

## Some Peculiar Wills.

BY L. S. LEWIS.

[From Photographs specially taken by George Newnes, Ltd.]



MOST people are interested in wills, directly or indirectly. If one has no "expectations" oneself, one has probably often followed some elusive document through three acts of a play or three volumes of a story. Goodness only knows what novelists and dramatists would do without wills. And everybody is aware that Somerset House is the headquarters of these things; are not the "searchers" one of the sights of the town—a race apart, comparable only to the curious wildfowl met with in the British Museum?

Thanks to the courtesy of Sir Francis Jeune, the writer was enabled to explore the vast vaults and strong-rooms beneath the Probate Registry in which the millions of originals are stored. To these wonderful vaults no one ordinarily has access, but, then, the whole world knows that Somerset House is always open to the "Strand."

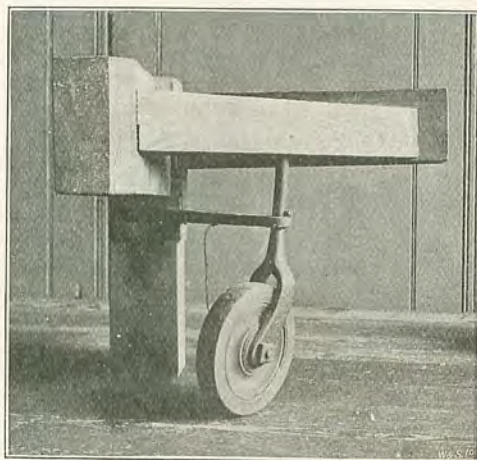
In spite of the ever-present gloom and dust, the spirit of romance pervades the great subterranean chambers we are considering. Millions of wills, going right down through the ages! The system of arrangement is absolutely perfect. Shakespeare's will is as readily produced as is that of the lowly Cockney who died the other day.

The oddities and curiosities among this stupendous collection are, as might be supposed, both extensive and peculiar. There is even quite a little museum of more or less romantic objects connected with litigation about wills; and these have at one time or another been produced as evidence in court. The courteous Record-keeper, Mr. Rodman, and his assistant, Mr. Stevens, do not exactly view these things with boundless enthusiasm, but of the interest attaching to the objects there can be no question. Just look at the leg of an old-fashioned "four-poster" bed-

stead, which is seen in the accompanying illustration. It was photographed by our own artist, in the strong-rooms or vaults of Somerset House, and with the other curiosities it now appears for the very first time.

Briefly, this is the story. The Earl of S— was an eccentric peer, a morose, reserved man, who apparently suspected everybody of sinister motives. He used to hide things. Important deeds and letters, and bank-notes for huge amounts, he bundled into damp cellars, with disastrous results. He would rip open chair-cushions and secrete things *there*; and in short he had treasure of greater or less value in every hole and corner.

After Lord S—'s death, the will and first codicil were readily forthcoming, mainly because they were in safer keeping than his lordship's. Thesecond and most important codicil, however, took no less than three years to find! After the Earl's death the bed on which he slept was unceremoniously pitched into the lumber-room, and it was

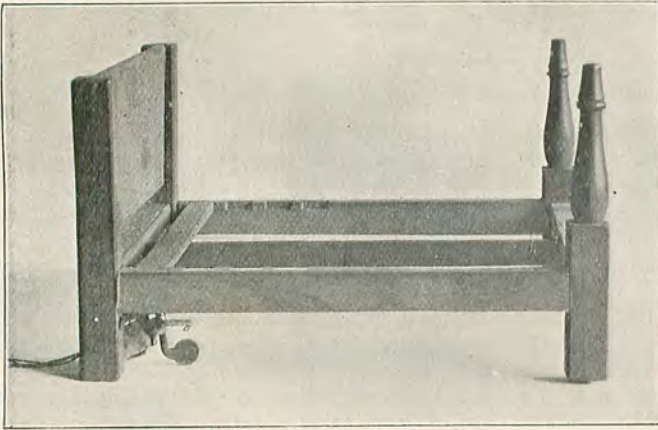


LEG OF BEDSTEAD IN WHICH A NOBLEMAN'S WILL WAS CONCEALED.

by the merest accident that a servant at length discovered the long-lost codicil, cunningly tied to the bar of the bedstead leg. In the photo. we see the very string that held the will in position. The paper was found folded neatly, and resting on the ledge formed by the bar where it meets the bed-post. As his lordship lay in bed, it was his delight to withdraw the will from its hiding-place (he could do so easily), and either dwell with satisfaction on its contents, or else make any slight alterations that pleased him. It was the poor man's only hobby.

