

The Cry of the Peacock

By H. Pease

‘Damn the dice!’ cried the elder of the two players, in a spasm of rage; ‘damn my ill-luck—damn everything!’ and as he shouted his imprecations he regarded his opponent askance, as if including him in his malediction.

‘Twas a thousand to one against you throwing two sixes,’ he cried. Then he flung his marker on the floor, pushed back his chair, and rising, walked moodily to the chimney-piece and gazed despairingly into the fire, for his estate had vanished—his last two farms had been lost to the ‘double six.’ Not only had he lost his estate, but he was hopelessly indebted to his companion for many an I.O.U. and bill beyond his mortgage. He might be made bankrupt at any moment.

The other kept silence a few moments before he said anything. A gleam of triumph and delight had shown for a second in his eye, but outwardly he was as cool as ever.

‘Tis a strange thing,’ he said soothingly;

‘I too have had my turn of ill-luck before this. I remember well one evening at Oxford years ago when I played high stakes with Lord Cantrip and others at “The House.” Hadn’t a stiver left one night, but I pawned my grandfather’s Louis xiv. watch for the next evening’s play. Luck turned, and I had my revenge. Had it not been for that last heirloom I should have enlisted, and probably have met my fate at Badajoz.’

The speaker was a powerfully built man of thirty-five years of age; he was broad rather than tall, underbred, coarse in complexion, and his jaw, well developed, seemed to indicate will power.

His companion was forty years of age, had a high, well-bred carriage, and a sensitive face that showed charm rather than strength.

He made no reply to the other’s sympathy or suggestion, but continued to gaze moodily into the dying log fire on the hearth, and on the smoke-begrimed Sussex ‘back’ which exhibited the ‘Flight into Egypt.’

He groaned within himself; he too would have to make his ‘flight into Egypt.’ There was nothing left in the dear old beloved manor-house that would furnish sufficient capital for another gamble.

‘The last family heirloom,’ he said finally, ‘departed in my father’s time. The manor goes in mine.’

There was a space of silence. Then the elder threw out a fresh suggestion.

‘There’s maybe something ye’ve left out of your calculation,’ he said suggestively, ‘something that some might put as high as the estate itself.’

‘What d’ye mean?’ inquired the other, turning about so as fully to see the other’s face.

‘Well, as ’twixt friends and neighbours I’ll speak out fairly,’ responded the man at the green table, ‘and as I’m your guest you’ll understand I’m perfectly straight in my proposition. The long and short o’t then is that I’m settled in this new place of mine next yours; that it is time for me to “range myself,” and that if you ‘ll give me your daughter’s hand—give me leave, that is, to propose for her hand in marriage, and she does me the honour of accepting—well then, I’ll settle your manor, or what’s left of it, on her and her heirs for ever. Make a dower-house of it, in fact. And more than this, I’ll burn all your I.O.U.’s in addition. You’ll be a free man once again.’

His host started violently, gave a sudden haughty and contemptuous look at the speaker, made as if he would speak, then turned swiftly back to the fire again.

He had a fierce desire to kick this vile newcomer—this Mosenthal, ‘the foreigner,’ or ‘ootner’—the son of a rich Jewish Manchester tradesman—out of the house, but the fellow was his guest, and he checked himself. Above all, he dreaded public bankruptcy; he, the last male descendant of the proud race of Heronsbeck.

‘Think it over,’ said the other quietly. ‘I think ’tis a fair offer—free to take or free to drop.’

Still his host made no reply. The other after a little pause proceeded with his tempting proposals. He had reached out his hand for the dice-box on the table; he took it up and rattled the dice in the box as if to throw on to the table.

‘Come,’ he cried vivaciously. ‘Have a throw! Let luck decide. I’ll back your throw against mine. A hundred pounds to a penny.’

He rattled the dice noisily, and cast them on the table, still holding the box tight over the ivory cubes.

The tempter prevailed; he had re-aroused the gambling fever in his host, who now advanced to the table and looked irresolutely on the upturned box.

‘Done!’ he cried suddenly. The other’s fist lifted up; the cubes nestled close together showing dots two and one.

‘Luck’s turned,’ said his guest philosophically, as he laid down the notes.

