

"A Yellow Duster"

by

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When my old friend Stanhope came unexpectedly, late in life, into a huge fortune he went traveling round the world for a whole year with his wife before settling down. We had been friends in college days, but I had seen little of him during his busy professional life. Now, however, in our declining years, chance threw us together again, and our old intimacy became renewed. I often stayed with him, both at Stanhope Towers and in his beautiful house in St. James's-square; and I noticed that wherever he was, certain of his curios went with him. He had always been a collector in a small way, and I have no doubt that in his hard-working time, though he had not the means to gratify his exquisite taste, the little he could do served as a relief to the worry and tedium of daily toil. His great-uncle, from whom he inherited, had a wonderful collection of interesting things; and Stanhope kept them much in the same way as he had found them - not grouped or

classified in any way, but placed in juxtaposition as taste or pleasure prompted. There was one glass-covered table which stood always in the small drawing room, or rather sitting room, which Mr. and Mrs. Stanhope held as their own particular sanctum. In it was a small but very wonderful collection of precious and beautiful things; an enormous gold scarib with graven pictures on its natural panels, such a scarib as is not to be found even amongst the wonderful collection at Leyden; a carved star ruby from Persia, a New Zealand chieftain's head wrought in greenstone, a jade amulet from Central India, an enamelled watch with an exquisitely-painted miniature of Madame du Barri, a perfect Queen Anne farthing laid in a contemporary pounce-box of gold and enamel, a Borgia ring, a coiled serpent with emerald eyes, a miniature of Peg Woffington by Gainsborough, in a quaint frame of aqua marines, a tiny Elzivir Bible in cover of lapis lazuli mounted in red gold, a chain of wrought iron as delicate as hair, and many other such things, which were not only rare and costly as well as beautiful, but each of which seemed to have some personal association.

And yet in the very middle of the case was placed a common cotton duster, carefully folded. It was not only coarse and common in its texture, but it was of such crude and vulgar colours that it looked startlingly out of place in such a congeries of beautiful treasures. It was so manifestly a personal relic that for a long time I felt some diffidence in alluding to it; though I always looked at that particular table, for as Mrs. Stanhope was good enough to share her husband's liking for me, I was always treated as one of themselves and admitted to their special sitting-room.

One day when Stanhope and I were bending over the case, I remarked:-

"I see one treasure there which must be supreme, for it has not the same intrinsic claim as the others!" He smiled as he said:-

"Oh, that! You are right; that is one of the best treasures I have got. Only for it all the rest might be of no avail!"

This piqued my curiosity, so I said:-

"May an old friend hear the story? Of course, it is evident by its being there that it is not a subject to be shunned."

"Right again!" he answered, and opening the case he took out the duster and held it in his hand lovingly. I could see that it was not even clean; it was one that had manifestly done service.

"You ask the missis," he said: "and if she doesn't mind I'll tell you with pleasure."

At tea that afternoon, when we were alone, I asked Mrs. Stanhope if I might hear the story. Her reply was quick and hearty:-

"Indeed you may! Moreover, I hope I may hear it, too!"

"Do you mean to tell me," I said, "that you don't know why it is there?" She smiled as she replied:-

"I have often wondered; but Frank never told me, and I never asked. It is a long, long time since he kept it. It used to be in the safe of his study till he came into Stanhope Towers; and then he put it where it is now. He keeps the key of the table himself, and no one touches the things in it but him. You noticed, I suppose, that every thing in it is fastened down for traveling?"

When I told Stanhope that his wife permitted him to tell me the story, I added her own hope that she, too, might hear it. He said:

"Very well! To-night after dinner - we are alone this evening - we will come in here and I shall tell you."

When we were alone in the room and the coffee cups had been removed he began:

"Of all the possessions I have, which come under the designation of real or personal estate, that old, dirty, flaring, common duster is the most precious. It is, and has been, a secret pleasure to me for all these years to surround it with the most pretty and costly of my treasures; for so it has a symbolical effect to me. I was once near a grave misunderstanding with my wife - indeed it had begun. This was not long into the second year of our marriage, when the bloom of young wedlock had worn off, and we had begun to settle down to the grim realities of working life. You know my wife is a good many years younger than I am, and when we married I had just about come to that time of life when a man begins to distrust himself as important in the eyes of a beautiful young woman. Lily was always so sweet to me, however, that out of her very sweetness I began to distrust her somewhat. It seemed almost unreasonable that she should be always willing to yield her wishes to mine. At first this distrust was on a very shadowy and unreal basis; but as we grew into the realities of life on small means, it was not always possible for her to forego her wishes in the same way. I had my work to do; and she had her own life to lead, and her own plans to make. I daresay I was pretty unreasonable at times. A man gets worried about his work, and if he tries to keep the worry to himself he sometimes overlooks the fact that his wife, not knowing the facts, cannot understand the almost vital importance of small arrangements which he has to make. So she unconsciously thwarts him."