As the missing codicil contained legacies and bequests to a very large amount, its ultimate production caused a great deal of excitement. And therefore, in order that the whole romantic story might readily be demonstrated before the Probate Court, a complete model of the entire bedstead was





MODEL OF BEDSTEAD PRODUCED IN COURT.

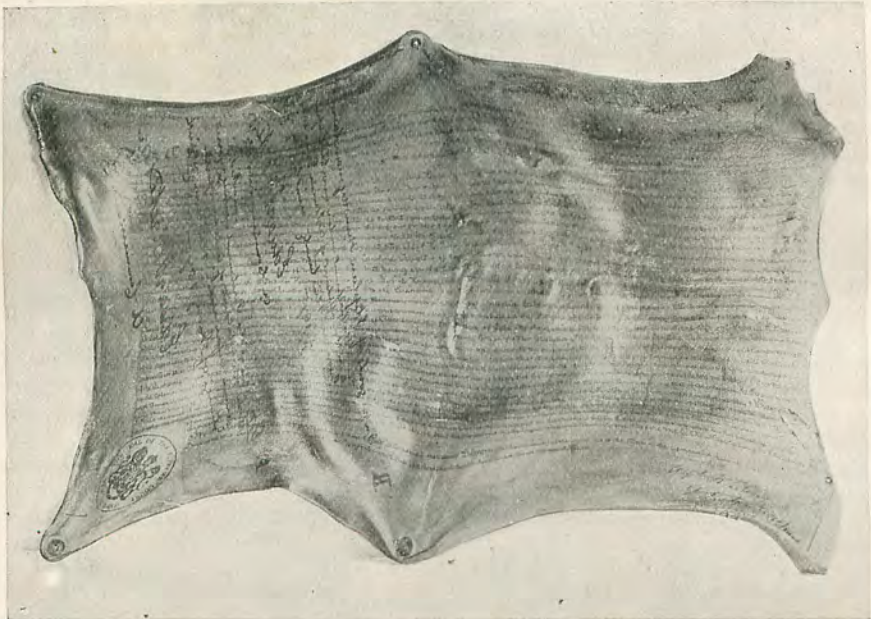
made on the scale of one inch to a foot. Our next illustration is a photograph of that model, which is still preserved in the strong-room at Somerset House. The case was a *cause célèbre* in its day. The Prerogative Court of Canterbury had the whole business well in hand, when it was served with an inhibition from the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council to transmit all proceedings to them. Somerset House, by the way, has not always been the head-quarters of what may be styled the "will trade." Previous to 1858 all testamentary business was in the hands of the Church, and the old Prerogative Court of Canter-

bury was located at Doctors' Commons.

When the Government took over the business (if one may say so without disrespect) a big "moving" job had to be negotiated. Doctors' Commons contained wills dating back to 1484, and all these had to be transferred to their new quarters. The office was closed for a fortnight. The thousands of wills were shot into baskets and conveyed to Somerset House in strongly guarded vans. They were then classified—a

labour that might well have horrified Hercules himself.

The will next seen is not a decorative object, but it has an interesting history. The testator was a labourer who died at Sunnyside, Canterbury, New Zealand, on June 11th, 1868. He left all he had—some £300 in the British Post Office—to his wife, who lived at Rye, in Sussex. The will was rather an elaborate affair, engrossed at prodigious length on parchment, and adorned with the Seal of the Supreme Court of New Zealand in the bottom left-hand corner. The solicitor responsible for the document was proud of his work. He was Mr. William H.



NEW ZEALAND WILL RECOVERED FROM THE SEA.



