Ye're a feather in ma cap, my man.'

'Just that!' I growled; 'a feather—especially about the head, and as fushionless and useless.'

'Ye're weak yet. It'll be all right when ye pick up a bit. Ye're alive anyway, and that's more than ye've any right to be, seeing the state you were in.'

'Ay, I sometimes wish——'

'No, you don't. I know better. You're not built that way. Take my word for it, my boy. It'll all come back as soon as ye tone up—and with added experience and greater power.'

But my head wagged dolefully to the tune of my heart. 'I know better, Doctor. I'm done. It's only what I'm going to do that troubles me.'

'Do, man? Why—write—as ye never wrote before. What else would ye do? That's what ye were made for.'

'That's just it. What else can I do? I've been asking myself that over and over again till I'm sick of it. And the answer is always—nothing—unless it's sandwich-boards or a hansom-cab.'

'Sandwich fiddlesticks! Hansoms be hanged!'—it was a stronger word he used. He could be very brusque at times. 'It's sheer nonsense and blithering havers ye're talking. And it is na good for ye to lie brooding over things like that.'

'Old hen on a china egg! And nothing comes of it.'

'It will, ma broodie-hen,' he said, with that somewhat rare smile of his. 'There's mair cheek'ns to be hatched yet than the world kens o', and bonnier birds too.'

It is only to his best-known that he develops the breadth of his native tongue. To the rest his language is most pedantically precise. Rothie talking braid Scots is the very best friend a man can have, especially if he is a sick man.

'Ye shall dedicate your next book to me,' he said, 'and it's a prood man I'll be, for it'll be a thumper.'

'You'll die a humble man, Doctor.'

'We'll see. I'm no a betting-man, but I'm prepared to stake my bill on that dedication.'

'It's brain I'm short of, man, not conscience. Why should I rook you?' At which he only laughed.

The following day when he came in he brought with him a parcel—it seems strange to me now to write of it so—an oblong parcel done up in brown paper and actually tied with string!

It looked like books—or it might have been an electric

battery, or a camera, or a set of jig-saw puzzles, or any similar toy suitable to the capacity of a worn-out brain.

He looked at me with a curious smile on his face.

'I'm going to lend you this for a day or two,' he said, with a strangely soft inflection of the voice.

'What is it?' I asked listlessly.

'I'll show you.'

He untied the string as carefully and cautiously as though the contents were frailest glass, opened the brown paper, and discovered an inner wrapping of dark blue velvet. This he unfolded with the same delicate care, and disclosed a metal box about a foot long and nine inches wide.

It was, I judged, of Eastern make. In colour it was of a very rich dark blue, so wonderful in its strange depths as to seem almost semi-transparent. The whole surface was damascened with faint gold tracery of most chaste and exquisite design.

'What lovely workmanship!' exclaimed my wife, who was watching anxiously. She had enormous faith in Rothie, simply because she hails from Renfrewshire, and he from Dumbarton.

'Yes,' he said, with that same soft inflection of the voice which was so very different from his usual hearty bluntness.

'Jewels?' I asked accommodatingly. If his object was to arouse my interest and lift my thoughts for a moment above my china egg he undoubtedly succeeded. But it was more by

the strangeness of his own manner than by his treasure-box.

'We shall see,' was the enigmatic answer to my question.

'What's it made of?'

'I'll tell you all about it later.'

'It is very beautiful,' said my wife, running a slender finger along the interwoven coils of the design and peering into the dark blue depths. 'I feel as if I could see into it, but I can't. It looks miles deep. It is like a great blue-black opal or a mountain tarn.'

'Anything inside?' I asked, to please him with a show of interest.

He drew out his old leather purse, took from it a small wash-leather bag, and out of it a tiny key, steel-blue and gold like the rest. He unlocked the box and quietly raised the lid, and we bent over eagerly to see the contents.

The box was empty. There was nothing to be seen but an inner lining of brown wood, the slight, subtle fragrance of which proclaimed it cedar.

