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Letter perfect

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Abstract

Stroke by stroke the language was slipping away from him. My dear nephew, he had written in his clear miniscule hand, I am sorry, though not, of course, surprised, to hear of your financial woes. And I am far from deaf to the eloquence of your arguments. (There was charity for you, he thought. His nephew on paper was like a cow on tiles.) I have long been aware that the economic climate in the dairying regions is nezther Invigorating nor, shall we say, sal- ... Damn! What was that word? Salub-? Solubr-? ... It was too vexing neither invigorating nor healthy he concluded irritably.

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My dear nephew, he had written in his clear miniscule hand, *I am sorry, though not, of course, surprised, to hear of your financial woes. And I am far from deaf to the eloquence of your arguments.* (There was charity for you, he thought. His nephew on paper was like a cow on tiles.) *I have long been aware that the economic climate in the dairying regions is neither invigorating nor, shall we say, sal-* ... Damn! What was that word? *Salub—? Solubr—? ... It was too vexing. ...neither invigorating nor healthy* he concluded irritably.

Once, so it seemed, every word in the dictionary was his to dispose. Today he sometimes erred, even blundered. The purely physical penalties of age he could have borne, borne gladly. What terrified him was to know that after each of those dizzy spells, with their familiar nausea and flickering pains, another small part of his brain was gone, blocked off by a tiny blood clot as if it had never been.

True. I promised my late brother to aid you in whatever way I could. You will concede that I have always done so. But the sum you entreat is extravagant.

A lance of sunlight burst between tightly-drawn blinds, splitting for a moment the darkness of the room; but the old man saw only the letter that lay in his reading-lamp's circle.

My personal fortune has long been willed to the library of my old university college. You will appreciate, dear boy, the fitness... No! He went back and erased 'fitness'. ...*the felicity of this. Monies earned from my books will be returned to perpetuate the influence of those spirits from whom, in part, I drew my inspiration.*

Charles William Blackwell rested, well pleased with the rhythm of that last paragraph. How the deft placing of words could expedite one's affairs! Even when temporizing with this illiterate boor. *None the less, the problem you raise is a considerable one...*

It was indeed. Fingers that seemed made of creased lizard-skin rather than any human material relaxed their grip on the pen and moved upwards to scratch absent-mindedly at the scaly throat.

Reluctantly he smoothed his nephew's letter open again, noting with disdain the smudged paper and the ragged lines of printed capitals. They looked, he thought, as if hacked out with a spade rather than scripted with a pen.

DIR UNKEL CHARLZ (Gary had written) I WOZ TAWKING TOO MY BANK MANAJER TOODAY...

When Gary was twelve a teacher at his country school had realized that the boy, though clever with his hands, would never learn to read and write in the normal way. She had switched tactics, teaching him to write words exactly the way he heard them. It had worked. Gary would never decipher more than a sentence or two from a printed book, but he could, on occasions, express himself almost fluently in writing.

HEE SED THE FARM IZ TOO MUCH IN DET BEEKOZ OV THE DROWTS. I HAV TOO SEL MY KOWZ AND PUT IN SHEEP. AWLSO I HAV TOO PAY HIM TEN THOWSAND DOLARS BEEFAW EESTER. AWLSO I NEED THERTY THOWSAND FOR EVREETHING INKLOODING THAT. How clearly the illiterate expressed himself, thought his uncle. I HATE ARSKING FOR HELP BUT DAD SED TOO IF I HAD TOO. Hardly elegant! But at least he knew Gary meant what he said. It did hurt to ask. Meanwhile, Charles reflected, this promise of his to a dying brother might be hard to evade. His brother had helped him in the past, with money as with everything else — especially at the start of his career when Charles William Blackwell was a gangling country lad whose name no publisher wanted to know...

After this last sentence four words had been scored out: NOE WOT I MEEN? 'Know what I mean?' was how Gary ended every second sentence. There were no four words more calculated to irritate his uncle. 'No I don't', he would answer, 'What do you mean?'

I GES THINGZ IS CRUK IN TULARUK was the concluding banality, BUT EVREEWUN SEZ THER GETING BETER. This too was impeccable. Charles's enquiries confirmed that the rural recession was ending. Gary was a good farmer, and with his debts paid off and his farm converted, could expect to succeed. But to give his hard-won money to this country churl! Scrawled across the bottom of the letter was the infuriating apology PLEEZ EXKOOZ KRONIK INGLISH. Charles William Blackwell gritted his teeth and hardened his heart.

I regret I can give you no answer yet, not for some weeks. Meanwhile I advise you to practise all possible economies. But was this fair? Gary needed an answer urgently. After a minute Charles put the letter aside.

'Suppose I have another stroke', he thought. 'A bad one. Gary might come here to look for me.... And could intimidate me if he chose.' But no. That was absurd. Gary at least was honest. Yet what if Charles found himself some day being persuaded to sign something whose contents he no longer understood? After a moment he dismissed the thought as morbid. 'By the time I'm dull enough to be duped by Gary', he decided, 'I'll be well beyond making or changing wills!'

