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THE DEVIL AND TOM WALKER.

A STORY OF THE LAST CENTURY.

BY WASHINGTON IRVING.

A few miles from Boston, in Massachusetts, there is a deep inlet winding several miles into the interior of the country from Charles Bay, and terminating in a thickly wooded swamp, or morass. On one side of this inlet is a beautiful dark grove; on the opposite side the land rises abruptly from the water's edge, into a high ridge on which grow a few scattered oaks of great age and immense size. It was under one of these gigantic trees according to old stories, that Kidd, the pirate, buried his treasures. The inlet allowed a facility to bring the money in a boat secretly and at night to the very foot of the hill. The elevation of the place permitted a good look-out to be kept that no one was at hand, while the remarkable trees formed good landmarks by which the place might easily be found again. The old stories add, moreover, that the devil presided at the hiding of the money, and took it under his special guardianship; but this, as it is well known, he always does with buried treasure, particularly when it has been ill-gotten. Be that as it may, Kid never returned to recover his wealth; being shortly after seized at Boston, sent out to England, and there hanged for a pirate.

About the year 1727, just at the time when earthquakes were prevalent in New England, and shook many tall sinners down upon their knees, there lived near this place a meagre, miserly fellow by the name of Tom Walker. He had a wife as miserly as himself; they were so miserly that they even conspired to cheat each other. Whatever the woman could lay her hands on, she hid away; a hen could not cackle but she was on the alert to secure the new laid egg. Her husband was continually prying about to detect her secret hoards, and many and fierce were the conflicts that took place about what ought to have been common property.—They lived in a forlorn looking house that stood alone and had an air of starvation. A few straggling savin trees, emblems of sterility, grew near it; no smoke ever curled from its chimney; no traveller ever stopped at its door. A miserable horse, whose ribs were as articulate as the bars of the gridiron, stalked about a field where a thin carpet of moss, scarcely covering the ragged beds of pudding stone, tantalized and balked his hunger; and sometimes he would lean his head over the fence, look piteously at the passer by, and seem to petition his deliverance from the land of famine. The house and its inmates had altogether a bad name. Tom's wife was a tall tormagant, fierce of temper, loud of tongue, and strong of arm. Her voice was often heard in wordy warfare with her husband, and his face sometimes showed signs that their conflicts were not confined to words. No one ventured, however, to interfere between them; the lonely wayfarer shrunk within himself at the horrid clamor and clapper-clawing, eyed the den of discord askance, and hurried on his way, if a bachelor, rejoicing in his celibacy.

One day that Tom Walker had been to a distant part of the neighborhood, he took what he considered a short cut homewards through the swamp. Like most short cuts, it was an ill chosen route. The swamp was thickly grown with great gloomy pines and hemlocks, some of them ninety feet high, which made it dark at noonday, and a retreat for all the owls in the neighborhood. It was full of pits and quagmires, partly covered with weeds and mosses, where the green surface often betrayed the traveller into a gulf of black smothering mud; there were also dark and stagnant pools, the abodes of the tad pole, the bull-frog, and the water snake, and where the trunks of pines and hemlocks lay half drowned, half rotting, looking like alligators sleeping in the mire.

Tom had long been picking his way cautiously, through this treacherous forest, stepping from tuft to tuft of rushes and roots which afforded precarious footholds among deep sloughs, or pacing carefully along like a cat along the prostrate trunks of trees, startled now and then by the sudden screaming of the bittern or the quacking of the wild duck, rising on the wing from some solitary pool. At length he arrived at a piece of ground which ran out like a peninsula into the deep bosom of the swamp. It had been one of the strongholds of the Indians during their wars with the first colonists. Here they had thrown up a kind of fort which they had looked upon as almost impregnable, and had used it as a place of refuge for their squaws and children. Nothing now remained of the old Indian fort but a few embankments gradually sinking to the level of the surrounding earth, and already overgrown in part by oaks and other forest trees, the foliage of which formed a contrast to the pines and hemlocks of the swamp.