Kissling, of Auckland, N.Z. In due time Mr. Kissling dispatched the will to a brother professional in London, but, alas for human hopes! the ship conveying the will was dashed to pieces in a hurricane off the Scilly Islands, and out "on the face of the waters" went the will, with the crew and cargo.

Some time after this tragic occurrence one of the Cornish fishermen was mending his nets on the beach when he saw a packet washed ashore. It was that Antipodean will. The fisherman made inquiries as to the best course to pursue, and he at length sent on the packet to London.

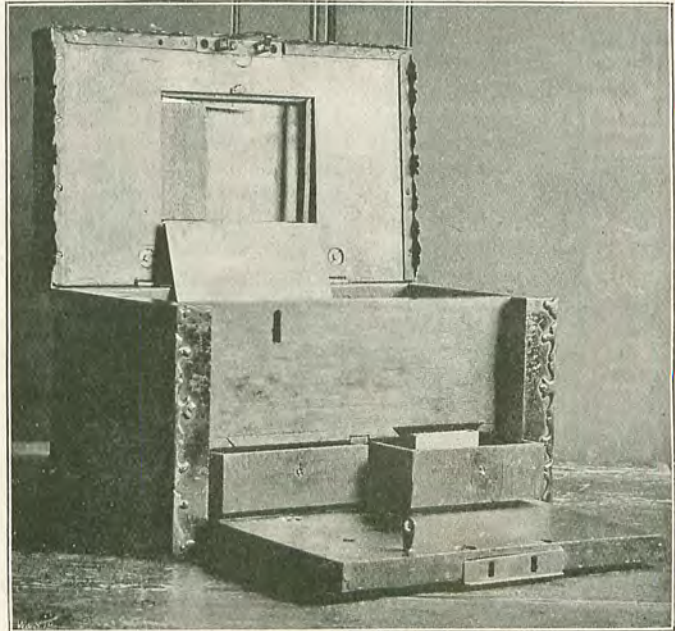
In his affidavit the solicitor to whom the will was addressed gives some quaint details. He received it in an envelope from the G.P.O. on May 18th, 1875. On the envelope was written "*Ex Schiller*"—the name of the ill-fated vessel. "The will," says the lawyer, "was sent with other documents by Mr. William Henry Kissling, solicitor, of Auckland, New Zealand, to me, to enable me to take out Letters of Administration of the estate and effects in England belonging to the deceased. That the said parchment writing, and the letters and papers which accompanied it, and the envelope from Mr. Kissling which inclosed them were

perfectly wet and saturated, and formed altogether a confused packet, like pulp. It was only by using the greatest care that the said parchment writing was separated and stretched out, as the same now appears. I have no doubt whatever that the said packet came to England in the mail steamer called the *Schiller*, which was wrecked on the Scilly Islands on Friday, the 7th May, 1875."

The will stories buried away in the dark vaults of Somerset House would enable novelists to turn out stories until the Greek Kalends. Only one has to do one's own delving in this extraordinary place—as Miss Braddon frequently does, by the way.

The secret cabinet next depicted is in accordance with the most hoary traditions of the penny novelette. It is a massive, brass-bound affair, with any number of sliding

panels within sliding panels, and secret drawers within secret drawers. Many of these our photographer has endeavoured to show. This is one of the relics that came from Doctors' Commons. The casket, or chest, belonged to a wealthy physician who lived at the beginning of last century. He had an astonishing number of relations, and as he advanced in years their attentions became intolerable. They all wanted to know how the old fellow was going to dispose of his money and property. They wrangled and fought with him, and they wrangled and fought



SECRET CABINET IN WHICH A WILL WAS FOUND.

among themselves. The old doctor had a plan of his own. He just made his will definitely, and then made a place of safe-keeping for it. In other words, he set to work and made this secret cabinet with his own hands, taking the utmost delight in devising the many panels and drawers. And when once the will was deposited in the cabinet, the latter never left the doctor's possession, even for a moment. He slept with it under his pillow, and he took it about with him from place to place.