He was frightened because he knew no remedy for the Voices he had begun to hear in his head. For the hundredth time he told himself it would have been easy to write them off as waking dreams, but for their utter clarity. For instance:... He concentrated; and almost at once a transmission began.

Sixty years underground! a high childish voice intoned. *Sixty dead years Charlie buried me. Oh yes! A babble of other voices began, lower, echoing the same phrases, remote yet clear, like inaccessible trombones.*

What did it mean? But, as suddenly as a dream fades on waking, the words were gone from his memory, and a new message replaced them. *Wattle pollen, fairy bread. Take it home, my mother said.* That made no sense, though it suggested children's songs in a sunny schoolyard. Then it too vanished before a new urgent message. *Mad as the mist and snow!* the Voices intoned. *Mad as the mist and snow!*

The transmission ceased. Words faded. But by an effort of will Charles William Blackwell reached back into his memory and hooked out the final line. *Mad as the mist and snow.* That at least sounded familiar — and if he could trace its source he might identify the Voices. Suddenly he was sure these words resided in one of the books on the opposite wall of his library.

The journey from writing-table to bookshelves, propping himself with his cane at every step, was slow but certain. He was on firm ground. No queen termite in the centre of her empire navigated so surely by blind senses as Charles in his library. Instinct guided him to the leather-bound COLLECTED DICKENS running the exact length of the fire-place.

No, it was not Dickens. Like a water-diviner's twig his hand was drawn downwards. Saurian fingers moved over a slim Horace (nestling under the bulk of Sir Walter Scott), fluttered briefly beside Homer, then settled on a tiny Yeats, that opened at the page:

Horace there by Homer stands,
Plato stands below,
And here is Tully's open page.
How many years ago
Were you and I unlettered lads
Mad as the mist and snow?

The verse was marked in pencil. Clearly he had noted it once before. But what did it mean? He turned back to the bookshelves for inspiration.

Without warning that random thudding came again in his chest. Sudden nausea. The familiar dizziness and shooting pains. He was choking. Too late he opened his mouth to call; but his voice was brassy, unreal. And then he was nowhere.

* * *

A strong young man in a check suit was bent over him, shouting. His face seemed odd somehow without a hat. That was Gary. He wanted to call back to him, from what seemed like the bottom of a tunnel, but no words came. 'It's Alright', Gary was shouting, 'Quack Says You'll Have Trouble Talking For A While. Do You Want To Sit Up?' He felt himself pulled upwards, while pillows were wedged in around him. Gary's hands were rough, unsycophantic; almost as if he were treating a sick cow on his property. Yet he omitted nothing that mattered to his patient.

With an effort Charles twisted his head. He was on the leather sofa in his library. 'Thank God They Found You', Gary was shouting. At least he looked as if he was shouting — actually he sounded faint. 'You've Been Unconscious For Two Days. Here, If You Want To Say Something, Write On This.' A stiff card and pencil were thrust into his hands. 'Anything You Want, Uncle Charles?'

Laboriously the old man took the pencil and wrote: I WONT TO REST. One of those words looked wrong; he was too tired to work out which. But Gary understood. 'Righto Uncle.' But then: 'Do You Feel Up To Being Moved Back To Your Room?'

That frightened him. To be carried away from his books, his leather-bound comrades, perhaps for ever. Whatever it cost, he had to resist... Slowly he lifted the pencil to renew the monstrous labour of communication. But Gary — bless him! — had understood. 'Tell You What, Uncle. You Might Prefer To Stay Here With Your Books. They're Sort Of Company For You, Know What I Mean?'

Yes, he did know what Gary meant! Grateful, he sank back, over-

whelmed by their shared understanding. He closed his eyes. Some terrible thought still fluttered against them like a moth. Something he had to remember. Something about books, and money. He ignored it, and after a while it went away. Then, before long, he slept.

* * *

He woke relieved. His mind was a peaceful harbour that only yesterday had been crowded with jostling boats. Now something inside him was going... dissolving... So simply.... Like crystals in water, he thought.

Then he remembered. ...something to do for Gary. ...the right decision... he saw that now. The only one. He was tied to Gary by bonds of blood, need — understanding. Let the books mind the books, he told himself. We Blackwells will stick together.

It was too early to summon a lawyer, but he could make a start on the drafting. This was the last time he would need his skill with words. He took up the card and pencil. His handwriting shocked him. It was large, spidery like a six year-old's, with strange dendritic quavers on the curves of his *g*'s and *f*'s. He switched to printed capitals.

I, CHARLES WILLIAM BLACKWELL, he slowly inscribed,
BEEING OF QWITE SOUND MYND...

Mark O'Connor is a strong supporter of spelling reform. Editor.