It was late in the dusk of the evening that Tom Walker reached the old fort, and he paused there for a while to rest himself. Any one but he would have felt unwilling to linger in this lonely, melancholy place, for the common people had a bad opinion of it from the stories handed down from the time of the Indian wars, when it was asserted that the savages held incantations here and made sacrifices to the evil spirit. Tom Walker, however, was not a man to be troubled with any fears of this kind.

He reposed himself for some time on the trunk of a fallen hemlock, listening to the boding cry of a tree toad, and delving with his walking staff into a mound of black mould at his feet. As he turned up the soil unconsciously, his staff struck against something hard. He raked it out of the vegetable mould, and lo! a cloven skull with an Indian tomahawk buried deep in it, lay before him. The rust of the weapon showed the time that had elapsed since the death-blow had been given. It was a dreary memento of the fierce struggle that had taken place in this last foothold of the Indian warriors.

"Humph!" said Tom Walker, as he gave the skull a kick to shake the dirt from it.

"Let that skull alone!" said a gruff voice.

Tom lifted up his eyes and beheld a great black man seated directly opposite him on the stump of a tree. He was exceedingly surprised, having neither seen or heard any one approach, and he was still more perplexed on observing, as well as the gathering gloom would permit that the stranger was neither negro or Indian. It is true, he was dressed in a rude, half Indian garb, and had a red belt or sash swathed round his body, but his face was neither black nor copper-color, but swarthy and dingy and begrimed with soot, as if he had been accustomed to toil among fires and forges. He had a shock of coarse black hair that stood out from his head in all directions, and an axe on his shoulder.

He scowled for a moment at Tom with a pair of great red eyes.

"What are you doing in my grounds?" said the black man with a hoarse growling voice.

"Your grounds?" said Tom, with a sneer; "no more your grounds than mine; they belong to Deacon Peabody."

"Deacon Peabody be d——!" said the stranger, "as I flatter myself he will be, if he does not look more to his own sins and less to his neighbor's. Look yonder, and see how Deacon Peabody is laring."

Tom looked in the direction that the stranger pointed, and beheld one of the great trees fair and flourishing without, but rotten at the core, and saw that it had been nearly hewn through, so that the first high wind was likely to blow it down. On the back of the tree was scored the name of Deacon Peabody. He now looked round, and found most of the tall trees marked with the name of some great man of the colony, and all more or less scored by the axe. The one on which he had been seated, and which had evidently just been hewn down, bore the name of Crowninshield, and he recollected a mighty rich man of that name, who had a vulgar display of wealth, which it was whispered he acquired by buccaneering.

"He is just ready for burning!" said the black man, with a growl of triumph. "You see I am likely to have a good stock of fire-wood for winter."

"But what right have you," said Tom, "to cut down Deacon Peabody's timber?"

"The right of prior claim," said the other. "This woodland belonged to me long before one of your white-faced race put foot upon the soil."

"And pray who are you, if I may be so bold?" said Tom.

"O, I go by various names. I am the Wild Huntsman in some countries, the Black Miner in others. In this neighborhood I am known by the name of the Black Woodsman. I am he to whom the red men devoted the spot, and now and then roasted a white man by way of sweet smelling sacrifice. Since the red men have been exterminated by your white savages, I amuse myself by presiding at the persecution of Quakers and Anabaptists; I am the great patron and prompter of slave dealers, and the grand master of the Salem witches."

"The upshot of all of which is that, if I mistake not," said Tom, sturdily, "you are commonly called 'Old Scratch.'"

"The same, at your service," replied the black man with a civil nod."

Such was the opening of this interview, according to the old story, though it has almost too familiar an air to be credited.—One would think that to meet with such a singular personage in this wild lonely place would have shaken any man's nerves; but Tom was a hard minded fellow, not easily daunted and he had lived so long with a termagant wife, that he did not fear even the devil.