His "bedside manner" grew tenfold more serious when he was sitting on the cabinet; and he allowed the report to get abroad that he carried in the brass-bound box medicines of wondrous efficacy. His income increased to quite an enormous figure, but at length the time came when he had to relinquish his



beloved box, which, of course, fell into the eager hands of the relatives. In the photo. the will itself is seen in the hollow part of the lid just peeping above the secret sliding panel in which it was found.

As might be imagined, the moment the contents of the will were made known, there was a frighful outcry, followed by prolonged litigation. However, matters were eventually arranged exactly as the astute old doctor had desired, a poor married niece coming in for nearly the whole of an immense fortune. Altogether a curious realization of hackneyed fiction.

Wills are often found in strange places, from weather-cocks to picture-frames, but there is surely but one instance of a will being found in a business day-book. There is a day-book treasured carefully at Somerset House, because a will has been made in it. It is a long, narrow book, of a well-known kind, and on the outside is written, "Peter Smith, March, 1807. Day-book for the Park." Peter was apparently an overseer or steward on some big estate. As the Probate people are only concerned with the one folio, the remainder of the leaves are fastened together, so that the book immediately opens at the required place.

The entry which is really the will has been marked "A," and here we read, "Left due to my dear wife, £100 os. od." Above is an entry debiting "Mr. Richard Hill" with "3 Beasts @ £15 10s. od." Certainly an unconventional will, this.

A punning will is doubly painful, particularly when much of it has reference to the "mode of my burial." A Kentish gentleman who

left personal estate worth £10,091 os. 10d. wrote as follows in this connection: "The coffin is to be of red fir. I pine for nothing better. Even this may be thought a deal too good, though certainly not very spruce"—and so on.

There are in the Registry many ancient wills of a highly decorative kind. They contain elaborate drawings and sketches, mainly illustrative of the trade or occupation of the testator. For instance, the initial letter of a certain baker's will takes the form of a sheaf of golden corn. Most of the wills up to comparatively recent times had something distinctive about them. Isaac Walton's is sealed with a curious device, showing the Saviour crucified on an anchor. Other wills in the great collection contain long sermons; and others, again, abuse of a peculiarly vituperative sort. "I leave," shrieks a barrister, who really ought to have known better, "to Herbert L—, his wife, and Frances Elizabeth, my sister, the happy assurance that their greed, jealousy, folly, plots, schemes, and vile lies have succeeded in making life a burden to me."

"Many times," wailed a Manchester man who was disinheriting his wife, "she wished I was stiff"—a curious saying, but sufficiently

	Worth 2000 Settled 301	4	
	Mr. Richard Hill Dr.		
Nov 19	For 3 Beasts @ 15: 10/- Now Lost to Mr. B. for away in 3 Weeks	46	10 0
	Mr. Philip. Lock Dr.		
Dec 29	For 3 Beasts @ 15: 10/- Now Lost to Mr. B. for away in 3 Weeks	8	12 10 1/2
	Left due to my dear wife for money paid at her death which is my dear wife's money	100	0 0

WILL MADE IN A BUSINESS DAY-BOOK.



expressive of the lady's weariness of her stricken spouse.

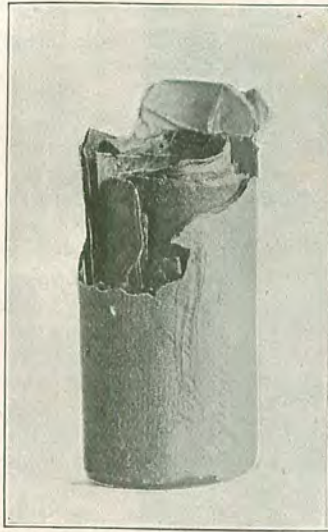
The will next seen came from Egypt preserved in a bottle of spirit for fear of the plague. The testator was apothecary to His Majesty's forces in Aboukir Bay, and he sent his will in the form of a letter to the surgeon on board the flagship. This is the cheerful way in which the will commenced:—

"Aboukir,

"July 1st, 1801.

"My dear—

"Being now afflicted with the Plague, the Scourge of Mankind, which will probably soon terminate my existence . . ." etc., etc.



WILL PRESERVED IN SPIRIT FOR FEAR OF THE PLAGUE.

