

THE TINKLING HOUSE OF WELLINGTON SQUARE

Victor Speer

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NEAR the main road leading through Wellington Square, a little place twenty-five miles west of Toronto and a convenient drive from Hamilton, stood the farmhouse of an old man named Pettit. Neighbours who passed in the night averred that at unusual hours a light shone and there was a tinkling sound such as they could not account for. They used to creep close and listen. They could hear the tinkety-tink, tinkety-tink, like the muffled tapping of a tiny bell, yet different from a bell's clear voice.

The old man kept to himself. He had a son who lived with him, and they were uncommunicative about their affairs. They were industrious and thrifty. Their crops were good, their cattle were fat, their expenses were small. Finally a neighbour, bolder than the others, was passing the house one night and hearing the faint, insistent tinkety-tink, he crept close, and finally climbed a tree and peered into the window. The sight made him gasp. A candle stood on the table. Beside the candle was a box as big as a washboiler. Old man Pettit stood by the box. His face was beaming, his eyes were bright. On the table was a heap of gold, not a little heap, but a big pile, with gold coins scattered all over the table. They shone and glittered in the candle-light. The old man would thrust his hands into the pile, seize the gold coins until he could hold no more, raise his hands and then drop the coins in golden streams down on to the pile again. As they struck the yellow pyramid they clinked and tinkled musically. At the sound of the gold the old man would laugh like a little child. His gold was the joy of his life.

After delving in this treasure to his heart's content, the old man gathered the gold pieces carefully into piles and placed them in the box. Then he blew out the candle and was lost in the darkness.

The neighbour climbed down out of the tree. He had solved the mystery of the tinkling house. He was an honest man and said nothing. But gradually others came to know that Pettit distrusted banks, and was said to keep a large sum of money in his house or buried on his farm.

"This talk spread until, in the country round about, Pettit was regarded as a man living in a treasure house," says Murray. "In the spring of 1875, before I became connected with the Government, Pettit went to Hamilton with a lot of fat cattle, and sold them for a good price. He was spotted; and when he did not put his money in a bank, the spotters made sure where he lived and let him go unmolested. A few nights later a waggon drove up to a dark spot near the Pettit house. Four masked men alighted. They went on foot to the Pettit house and knocked upon the door. The old man answered the knock, and when he opened the door they knocked him down, while his son ran out of the house and across fields, and hid in the woods a mile away. They ransacked the house, discovered the box, and emptied out the gold. There was \$10,500 in gold. Despite the old man's pleadings they took the gold and went away.

"The old man raised a great hubbub and four men were arrested in Hamilton, taken before a police magistrate and promptly acquitted. They were very highly connected and a large number of the leading lawyers appeared for them. The affair ran along until November 1875. Politics had become mixed up in it, some alleging that the reason the men were not prosecuted was, that their friends had a large amount of political influence. No doubt they had. Finally a demand was made on the Department of Justice to have the matter investigated. I had become connected with the Department in July, and when the complaint came in I was instructed to take the matter up. I knew at the outset that, owing to certain matters, I could not look for much assistance in Hamilton. Every detective must expect such conditions occasionally to confront him. So must men in other businesses. Friendships are friendships, and business is business, and there may be times when the ties of one are as strong as the rules of the other.

"I set out to learn what became of the gold. I learned that some of it had appeared in Brantford the morning after the robbery, so it was probable the robbers had gone to Brantford and divided it. My suspicions were correct. They had divided the booty in Brantford and had bought wine there. I learned also that they had hired the waggon in Hamilton. I got track of one of the four men in the United States. He was a professional burglar and thief. He

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has reformed since, and now is living in Buffalo, and I would be quite as ready to trust him as a lot of other people who lay strenuous claim to respectability. I had known him of old, and had landed him for seven years once. That was long before he reformed. He had his share in the Pettit gold, for he had done his part in the Pettit robbery.

"I learned, by tracing the gold in various places where it was spent, that the chief figure in the robbery was Charles Mills, of Hamilton. He was highly connected with leading people and had gone to Texas. He was far from being a poor man, having \$50,000 or so, and, in addition, a rich old aunt, who was expected to leave him a fortune. I planned various ways to get him back into Canada, but none worked. Finally, I got track of a girl in Hamilton, named Lil White, of whom he was very fond. I had scoured the country for miles around in hunt of gold that had been spent and in search of information about Mills. I heard of the White girl through an acquaintance of Mills, and through Lil White I put up a job on Mills, and lured him back to Canada. I caught him in Hamilton on Sunday night, December 12th, 1875. I convicted him, too. Among the witnesses was Detective Patrick Mack of Buffalo, and I traced where they spent some of the gold there.

"The case, of course, attracted considerable attention, because of the influence of the friends of some of those involved. The late B.B. Osler, then County Crown Attorney in Hamilton, prosecuted. The prisoners were defended ably by William Laidlaw, K.C., of Hamilton, now of Toronto, and by the present Judge Robertson. Mills was convicted of robbery on January 14th, 1876, at Milton, and was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Subsequently he was pardoned through the efforts of political friends. Politics cut no figure in the conviction, but it did in the pardon. Mills demanded a speedy trial instead of a trial by jury, and he was tried by the county judge without a jury. In Canada you can waive the right of a jury trial and demand what is termed a speedy trial. The Act was just passed at that time.

"After the trial and sentence, old man Pettit began an action against the Mills estate for the \$10,500 of his gold that had been stolen. He got a judgment, and collected all the money with interest. Then he began an action against his own lawyer for overcharging, and he beat him, too.

"Pettit was a man of deep-set characteristics. I remember that, when I set to work on the case for him, I went to his house at Wellington Square, and went over the ground. From there I desired to go to Milton, nine miles away.

"I will drive you over,' said old man Pettit.

"Thank you,' said I.

"He hitched up a horse and drove me the nine miles to Milton. When we arrived at Milton I alighted, thanking him, and bade him good-day.

"Just a minute,' said he. 'I'd like \$1.75, please.'

"What for?' said I.

"For driving you over,' said he.

"But I am working on your case,' said I.

"I know that,' said he, 'so I used my son's rig and the bill is \$1.75.'

"I paid it. If he had made it \$2 he could have put it into gold."