My wife and I straightened up simultaneously after the first disappointing glance and looked at Rothie.

'Why—it's empty,' said my wife.

He nodded his big head gravely, and then stood looking down into the empty box in so absorbed a fashion that I said to

myself 'He expected to find something there and is puzzled as to what has become of it.'

'Something amissing, Doctor?' I asked.

'Nothing ... I want to leave it with you for three or four days. Keep it open. Examine it. And, I beg of you, take every care of it.'

'Won't you explain the mystery?'

'Later. Perhaps you can fathom it for yourselves. It is better worth hatching than your china egg.'

And with that, and with that same strange softening of the rugged face which had found its way into his voice, he went.

'What a curious idea!' said my wife, looking down into the box when she returned from seeing him to the door. 'I can see nothing but an empty wooden box—cedar too. But there is nothing in that. It is perhaps thicker and more stoutly made than those one buys in the shops. I wonder—perhaps there's something underneath the wood.'

'If there is it's not meant to be tampered with,' for across the top of the cedar box were two bars of the same steel-blue metal chased with gold—one running exactly midway the length of the box, the other crossing it at right angles about three inches from the end. I had already tried them with a cautious finger and found them inviolable. By some deft craftsmanship they seemed an integral part of the outer case. The cedar box had certainly never been outside it since they were placed in position.

'Well, it's certainly a lovely old box,' was my wife's conclusion. 'But it's all very odd. What does Dr. Rothie expect it to do for you, I wonder?'

I thought I gauged his intention, but as a matter of fact I came nowhere near the meaning of it.

'Shall I close it up?' asked my wife, when she had packed me up for the night.

'Rothie said leave it open. We'd better follow orders,' and the box was left standing open on the table by my bedside.

The days, black with gloomy thought, had been long; the nights blacker and longer still, solid, interminable, uttermost depths of darkness. None but the sick and sleepless know how the shadows can ride the weary soul when the rest of the world is sleeping.

I had had many bitter bad hours in the nights, when the burden of life seemed too grievous to be borne,—when there was nothing to relieve one's thoughts for a moment from the useless weariness of their convict rounds,—when faith and hope burned dimmer than the night-light, and prayers availed not for their brightening,—when Death was the best of friends, and final rest the only thing left to long for.

But this night, strangely enough, I slept sound refreshing sleep, for the first time in many weeks.

The night-light glimmered on the dim gold chasing of the steel-blue box, and here and there tiny gold eyes winked back at it as though they were heliographing to one another. Then

there would be intervals when they were probably uncoding and making up their answers, and then the wick would give a spurt and the messages flashed to and fro like lightning, and I lay and wondered dreamily what it was all about. The faint fragrance of the cedar came to me at times like a breath of Lebanon.

I was thinking of the box when I fell asleep. My waking eyes fell on it. Drowsily I thought I had dreamed of it. What, I could not recall, but the sense of it was vaguely pleasing.

'You've had a better night,' was my wife's greeting, as soon as she set eyes on me.

'Yes, old Rothie's charm is working, though I can't tell how.'

But I came to the conclusion that it was all quite simple.

Rothie had seen the need of some distraction for my thoughts and had provided it in the form of this curious old box. His quiet air of mystery was of course part and parcel of his scheme.

Very well, let it work, and I would help it all I could. To have had so restful a night was in itself mighty gain and worth pursuing.

Unconsciously I began to weave odd fancies round the damascened box; and from old custom, and so that the fancies might at all events have legs to stand on or wings to fly with, I got my wife to bring me the necessary volume of the encyclopaedia and to read to me of Damascus and the ancient art of damascening.

Without a doubt old Rothie's charm was working.

So Damascus dated back to the days of Abraham! And the art of damascening originated in Northern India and was established at Damascus in the reign of the Emperor Domitian, some time in the first century!

