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THE ROMANCE OF ACCIDENT

Many of our most important inventions and discoveries owe their origin to the most trivial circumstances; from the simplest causes the most important effects have ensued. The following are a few culled at random for the amusement of our readers.

The trial of two robbers before the Court of Assizes of the Basses-Pyrénées accidentally led to a most interesting archæological discovery. The accused, Rivas a shoemaker, and Bellier a weaver, by armed attacks on the highways and frequent burglaries, had spread terror around the neighbourhood of Sisteron. The evidence against them was clear; but no traces could be obtained of the plunder, until one of the men gave a clue to the mystery. Rivas in his youth had been a shepherd-boy near that place, and knew the legend of the Trou d'Argent, a cavern on one of the mountains with sides so precipitous as to be almost inaccessible, and which no one was ever known to have reached. The Commissary of Police of Sisteron, after extraordinary labour, succeeded in scaling the mountain, and penetrated to the mysterious grotto, where he discovered an enormous quantity of plunder of every description. The way having been once found, the vast cavern was afterwards explored by *savants*; and their researches brought to light a number of Roman medals of the third century, flint hatchets, ornamented pottery, and the remains of ruminants of enormous size. These interesting discoveries, however, obtained no indulgence for the accused (inadvertent) pioneers of science, who were sentenced to twenty years' hard labour.

The discovery of gold in Nevada was made by some Mormon immigrants in 1850. Adventurers crossed the Sierras and set up their sluice-boxes in the cañons; but it was gold they were after, and they never suspected the existence of silver, nor knew it when they saw it. The bluish stuff which was so abundant and which was silver ore, interfered with their operations and gave them the greatest annoyance. Two brothers named Grosch possessed more intelligence than their fellow-workers, and were the real discoverers of the Comstock lode; but one of them died from a pickaxe wound in the foot, and the other was frozen to death in the mountains. Their secret died with them. When at last, in the early part of 1859, the surface croppings of the lode were found, they were worked for the gold they contained, and the silver was thrown out as being worthless. Yet this lode since 1860 has yielded a large proportion of all the silver produced throughout the world. The silver mines of Potosi were discovered through the trivial circumstance of an Indian accidentally pulling up a shrub, to the roots of which were attached some particles of the precious metal.

During the Thirty Years' War in Germany, the little village of Coserow in the island of Usedom, on the Prussian border of the Baltic, was sacked by the contending armies, the villagers escaping to the hills to save their lives. Among them was a simple pastor named Schwerdler, and his pretty daughter Mary. When the danger was over, the villagers found themselves without houses, food, or money. One day, we are told, Mary went up the Streckelberg to gather blackberries; but soon afterwards she ran back joyous and breathless to her father, with two shining pieces of amber each of very great size. She told her father that near the shore the wind had blown away the sand from a vein of amber; that she straightway broke off these pieces with a stick; that there was an ample store of the precious substance; and that she had covered it over to conceal her secret. The amber brought money, food, clothing, and comfort; but those were superstitious times, and a legend goes that poor

Mary was burned for witchcraft. At the village of Stümen, amber was first accidentally found by a rustic who was fortunate enough to turn some up with his plough.

Accidents have prevented as well as caused the working of mines. At the moment that workmen were about to commence operations on a rich gold mine in the Japanese province of Tskungo, a violent storm of thunder and lightning burst over them, and the miners were obliged to seek shelter elsewhere. These superstitious people, imagining that the tutelar god and protector of the spot, unwilling to have the bowels of the earth thus rifled, had raised the storm to make them sensible of his displeasure, desisted from all further attempts to work the mine.

A cooper in Carniola having one evening placed a new tub under a dropping spring, in order to try if it would hold water, when he came in the morning found it so heavy that he could hardly move it. At first, the superstitious notions that are apt to possess the minds of the ignorant made him suspect that his tub was bewitched; but at last perceiving a shining fluid at the bottom, he went to Laubach, and shewed it to an apothecary, who immediately dismissed him with a small gratuity, and bid him bring some more of the same stuff whenever he could meet with it. This the poor cooper frequently did, being highly pleased with his good fortune; till at length the affair being made public, several persons formed themselves into a society in order to search farther into the quicksilver deposits, thus so unexpectedly discovered, and which were destined to become the richest of their kind in Europe.

