

# Mr. Kershaw and Mr. Wilcox

By Amyas Northcote

The relations between Mr. Kershaw and Mr. Wilcox were somewhat closer than merely those of business connections and yet were not sufficiently close to be dignified by the name of friendship. The two men were neighbours, living in similar houses, each standing apart in its own garden, in one of our more exclusive London suburbs and were acquaintances of many years standing. They were both men of middle age. Mr. Kershaw was a married man with three children; Mr. Wilcox was a bachelor.

In appearance and in character the two men were widely dissimilar. Mr. Kershaw was a powerfully built, well-preserved man, warm-hearted, cheerful and sanguine in temperament. He possessed considerable ability and his active mind teemed with schemes and ideas, some of which held good promise of success, if carefully worked out, though many were hopelessly impracticable. In support of his various business ventures and projects he had adventured more than the somewhat slender fortune to which he had fallen heir justified, and he was continually seeking means whereby he could raise further capital to promote the success of his beloved projects. In fact he was a type of what may be called the mortgagor mind, the mind that can foresee no obstacles as insuperable and that, venturing too much, frequently loses all.

Mr Wilcox was of a very different temperament and may be fairly set down as of the mortgagee type. He was a cautious, shrewd and able lender, ready to promote the success of an enterprise, provided always that he ran no risk thereby, and equally ready to wreck either the business or its promoters' fortunes did he see any sure and substantial gain for himself in the process. Left by his parents the heir to a moderate fortune, by strict attention to business methods as outlined above, he had succeeded in turning himself into a wealthy man. Withal he was outwardly of a jovial turn, a good storyteller and a hearty fellow, fond of good food and the luxuries of life and possessed of a large acquaintance among his neighbours, with whom, as a rule, he did not engage in business affairs and who knew him chiefly as a pleasant companion. In person he was of middle height, bald and extremely fat, in fact, the very antithesis of Mr. Kershaw's athletic and well-conserved frame. The date of this story is about ten years ago and the time late summer, when most of the business world is seeking relaxation far from town. Neither Mr. Kershaw nor Mr. Wilcox, for reasons which will soon become apparent, was taking such repose from toil, but Mr. Kershaw had sent his wife and family to the seaside and was, therefore, a bachelor in his own house, cared for by a reduced number of servants.

With this preface the heart of the story may now be approached.

For some time past the affairs of Mr. Kershaw had not been going well. One after another, schemes on which he had counted as money makers had failed and been abandoned; until now, of all his various enterprises, only one was left. But on the success of this one he confidently relied, and the remainder of his whole future was bound up in it. Successful, it would bring him honour and wealth; its non-success would involve him in hopeless bankruptcy. There was no reason, however, to dread failure. Experts who had investigated the invention had pronounced unanimously in its favour. The demand for the appliance would be great, it would satisfy a popular need. There was only one difficulty to be overcome, and that was the provision of certain further capital to place the business upon an absolutely sound footing. This difficulty, however, did not seriously trouble Mr. Kershaw, because, was he not dealing with his friend, Mr. Wilcox?

Some time before he had, in his usual expansive fashion, discussed his incipient invention with that gentleman, and Mr. Wilcox, quick to recognize any opportunity for adding to his fortune, had entered into an agreement with him, whereby Mr. Wilcox agreed to lend upon security—which security included the patents and models of the new invention—up to a certain amount in cash for the development of the idea, taking one half of the prospective profits, Mr. Kershaw retaining the other half for himself.

Well, Wilcox had carried out his side of the bargain, the money had all been spent, and now a little more was required of course Wilcox would be reasonable and see to that. “Good fellow, Wilcox,” thought Mr. Kershaw, as he went over to his neighbour’s house one afternoon to discuss the position. Alas, Mr. Kershaw did not know, as he had thought he did, his Wilcox, even after years of acquaintance. He laid the whole position clearly and candidly before Mr. Wilcox and wound up by explaining the necessity for some further cash advances, advances which, as he truly said, were certain to be repaid and which were necessary to protect the whole of the work and money that had already been expended.