It is said that after this commencement they had a long and earnest conversation together, as Tom returned homewards.—The black man told him of great sums of money which had been buried by Kidd, the pirate, under the oak trees on the high ridge not far from the morass. All these were under his command, and protected by his power, so that none could find them except such as propitiated his favor.

These he offered to place within Tom Walker's reach, having conceived an especial kindness for him but they were to be had only on certain conditions. What those conditions were may be easily surmised, though Tom never disclosed it publicly. They must have been very hard, for he required time to think of them, and he was not a man to stick at trifles where money was in view. When they had reached the edge of the swamp the stranger paused.

"What proof have I that all you have said is true?" said Tom.

"There is my signature," said the black man, pressing his fingers on Tom's forehead. So saying he turned off among the thickest of the swamp, and seemed, as Tom said, to go down, down, down into the earth, until nothing but his head and shoulders could be seen, and so until he totally disappeared.

When Tom reached home, he found the black print of a finger burnt as it were into his forehead, which nothing could obliterate.

The first news his wife had to tell was the death of Absalom Crowninshield, the rich buccaneer. It was announced in the papers, with the usual flourish, that "a great man had fallen in Israel."

Tom recollected the tree which his black friend had just hewn down, and which was ready for burning.

"Let the freebooter roast," said Tom, "who cares?"

He now felt that all he had heard and seen was no illusion.

He was not prone to let his wife into his confidence; but as this was an easy secret, he willingly shared it with her. All her avarice was awakened at the mention of hidden gold, and she urged her husband to comply with the black man's terms, and secure what would make them happy for life.

However Tom felt disposed to sell himself to the devil, he was determined not to do so to oblige his wife; so he flatly refused out of the mere spirit of contradiction. Many and bitter were the quarrels they had on the subject, but the more she talked the more resolute Tom was not to be damned to please her. At length she was determined to drive the bargain on her own account, and if she succeeded, to keep all the gain to herself.

The next evening she set off for the swamp with her apron heavily laden. Tom waited and waited for her, but in vain;—midnight came, but she did not make her appearance; morning, noon, night returned, but still she did not come! Tom grew uneasy for her safety, as he found she had carried off in her apron the silver teapot and spoon, and every other article of value. Another night elapsed, another morning, but no wife. In a word, she was never heard of to this day.

What was her real fate nobody knows, in consequence of so many pretending to know. It is one of those facts that have become confounded by a variety of historians. Some asserted that she had lost her way among the tangled mazes of the swamp, and sunk into some pit or slough; others more uncharitable, hinted that she had eloped with the household booty, and made off to some province, while others assert that the tempter had decoyed her into a dismal quagmire, on top of which her hat was found lying. In confirmation of this, it was said that a great black man with an axe on his shoulder, was seen that very evening coming out of the swamp, carrying a bundle tied in a check apron, with an air of surly triumph.

The most current and probable story, however, observes that Tom Walker grew so anxious about the fate of his wife and his property that he set out at length to seek them at the Indian fort. During a long summer's afternoon he searched the gloomy place, but no wife was to be seen. He called her by name repeatedly, but she was nowhere to be heard. The bittern alone responded to his voice, as he flew screaming by, or the bull frog croaked dolefully from a neighboring pool. At length, it is said, just in the brown of twilight, when the owls began to hoot and the bats to flit about, his attention was attracted by the clamor of carrion crows that were hovering about a cypress tree. He looked, and beheld a bundle tied up in a check apron and hanging in the branches of the tree, with a great vulture perched hard by, as if keeping watch upon it. He leaped with joy, for he recognized his wife's apron, and supposed it to contain the household valuables.

"Let us get hold of the property," said he consolingly, to himself, "and we will endeavor to do without the woman."

As he scrambled up the tree, the vulture spread its wide wings, and sailed off with a scream into the deep shadows of the forest. Tom seized the check apron, but woful sight! found nothing but a heart and liver tied up in it.