The other flung the dice swiftly on to the green board; the cubes rolled apart, then as they settled they showed six and five.

A spark of momentary fire flickered in the gambler’s eye; he picked up the notes; then the frown came back to his brow; he shivered, looked at the clock, then, ‘It’s damned late,’ he said, ‘and if you don’t want any more to drink we’d better go to bed.’

So saying Heronsbeck of Heronsbeck lit a candle for his guest, showed him to his chamber, then went gloomily to his own.

There was no sleep, however, for him that night, for he dreaded the morning and the astounded look of his darling Lily—his only child—when he had to tell her of Mosenthal’s proposal.

‘Of course she won’t do it—she couldn’t. There’ll be no harm done, for she’d as soon accept a Hottentot as a rich Jew.’ So her father reflected aloud.

But she wouldn’t like it. He hated to think of her expression when he conveyed Mosenthal’s offer to her.

The Jew’s notes positively burned in his fingers as he had laid them down on his dressing-table; the fellow’s offer was extraordinarily tempting. Ah, welladay! This was the end, then, of Heronsbeck Hall, which he prized above every earthly possession after his daughter. His father had lost the half of it over cards; now he himself had thrown away the rest in like manner. There was the grouse moor; he counted up the ‘amenities’ as he lay in bed, even as a lover enumerates the charms of his mistress.

The wine-dark moorland—how he loved it! And the great days in autumn after grouse and blackcock. Then the fishing in the beck for trout as a boy, and the call of the sounding ‘forces.’ Then the huntings afoot on the high fells, and the reckless gallops on the haughs below. No wonder he loved it, for he and his forefathers were part and parcel of the land. They had been there and owned it since the days of the Testa de Nevil. He was ‘hefted’ to it, as the farmers said of their stock.

Well, all was now over. The 'lament' must sound over Heronsbeck. Mosenthal must take the estate; he himself would take Lily abroad and live forgotten, for he had rejected Mosenthal's proposal now, absolutely.

Just at this decisive moment he distinctly heard the cry of a peacock sound—weird and discordant—without.

'The peacock's cry!' It was as the wail of the banshee in his ear.

Peacocks had long since disappeared from the Hall, yet their fateful cry, which had sounded through the night of the strange death of his ancestor who first brought them there, had been wonderfully allied with the fortunes of his house.

He accepted the omen.

Rising up with the first gleam of dawn, he went out into the park.

He determined to appraise and make an inventory of all that remained on the place that he could call his own still and sell. There was some timber left. Then all the stock on the home farm would be disposed of. As he endeavoured to 'tot' this up he noticed a figure swinging along across the park at a great pace. Was a stranger already fearless about trespass?

Turning away from the approaching intruder, he commenced his calculation afresh. Suddenly a voice hailed him joyfully.

'Back again! Back again, Pater, at long last! Yes, the rolling stone has gathered some moss after all—honourably, if luckily, come by. So here I am, Pater, like the Prodigal—to crave forgiveness, and—to repay you my debts.'

Héronsbeck turned and stared upon the speaker. 'Joe!' he cried faintly, but with Joe, his only son, he had quarrelled. Joe had vanished on the Klondyke in a blizzard. This must be his ghost.

'Come, Dad!' called the beloved figure in front of him beseechingly.

'My boy, my boy!' cried his father, pressing his son to his bosom. 'Thank God for ye, my boy, my boy! But how can it be that you're alive?' he asked apprehensively, as though fearing his son might vanish again from his eyes.

'A good Samaritan—this time disguised as a Jesuit Father, rescued me. Then I saved a pal myself eventually, who died of fever and left me all his pile.'

'Yet I heard the peacock cry this morning,' muttered Heronsbeck to himself, still apprehensive of misfortune.

'And did you also, Pater, hear the peacock shouting?' asked his son in astonishment.

'Why, as I came over the fell by the Hanging Stone at break o' day—just above the young larch plantation where we had the record woodcock shoot—I heard his rasping cry.

"'Halo!" I called back to him. "Halo, old bugler! You've got it all wrong this time. 'Tis not 'The Last Post,' but 'Réveillé' that you must sound over Heronsbeck Hall this day.'"