Mr. Wilcox listened in absolute and ominous silence. At last Mr. Kershaw had done and awaited his reply. It came—and was brief and to the point. Mr. Wilcox would not put up another penny: he was very sorry, but he was very firm. More than that he plainly told Mr. Kershaw that he meant to insist on his rights. Mr. Kershaw had had his money on loan, he had paid no interest thereon, matters at the works were in a mess, he was going to foreclose on the lien he had taken over factory, invention, everything. Perhaps the invention was a good one, that remained to be seen, but the first thing he meant to do was to take entire possession of it.

Mr. Kershaw was dumbfounded.

“But what about me?” he asked. “Do you know that all I have is staked on this business? If I lose that, I lose everything.”

“I am sorry, Kershaw,” said the other. “But business is business, and I must protect myself.”

“Give me time at least,” cried the unhappy Mr. Kershaw. “Give me a chance to raise the money I owe you elsewhere, and pay you off.”

“I cannot agree to that,” replied Mr. Wilcox. “That was not the bargain between us. Remember, our agreement provided for my retaining my half interest.”

Mr. Kershaw began to lose control of himself.

“You dog,” he cried, “you know there is a fortune in it and you want to take advantage of me and get it all.”

Mr. Wilcox smiled.

“You can form what opinion you like of me,” he said, and then went on, “You called me dog; call me top dog, that will be more correct.”

Mr. Kershaw was beside himself. He argued, implored, threatened: Mr. Wilcox remained cool and unmoved. When, at last, exhausted, Mr. Kershaw stopped, Mr. Wilcox said:

“Have you quite finished? Good. Well, I may as well tell you that I wrote to my solicitors to-day instructing them to commence proceedings. I think we may as well close this interview now; your legal advisers will hear from my people shortly. Good afternoon.”

In a frenzy of rage and despair, Mr. Kershaw left Mr. Wilcox’s house and sought his own. The blow had been so sudden, so utterly unexpected, that he was almost too stunned to think. He entered his own house and tried to collect himself, but his brain whirled.

Dinner was announced and mechanically he went to the dining-room; but he could not eat. Instead he drank heavily and, after going through the form of dining, stumbled into his study and sank into an easy chair.

What had happened to him? Gradually he began to collect his thoughts and the full horror of his position rushed over him. He was utterly and hopelessly ruined. He was in debt to his bankers, his very house was mortgaged up to the hilt. He had staked all, all on this one last enterprise. Success had been in his grasp and now all was gone, gone through his trust in Wilcox—Wilcox, who had just proved himself to be an unutterable scoundrel, and he cursed him long and bitterly. Wilcox had stolen his invention, Wilcox would make a fortune out of it, Wilcox would stand and jeer at him as he sank into the pit of failure and want. He and his family, his innocent family! His mind reeled at the thought of their distress and misery: to calm himself he commenced to drink again. Still his mind worked feverishly. Was there nothing he could do, no one he could appeal to? He could think of nothing; the very fact of the holiday season being on rendered it even more hopeless. Every one who might have helped him was away and there was no time to wait; that devil, Wilcox, had already begun proceedings. Well, Wilcox would burn in hell for this piece of work, even though he should profit by it on earth. But, all at once, a thought struck him: need Wilcox profit by it? Suppose God should kill him that very night and send his wicked soul shrieking to the Pit. Why not? That would be justice. But Justice needs an implement, why should he not kill Wilcox? Such a one was not fit to live. All the ranks of those whom Wilcox had oppressed would rise up and bless their deliverer. Heaven itself would approve his act! He thought again and again of what he might do: he seemed to see before him Mr. Wilcox's puffy face, distorted in death, to feel Mr. Wilcox's fat figure writhing in his grip. He rejoiced at the thought. Yes, he would kill Wilcox.

Almost before he knew it, he found himself standing on his own lawn. He glanced up at his own house; it was dark and silent, the whole suburb was silent, the night was silent. All was dark and silent; he crossed his lawn and bounded lightly over the fence dividing his own from Mr. Wilcox's garden and looked up at Mr. Wilcox's house. All there was dark and silent, save for a light in one window, the window which he knew to be that of Mr. Wilcox's bedroom. So the dog was not yet asleep; did he know what was coming to him? Mr. Kershaw stole towards the house. Without surprise he found the French window of the drawing-room open. God was helping him; He wished him to kill Wilcox. Softly he entered the room, softly he crossed it and glided up the stairs to the bedroom. His feet made no sound on the thick carpet. He reached the bedroom door, the handle turned easily in his grasp. He entered the room.