Such, according to the most authentic old story, was all that was to be found of Tom's wife. She had probably attempted to deal with the black man as she was accustomed to deal with her husband; but though a female scold is generally considered a match for the devil, but in this instance she appears to have had the worst of it. She must have died game, however, for it is said that Tom noticed many prints of cloven feet deeply stamped about the tree, and several handsful of hair that looked as if they had been plucked from the coarse black shock of the old woodsman.

Tom knew his wife's prowess by experience. He shrugged his shoulders as he looked at the signs of the fierce clapper clawing. "Egad," said he to himself, "Old Scratch must have had a tough time of it."

Tom consoled himself for the loss of his property by the loss of his wife, for he was a little of a philosopher. He even felt something like gratitude towards the Black Woodsman, who had done him a kindness. He sought, therefore, to cultivate a further acquaintance with him, but for some time without success; the old blackleg played shy, for whatever people may think, he is not always to be had by calling for; he knows how to play his cards when pretty sure of his game.

At length, it is said, when delay had whetted Tom's eagerness to the quick, and prepared him to agree to any thing rather than again to lose the promised treasure, he met the black man one evening in his usual woodman dress, with his axe on his shoulder, sauntering along the edge of the swamp, and humming a tune. He affected to receive Tom's advances with indifference; made brief replies, and went on humming his tune.

By degrees, however, Tom brought him to business, and they began to haggle about the terms on which the former was to have the pirate's treasure. There is one condition which need not be mentioned, being generally understood in all cases, where the devil grants favors: but there were others about which, though of less importance, he was inflexibly obstinate. He insisted that the money found through his means should be employed in his service. He proposed, therefore, he should employ it in the black traffic; that is to say, that he should fit out a slave ship. This, however, Tom absolutely refused; he was bad enough in all conscience, but the devil himself could not tempt him to turn slave dealer.

Finding Tom so squeamish on this point, he did not insist upon it; he proposed instead he should turn usurer, the devil being extremely anxious for the increase of usurers, looking upon them as his peculiar people.

To this no objection was made, for it was just to Tom's taste.

"You shall open a broker's shop in Boston next month," said the black man.

"I'll do it to-morrow, if you wish," said Tom Walker.

"You shall lend money at two per cent. a month."

"Egad, I'll charge four," was Tom's reply.

"You shall extort bonds, foreclose mortgages, drive the merchant to bankruptcy—and—"

"I'll drive him to the d—l," cried Tom eagerly.

"You are the usurer for my money!" said black legs with delight. "When do you want the rhino?"

"This very night."

"Done!" said the devil.

"Done!" said Tom. So they shook hands and struck a bargain.

A few days saw Tom seated behind his desk in a counting house in Boston. His reputation for a ready moneyed man, who would lend money out for a good consideration, soon spread abroad. Every body remembers the days of Gov. Belcher, when money was perticularly scarce. It was a time for paper credit. The country had been deluged with government bills; the famous land bank was established; there had been a rage for speculating: the people had run mad with schemes for new settlements, for building cities in the wilderness; land jobbers went about with maps of grants, and townships and Eldorados, lying nobody knew where—but which everybody was ready to purchase. In a word, the great speculating fever which breaks out now and then in the country, had raged to an alarming degree, and everybody was dreaming of making sudden fortunes from nothing. As usual, the fever had subsided; the dream had gone off, imaginary fortunes with it; the patients were left in a doleful fix, and the whole country resounded with the cry of "hard times."

At this propitious time of public distress did Tom Walker set up as usurer in Boston. His door was soon thronged with customers. The needy and the adventurous, the gamblig speculator, the land jobbers, the shiftless tradesman, the merchant with cracked credit; in short every one driven to raise money by desperate means and desperate sacrifices, hurried to Tom Walker.

Thus Tom was the universal friend of the needy, and he acted like a friend in need; that is he exacted good pay with good security. In proportion to the distress of the applicant was the hardness of his terms. He accumulated bonds and mortgages, gradually squeezed his customers closer and closer, and sent them, at length, as dry as a sponge from his door.

