

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

The Tale of a Story

I confess it, it was a weakness. I am frequently guilty of weakness, what pleasure is there in life for a man who cannot at times indulge his weakness. A man who is not weak is simply a machine – a mechanical logical apparatus. Now, there is G. He is a strong man, a man of nerve, a great will-power and thoroughly consistent. His mind and feelings work with perfect accuracy. Given a particular cause, and the result in his case is certain. There is no uncertain quality in his nature. There is no spontaneity in his nature. Every action is measured and calculated to produce a certain result. And yet G. is said to be an unhappy man. And why? He is not annoyed by that terrible task-master, Poverty. He has a handsome wife and fine, healthy children, and every thing that to most of us would seem all that is necessary to make a man happy. And yet G is unhappy. The reason is apparent to a man who has a real human mind, – a human mind understand me – as distinguished from a logical mind. G has no weaknesses. He is not human. He is all logic. He never knew the pleasure of yielding to temptation, – temptation understand me again – not to commit a crime, but the temptation to commit an indiscretion. But G says, and say you, cold, inhuman reader, and indiscretion is a crime. Not so; a man who never committed an indiscretion is divine, not human, and all men although sinners, are not supposed to be criminals.

But to return to my weakness. I confess it with shame and covered head. A man can do no more in atonement for an indiscretion than make a full confession, and then endeavor to repair the results of that indiscretion. Now to make amends. Pray hear my avowal. I now announce to you officially that I am not a literary genius. There! it is done. I have unburdened my soul, and now I crave your forgiveness for my former presumption. This I am sure you will grant when you hear the punishment I have already endured. As you all know, I had aspirations for literary reputation. I was anxious to see my name in print as an author. I was anxious to read in the Reviews that such and such a monthly was again redeemed from its usual stupidity by “another of the characteristic sketches of our unique artist, who has done so much to redeem our national reputation for humor.” And finally. I yielded to temptation. I purchased a block of paper, for which I paid too high a price altogether for a man who wanted to be a successful writer, and at eventide deserted my family, and retired early to the quiet of my own room.

The first evening producing no results, I repeated my enforced retirement a second night, and then another, until I was obliged to indicate to my anxious family that I was affected all at once with a periodic headache which came on every evening just after dinner and required absolute quiet. The fourth evening, just as I was about to write the first line of my story, for in the three previous evenings I had got no further than this title, which came to me by inspiration as it were, and had spent the rest of the time in trying to fit a story to the title, – my mother knocked at my door, and anxiously inquired if I did not

think it would do me good if she were to come in and bathe my head. At this insulting proposition I was aroused. I pettishly answered her in the negative to her great grief, as she was sorry to see her dear son suffering so that he had lost his usual good temper, and, unceremoniously dismissing her, I began to write. The interruption had aroused the spirit of a man that was in me, and in a few hours I had the satisfaction of seeing before me what I confidently assured myself would make a name for me in the world.

The next morning, I immediately posted my production to the editor of the most popular magazine in the country, and then went my way, expecting by return mail to receive a check and a grateful note, stating that the editor was so much pleased with my story that he would alter the form of the next number, of the monthly which was already in press, to insert my matchless production, and requesting further contributions from my pen. To cut a long story short, the editor did not do anything of the sort. He simply, after the expiration of several weeks returned my story with “declined with thanks, as not suitable for our purposes” written on a sheet of paper enclosed with it.