Mr. Wilcox was not in bed. He was undressed and was seated in an arm-chair near the window, his pyjamas open at the neck on account of the heat. He looked up as the other entered.

"Kershaw," he said in a low voice, "what do you want?"

Mr. Kershaw crossed the room quickly and stood over the other.

"I give you one more chance," he said. "Renew our old agreement, cancel your lawyer's letter, provide more money, or——"

He was going on when Mr. Wilcox looking coolly at him broke in:

"Too late, my dear——"

Mr. Kershaw did not wait for the end of the sentence. He sprang on Mr. Wilcox, gripping his fat neck in his sinewy hands. The other struggled to rise, to repel his assailant, but he was as a child in Mr. Kershaw's powerful grasp. Silently the struggle proceeded, but Mr. Wilcox's movements grew fainter, his bulging eyes started from his head, his red face grew black, his limbs grew rigid and then relaxed. Still Mr. Kershaw gripped his throat, and it was not till long after all motion had ceased that he finally relinquished his hold and let the poor body fall, a tumbled, broken heap, across the arm of the chair.

Then slowly he turned, went to the door, looked again at the motionless form, said "Thank God," and went out.

Mr. Kershaw did not know how he got home, it seemed to him but a moment from the time he left Mr. Wilcox's room to the time he found himself once more sitting in his own chair.

For a time he remained motionless and almost unconscious and then slowly the realization of what he had done began to flow over him. He did not regret it: on the contrary he rejoiced, the world was rid of a scoundrel. Yes, he had killed Wilcox, he had gone to his house, he had given him a chance to repent. Wilcox had not taken it, so he had killed, had murdered—Stop, that was an ugly word, murder. Suddenly he visualized himself—he was a murderer, and the law, the law hanged murderers. He broke into a cold sweat of fear, every instant his own position became clearer. What had he done? He had not benefited himself or his family, he still was deprived of his invention; ruin still stared him in the face and upon ruin he had piled disgrace, his wife would be the widow and his children the orphans of a murderer. Agony possessed his soul and he writhed in hopeless anguish. Gradually, however, he became calmer. He was a murderer, but why should murder out? If he could summon up courage and coolness enough to go on with his life undisturbed, why should he be found out? He must be cool and collected, he must act as he normally did.

He grew steadily calmer and laid out the line of his action. First he must go to bed and go noiselessly, so as not to let his household know he had been up so late. He slipped upstairs, undressed, lay down and waited for the day.

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At the usual hour the maid knocked at his door. Mr. Kershaw answered her as naturally as he could, and lay waiting to hear her say something of the dreadful tragedy next door. Surely by this time servants' gossip would have reached his house. But the girl said nothing and Mr. Kershaw rose, bathed, dressed and went to his dining-room. Breakfast was ready; he could not eat, but he drank his coffee and waited for news.

None came, the household was undisturbed as ever. Mr. Kershaw rose and peered out of the window at the Wilcox house. There was no sign of disturbance there either. What could have happened? At this moment his own door-bell rang. Mr. Kershaw started violently. Was it the police already? He hurried into the front room and, looking out of the window, saw a man on his doorstep. The man had his back towards him, but Mr. Kershaw saw at once he was a stranger and in ordinary civilian clothes.

A few moments later the maid announced:

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

The man entered quietly behind her, and Mr. Kershaw saw that his first judgment had been correct and that he was a stranger, although just for an instant his appearance recalled to him the look of his brother, to whom he had been passionately devoted, and who had died some ten years before.

The stranger bowed slightly, saying:

"Mr. Kershaw, I believe?"

Mr. Kershaw nodded, he was too agitated to speak. Who was this man and what did he want?

The other continued, disregarding the chair to which Mr. Kershaw pointed:

"I have come at some inconvenience to myself on an errand to you, Mr. Kershaw. I wish to tell you that you will find it greatly to your advantage to call without delay on Mr. Wilcox."

Mr. Kershaw was stupefied with amazement. At last he managed to ejaculate:

“Call on Mr. Wilcox!”

“Yes,” returned the stranger, “and as soon as possible.”

“Who are you,” exclaimed Mr. Kershaw, “and why do you come with this message to me? I cannot call on Mr. Wilcox. He is—” He stopped himself in time. “We have quarrelled,” he added lamely.

