



the vanished fortune

Do not judge me harshly, you who read this; do not condemn me without pause to consider the ineluctable human weaknesses which brought me to this melancholy state of affairs. I tell my story reluctantly, for it reveals me as the utter foolish creature that I am, but I think it my duty to make the circumstances known, if only that others, forewarned, may avoid the same tragic fate which overtook me. For this reason, and this reason only, do I brave the jests and jeers of a mocking humanity and hope that, by describing my folly, I may divert the footsteps of another such sorry individual from the path to ruination and despair.

I have always held that I am not so very different from other men; possess similiar interests, similiar desires — not the least of these being the acquisition of wealth. I have also considered (or had considered, the events which I shall now relate having immensely altered my perceptions) myself a practical person, one cannot be given to mad schemes or sudden absurd flights of fancy; content rather to plan slowly and

deliberately for the future. Having decided, as a young man, that diligent labor in a dependable vocation is the surest way to eventual fortune, I had accordingly secured a position as accountant for a prosperous manufacturer of dairy goods. To my consternation, however, my fortune did not amass as quickly as I had anticipated. After spending the better part of a decade working for the firm, I was still receiving the same modest salary with which I had begun.

Not one to be daunted by minor setbacks, I embarked on a new course, one which appealed to me for its shrewdness and simplicity. I determined to place all of my surplus funds in a savings account and allow them to increase, against such time as I might withdraw the entire amount and put it towards the purchase of a cow. I could then sell the milk and cheese produced by my beast, again banking the profits, with a view towards acquiring more bovines. In this manner I hoped to parlay my initial meager investment into a vast lactic empire, larger even than the one which employs me — and I would be sole owner!

Would that such entrancing daydreams could take place in real life! You have seen to be true that which I asserted at the beginning of my narrative — that my plans were eminently sensible, and based on shrewd business practice. They might — they would — have succeeded, were it not for the unutterably perverse change of fortune which followed. I blanch, even now, and suppress a shudder, when I harken back to the detestable events — but let me relate them as they occurred.

The glorious day had at last arrived when my savings were sufficient to purchase the initial cow. I had, during my lunch hour, journeyed to the bank and withdrawn the balance of my account, then returned to my office with the precious currency artfully concealed in my pocket handkerchief. As my hour was not yet over, I elected to prepare a meal of sorts to be eaten at my desk. A judiciously applied blow persuaded the coffee machine to spew forth a cup of its loathsome putrescence, and, settling down in my chair, I endeavored to interest myself in a dog-eared, paper-bound edition of Canning's **Mad Trist**.

My efforts were futile, however, for all my senses were drawn irresistibly to the minor fortune residing in my pocket. My mind was awash with resplendent images of prosperous future days. All my powers of reason were helpless against the siren call of Wealth, as my brain raced furiously along amidst overwhelming scenes of Babylonian splendor.

In these fevered imaginings, I saw myself as the head of a vast corporation. I lived on a sprawling estate, filled with ornate furnishings, floors of marble, and paintings of immense value. I was denied no luxury that money could buy. Wealth had lost its meaning for me; I casually incinerated thousand-dollar bills.

At that point, the singeing of my fingertips brought me violently out of my mesmerized state, and I gazed in mingled shock and horror at my swiftly vanishing bankroll, to which I had inadvertantly set fire. I flung the bundle hurriedly away as the flames consumed it entirely, and I cursed the Pyrrhic nature of my financial aspirations.

— robert harris