Here Mrs. Stanhope came over and sat on a stool beside him, and put her hand in his. He stroked it gently and went on:-

"I was especially anxious not to worry her about this time, for there was a hope that our wishes for a child were to be realised, and in my very anxiety to save her from trouble I created the very thing I dreaded. Some little question arose between us; a matter in itself of so small importance that I have quite forgotten it, though the issues then bearing on it were big enough to be remembered. For the purpose of my work things had to be settled

in my way, but I could not explain to her without letting her share the worry, and, in addition, I feared that as we were at two, my having held back anything from her might be construed into a want of confidence. Thus it was that her opposition to me became far graver than the occasion itself warranted; and in my blind helplessness, with no one to confide in, I began to fancy that the reason of her opposition was that she did not love me. Let me tell you, old friend - you cannot know, since you were never married - that when once you raise this spirit it is hard to exorcise it. It grows, and grows, and grows, like the genius in the 'Arabian Nights,' until it fills the universe. With this fatal suspicion in my mind every little act of petulance or self-will, everything done or undone, said or unsaid, became 'proof as strong as Holy Writ' that she did not love me; until I grew morbid on the subject. Like the people of old, I wanted a sign.

"One day the strain of silence became too great for me to bear. I broke my resolution of reticence, and taxed her that she did not love me. At first she laughed; for she felt, as she told me afterwards, that the idea was ridiculous. Anyhow, I did not wait to understand, or to weigh her feeling. Her laughter maddened me, and I spoke out some bitter things. 'Oh, yes, my dear, I did!' [This in response to a pressure from the hand that held his, and a warning finger of the other raised.] She tried to bear with me bravely for a while; but at length her feelings mastered her, and the tears rose in her eyes and trickled down her cheeks. But even then I was obdurate. The suspicion of weeks, and all the bitterness of it which had kept me awake so many nights, could not be allayed in a moment. I began to doubt even her very tears. They might, I thought, have come from annoyance at having to explain, from chagrin, from vexation, from anything except the real cause, true womanly and wifely feeling. Again I wanted a sign. And I got it."

His wife's hand closed harder on his; I could see the answering pressure of his hand as he went on:

"She had been dusting the little knick-knacks in the drawing-room, using for the purpose a duster of a peculiarly aggressive pattern. It was one of a set put aside for this special purpose, and therefore chosen of a colour not to be confused with the rest of the domestic appliances. She still held this in her hand; and whilst I stood looking at her with something like rage in my heart, and with my brain a seething mass of doubt as to her half-hysterical sobbing, she raised the duster unconsciously to her face and began to wipe her tears away with it.

"That settled me! Here was a sign that not even a jealous idiot could mistake! Had the thing been less gaudily hideous, had it even been clean, I might still have wallowed in my doubt; but now the conviction of the genuineness of her grief swept me like a great burst of sunshine through fog, and cleared it away for ever. I took her in my arms and tried to comfort her; and from that hour to this there has never been - I thank God for it with all my heart - a doubt between us. Nothing but love and trust and affection! I noticed where she placed the duster, and in the night I came and took it and put it safely away. Do you wonder now, old friend, why I value that rag; why it has a sacred value in my eyes?"

By this time Mrs. Stanhope was shading her face, and I could see the tears roll down her cheeks. "Frank, dear," she said, "let me have your key a moment?" He handed the bunch to her without a word. She selected the key, opened the table top, and took out the duster, which she kissed. Then turning to her husband, as she dried her eyes, she said, "Frank, dear, this is the second time you have made me cry in my long, happy life; but, ho, how different!" Stanhope spoke: "Lily, dear, the first time you used that duster I noticed the glaring contrast of its colour to your black hair, and now it holds its own against the coming grey," and he took her in his arms and kissed her. She turned to me and said: "I think the story was worth the telling - and the hearing - don't you? I have allowed this poor, dear old rag to remain in its place of honour all these years because my husband wished it so; but now it shall hold its place in my heart as well as his. God does not always speak in thunder; there are softer notes in the expression of His love and tenderness. Oh, Frank!"

What more she said I know not; for by this time I had stolen quietly away, leaving them alone together.