Curious discoveries by ploughmen, quarrymen, and others of caves, coins, urns, and other interesting things, would fill volumes. Many valuable literary relics have been preserved by curious accidents, often turning up just in time to save them from crumbling to pieces. Not only mineral but literary treasures have been brought to light when excavating mother earth. For instance, in the foundations of an old house, Luther's *Table Talk* was discovered 'lying in a deep obscure hole, wrapped in strong linen cloth, which was waxed all over with beeswax within and without.' There it had remained hidden ever since its suppression by Pope Gregory XIII. The poems of Propertius, a Roman poet, long lurked unsuspected in the darkness of a wine-cellar, from whence they were at length unearthed by accident, just in time to preserve them from destruction by rats and mildew. Not only from beneath our feet but from above our heads may chance reveal the hiding-places of treasure-trove. The sudden falling in of a ceiling, for example, of some chambers in Lincoln's Inn revealed the secret depository of the Thurloe state papers. Other literary treasures have turned up in an equally curious manner. Milton's essay on the *Doctrines of Christianity* was discovered in a bundle of old despatches: a monk found the only manuscript of Tacitus accidentally in Westphalia: the letters of Lady Mary Montagu were brought to light from the recesses of an old trunk: the manuscripts of Dr Dee from the secret drawer of an old chest: and it is said that one of the cantos of Dante's great poem was found, after being long mislaid, hidden away beneath a window-sill.

It is curious to trace how the origin of some famous work has been suggested apparently by the merest accident. We need but remind the reader how Lady Austen's suggestion of 'the sofa' as a subject for blank verse was the beginning of *The Task*, a poem which grew to formidable proportions under Cowper's facile pen. Another example of is furnished by Lockhart's account of the gradual growth of *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*. The lovely Countess of Dalkeith hears a wild legend of Border *diablerie*, and sportively asks Scott to make it the subject of a ballad. The poet's accidental confinement in the midst of a yeomanry camp gave him leisure to meditate his theme to the sound of the bugle; suddenly there flashes on him the idea of extending his simple outline so as to embrace a vivid panorama of that old Border life of war and tumult. A friend's suggestion led to the arrangement and framework of the *Lay* and the conception of the ancient Harper. Thus step by step grew the poem that first made its author famous. The manuscript of *Waverley* lay hidden away in an old cabinet for years before the public were aware of its existence. In the words of the Great Unknown: 'I had written the greater part of the first volume and sketched other passages, when I mislaid the manuscript; and only found it by the merest accident, as I was rummaging the drawer of an old cabinet; and I took the fancy of finishing it.'

What great events from trivial causes spring,

Charlotte Brontë's chance discovery of a manuscript volume of verses in her sister Emily's handwriting led, from a mutual confession of the *furor poeticus*, to the joint publication of their poems, which though adding little to their subsequent fame, at least gives us another instance of how much of what is called chance has often to do with the carrying out of literary projects. It was the burning of Drury Lane Theatre that led to the production of *The Rejected Addresses*, the success of which, says one of the authors, 'decided him to embark in that literary career, which the favour of the novel-reading world rendered both pleasant and profitable to him.' Most of us know how that famous fairy tale *Alice in Wonderland* came to be written. The characters in *Oliver Twist* of Fagin, Sikes, and Nancy were suggested by some sketches of Cruikshank, who long had a design to shew the life of a London thief by a series of drawings. Dickens, while paying Cruikshank a visit, happened to turn over some sketches in a portfolio. When he came to that one which represents Fagin in the condemned cell, he studied it for half an hour, and told his friend that he was tempted to change the whole plot of his story, not to carry Oliver through adventures in the country, but to take him up into the thieves' den in London, shew what this life was, and bring Oliver through it without sin or shame. Cruikshank consented to let Dickens write up to as many of the drawings as he thought would suit his purpose. So the story as it now runs resulted in a great measure from that chance inspection of the artist's portfolio. The remarkable picture of the Jew malefactor in the condemned cell biting his nails in the torture of remorse, is associated with a happy accident. The artist had been labouring at the subject for several days, and thought the task hopeless; when sitting up in his bed one morning with his hand on his chin and his fingers in his mouth, the whole attitude expressive of despair, he saw his face in the cheval glass. 'That's it!' he exclaimed; 'that's the expression I want.' And he soon finished the picture.

The sudden prosperity of many a famous painter has resulted from some fortunate accident. Anthony Watteau, when a nameless struggling artist, timidly offered a painting to a rich picture-dealer for six francs, and was on the eve of being scornfully rejected, had not a stranger, who happened to be in the shop, come forward, and seeing some talent in the work, spoke encouragingly to the youth, and offered him one hundred and fifty francs for the picture; nor was this all, for he became Watteau's patron and instructor. – One day a little shepherd-boy was seated near the road-side on the way from Vespignano to Florence drawing upon a polished stone, his only pencil another polished stone which he held in his tiny fingers. A richly dressed stranger, who had descended from a conveyance that was following him, chanced to pass, and looking over the boy's shoulder, saw that he had just sketched with wonderful truth and correctness a sheep and its twin lambs. Surprised and pleased, he examined the face of the young artist. Certainly it was not its beauty that attracted him. The child looked up, but with such a marvellous light in his dark eyes, that the stranger exclaimed: 'My child, you must come with me; I will be your master and your father: it is some good angel that has led me here.' The stranger was Cimabue, the most celebrated painter of that day; and his pupil and protégé became the famous painter, sculptor, and architect Giotto, the friend and admiration of Dante and Petrarch.