This made me mad. My story was a good one, I was confident, and all that it needed was a sensible editor who was able to appreciate its merits. So I determined that it should be published, if I had to print it myself. I recall the story of the publication of Mr. Shorthouse's “John Englesant” and I persevered. Well, in time I found an editor who accepted it, and about a year and a half after it was written, it appeared in his magazine. My expectations were at first fully realized. The story did create a sensation. Everybody that read it praised it, and the result was that soon everybody that praised it, read it. Everywhere I heard my name mentioned as that of a promising literary light and a rising author. An edition in pamphlet form was called for, and soon I was flooded with opportunities to write for any magazine I might select. To me however, no praise was so sweet as that of Pauline. For years I have been trying to make an impression on the heart of this fair maid; but though at times I had felt that I was near the goal of success, – pardon this expression, I know it is old – each time my earnest pleading had met with no more encouragement than a laughing injunction “not to be foolish. For,” said Pauline, “you are a good enough fellow when you are not sentimental; but when you're foolish fancy gets control of you, you are just too absurd for anything. Love you? Of course I do. I love all my friends.” All my earnest protests that the privilege of being one of the objects of such universal love was not sufficient to satisfy the cravings of my bleeding heart, were of little avail. I did not despair of final success, but I feared that the fruition of my hopes was to be long deferred. Pauline evidently liked me, and I hoped that the liking would ripen into something stronger. But her liking partook too much of that confidence and esteem that a girl has for an elderly uncle to be altogether satisfactory. However, after the publication of my great story, she smiled more sweetly upon me. My praises were on everybody's tongue, and she of course heard much of my great promise. I was conceited enough to take her extracts from all favorable reviews, which we read together in the fire light, leaning our heads close together toward the fire in order to get all the light possible on the paper we were reading. I am quite confident that if I ever become insane, it must be attributed to the baking my brains received at that time.

One evening, my opportunity came. “Oh Stuart” said Pauline, after we had concluded one of the most complementary notices “I am so proud of you that I could marry you!” I do

not believe it is necessary to indicate in any more detail, even to the most unsentimental member of the club, what followed this innocent and unintended avowal. Suffice it to say that as I kissed Pauline farewell that night, it was with the firm conviction that I was the happiest man on earth. Pauline had indicated, in the course of our –to an outsider – commonplace conversation, that for years she had implicit confidence in my sincerity, truthfulness, ability, and in short general worth, and that her previous seemingly indifferent behavior had been merely the innocent desire to feel her absolute power over me. The next evening, as I entered my darling's parlor, or rather the parlor of my darling's father, – my prospective father-in-law, I was perfectly happy. I impatiently awaited my fair love's coming, anxious to clasp her in my warm embrace. (Please don't ring a bell here.) Slowly she came down stairs, and entered the room. As I rushed to meet her I saw something was wrong.

Her face had a pale, but firm expression, in which there was none of the gladness I had hoped to see, and her eyes wandered from my face to a copy of the evening paper that she held in her hand. “My dear Pauline,” cried I, “what is the matter? Why are you so cold and pale?” “Matter” said she in tones whose coldness chilled me to the heart, – the usual expression, – gentlemen, is to my bones. I thought I would give you a little variety. “The matter is that you are found out. O cruel, faithless man to deceive me in such a graceless fashion, when I had such confidence in you, and was so proud of your truthfulness and honesty. I can never forgive you. Never let me see you more.” With this, she hurled the paper at me, and bursting into tears rushed from the room. “Well” thought I “here's the deuce to pay. What have I done? It is evidently something she has seen in the paper.”

With an eager desire to find the explanation of her strange treatment, I hastily looked over the paper, and there, among the news from the “Old World” I discovered the cause of her agitation. The dispatch was headed “A Literary Theft” and went on to recite the publication of my story, the favor with which it had been received, and the praise that had been showered upon me; and now at last, the astonishing discovery that the story was not original in its conception, but plainly copied from a story that had appeared in Germany just previous to the publication of my story, which was so exactly like my own production both as to plot an incident, that there could be no doubt of my having stolen from it. The notice stated that leading incident was so startling in its originality, that it could not possibly occur to the two writers without communication. As the German article was by a well-known writer, and had appeared previous to my own, it was a clear case of literary theft. As if to soften this charge, the article went on to state that it was a pity that a writer with so promising a style should have ruined himself at the beginning of his literary career by a fraud so flagrant and so transparent.

I read the article with a great feeling of indignation. And so this was all the faith that Pauline had in my truthfulness. What! Could a woman who professed to love a man be so ready to distrust him as to believe such a silly tale as that. An immediate explanation must be made. I rang for the servant, and asked him to take a card to Miss Pauline on which I had written “Pray give me an opportunity of explaining the cruel mistake under which you are laboring.”

