

THE KING OF MISERS.



HE career of John Elwes—who may be fitly termed the “King of Misers”—is pre-eminently remarkable in the annals of those men in whom the ruling passion has been “gold, gold, gold!” Though avaricious and penurious in the extreme, there was still much in Elwes’ character to admire; and his public life appears to have been marked by great uprightness. The following is a concise account of his extraordinary career:—

The father of John Elwes was a London brewer, named Meggot, who died when his son was only four years old. Young Elwes was thus early left to the sole charge of his mother. She was most parsimonious, and although the possessor of about one hundred thousand pounds left by her husband, she nearly starved herself to death. Hereditary avarice must have been in her family, for her brother, Sir Harvey Elwes, although possessed of a large fortune, maintained his establishment at an expenditure of little more than one hundred pounds a year! This Sir Harvey Elwes died worth upwards of a quarter of a million sterling; and it was on succeeding to this immense fortune that young Meggot assumed the name of “Elwes,” that being a condition of his uncle’s will.

After twelve years at Westminster School, John Elwes—to call him by the name he bore in after-life—went to finish his educational career at Geneva. On returning to England he paid frequent visits to Sir Harvey, who resided at Stoke, in Suffolk; and on these occasions, in order to gain the favour of his uncle, he would affect the habits and costume of a most careful, miserly person—thinking that perhaps his suc-

cession to his uncle’s estate might be endangered if he exhibited any outward signs of extravagance—and it was his habit to stop at a public-house, where he would partially satisfy his hunger, so that he might not alarm or disgust his uncle by an excessive appetite; and he also changed his fine clothes for common ones. He thus rendered it easier to impose on his uncle, whom he delighted by his assumed virtues: and in so doing he probably unconsciously contracted his miserly habits and strengthened his hereditary idiosyncrasy.

At the time of his uncle’s death, John Elwes, being then in his fortieth year, was in possession of a fortune nearly equal to that which he inherited from Sir Harvey. For upwards of fifteen years previous he had been known in all the fashionable circles of London, and was in the habit of attending the most noted gaming-houses. His passion for play was only exceeded by his avarice; and it was not till late in life that he was cured of the infatuation. Few men, according to his own acknowledgment, had played deeper, and with more varied success. He once played two days and a night without intermission, and the room being small, the party—one of whom was the Duke of Norfolk—were nearly up to their knees in cards! At this sitting Mr. Elwes lost some thousands. It is related of him that after sitting up a whole night at play he would proceed to Smithfield to meet his cattle, which were coming to market from his seat in Essex, and forgetting the scenes he had just left, would there stand disputing with a butcher for a shilling! If the cattle did not arrive, he would go on to meet them. On more than one occasion he walked, without stopping, the whole way to his farm, which was seven-

teen miles from London—and this to save the expense of a coach fare! He would get wet through in London sooner than hire a vehicle; sit in wet clothes to save the expense of a fire; eat his provisions in the last stage of putrefaction; and, in fact, he would do anything to save sixpence, or a much less coin!

The principal seat of Mr. Elwes was at Marcham, Berkshire, and here he had two sons born to him by his housekeeper. These natural children, at his death, inherited by will the greatest part of his immense property, and if he ever manifested a fondness for anyone, it was for those two boys. But he lavished no money on their education, often declaring that "putting things into people's heads was taking money out of their pockets."

On the death of his uncle, Mr. Elwes went to reside at Stoke, where the mansion was in a better state of repair than his own—which he had allowed to become nearly uninhabitable, through his unwillingness to incur the cost of even necessary outlay on the fabric. He at first began to keep a pack of foxhounds; and his stable of hunters was at that time considered the best in the kingdom. This was the only instance of his ever sacrificing money to pleasure; but even here everything was managed in the most frugal manner. He kept the hounds for nearly fourteen years, and the whole fox-hunting establishment—huntsman, dogs, and food for horses—did not cost him three hundred pounds a year!

Mr. Elwes had resided nearly thirteen years in Suffolk, when, on the dissolution of Parliament, in 1774, he was nominated to represent Berkshire. He consented to stand for the county only on the express stipulation that he was to be brought in for nothing! All he did was to dine at the ordinary at Abingdon—so that he actually obtained a seat in Parliament for the moderate sum of eighteen-pence! He now left Suffolk,

and again went to his seat at Marcham. He was at this time nearly sixty years of age, but was in possession of all his activity, and used to constantly attend the races and other public meetings in all the towns where his voters resided. At the different assemblies, he would dance amongst the youngest to the last, after riding many miles on horseback, frequently in the rain, to the place of meeting.