“My name is not important,” answered the other, “but I come as a friend and I urge you to follow my advice; I know of your quarrel, but quarrels can be made up.”

Mr. Kershaw’s mind was labouring like a mill, but the idea suddenly flashed over him that this might be Wilcox’s solicitor, who, ashamed of his client’s action, was now seeking to repair the breach between him and himself.

“I can never make up with Mr. Wilcox,” he said, “it is too late.”

The stranger bowed.

“I have given my message,” he said. “Think it over and act upon it.”

Without another word he turned and left the room.

Almost as he closed the door the recollection of what he had said flashed across Mr. Kershaw. “It is too late;” he had given himself away, he was a lost man. He sprang from his chair and rushed into the hall. The stranger was not there.

“Mary,” he cried, “has that gentleman gone?”

“Isn’t he with you, sir?” said the maid. “I didn’t see him go out.”

Mr. Kershaw hurried to the front door and went out into the road, at that hour nearly empty of traffic. He gazed up and down: the stranger was not to be seen. Crushed by the sense of his own folly and dumbfounded at the amazing message, Mr. Kershaw returned to his study and endeavoured to think out his position.

Clearly the stranger knew something, but what and how much and why did he adopt this friendly attitude? Perhaps he, too, was a victim of Wilcox’s and sought in an indefinite way to warn him. Perhaps he was a madman, perhaps he really was Wilcox’s solicitor, bent on a peacemaking errand. Mr. Kershaw could reach no conclusion, but presently the value of the advice began to dawn on him. He would call on Wilcox; he had had no intimation of the latter’s murder and it would be surely an unusual thing for a murderer to go and pay a social call on his victim. It would help to mislead the police.

But no time was to be lost. At any moment his servant might burst in on him with the dreadful news; he marvelled she had not done so before.

Putting on his hat he left the house and, with as much composure as he could command, walked over to Mr. Wilcox’s house and rang the bell.

The butler, calm and dignified as usual, opened the door.

“Good morning, Mr. Kershaw,” he said. “Will you walk in; Mr. Wilcox said you were to be shown in to him if you called.”

Mr. Kershaw was staggered. What did all this mean? Wilcox was dead, he himself had killed him. He recovered himself as best he might and followed the butler. The latter threw open the library door.

“Mr. Kershaw, sir,” he announced.

Mr. Kershaw entered the library. Mr. Wilcox fully dressed, was sitting in front of his desk, on which lay various papers. He was deathly pale and trembling violently; his right hand lay half concealed in a partly opened drawer. As Mr. Kershaw entered his hand moved, and Mr. Kershaw heard a heavy metal object rattle against the side of the drawer.

“Good morning, Kershaw,” said Mr. Wilcox in a low voice; and as his visitor advanced across the room towards him “No nearer,” he screamed. “Sit in that chair by you. Don’t come any nearer.” He partly withdrew his hand from the drawer and Mr. Kershaw saw that it held a revolver.

Mr. Kershaw seated himself and there was silence. Presently Mr. Wilcox began in a thin, quavering voice:

“I am glad you have called, Kershaw, very glad, I—I wanted to see you—I wanted to talk things over a bit with you. Perhaps I was a little hasty yesterday, but it was a joke, a bad joke, if you like.” He went on with a sickly smile, “But now it is different. I am sure we can come to an agreement—I am so sorry for what happened yesterday afternoon.

He stopped. Mr. Kershaw gazed at him.

“I hardly understand you,” he said, “Yesterday afternoon?”

“Yes, yes,” broke in the other, “our quarrel, you know. Now we must not quarrel; we must be friends again. Look—No, don’t come nearer; I’ll throw you the papers; here is a copy of a letter and a telegram to my lawyers, sent off this morning to stop all proceedings; and here,” he threw over another paper, “is a letter to you agreeing to go back to our old understanding and saying that I’ll find the money you want. It is not quite in legal shape yet,” he went on, “but it will serve, yes, it will serve till we can get a new agreement drawn.”

Mr. Kershaw took up the papers and gazed dully at them.

“They seem to be all in order,” he said, “but I don’t understand. Am I mad? Are you Wilcox? Why are you sitting there? Did I dream last night?”

The other turned even more ghastly than before.

“Then did you dream it too?” he cried. “Did you dream, as I dreamed, that you came into my bedroom last night and throttled me to death?”