This ancient box might obviously then go back a very long way indeed. And the things it might have seen—if only it had been gifted that way!—Vespasian, Trajan, the Crusaders, Louis of France and Conrad of Germany, perhaps Richard of England, and Tamerlane who carried away the cleverest damasceners to Samarkand; and later, many a tragic time 'twixt Moslem and Christian!

And was it not at Damascus, in the street called 'Straight,' that a certain Ananias went reluctantly to the house of Judas for the relief of one, Saul of Tarsus, a man of ill repute in those days, but held for better things? And later, had not this same Saul, having forsaken the old things for the new, to be let down from the walls of this same Damascus by night in a basket in order to escape the too-pressing attentions of his former associates?

Having got to St. Paul, my hand went naturally to the shelf above the head of my bed, and groped there till it found without any difficulty—so accustomed is it to that same search—my copy of Myers' most wonderful poem. And where I opened I read:

*'What can we do, o'er whom the un beholden  
Hangs in a night with which we cannot cope?'*

That appealed. It hit me off to a nicety. If ever the unbeholden hung over any man in a night with which he could not cope, it surely did with me.

*'What but look sunward, and with faces golden  
Speak to each other softly of a hope?'*

The sun of my hopes had sunk behind the blackest of clouds. Now in the daylight, it was less impossible, if also less valorous than it had been in the night, to think of his possible rising again.

*'Can it be true, the Grace He is declaring?  
Oh, let us trust Him, for His words are fair!  
Man, what is this, and why art thou despairing?  
God shall forgive thee all but thy despair.'*

Yes, that got home too, for surely I had been most desperately despairing—an unforgivable sin! 'This is my infirmity,' cried old Asaph the Singer, the leader of David's choir, and I felt myself akin to him. Maybe he was sick and thought he would never write another song for Jeduthun, the chief musician. And here was something more, and to the point:

*'Quick in a moment, infinite for ever  
Send an arousal better than I pray;  
Give me a grace upon the faint endeavour,  
Souls for my hire and Pentecost to-day!'*

Send an arousal better than I pray? Just what I wanted, and wanted badly.

And as my fingers turned the well-known pages, I came on

this also:

*'Eager and faint, empassionate and lonely,  
These in their hour shall prophesy again:  
This is His will who hath endured, and only  
Sendeth the promise where He sends the pain.'*

Great words, my masters—golden thoughts in jewelled words! They chased the darkness of my soul as those ancient craftsmen of Damascus chased that wonderful casket—wounding it first with sharpest chisellings, then salving the wounds with purest gold. They roused me from my hopelessness, and started trains of thought which were sweet to my heart as springs in a thirsty land.

It was the first profitable day I had spent since the ropes slackened. Profitable, that is, from my point of view. Who shall venture to deprive of their full and proper value the days we look upon as wasted?

And tracing back, I saw that it all came out of that strange old box of Rothie's, and I smiled quietly to myself at the shrewd old fellow's acumen.

That night again was a beneficent one. I slept soundly, and yet I knew when I woke that I had dreamed dreams and seen visions, for my brain was at work again, tentatively delving and sowing in its chosen field—and it seemed to me that it was a larger field than before, and that the delving went deeper and the seed was more choice.

For three clear days Rothie left me solely to the cure of the damascened box, and when he did at last favour us with a visit

he showed less surprise at my surprising renaissance than one might have expected.

As it happened, he caught me hard at work. For, some time in the early morning, the thoughts and fancies my mind had never ceased to weave around the silver box had crystallised into so definite a shape that, falling asleep still full of them, it had dreamed a dream.

And, what is more, when I awoke, the details of it were all so sharply etched upon my memory that I knew from old experience that there would be no peace of mind for me till it was all set down on paper. It is at such a time, when what has been vouchsafed to one insists on expressing itself, that the writer's joy is at its fullest.

So, at the earliest possible moment I had, for the first time in many weeks, called for pen and paper, and had rejoiced greatly at finding myself once more at work.

I had just finished writing when Rothie came in.

'That's all right. I don't need to ask if you're better,' he began, with a benignant smile.

