

# A Dilemma

S. WEIR MITCHELL

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***“VINTAGE SHORT MYSTERY CLASSICS”***

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*Silas Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) was a neurologist by profession. Born in Philadelphia, he earned his medical degree at 21, conducted further studies in Paris, was placed in charge of an Army hospital for nervous diseases during the Civil War, and earned recognition for his use of psychology in medical practice, particularly in the treatment of nervous disorders. Besides authoring medical works, he wrote novels, stories and poems. “A Dilemma,” a brief study in diabolical tantalization, is from Little Stories, published in 1903.*

# A Dilemma

I was just thirty-seven when my Uncle Philip died. A week before that event he sent for me; and here let me say that I had never set eyes on him. He hated my mother, but I do not know why. She told me long before his last illness that I need expect nothing from my father's brother. He was an inventor, an able and ingenious mechanical engineer, and had much money by his improvement in turbine-wheels. He was a bachelor; lived alone, cooked his own meals, and collected precious stones, especially rubies and pearls. From the time he made his first money he had this mania. As he grew richer, the desire to possess rare and costly gems became stronger. When he bought a new stone, he carried it in his pocket for a month and now and then took it out and looked at it. Then it was added to the collection in his safe at the trust company.

At the time he sent for me I was a clerk, and poor enough. Remembering my mother's words, his message gave me, his sole relative, no new hopes; but I thought it best to go.

When I sat down by his bedside, he began, with a malicious grin:

"I suppose you think me queer. I will explain." What he said was certainly queer enough. "I have been living on an annuity into which I put my fortune. In other words, I have been, as to money, concentric half of my life to enable me to be as eccentric as I pleased the rest of it. Now I repent of my wickedness to you all, and desire to

live in the memory of at least one of my family. You think I am poor and have only my annuity. You will be profitably surprised. I have never parted with my precious stones; they will be yours. You are my sole heir. I shall carry with me to the other world the satisfaction of making one man happy.

“No doubt you have always had expectations, and I desire that you should continue to expect. My jewels are in my safe. There is nothing else left.”

When I thanked him he grinned all over his lean face, and said:

“You will have to pay for my funeral.”

I must say that I never looked forward to any expenditure with more pleasure than to what it would cost me to put him away in the earth. As I rose to go, he said:

“The rubies are valuable. They are in my safe at the trust company. Before you unlock the box, be very careful to read a letter which lies on top of it; and be sure not to shake the box.” I thought this odd. “Don’t come back. It won’t hasten things.”

He died that day next week, and was handsomely buried. The day after, his will was found, leaving me his heir. I opened his safe and found in it nothing but an iron box, evidently of his own making, for he was a skilled workman and very ingenious. The box was heavy and strong, about ten inches long, eight inches wide and ten inches high. On it lay a letter to me. It ran thus:

“DEAR TOM: This box contains a large number of very fine pigeon-blood rubies and a fair lot of diamonds; one is blue—a beauty. There are hundreds of pearls—one the famous green pearl and a necklace of blue pearls, for which any woman would sell her soul—or her affec-

tions." I thought of Susan. "I wish you to continue to have expectations and continuously to remember your dear uncle. I would have left these stones to some charity, but I hate the poor as much as I hate your mother's son,—yes, rather more.

"The box contains an interesting mechanism, which will act with certainty as you unlock it, and explode ten ounces of my improved, supersensitive dynamite—no, to be accurate, there are only nine and a half ounces. Doubt me, and open it, and you will be blown to atoms. Believe me, and you will continue to nourish expectations which will never be fulfilled. As a considerate man, I counsel extreme care in handling the box. Don't forget your affectionate

UNCLE"

I stood appalled, the key in my hand. Was it true? Was it a lie? I had spent all my savings on the funeral, and was poorer than ever.

Remembering the old man's oddity, his malice, his cleverness in mechanic arts, and the patent explosive which had helped to make him rich, I began to feel how very likely it was that he had told the truth in this cruel letter.

I carried the iron box away to my lodgings, set it down with care in a closet, laid the key on it, and locked the closet.

Then I sat down, as yet hopeful, and began to exert my ingenuity upon ways of opening the box without being killed. There must be a way.

After a week of vain thinking I bethought me, one day, that it would be easy to explode the box by unlocking it at a safe distance, and I arranged a plan with wires, which seemed as if it would answer. But when I reflected on what would happen when the dynamite scattered the

rubies, I knew that I should be none the richer. For hours at a time I sat looking at that box and handling the key.

At last I hung the key on my watch-guard; but then it occurred to me that it might be lost or stolen. Dreading this, I hid it, fearful that some one might use it to open the box. This state of doubt and fear lasted for weeks, until I became nervous and began to dread that some accident might happen to that box. A burglar might come and boldly carry it away and force it open and find it was a wicked fraud of my uncle's. Even the rumble and vibration caused by the heavy vans in the street became at last a terror.

Worst of all, my salary was reduced, and I saw that marriage was out of the question.

In my despair I consulted Professor Clinch about my dilemma, and as to some safe way of getting at the rubies. He said that, if my uncle had not lied, there was none that would not ruin the stones, especially the pearls, but that it was a silly tale and altogether incredible. I offered him the biggest ruby if he wished to test his opinion. He did not desire to do so.