On receiving this strange will - epistle, the surgeon grew alarmed for his own safety. Fearing that the paper was infected, and dreading to put it with his other papers lest the contagion should spread, he instantly made a copy of it, and then carefully compared that copy with the original.

This done, the surgeon placed the original in the bottle of spirit, and brought it home to England with him. When the bottle was opened, no trace of writing could be found on the paper, it having been completely absorbed by the strong spirit. Then, of course, the copy had to be produced and proved.

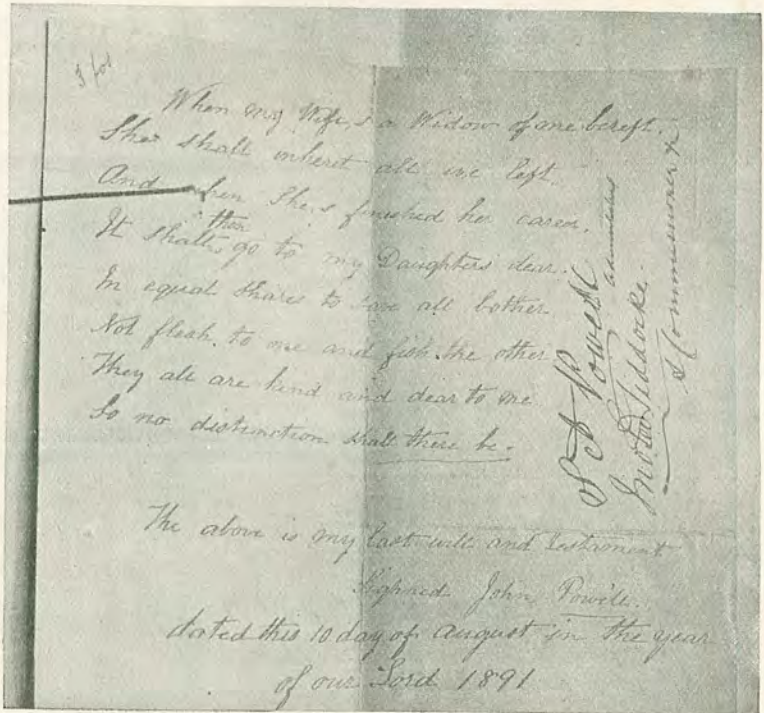
Of rhyming wills there are not many examples. Mr. Powell's "last will and testament," with its magnificent impartiality and high moral tone, is a good specimen. That it may

be easily read, we print it here:—

When my Wife's a Widow of me bereft,  
She shall inherit all I've left ;  
And when she's finished her career,  
It shall then go to my Daughters dear.  
In equal Shares to save all bother,  
Not flesh to one and fish the other.  
They are all kind and dear to me,  
So no distinction shall there be.

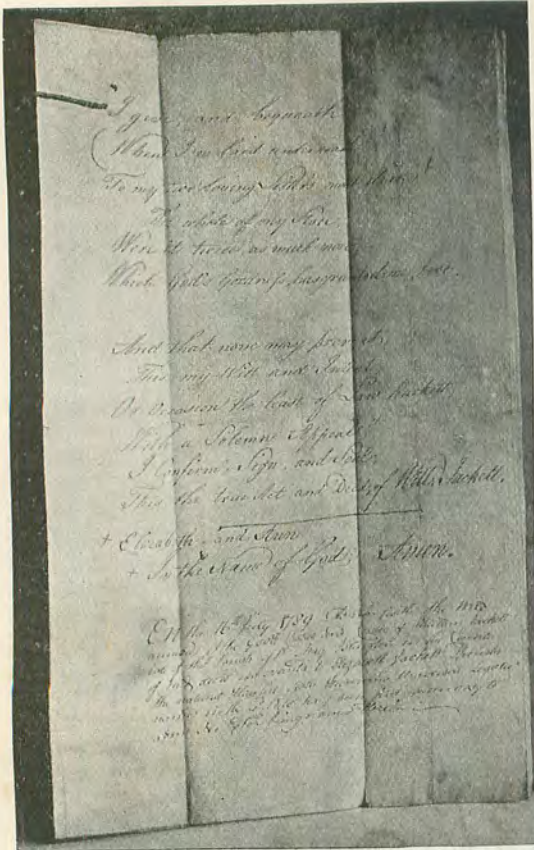
There is practically no end to the curious and interesting wills in the Probate Registry. There is, for example, a little pocket-book of Nelson's which seems to have escaped the notice of even Captain Mahan. In

