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 BY CHAS. L. VAN BAAR
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NEXT WEEK'S FEATURES: It's Dan Cupid, a Song. Silk Gowns, for Between Seasons Wear by Dorothy Dale. Mantlepiece Decorations, by Beatrice Carey. Fish and Sea Food Recipes, by Sara Cranford.

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The GUARDIAN'S SHORT STORY

A Gallant Old Bachelor

By Donald Allen

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Mr. Cyrus Stebbins, attorney-at-law and a resident of Philadelphia, had some legal business to transact in Paris, and knowing that it would take him several months to accomplish it and being a man who preferred peace and quietness he looked about for lodgings and soon obtained what he wanted.

Mr. Stebbins had turned the sixty mark, and there were young and envious attorneys who spoke of him as old Stebbins. He had never married, and there were other young and envious attorneys who said that it was a blessed good thing for at least one woman that he hadn't. The fact was that Mr. Stebbins was bitter, cranky and not at all willing to extend the glad hand. He had never been known to exhibit the least consideration for womankind, even when one of them was on the stand for him as a witness. As for being gallant, the idea was ridiculous.

One day, in walking about with his hands clasped behind his back and his shoulders humped over, the old lawyer happened on an auction room. There was a sale going on, and in idle curiosity he dropped in. An escritoire was up for bidding. It was an antique. The bids were low and the auctioneer indifferent, and as a result the lawyer found himself the owner of the piece of furniture at what he knew to be about one-third its value.

A minute after it was knocked down to him a man came rushing in and seemed greatly put out that the escritoire had been sold. When he found that Mr. Stebbins was the new owner he took him aside and said:

"That article was included by mistake among a lot of other goods sent here for sale. It belonged to a friend of mine who is dead and was really left to me by his will. I will give you 100 francs advance on your bargain."

Mr. Stebbins was sorry if any one in Paris had died and sorry if any mistake had been made in loading up vans with furniture, but he couldn't see his way clear to parting with his purchase. The offer was increased to two hundred—three hundred—five hundred, but in vain. He said he might sell it when

he was ready to leave Paris, but not before. The escritoire was removed to his lodgings and rubbed up a bit, and its next adventure took place a week later.

The lawyer was in the public library to look up some dates connected with his case when he saw a man who closely resembled the one he had met in the auction room. They did not speak, and the time was forgotten in five minutes. Three hours later the lawyer returned to his lodgings just in time to halt two men who were bringing his recent purchase downstairs to be loaded into a van. The landlady explained that a very nice French gentleman had called and exhibited an order signed by Mr. Stebbins, and of course she thought it was all right to let the article go. The man he had seen in the library had put up the job to get possession of the escritoire.

Mr. Stebbins sat down to reason it out. He had paid 50 francs for the piece of furniture. He had been offered 500 francs advance. The piece wasn't worth the money. Why was the man so anxious, then, to get it into his possession? It had been pretty closely examined when first brought home. It was now given another inspection, but the lawyer could discover no secret drawers. He gave the landlady strict orders and went his way.

Ten days later he told her he would be gone all day. Half an hour after leaving the house he returned for some forgotten data and found her showing his room to a stranger—the man he had met twice before. The stranger hurried away without excuse, and the landlady said she was showing the room because the gentleman stood ready to take it as soon as Mr. Stebbins vacated. The caller had looked at and admired the escritoire and had even moved it about, but had taken nothing from it. She was talked to in plain, legal Philadelphia language and her key taken away.

A couple of weeks passed away before anything more happened. Then, as the lawyer sat reading one evening, the landlady came up with a young woman behind her. This young woman was plainly but neatly dressed and looked to be a lady's maid. She introduced herself, and the landlady left. She had friends in Philadelphia, and, learning that Mr. Stebbins was from that city, she had made bold to call on him to ask for information. The lawyer didn't believe her story for a minute, but while he was preparing to draw her out and show up her inconsistencies she suddenly clasped her hand over her heart and tumbled down in a faint. Of course Mr. Stebbins summoned the landlady—that is, he started to go downstairs to her, his

room having no bell, when a lawyer-like idea came to him, and he turned about. He was just in time to find the fainting girl at work at the escritoire. She screamed. Then she was taken by the ear and led to the door and ceremoniously bowed out.