How the fortunes of painters may hinge upon the most trifling circumstances, has another example in that of Ribera or Spagnoletto, which was determined by a very simple incident. He went to reside with his father-in-law, whose house, it so happened, stood in the vast square one side of which was occupied by the palace of the Spanish Viceroy. It was the custom in Italy, as formerly amongst the Greeks, that whenever an artist had completed any great work, he should expose it in some street or thoroughfare, for the public to pass judgment on it. In compliance with this usage, Ribera's father-in-law placed in his balcony the 'Martyrdom of St Bartholomew' as soon as it was finished. The people flocked in crowds to see it, and testified their admiration by deafening shouts of applause. These acclamations reached the ears of the Viceroy, who imagined that a fresh revolt had

broken out, and rushed in complete armour to the spot. There he beheld in the painting the cause of so much tumult. The Viceroy desired to see the man who had distinguished himself by so marvellous a production; and his interest in the painter was not lessened on discovering that he was, like himself, a Spaniard. He immediately attached Spagnoletto to his person, gave him an apartment in his palace, and proved a generous patron ever afterwards.

Lanfranco, the wealthy and munificent artist, on his way from the church Il Gesù, happened to observe an oil-painting hanging outside a picture-broker's shop. Lanfranco stopped his carriage, and desired the picture to be brought to him. Wiping the thick dust from the canvas, the delighted broker brought it, with many bows and apologies, to the great master, who on nearer inspection saw that his first glance had been correct. The picture was labelled 'Hagar and her Son Ishmael dying of Thirst,' and the subject was treated in a new and powerful manner. Lanfranco looked for the name of the painter, and detecting the word Salvatoriello modestly set in a corner of the picture, he gave instructions to his pupils to buy up every work of Salvatoriello they could find in Naples. To this accident Salvator owed the sudden demand for his pictures, which changed his poverty and depression into comparative ease and satisfaction.

More than one famous singer might probably never have been heard of but for some discriminating patron chancing to hear a beautiful voice, perhaps exercised in the streets for the pence of the compassionate. – Some happy stage-hits have resulted from or originated in accidents. The odd hop skip and jump so effective in the delineation of Dundreary, says an American interviewer of Mr Sothern, was brought about in this way. In the words of the actor: 'It was a mere accident. I have naturally an elastic disposition, and during a rehearsal one cold morning I was hopping at the back of the stage, when Miss Keene sarcastically inquired if I was going to introduce that into Dundreary. The actors and actresses standing around laughed; and taking the cue, I replied: "Yes, Miss Keene; that's my view of the character." Having said this, I was bound to stick to it; and as I progressed with the rehearsal, I found that the whole company, including scene-shifters and property-men, were roaring with laughter at my infernal nonsense. When I saw that the public accepted the satire, I toned down what was a broad caricature to what can be seen at the present day by any one who has a quick sense of the absurd.'

An excellent landscape of Salvator Rosa's exhibited at the British Institution in 1823 came to be painted in a curious way. The painter happened one day to be amusing himself by tuning an old harpsichord; some one observed they were surprised he could take so much trouble with an instrument that was not worth a crown. 'I bet you I make it worth a thousand before I have done with it!' cried Rosa. The bet was taken; and Salvator painted on the harpsichord a landscape that not only sold for a thousand crowns, but was esteemed a first-rate painting. – Chemistry and pathology are indebted to what has often seemed the merest chance for many an important discovery. A French paper says it has been accidentally discovered that in cases of epileptic fits, a black silk handkerchief thrown over the afflicted persons will restore them immediately. Advances in science and art and sudden success in professions have often more to do with the romance of accident than most people imagine; but as we may have occasion again to take up the subject, we quit it for the present.

A DIFFICULT QUESTION

THE STORY OF TWO CHRISTMAS EVES

IN TWO CHAPTERS

CHAPTER II. – ANSWERED

The mistletoe hung from the chandelier, the holly wreaths were on the walls, the clear fire shed a warm glow through the dimly lighted room, upon pictures and gilding, upon a great vase filled with crimson camellias, upon Ralph Loraine's dark handsome face. Christmas eve again, his first year in England over. How little certainty there is in this world; when we think we have smoothed our path, and see our way straight before us, there rises up some roughness, some unevenness we have left unnoticed, or thought too small to trouble us. So with Ralph; he had answered the question he asked himself last Christmas eve by another; he was very happy, but he was thinking now as he leaned against the mantel-piece whether he could bear to leave the army and give up the life he had led for so long; the life, at times one of bold daring, at others of lazy pleasure, which had suited him so well; that even now, with the wish of his heart fulfilled, it cost him a struggle to bid farewell to it, and to settle down into a quiet country gentleman. He had kept his oath to his dead friend, the oath he had taken in answer to the faintly spoken words, 'I meant to have made her so happy.' Louise would remain in her old home as its mistress.