it the hero makes a strange kind of will. He bequeaths Lady Hamilton to his King and country, and relates in sonorous prose how she helped him to win certain victories. He also rambles on about some letters she stole for him. This extraordinary will is dated "In sight of the 'Allied Fleets.'"



WILL WRITTEN IN POETRY.





MR. JACKETT'S POETICAL WILL.

The officials at Somerset House haven't much time to take notice of the queer names of testators, but "Time Of Day" was a regular staggerer! The unfortunate man's family name, it seems, was Day, and his people had the monumental fatuity to christen him "Time Of," in order to round off an outlandish phrase-name. The notion is full of ghastly potentialities.

The rhyming will of Mr. Will Jackett, seen in the next reproduction, goes with the lilt and swing of a ballad by Kipling or Colonel Hay. Notice how ingeniously the testator has found a rhyme for his own name—entirely without the aid of a rhyming dictionary, but merely out of his own fears respecting dissension after

his death. Jackett's writing is so legible that it is unnecessary to print the will-poem.

There is on record only one will made in shorthand, and here it is. The paper lies in a glass case set in a box made to resemble a bound book, so that the moment you lift up the cover you behold this most curious of wills. On the outside is the name, "H. Worthington, February, 1815."

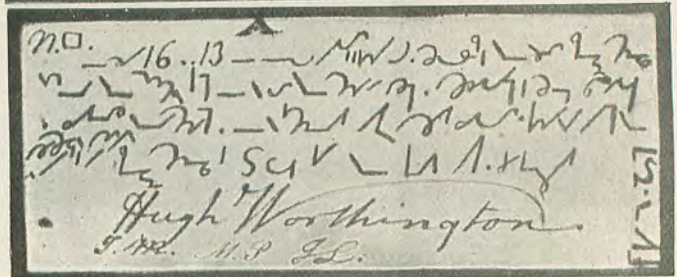
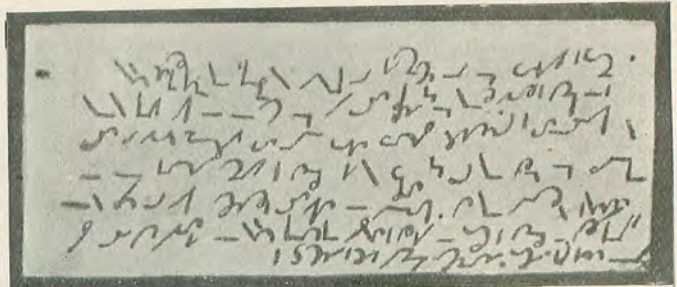
The Rev. Hugh Worthington was formerly of Highbury Place, Islington. His unique will reads:—

"Northampton Square, June 16th, 1813. I, Hugh Worthington, give and bequeath to my dear Eliza Price, who is my adopted child, all I do or may possess, real and personal, to be at her sole and entire disposal; and I do appoint William Kent, Esq., of London Wall, my respected friend, with the said Eliza Price to execute this my last will and testament.

—HUGH WORTHINGTON."

The other side of the queer little box also opens, and here we read:—

"Most dearly beloved, my Eliza. Very small as this letter is, it contains the copy of my very last will. I have put it with your letters, that it may be sure to fall into your hands. Should accident or any other cause destroy the original, I have taken pains to write this very clearly, that you may read it easily. I do know you will perfect yourself in shorthand