The man soon returned, bearing a message from his mistress that “No explanation possible or desired.” I left the house boiling over with indignation which soon changed to

grief when I realized the full significance of my loss. I did not care anymore for my very reputation, but I did care for Pauline. I went home and wrote a long letter to Pauline, and also one to the editor of the paper in which the article had appeared, explaining that my story had been written more than a year before the publication referred to, that I could not read German, that I never read the article in question, and that the charge, so far as I was concerned, was a lie without any foundation in fact. The paper published the letter with some sarcastic remarks implying that it doubted my story. Pauline's letter was returned unopened. As rapidly as the story of my success had spread, its fame traveled slowly indeed compared with the scandalous story that succeeded it. My former friends, for I had friends no more, passed on the street with a cold nod. My business Associates never ventured off their business topics, and plainly feared that I was trying to swindle them. It was suggested that I be requested to resign from my club, – in short, my life soon became a burden. Pauline I never saw any more. I had called to see her several times, but at each time had been told that she was “not at home;” I soon became aware of the fact that literary fame is not, to use an expressive statement, “what it is cracked up to be,” at least when it makes a man liable to the most cruel suspicions, to which there seems to be no defense. If I at any time previous to the appearance of my fatal story and its denouement made almost any statement within the range of probability, I should have been believed implicitly by the majority of my acquaintances; but since the fateful day when ambition led me from my usual course, I was no longer a man worthy of belief. In the meantime, the German story, which I had been accused of copying, came over to this country and was translated. The same paper that had received my letter with such scorn commented on the fact that the similarity was not so great after all: that of course one of the principal incidents was the same in both stories, but that the resemblance beyond this failed.

“This however” continued the reviewer “does not exclude the greater crime of which Mr. P. has been guilty of having attempted to deceive the public, who deserve and demand perfectly sincere treatment on the part of those who cater to its tastes. Had Mr. P. at first exposure of the origin of his curious and interesting story frankly come forward and confessed his mistake, the public would have been ready to forgive him such a slight error, for the sake of the great merit of the story, which by no means depends for its strength upon the plagiarism, but has worth of its own both as to incident and treatment. It is a privilege of an author, well-recognized, to appropriate the incidents that have served others before them, if they but embellish and adorn these incidents with the marks of their own individuality. This Mr. P. has done in the story to which we refer. He has taken an incident that in the hands of its German original is poorly treated, and has set it in a frame-work that is purely original, the creation of his own mind, and for this Mr. P. deserves great praise. This is the public would gladly have afforded him had he not attempted to deceive them.”

This was not all of the article, but was enough for me. The story that I had written had certainly been an original production. I had never seen a single incident recited in it in print before, but there was enough originality in me still for me to try one other piece of fiction. In a few days there appeared in the same paper over my name a letter stating that I had for the first time read the German story referred to, and recognized the similarity to my own, but wished to reiterate the statement that I had not stolen my story from it. The exact incident referred to as occurring in both stories is however taken from a narrative in

a very old M.S. at present in the British Museum; and it is from that M.S. that I stole my story. To that extent I am a literary thief. I am free to confess that so much of my story is stolen, and I can only attempt to justify what is so worthy of your condemnation by the well-known privilege accorded Charles Reade and other well-known authors, of appropriating materials of others under the theory that they could be improved in treatment. Whether I have succeeded in improving my original is for those to judge who have compared the two passages, and not for me. I am, sir, very respectfully etc.

The plan worked. The editor of the paper made a special notice of the fact that Mr. Price had finally seen it to his best interest to confess his little indiscretion, which the Editor felt sure his many delighted readers would gladly forgive him. The editor further insinuated that Mr. Price's course compared very favorably with that of the German writer, who, knowing that his own story too was stolen from the old M.S. in the British Museum, had allowed Mr. Price to labor under the temporary embarrassment he had suffered.

This was my grand coup. Needless to relate, Pauline was among the first to forgive me. Her only reproach was that I had not told her when I wrote the story that I had stolen it, as this implied that I had not faith in her ability to keep a secret. Womanlike, with her the theft counted for nothing. The deception was everything. -----

Now gentlemen, I have never been in the British Museum and I know of no M.S. there; but this is my punishment, – I shall never write another story. I confess and ask absolution at your hands, knowing that I have had to tell a lie to save my reputation for truthfulness: only – Don't tell my wife

C. T. Greve