It had been a happy year to Ralph, and had glided away so quickly since that first night when he had seen her standing in the snowy churchyard, listening to words which sounded very much like love from another man's lips. That other had, however, confirmed his opinion. Vere Leveson had been away with his regiment during all the twelve months; not once had he met Louise; the field had been clear for Ralph. Yet it was only a week since he had spoken; he had not dared at first to break through the barrier of childish affection. She looked upon him as her guardian, her father's friend, with the same grateful reverence she might have given to that father had he lived; so he had tried very gently to awaken deeper feelings, through the sweet early spring-time and the glowing summer days, till when the leaves were lying in brown showers upon the sodden earth, she had grown silent, shy, and distant, and so cold that he thought all hope was gone. He went away in November; and when he returned, his love unspoken became torture to his upright nature; he could not bear to live there day by day, to see her so often, to let her kiss him as a daughter might have done, and all the while that hidden passion burning in his heart. But after his temporary absence she had changed again; she was more as she had been, gentle, playfully loving; and so one day he had spoken. He told her of her dying father's words; how his great wish had been that she should never feel the loss he had caused her; how her happiness was his first object in life; and how that life would be indeed worthless and barren, should he go back to it alone. Grateful, she answered as he wished, and Ralph held in his arms as his betrothed wife the child he had promised to watch over in the silence of the Indian dawn.

'But you must give me time,' she had said timidly. 'I have never thought of you but as my guardian, Ralph.' She dropped the name of her childhood then, as a tacit acknowledgment that those days were over, and that she would learn to love him henceforth, not with a child's grateful unquestioning love, but with the tenderness of a wife.

She was the only one surprised by the event; all the neighbourhood had known it long before; so had Mrs Loraine and Emma; so had Katharine, whose wedding-day was now approaching, and whose bridegroom was Sir Michael Leyland. The drawing-room door opened, and Louise entered into the uncertain light, wearing the dress he had chosen for her – white bridal-looking silk, and holly wreaths like those she had worn last year. She went up to him composedly, with none of a young fiancée's usual bashfulness.

'Do you like my dress, Ralph?' she said, looking up with her sweet dark eyes, as he bent down and touched the rosy lips.

'I do,' he answered. 'You are always lovely, darling; last year I thought the same, but then things were different. I did not dare to hope for such happiness as this.'

'Are you happy, Ralph?'

'Happier than I have ever been in my whole life,' he whispered.

Then the others came in, and they started for the annual ball at Leigh Park. Vere Leveson had returned a week ago; and as he stood among his father's guests there was a troubled look on his face which deepened ever as the white silk folds of the holly-wreathed dress brushed past him, or the dark eyes watching its wearer met hers. At last he went to her.

'Are you engaged for this, Miss Wrayworth?' he said abruptly.

'No,' she answered.

'Then you will give it to me?'

Once more he held her in his arms, once more her hand rested in his, as they glided slowly round the room. Vere did not speak till the waltz was ended, and then he led her to the same window where they had stood a year ago. The same stars were shining down on the same world, only that night there was no snow-shroud over the dead flowers, and the moon was half hidden by a great splash of cloud. The same first faint Christmas bells were sounding in the distance, mingled with the echoes of a carol sung by boys' clear voices, telling for the angels the old story they had told so long ago.

'I wish you a merry Christmas,' Vere said, looking down on her with a half-scornful smile. 'What mockery there is in that salutation sometimes. If you were to say it to me, for instance.'

'Indeed I hope you will have one,' she answered timidly.

'I must go a long way to find it then,' he muttered. 'But I beg your pardon, Miss Wrayworth; I must congratulate you. I met – your sister I was going to say – Miss Loraine I mean, as I was on my way to call upon you the other day, and she told me of your engagement.'

'But you did not come,' said Louise.

'No; I thought you would be occupied. I congratulate you,' he repeated.

'Thank you,' she answered very low.

'Major Loraine is completely calculated to make a wife happy, I should think,' said Vere, in the same cold scornful tone.

She lifted her head quickly. 'Indeed he is; he is the best, noblest, most generous man that breathes!'

'And you love him?'

'He has been everything to me all my life long, Mr Leveson – father, brother, friend. Would you not have me do what I can to prove my gratitude?'

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