In this way he made money hand over hand, became a rich and mighty man, and exalted his cocked hat upon change. He built himself, as usual, a vast house out of ostentation, but left the greater part of it unfinished, out of parsimony. He even set up a carriage in the fulness of his vain glory, though he nearly starved the poor horses which drew it, and as the ungreased wheels groaned and screeched on the axletrees, you would have thought you heard the souls of the poor debtors he was squeezing.

As Tom waxed old, however, he grew thoughtful. Having secured the good things of this world, he began to feel anxious about those of the next. He thought with regret on the bargain he had made with his black friend, and set his wits to work to cheat him out of the conditions. He became, therefore, all of a sudden, a violent church goer. He prayed loudly and strenuously, as if heaven were to be carried by force of longs. Indeed, one might always tell when he had sinned the most during the week, by the clamor of his Sunday devotion. The quiet christians who had been modestly and steadily travelling Zionward, were struck with self reproach at seeing themselves so suddenly outstripped in their career by this new made convert. Tom was as rigid in religious as in money matters; he was a stern supervisor and censurer of his neighbors, and seemed to think every sin entered up to their account became a credit on his own side of the page. He even talked of the expediency of reviving the persecution of the Quakers and the Anabaptists. In a word, Tom's zeal became as notorious as his riches.

Still, in spite of all his strenuous attention to forms, Tom had a lurking dread that the devil after all would have his due. That he might not be taken unawares, therefore, it is said that he always carried a small bible in his pocket. He also had a great folio bible in his counting-house, and frequently would be found reading when called on business. On such occasions he would lay his green spectacles on the book, to mark the place, while he turned round to drive some usurious bargain.

Some say that Tom grew a little cracked brained in his old days, and that fancying his end approaching, he had his horse new shod saddled and bridled, and buried with his feet upppermost; because he supposed that at the last day the world would be turned upside down, in which case he should find his horse ready for mounting, and he was determined at the worst to give his old friend a run for it. This, however, is probably a mere old wife's fable. If he really did take such a precaution it was totally superfluous, at least so says the authentic old legend which closes his story in the following manner:

One hot afternoon in the dog days just as a terrible black thunder gust was coming up, Tom sat in his counting-house in his white linen cap and Indian silk morning gown. He was on the point of foreclosing a mortgage, by which he would complete the ruin of an unhappy land speculator for whom he had professed the greatest friendship. The poor land jobber begged him to grant a few months indulgence. Tom had grown testy and irritated, and refused another day.

"My family will be ruined and brought upon the parish," said the land jobber.

"Charity begins at home," replied Tom, "I must take care of myself these hard times."

"You have made much money out of me," said the speculator.

Tom lost his patience and his pity.—"The devil take me if I have made a farthing," said he.

Just then there were three loud knocks at the street door. He stepped out to see who was there. A black man was holding a black horse, which stamped with impatience.

"Tom, you're come for," said the black fellow, gruffly. Tom shrunk back, but too late. He had left his little bible at the bottom of his coat pocket, and his big one on the desk buried under the mortgage he was about to foreclose; never was a sinner taken more unaware. The black man whisked him like a child astride the horse—and away he galloped in the midst of a thunder storm. The clerks stuck their pens behind their ears and stared after him from the windows. Away went Tom Walker dashing down the streets, his white cap bobbing up and down, his morning gown fluttering in the wind, and his steed striking fire out of the pavements at every bound. When the clerks turned to look for the black man he had disappeared.

Tom Walker never returned to foreclose the mortgage. A countryman who lived near the swamp reported that in the height of the thunder gust he had heard a great clattering of hoofs and howling along the road, and that when he ran to the window he just caught sight of a figure such as I have described, on a horse that galloped like mad across the fields, over the hills, and down into the hemlock swamp towards the old Indian fort, and shortly after a thunderbolt fell in that direction, which seemed to set the whole forest in a blaze.