'Yes, I'm fine; but I've been dreaming about this, and I'll have a relapse unless you tell me all about it,' and I nodded towards the box.

He nodded understandingly. 'I know. And I'll tell you all I know myself——'

'Is it magic of some kind?' asked my wife, in the wonder of

my new lease of life. 'Where did you get it? Have you found it act the same way in other cases? Sit down and tell us all about it. It's Damascus, isn't it?'

'Yes, Damascus of the first century.'

'Steel?'

'No, silver. That wonderful depth is simply the result of age. The inlay is, of course, pure gold.'

'It is worth something, then.'

'It is perhaps the most precious purely material thing existent at this present moment,' he said very softly and deliberately. And she stared at him in surprise.

For a matter-of-fact, level-headed medico, his voice and manner as he said it, expressive beyond words of a conviction that admitted of no shadow of doubt, were strangely impressive. Then again, you must remember, he was a hard-headed Scot, not given to sentiment, still less to any display of feeling, though we knew by long experience that the heart he hid so carefully beat more warmly than most.

'But,' he continued, 'this outer case, beautiful as it is as a mere work of art, is nothing. It is only the husk——'

'But there is nothing else,' said my wife, looking up at him with a puzzled face, '—except the cedar box.'

'Nothing else—except the cedar box.'

'Exactly!' said I. 'The cedar box.'

'Why, Jack, what do you know about it?' asked my wife.

'I've just been trying to write the history of the cedar box as it came to me in the night.'

'Let us hear your version,' said Rothie, mightily interested. 'Then I'll give you the authorised.'

And I read them these notes of what I had seen in the night.

I was in an Eastern land. And it seemed to me that I was native there. I wore the dress of the country, spoke its speech, and was quite at home in all its ways.

I was sitting on a wooden seat in a carpenter's workshop. It was a simple workman-like place, but with a charm about it beyond the charms of any other carpenter's shop I had ever been in, and carpenters' shops and saw-mills have ever been dear to me. This was due no doubt in part to its situation. The upper portion of the wall, where the working-bench stood, was quite open. Whenever the worker at that bench lifted his eyes from his work they lighted on a view of uplifting and ever-changing beauty.

From that wide opening in the wall the narrow valley ran straight towards the setting sun. The bare, round summits of the hills on either side gleamed like silver. Here and there along their slopes I saw soft dark patches which I knew were Lebanon cedars. In the valley below the corn-fields glimmered

like sheets of gold, the scattered houses were almost lost among their gardens and hedges of cactus, and their orchards of pomegranate and orange, and fig and olive; and over them all the light of eventide was falling like a blessing, in a soft golden haze.

The workshop was ankle-deep in wide-flaked shavings of oak, chippings of ash, long creamy screw-spirals of pine, and the shorter brown-pink curls of cedar, and the sweet fresh fragrance of these was in the air. Outside were wheels, and yokes for oxen, in various stages of construction.

The sun was sinking towards the western ridge which closed in the valley. His beams came in through the opening above the workbench in level golden shafts.

At the bench, in the full radiance of all that glory, a boy wrought all alone, so intent on his work that he barely looked up even when he spoke.

'It is for her, you see,' he said, with a quick smiling look at me,—evidently in reply to some remark of mine which the dream did not yield me.

He was a sturdy boy of twelve and very pleasant to look upon,—comely of face, and brown of skin through great friendship with the sun and air; brown-eyed, and every time his eyes glanced at me I found in each of them a radiant spark like a little golden star. It seemed as though a great glowing soul dwelt within him and shone out through those starry brown eyes. His hair, too, was brown and had a ripple in it.

He was dressed in a loose white garment, girded at the waist

with a carelessly-knotted cord, open at the neck, and coming down only to his knees. His legs and feet were as brown as the cedar shavings, and he wore the small roughly-tanned sandals of the country.