Dr. Schaff, my uncle's doctor, believed the old man's letter, and added a caution, which was entirely useless, for by this time I was afraid to be in the room with that terrible box.

At last the doctor kindly warned me that I was in danger of losing my mind with too much thought about my rubies. In fact, I did nothing else but contrive wild plans to get at them safely. I spent all my spare hours at one of the great libraries reading about dynamite. Indeed, I talked of it until the library attendants, believing me a lunatic or a dynamite fiend, declined to humor me, and

spoke to the police. I suspect that for a while I was “shadowed” as a suspicious, and possibly criminal, character. I gave up the libraries, and, becoming more and more fearful, set my precious box on a down pillow, for fear of its being shaken; for at this time even the absurd possibility of its being disturbed by an earthquake troubled me. I tried to calculate the amount of shake needed to explode my box.

The old doctor, when I saw him again, begged me to give up all thought of the matter, and, as I felt how completely I was the slave of one despotic idea, I tried to take the good advice thus given me.

Unhappily, I found, soon after, between the leaves of my uncle’s Bible, a numbered list of the stones with their cost and much beside. It was dated two years before my uncle’s death. Many of the stones were well known, and their enormous value amazed me.

Several of the rubies were described with care, and curious histories of them were given in detail. One was said to be the famous “Sunset ruby,” which had belonged to the Empress-Queen Maria Theresa. One was called the “Blood ruby,” not, as was explained, because of the color, but on account of the murders it had occasioned. Now, as I read, it seemed again to threaten death.

The pearls were described with care as an unequalled collection. Concerning two of them my uncle had written what I might call biographies—for, indeed, they seemed to have done much evil and some good. One, a black pearl, was mentioned in an old bill of sale as—She—which seemed queer to me.

It was maddening. Here, guarded by a vision of sudden death, was wealth “beyond the dreams of avarice.” I

am not a clever or ingenious man; I know little beyond how to keep a ledger, and so I was, and am, no doubt, absurd about many of my notions as to how to solve this riddle.

At one time I thought of finding a man who would take the risk of unlocking the box, but what right had I to subject any one else to the trial I dared not face? I could easily drop the box from a height somewhere, and if it did not explode could then safely unlock it; but if it did blow up when it fell, good-by to my rubies. *Mine*, indeed! I was rich, and I was not. I grew thin and morbid, and so miserable that, being a good Catholic, I at last carried my troubles to my father confessor. He thought it simply a cruel jest of my uncle's, but was not so eager for another world as to be willing to open my box. He, too, counselled me to cease thinking about it. Good heavens! I dreamed about it. Not to think about it was impossible. Neither my own thought nor science nor religion had been able to assist me.

Two years have gone by, and I am one of the richest men in the city, and have no more money than will keep me alive.

Susan said I was half cracked like Uncle Philip, and broke off her engagement. In my despair I advertised in the *Journal of Science*, and have had absurd schemes sent me by the dozen. At last, as I talked too much about it, the thing became so well known that when I put the horror in a safe, in a bank, I was promptly desired to withdraw it. I was in constant fear of burglars, and my landlady gave me notice to leave, because no one would stay in the house with that box. I am now advised to print my

story and await advice from the ingenuity of the American mind.

I have moved into the suburbs and hidden the box and changed my name and my occupation. This I did to escape the curiosity of the reporters. I ought to say that when the government officials came to hear of my inheritance, they were reasonably desired to collect the succession tax on my uncle's estate.

I was delighted to assist them. I told the collector my story, and showed him Uncle Philip's letter. Then I offered him the key, and asked for time to get half a mile away. That man said he would think it over and come back later.

This is all I have to say. I have made a will and left my rubies and pearls to the Society for the Preservation of Human Vivisection. If any man thinks this account a joke or an invention, let him coldly imagine the situation:

Given an iron box, known to contain wealth, and to contain dynamite, arranged to explode when the key is used to unlock it—what would any sane man do? What would he advise?

—*S. WEIR MITCHELL*

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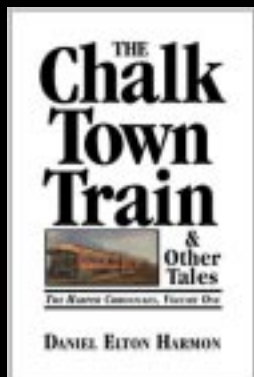
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South Carolina author and editor Daniel Elton Harmon has written more than fifty books. Recently published by Chelsea House are his six volumes in the “Exploration of Africa: The Emerging Nations” series; *The Titanic*, part of the “Great Disasters: Reforms and Ramifications” series; his history of the Hudson River for the “Rivers in American Life and Times” series; and juvenile biographies in the “Explorers of New Worlds” series. Other of his books are published by Wright/McGraw-Hill, Mason Crest and Barbour Publishing. His freelance articles have appeared in such periodicals as *Nautilus*, *Music Journal* and *The New York Times*. Harmon is the associate editor of *Sandlapper: The Magazine of South Carolina* and editor of *The Lawyer’s PC*, a technology newsletter.

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