

The Horrible Power of Words

(by Ottmar Bauer)

It was in his father's will - his father's of all people, who had found a living in the fatal combination of physician and undertaker, and found his death after a huge helping of fresh shellfish in herb sauce at the 'Hare and Eagle', the public house nearest to his residence somewhere on the chalky edge of Kent - it was in the will of that extravagant old man with his outlandish tastes and the gift of a more than liberal mind that he, Geoffrey, should follow him in the undertaking business.

Geoffrey was an outspoken handsome young man of twenty, a good sport, a good scholar at that, who would have made it in any line of career. No-one was more convinced of that than himself. He had, however, not set his mind on any particular profession, let alone on such a sombre, if profitable, thing as burying the jolly countryfolk around him and eventually ending up in a free coffin from his own stores.

Even if he had inherited a certain economical disposition from his father, who had in his lifetime not only been a big spender but also a scrupulous accountant of his double income, money didn't matter much to Geoffrey. For all his secret ambition, he was a romantic. He was full of imagination and had a deep understanding of what he called nature's affairs. At the age of five, he had sent flocks of birds perched on the telegraph wires into the air and on their way to Africa at the mere utterance of a word. Even now, on stormy days, if he had a mind to leave the house, he would talk to the skies with great patience until the rain stopped.

He was young enough and sentimental enough to believe that the book of life was bound to open for him one day, and that he must not probe into the future by planning.

Consequently, as far as his father's plans went, Geoffrey would have met them with flat refusal - had he known of them, which as yet he didn't.

Even on the day of the funeral the vital document, referred to in pathetic handwritten letters as 'My Will', still lay in the briefcase of a Mr Heathersway, who was Geoffrey's father's lawyer and was presently preparing himself to call at the house of mourning.

The clock in the hall struck eight. Unlike his late father, whom no client, alive or dead, had ever urged out of bed before nine, Geoffrey was an early riser. As he came down the stairs this morning for what he hoped would be a decent enough breakfast to take him through the funeral, from the kitchen came lively conversation, parts of which he overheard.

Geoffrey held his breath.

„I say, Cook, it's a crying shame.“

„What is?“ asked Cook, a plump woman with a genial smile.

„Why, poor Jeff, haven't you heard? Heading to be an undertaker.“

The speaker of these sympathetic words was Edwina, a delicate little thing of seventeen, who had been engaged to do all sorts of things around the house, from serving tea between six and half past to doing the modest clerical work at Geoffrey's father office, but certainly not for making Geoffrey self-conscious when they met by accident.

„Who says?“ inquired Cook.

„Everybody says. And if he won't be an undertaker as from the day of the funeral, they're going to make him.“

Cook didn't understand. Neither did Geoffrey.

„Well, it's in the will. He'll lose a fortune, and all the money will go to charity or that Mr Hathersway.“

„Hathersway? The lawyer! Blimey.“ Cook, who had rather hoped she would figure somewhere in the will herself, was anxious to learn more, as in fact was Geoffrey. But Edwina wouldn't come out with more. Did Cook think she, Edwina, might be considered at all?

„Oh do be sensible!“ cried Cook. „How long have you worked in this house? Nine years? Or nineteen years? Or twenty-nine like myself?“

Geoffrey whispered, „Eight precious months.“

„What's eight months?“ exploded Cook. „Nothing! Go and get on with your work. The green peppers. Out of the oven with them. Take a tea-towel, silly. That's better. I'll give you a hand.“

It was Geoffrey's father's wardrobe next - what a state it was in! - then the all too familiar cold cigar on the mantelpiece, which was likely to become a permanent sight, since Edwina protested she wouldn't touch it for a thousand mentions in the dead man's will.

Thus the preparations for the funeral feast were resumed, but the subject of the will was not.

Edwina had betrayed enough, anyway. Geoffrey stepped out of his hiding-place in bewilderment rather than agitation. Agitation in him rose to a sudden peak, however, when the telephone rang in the hall, and again when Edwina came dashing out of the kitchen to answer it. Seeing each other, both apologized for an accident that again had not happened. Edwina retreated to just behind the kitchen door, where she obviously meant to cook Geoffrey's egg and brew his tea.

As Geoffrey had feared, it was Mr Hathersway on the phone, announcing his arrival for the funeral. As a friend of his father's, Mr Hathersway, who had shed many an unmanly tear, again expressed his deep regrets at Geoffrey's irreplaceable loss. As their lawyer, he was glad to say, he could at least offer some comfort in the mention of the house and a substantial sum of money, which - tragically though - Geoffrey no doubt would be able to call his own, once his father's will was officially opened and read. This Mr Hathersway intended to do before the funeral party, immediately after the burial.

„I wonder“, said Geoffrey.

„What do you mean?“ asked Mr Heathersway.

„The will, I understand, has already been opened.“

„I beg your pardon!“ gasped the lawyer.

„There’s a rumour among the locals ...“

„My dear Geoffrey“, interrupted Heathersway, „if I may call you that ...“

„Go on“, said Geoffrey in as forbidding a tone as no-one, not the lawyer, nor Edwina behind the kitchen door, nor Geoffrey himself had ever heard from his mouth.

Mr Heathersway went on. „My dear Geoffrey, beware of the locals. They are a pest. They pick up a rumour, and in no time at all it has become the truth. They cannot tell fact from fiction. And they don’t seem to mind. My experience as a man of the law has taught me to avoid them like the plague.“ Mr Heathersway paused, as if expecting Geoffrey to contradict that patent lie of his. „There can be a horrible power in words, you know.“ Geoffrey did know. He had used that power. And he decided he would use it again.

They talked technicalities after that. Then Geoffrey rang off.

Among the technicalities they had discussed was the question of how Mr Heathersway would get to the funeral.

Mr Heathersway lived a couple of miles away in a village further up the coast. He did drive, professionally, but it was one of his minor aims in life to give up driving for good, which was just another way of saying that it was a major aim of his to give up work for good, and hope for lifts to and from his club and the few other places he went to. In this case he decided to walk along the cliff, which cut the distance by more than half.

„Are you sure that’s wise?“ Geoffrey had asked. „After all those storms we’ve seen lately?“ Geoffrey warned him to take the car after all. He didn’t mean it, though.

Geoffrey stood now by the window of one of the top rooms overlooking much of the bay. He followed the distant figure of a man, black against the grey sky, moving along the edge of the cliff, and equally black against the green turf of the landslide shoulders as the walker zig-zagged down the coastal slope to make his way through the massive chalk boulders scattered over the beach, obviously to avoid the inland bend around a steep valley and the stream that had carved it out.

Geoffrey closed his eyes and began talking to the cliff, where it sat highest and proudest, but brooding.

His words didn’t go unheard. Edwina, who had her little room next door to where Geoffrey stood, and her little ears even nearer, was at quite a loss. An hour later, by the graveside, while the minister gave his address, she still looked more disturbed than it was felt a girl her age should, even on so sad an occasion.

As to Mr Heathersway, he didn't live to see his friend's and client's burial. He was in good time for his own, though. A solid portion of the Kentish coast, somewhat bigger than geologists had predicted, with half an acre of never to be harvested wheat, descended on him, entombing him forever.

Years later, when Geoffrey had risen to considerable heights in his career, and long after Edwina moved from her attic chamber down to the more presentable parts of the house, the memorable circumstances of Geoffrey's father's passing were still talked about in the village. As villagers go, they gave the story ever-changing twists and variations. One of them said that it was the lawyer who died of the shellfish (fresh shellfish, as the landlord and the menu still insisted), whereas Geoffrey's father got killed by the cliff, which to Geoffrey, when he stopped to think, was true enough.