The work he was just finishing with such absorbing care was a small oblong box of cedar wood. As he turned it over and over in his hands, and ran his eyes and fingers along its sides and joints in search of slightest imperfection, I saw two things: First, that the box was very beautifully fashioned, without nail or peg,—sides and bottom all dovetailed into one another in a way that betokened considerable skill and long and patient labour. And, secondly, that the hands which had made it were very finely shaped, at once strong and delicate, and very gracious and gentle in their touch. The eager little fingers were soiled with work at the moment, and one of them, on the left hand, had a bit of rag tied round it. But in their handling of that cedar box they seemed to me instinct with loving sympathy as well as boyish pride of accomplishment.

A door opened off the workshop to an inner room. And through this door a sweet, low voice called, 'Leave thy work now, my son. The supper is ready and thy father and I await thee.'

'In one little moment, mother. I am just finishing,' cried the boy, and smoothed a tiny roughness on his box with a plane, and passed his fingers searchingly along it again, and ran his eye carefully over every inch of it to make sure.

'It is for her, you see,' he said to me again, with his starry glance and smile. 'And so it must be flawless.'

'To whom art thou speaking, my son?' came the voice through the door again. 'Who is out there with thee?'

'Tis a wayfarer,' said the boy. 'Perhaps he will eat with us,' and he smiled across at me once more.

And at that I heard them rise from their seats within, and they came to the door of the workshop.

The boy's mother was a woman of about thirty, I judged, very sweet of face and of a comely figure. She wore an outer robe of blue over an under-garment of rose, and on her head was a veil of white linen which fell down over her shoulders. Her eyes were brown like the boy's, but in them was a look which I could not at once fathom. There was in it an outreach, a farawayness, a touch of wonder, perhaps something of apprehension, as though she were subject to constant surprises and never quite sure what to expect.

The father was behind her. He but glanced over her shoulder and said a word and went back to his seat. I got no more than a glimpse of a bearded face and a pair of dark eyes.

'Where, then, is thy wayfarer?' asked the mother, looking round.

'Why,—on the bench there by the big saw,' said the boy, with a nod and a laughing look at me.

'But I see no one here,' said the boy's mother, gazing very earnestly at him.

'No?' he said in surprise, and smiled at me again. 'That is

strange, now, for I both see him and speak to him, and he sees and hears me. I must have thought him, for he is very real to me.'

'Thou hast such strange thoughts at times, my son,' she said gently. 'Put away thy tools now. Thou hast wrought late to-night. Thy work will keep till to-morrow.'

But the boy suddenly fancied he had detected another tiny flaw in the side of his box, and bent over it with his plane again.

'And thou art always telling me—"The day's work in the day,"' he laughed merrily.

'Yea, but this could surely be to-morrow's work just as well as to-day's.'

'Nay, then, for when the sun sets it is thy birthday, and this is for thee. Now,'—with a final careful scrutiny with eye and finger, just as the sun dipped behind the western hills and the long narrow valley filled in an instant with plum-purple shadows, 'it is finished, and it is thy birthday,' and he joyfully placed the cedar box in her hands.

'For thee, mother,' he said again, with dancing eyes. 'And I made it all with my own hands—all for thee.'

'It is a marvellous box for one so young to make,' and she examined it with loving pride.

'My father taught me, you see, and it has taken me many weeks to make.'

'I thank thee, my little son, and I will keep it for thy sake as long as I live. It is the most beautiful box I have ever had. Surely there is not another like it in all the world.'

'I put my heart into it because it was for thee.'

'It lacks but one thing,' she said, as she slipped the lid out of its groove and examined the box again, inside and out.

'What, then, mother? What lacks it?' he asked quickly. 'I thought I had——'

'Thy name on it as its maker, little son. It is so marvellous a box that some might doubt——'

'I will soon remedy that,' and he seized a slender gouge and a mallet.

'To-morrow, then. Come now and eat.'

'Nay, the sun is set, but I can finish it before the first star shows. 'Twill take me but a moment.'

He turned the lid upside down, and as he wrought on it with gouge and chisel—I awoke.