"Sir, you are no gentleman!" she exclaimed as she went.

"Miss, you are not a success as a faintest!" he called after her.

The escritoire was now hauled into the middle of the room, all the drawers removed, and Mr. Stebbins went over it inch by inch. He was in the midst of his work when the lady's maid returned to say:

"I came here and told you a story, and I am sorry for it."

"I have no doubt the jury will take that into consideration," grimly replied the lawyer.

"I will now tell you why I wanted to look into the escritoire," she continued. "The date of a certain person is written on the bottom of one of the drawers or some other place. I was offered a thousand francs to get it."

"But you got over your faint too soon."

"Will monsieur put his price on the piece of furniture?"

"Monsieur won't. I'll take the old thing all to pieces and find out what you folks want of it."

"If monsieur would take, say, 2,000 francs?"

"I'm busy this evening, my dear."

She stood for a moment as if wondering how she could accomplish her object, and then burst into tears and took her departure. Mr. Stebbins peeked and peered and worked for two hours before he found the secret drawer, but it was discovered at last. The contents consisted of six letters from a woman to a man. If he had been a poet he might have had comparisons, but, as a lawyer, instead, he sat down and read every one of those letters with as much interest as if a branch of promise case was on the tapis. Some of them he read over twice. When he had finished and tied them up again he said to himself:

"A jury wouldn't be ten minutes bringing in a verdict of guilty after reading those letters."

He had scarcely eaten his breakfast next morning when the landlady announced a lady caller.

"Is it that girl of last night again?" he asked.

"No; it is a grand lady. Such a hat; such diamonds!"

"Show the lady and the hat and the diamonds up."

Mr. Stebbins knew that he stood in the presence of the real thing as soon as his visitor entered, and he seated

her with a courtly bow and a wave of the hand.

"I shall speak the truth and say that I have come on account of the escritoire," she began.

"I admire your candor, madame. Always speak the truth on the witness stand. Several persons have come on the same errand."

"It belonged to a gentleman who died very suddenly."

"How suddenly?"

"He was killed in a railroad collision."

"But, as the last one was written a whole year ago, he had time to burn them."

She looked him in the eyes, but made no reply.

"There are documents that should be sacredly preserved and documents that should be burned as soon as read."

The lady inclined her head.

"My advice to you as a lawyer is not to write at all."

"This package is what you are after, madame, and I present it to you, with my compliments."

And, with a wave and a bow, he took the package of letters from his pocket and presented it to her.

"Monsieur, I am grateful," she murmured.

"Tush, tush!"

"I shall hold you in dear remembrance."

"Run along, countess. The jury says not guilty, but don't do it again. You have your letters, I have the escritoire, and I'll set aside that secret drawer to keep my comic valentines."

A Baker in Your Home

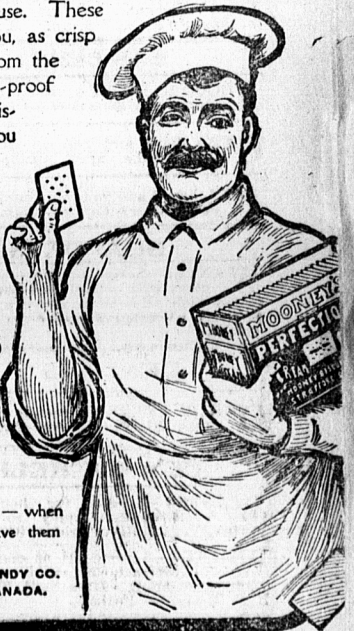
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