The good people of Boston shook their heads and shrugged their shoulders, for they had been so accustomed to witches and goblins, and tricks of the devil in all kinds of shapes, from the first settlement of the colony, that they were not so much horror-struck as might have been imagined. Trustees were appointed to take charge of Tom's effects. There was no thing, however, to administer upon. On searching his coffers, all his bonds and mortgages were found reduced to cinders. In place of gold and silver, his iron chest was filled with chips and shavings; two skeletons lay in his stables instead of his half-starved horses, and the very next day his great house took fire and was burned to the ground.

Such was the end of Tom Walker and his ill gotten wealth. Let all griping money brokers lay the story well to heart.—The truth is not to be doubted. The very hole under the oak trees from whence he dug Kidd's money is to be seen to this day, and the neighboring swamp and the old Indian fort is often haunted in stormy nights by a figure on horseback, in a morning gown and white cap, which is doubtless the troubled spirit of the usurer. In fact the story has resolved itself into a proverb, and is the origin of that poular saying prevalent through New England, "the Devil and Tom Walker."

A SECOND WILLIAM TELL.

About a month ago, as we learn from the Courier Des Etats Unis, a case was brought before the Correctional Police of Spires, a city of Baden, which is certainly without a parallel in the annals of justice. A weaver of Spire, who had been much extolled as a marksman, undertook, by a desperate experiment, to establish his reputation beyond dispute. To this end, he loaded his pistol and repaired to his garden, accompanied by his son, a lad about 12 years old. He ordered the child to stand at fifteen paces from him, with a potato upon his head. The boy obeyed, without making any resistance; and the father, preserving the utmost coolness, fixed his pistol and dislodged the potato, the ball piercing it through the very centre. The weaver's neighbors, to whom the fact was related, refused to believe it, and would only be convinced by a repetition of the foolhardy exploit. It was now night; but the intrepid marksman insisted upon an immediate repetition. Instead of the potato, he placed upon his boy's head a lighted lantern, at which he discharged his pistol with the same success as before. The fame of this extraordinary exploit coming to the ears of the police, they deemed it their duty to arrest this second William Tell, and put a check to his wild ambition by the agency of the law. The Justice before whom the case was brought, not sympathizing with the admiration which the affair had excited among the weaver's neighbors, and having ascertained by a careful investigation of the circumstances, that the second time, the pistol ball had slightly grazed the boy's cap, condemned the marksman to eighty days imprisonment.

☞ How few of us, at the close of life can say, "I have filled and occupied the position to which I looked forward when a boy!" In the onward progress of life, how often, in some stray moment of thought and reflection, do we find ourselves inquiring, "Is this as I hoped—have I enacted my dream?" And the answer is invariably—"No!" We have looked forward in childhood—and only look forward—without reflection. We build up gorgeous palaces, we sketch a career of life all gold and sunshine—what are they? And what are they, when years sober us?

Funny Mistake.—A short time since a lady took passage in the cars on the Cincinnati, Hamilton and Dayton Railroad. She put her ticket in her dress pocket, where she had several other articles, and seating herself, become earnestly engaged in conversation with a friend. The conductor soon came around for the tickets. When he came to this lady, she drew from her pocket what she supposed to be the ticket, and without looking at it offered it to the conductor, and continued talking; but after extending it for a short time, and he not taking it, she looking up and discoverd that she was offering the conductor a *fine tooth comb*.

Devid Crocket.—An anecdote is related of this remarkable man, which does him infinitely more honor than any office he ever held. Before he was a candidate for Congress, or expected to be, there was a season of scarcity in the Western District, where he lived. He went up the Mississippi, and bought a flat boat load of corn, and took it to what he called his "old stamping ground." When a man came to him to buy corn, the first question he asked was: "Have you got the money to pay for it?" If the answer was in the affirmative, Davy's reply was, "Then you cannot have a kernel. I brought it here to sell to people that have no money." It was the foundation of his popularity.

☞ Drops of water constitute the ocean. Grains of sand make the mountains.—Good actions in small, as well as in large matters, constitute the gentleman. Small amounts due the printer, when collected together, would make his pocket book collapse with joy. He needs it. Send you share.