Rothie had listened with keenest attention. When I stopped he nodded his head gravely, and said:

'That is really very curious. You will hardly appreciate how extraordinary it is till you hear the actual facts. Listen! Some

years ago I had as a patient an old man named Isaacson—Isaac ben Isaac, to be quite correct, but simply old Isaac Isaacson to the world at large. He was a Christian Jew and traced back without a flaw through generations of Isaac ben Isaacs right up to the very first Isaac, son of Abraham. His family tree, inscribed on parchment rolls, was monotonous enough to look at, but he was naturally very proud of it in a quiet way, and prouder still of the fact that the Isaac ben Isaac of the years 6-97 A.D. had risen above the material hopes of his race and had accepted Jesus of Nazareth as the promised Messiah.

'I won't go into details of his family history. As Christians its members suffered persecution and death, but always some survived to carry on the faith.

'My dear old patriarch completed his hundredth year and he was the last of his line. Wife, sons, and daughters, all had gone before him. He had other relatives, of course, but they were not in sympathy with him.

'I attended him for many years. There was never anything much wrong with him, but when one passes the allotted span by a generation it is perhaps well to have a doctor for a friend. And we had come to be on terms of the closest friendship.

'He was a most delightful old fellow. I never heard a complaint from his lips. He was at all times calm, quiet, dignified—at peace with God, with himself, and with all the world, even with his relatives who despised and hated him.

'And that Damascus casket stood always open on a table by his bedside.

'I had often admired it and spoken about it. Whenever I did so, he always wore a strangely uplifted look—a kind of exaltation of the spirit in some knowledge not possessed by others. I can hardly describe it, but his fine old face seemed to glow with some inner radiance, and his frail body to expand as though the spirit within grew almost too large for it. He was so good to look upon at such times that I used often to speak of the casket just in order to see him so.

'He died on his hundred and first birthday of simple old age, in full possession of all his faculties, and his passing was wonderfully sweet and beautiful.

'As I sat by his bedside, he looked at that casket with the look on his face that I knew so well, and he said "I am the last. You are to have that for the love you have borne me. It is a good thing to have. You will treasure it for its own sake——"

"For yours chiefly," I said.

"I am nothing," he said softly. "But that is much. I think it brings peace and a quiet mind. It has been very dear to me and to all my house for many generations... You will wait with me now. It cannot be long. And then you will take the casket with you, and a letter I have written about it. And when you have read the letter you will not fail to cherish the box. There are others... If it fell into their hands... It is not mentioned in my will, but my lawyers have drawn up a deed of gift which I have executed. Guard it very jealously, my friend..."

'I took the box home with me when he had gone, and the letter. This is the letter:

'The cedar wood box enclosed in the damascened silver casket I had from my father, Isaac ben Isaac, who had it from his father, who had it from his father, and so it has come down through all the generations of our house, from the days of Isaac ben Isaac who lived in Jerusalem in the time of Tiberius and died in Ephesus in the year 97. Which Isaac ben Isaac was the friend and disciple of John, the son of Zebedæus and Salome, who was sister to Mary the mother of Jesus. It was to this John, His cousin and much-loved disciple, that the Master commended Mary with almost His last words, and John took her to his home and tended her as a son until her death.

'It was after her death and just before the persecution drove him to Patmos, that he gave to Isaac ben Isaac the little cedar box, and it was Isaac ben Isaac who enclosed it in the silver casket which he made, and wrought, and chased entirely with his own hands, he being a silversmith and no mean craftsman as the casket proves.

'But the silver casket, beautiful though it is, is nothing. It is but the body, of which the cedar box may be likened to the soul.

'For this little box was one of Mary's most cherished possessions, and she told John that it was made for her as a present by her little son, Jesus, with His own hands in His father's workshop at Nazareth.

'In confirmation of this you will find, in the lower right-hand corner of what appears to be the bottom but is in reality the lid placed thus for safety, inscribed evidently with gouge and chisel, in Hebrew characters, THE NAME:

ו ש ן ע

'And this is, as far as I know, the only piece of the Master's writing in existence.