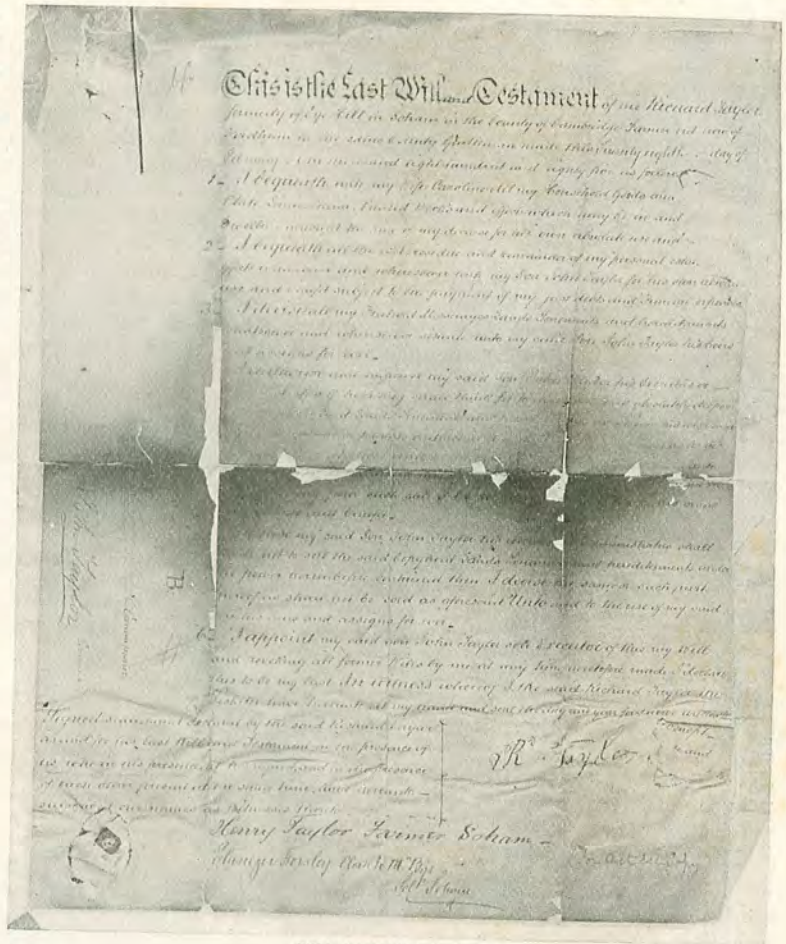
THE ONLY WILL EVER WRITTEN IN SHORTHAND.



for my sake. To-morrow we go for Worthing, I most likely never to return. I hope to write a few lines to express the best wishes, and prayers, and hopes of thy true, HUGH WORTHINGTON."

All sorts of queer accidents happen to wills. They get burnt or thrown into the water; torn up, eaten by rats, and the like. One will in the great Registry is preserved in cotton-wool in a big box. If the document itself were touched it would crumble to pieces. It is the will of a rich baker, and somehow it got into a big oven, where it remained for months. The original is never disturbed now, a copy being kept for reference.

Here is a will that has been damaged by fire. It is the will of a Mr. Richard Taylor, who lived in Cambridgeshire, and it was prepared by a local solicitor. Taylor himself called and signed the engrossment in the presence of two witnesses, and he then took the document away with him. The will did not again come into the solicitor's hands until about four years later, and then it was in the condition in which we see it—badly damaged by fire. Mr. Taylor died about a year after he had made the will, and his son took possession of the document, together with certain other title-deeds and accounts. Then came the great fire at the house of young Mr. Taylor, who declares in his affidavit that all kinds of valuable papers were "destroyed or rendered illegible by the flames." Fortunately, this will was saved from the burning building, with no more damage than



WILL DAMAGED IN A FIRE.

we see in the photograph. The original, however, is very liable to crumble on being handled.

Perhaps the queerest will on record was that of a very prominent citizen in the United States. The trustees were directed to pay the widow every year *her own weight in gold!* The weighing took place more or less in public, and needless to remark, it was an interesting ceremony, particularly to the lady herself. By this curious will the widow was always pretty sure of about 1,161 troy ounces of the precious metal, which at £4 an ounce works out at quite a handsome income. We understand she did *not* diet herself so as to increase her weight; she merely charged a fee to the public who wished to be present at the weighing ceremony; and in this way indemnified herself against possible loss.