The honour of being a member of Parliament made no alteration in the dress of Mr. Elwes. For the Speaker's dinners, however, he had one suit, with which the Speaker, and also the ministers, in the course of the session, became very familiar. The wits of the minority used to say, "That they had full as much reason as the minister to be satisfied with Mr. Elwes, as he never turned his coat!"

Whilst in Parliament, Mr. Elwes' conduct and principles were perfectly independent. He frequently declared—"that after the experience he had had of public speakers and members of Parliament, there was only one man, he thought, could now talk him out of his money, and that was young Pitt." Mr. Elwes was chosen for Berkshire in three successive Parliaments, and sat as a member of the House of Commons about twelve years.

The parsimony of Mr. Elwes was the chief cause of his quitting Parliament; for such was the high opinion his constituents entertained of his integrity, that a very small outlay would have restored him to his seat; but he would not incur the expense, and therefore voluntarily retired from the legislature. It was shortly after this time that he lost his famous servant-of-all-work, who died as he was following his master, on a hard-trotting horse, into Berkshire. The poor fellow died "empty and poor;" for his wages had been but five pounds per annum. The life of this hard-working domestic verified the saying which Elwes

often used:—"If you keep one servant your work is done; if you keep two it is half done; but if you keep three you may do the work yourself."

Yet, despite Elwes' avarice, there are not wanting traits of generosity in his character, and several instances of rare benevolence are recorded of him—amongst others the following:—A sporting nobleman, having made a match at Newmarket for seven thousand pounds, and not having the money at command to stake, was on the point of losing by forfeiture. Elwes, who knew his lordship but slightly, stepped forward and gave him the money. On the day the match was run, Elwes rode to Newmarket, saw the sports, ate on the course a piece of bread and cheese which he had taken in his pocket, and returned home without any other refreshment! On another occasion, two maiden ladies, who had incurred the penalties of an ecclesiastical suit, were most dreadfully alarmed at the threatened consequences, and applied to their friend, Mr. Elwes, for advice. As no time was to be lost, that eccentric character immediately boiled some eggs—his favourite provision for a journey—mounted his horse, and, after a ride of sixty miles, presented the ladies with a discharge for the penalties they were under.

From the parsimonious manner in which Elwes lived, riches rolled in upon him full and fast; but as he knew scarcely anything of accounts, and never reduced his affairs to writing, he was obliged to trust much to memory, and still more to the suggestions of others. No person who had a want or a scheme promising a high rate of interest—adventurer or honest it signified not—came to him in vain. He caught at every bait; and to this cause must be ascribed his possession of numerous annuities on lives that could never pay; and drawers filled with bonds of peers, senators, and others, who had contrived to borrow money from him. In this manner he lost at least £150,000.

Mr. Elwes had inherited from his father some house property in the vicinity of the Haymarket, London. To this he began to add, by building more houses; and he was the founder of a great part of Marylebone, Portman Place, Portman Square, and the adjacent streets. When staying in town, he would take up his quarters in one of his unoccupied houses, living there quite alone, and frequently giving no clue as to his address. This habit, on one occasion, nearly cost him his life, for, being seized with illness, he was only saved from starvation by a visit from his nephew, Colonel Timms, who, after some days' search, found him apparently in the agonies of death, lying on an old pallet-bed in one of his empty houses.

In the autumn of 1789, being then in his 75th year, Elwes' memory failed him, his senses sunk rapidly into decay, his mind became unsettled, and gusts of the most violent passion began to usurp the place of his former command of temper. For six weeks previous to his death he went to rest in his clothes, as perfectly dressed as during the day. He was one morning found fast asleep between the sheets with his shoes on his feet, his stick in his hand, and an old torn hat on his head. On this circumstance being discovered, a servant was set to watch over him, and take care that he undressed himself; yet, so desirous was he of continuing this custom, that he told the servant that if he would not take any notice of him, he would leave him something in his will!

On November 26, 1789, Elwes was conveyed to his bed, from which he never rose again. His appetite was gone; and he had but a faint recollection of anything about him. In his disturbed dreams he would groan and mutter, "I will keep my money! I will! I will! You shall not rob me of it!" and other such-like expressions, showing how completely his wealth occupied his thoughts. He expired calmly, leaving property to the amount of above £800,000.