'We have treasured and revered this little box through all our generations in remembrance of Him.

'Do you the same! For it hath in it a virtue and a comfort beyond any words of man to express.'

We sat gazing in silence at the little cedar box, as Rothie carefully folded and put away his letter; and, for myself—no, I could not possibly explain what I felt. I was stirred to the depths.

'How very strange and wonderful!' murmured my wife at last, in an awestricken whisper.

'You think it is beyond doubt, Doctor?' I asked, in a whisper also; for that little wooden box, in the light of this disclosure and my own strange dream, was lifted above the realm of all ordinary mundane matters and it lifted us with it.

'Quite. I accept it absolutely, as my dear old friend did.'

'It is the most wonderful thing in the world then—a treasure beyond all price.'

'The most wonderful thing in the world,' he said softly, 'a treasure beyond all price.'

'Where do you dare to keep it, Doctor?' asked my wife. 'I should be almost afraid——'

'When it is not in use I keep it in a Safe Deposit—and, after a hint I had from ben Isaac's solicitors, it is not in my own name.'

'May we see the—the Name?' asked my wife, in the same awed voice.

He took out one of those tiny pocket electric torches—the incongruity of it!—and illuminated the inside of the cedar box, and in the right-hand bottom corner we could with his assistance just make out the Name—the Name that is above every name—carved in the wood as a boy might carve it with gouge and chisel.

'Well, whether it is so or not,' I said, with no little emotion, 'I most certainly can testify that it hath in it a virtue and a comfort beyond any words of man to express. I have been a new man since you brought it into this room. Have you found it affect others in the same way?'

'I have. But you can understand that there are very few with whom I would care to leave it,—only where I have reason to

believe in the result.'

'I am very grateful to you, Doctor. Truly it has done great things for me. I feel as if I could write as well as I ever have done.'

'Better, my boy, better!' he said heartily. 'What you have gone through will take you a great deal farther than if you had never been there.'

And, after allowing us a last long look at the cedar box, he reverently locked the casket and folded it with tender care in its various wrappings.

'I'm going up home for a day or two,' he said, as he tied the last knot.

'To Scotland?' said my wife, with a soft inflection of nostalgia in her voice.

'Ay!—to the Land of the Leal, as the young lady mistakenly called it, though indeed she spoke truer than she knew. For so it is.'

'And you are taking this with you?'

'Not this time. It has made the journey many times, but for the special purpose for which I took it, it is no longer needed.... A very dear old aunt of mine realised her heart's desire yesterday. She was eighty-two and had been an invalid for over twenty years, suffering always and longing hopefully for the better things beyond. Now she has attained them and is completely happy. The cedar box has comforted her many

times. Now she is with the Comforter Himself and no longer needs it. It will lie quietly in its secret place till I get back.... When I do,'—to me—'I'll look you up again, though you are out of my hands now. But take my advice and go slow for a bit. You'll go all the stronger and farther in the end. So I won't say good-bye but only au revoir!'

We never saw him again. He was killed, as you may remember, in the dreadful fiery smash at Carnforth.

And the cedar box?

Some day, perchance, when, after long waiting for overdue rent, and many futile applications to a name and address which have no longer any significance, a certain small safe in a certain great Safe Deposit is at last opened, and the contents disposed of in such manner as may be customary—the silver casket may pass into alien hands which will surely treasure it for its antique beauty, though ignorant of the Wonder of Wonders within.

And I have thought at times, when pondering this matter, that if it could only be discovered and left open in some sure and sacred place, that which emanates from it might do something perhaps towards counteracting some of the evil tendencies of the times.

But that, after all, is surely taking but a narrow view of the matter. For the Spirit knows no bonds or bounds, nor needs any assistance from material things. Silent and unseen, it is ever at work amongst us, and in time its leaven shall leaven the

whole world and raise it to the heights of God's great hope and intention.

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[The end of *The Cedar Box* by John Oxenham (ps of William Arthur Dunkerley)]