

Last Rites

Death and Taxes. It was...well, a fact of life. Or so a long-forgotten scholar had once quoted to him many years previously.

It was the former that had been playing on Henry Frederick Albert Rite's mind for several days now and the thought wasn't going away any time soon.

Perhaps it was the current economic turmoil that had reminded him so severely of times gone by. He did not know. He only knew one thing.

He was scared...

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One, two, three...forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty! Coming ready or not!

Lions prowled the garden. Ravenous, they crept through the long winding grass, preying on a grazing unsuspecting Cocker Spaniel.

"Sit up straight Henry for goodness sake; I didn't raise you to slouch now did I?" his father said, raising his voice so that Freddie would be able to hear him over the growling of the hungry lions.

"Albert dear, you know he doesn't respond to that name. Yes I know...I know it aggravates you...but he's just a *boy*, your *son*...and he likes to be called Freddie".

Freddie's father sighed, glanced at his watch, picked up his copy of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, and on reading the headline began to mutter obscenities under his breath.

Freddie stared up at him intently, admiring every distinct virtue, as well as every blemish. He adored his father, as any self-respecting five-year-old would. His father

frowned, grumbling some more as he did. His wife, noticing this, raised her eyebrows, making inquiries into what the problem was.

“Just some trouble at the bank my dear...nothing to worry about” he uttered.

She nodded.

Freddie’s father folded the newspaper and flung it onto the dining table.

“I’ve found a school though...that’s good news isn’t it? We can finally stop worrying about the boy’s education. Need to bring him up right; he has the Rite family’s reputation to uphold you know.”

Freddie scowled. He did not want to go away to school.

“Now don’t you look at me like that Henry my boy; I’m doing this for you...kids these days, don’t appreciate anything.”

“Are you sure we can afford to send him away though dear? It is awfully expensive.”

“It’ll be fine...I’ve made some arrangements with some businessmen and they should be able to give us a helping hand.”

He picked up the newspaper once more, staring at the headline. No-one but Freddie was watching...

He looked scared.

Giggle giggle.

“Howdy partner” uttered Freddie the Kid. A wave of feather-capped Indians crashed into the house. They stopped. A man was there...

It was an unfortunate turn of events. This man, whoever he was, towered over Freddie; a giant among men...literally. He was wearing a navy blue pinstripe suit with

co-ordinating light blue tie. He hadn't seen the young Master Rite. Freddie stepped back, intimidated by this mysterious stranger. The man, noticing this flicker of movement, flinched, acknowledged the child for the first time. He looked down at Freddie. Freddie looked up at him. A pained expression spread across his face all of a sudden, and as though realising that this showed, he flattened his tie, composing himself.

"Good evening young man..." he exclaimed, as though welcoming the opportunity to avoid doing what was necessary of him, "...don't you look...err...brave?" The suited procrastinator confused Freddie. He stared up at the Tie-Man. The Tie-Man stared back at him.

"Where is your mother, young man?" The sound he produced was so quiet that Freddie had to strain to hear him.

"She's in the...the...the...the library Sir." Freddie answered back scared. He wasn't sure if he wanted the big scary tie-man to make that visit to his mother. Whatever he was here for, it wasn't good news. In fact, everything about this man screamed trouble. And trouble, as Freddie knew from past experience, earned you a smacked bottom and a one-way trip to 'Bedfordshire'.

"...I'm sorry Mrs. Rite, there was nothing that they could do...I...I...don't know what to say...I'm sorry".

"Tha...tha...tha...tha...thank you Mr. Bradford. I appreciate you coming over here to tell me in person. We'll be alright..."

"...well then I'll...I'll just be going. I don't want to impose on you in your time of sorrow".

High-pitched sobs and cries of despair echoed throughout the room. Freddie did not know what had happened to make his mother cry, but he was willing to bet his shiny

new collection of marbles that it had something to do with her conversation with this Mr. Bradford. Bradford stepped out into the hallway; the room that Freddie currently occupied. He looked down at Freddie for the last time, the shaking of his head resembling that of a Wall Street stock ticker. He paused, as though a million light bulbs had lit up all at once inside of his head. Slowly putting his hand into the left pocket of his clean-cut trousers, he carefully withdrew a trove of glittering gold and placed it on the table. He left promptly afterwards, detaching himself from the trail of anguish that had been created that afternoon.

Now alone, Freddie had a chance to take a closer look at the shining treasure upon the table; the dim light had been a hindrance to him from his previous position, but now he had moved, he could see far better.

It was a watch. The hands of the clock within it moved with each second. Freddie stared and stared. And then recollection kicked in.

It was his fathers...

Mummy!

Thump...Thump...Thump. Hook waved his gleaming coat-hanger shaped hand menacingly at Freddie.

“Onto the plank, ye rotten scallywag” he cackled, his dentures flashing in the sunlight.

Freddie screamed.

It was his fault. He knew it. Nobody could tell him otherwise. It didn't get any easier either. The biting recognition of blame lingered; Freddie doubted that he would ever be rid of it. The watch that had so keenly held Freddie's interest lay abandoned on the table. It had not been touched.

His mother had warned Freddie not to trouble his father with trivial matters, that doing so would only draw him further into the spiral of depression that had hold over him.

Now he was gone...forever.

His last moments on earth were spent scared and confused. He had lost everything; his savings he could live with, money could be remade; they would just have do without some of home comforts for a while. But his job, his pride, was irreplaceable. The only thing that truly belonged to him had been ripped away by the same *humble* bankers that had promised the earth and more.

It was a guarantee; invest on the New York Stock Exchange and all your money-filled dreams will come true.

It was Freddie who had needed to go to school. Freddie who had *needed* the best education money could buy. It was Freddie that had been on Albert Rite's mind at that moment in time; the moment when his father had spontaneously jumped on the bandwagon and laid his life in the hands of ordinary but greedy men.

The day when that gloomy shadow had swept across the nation and plunged it into darkness; *Black Thursday* the papers had called it. Doomsday.

That first night Freddie had spent cradled in his mothers arms, trying to block out the last image he had of his father. During the intervals of his mother's sobs, he had concluded that he was now the man of the house, and that it was his duty to protect her from the same things his father had. Albert Rite had held his cards close to his chest, and Freddie was determined to follow suit. As the only surviving Rite it was his responsibility to guard these secrets. To his death if he had to.

He was the man of the house...at five years old.

"Freddie!"

Except that Freddie wasn't his name anymore. It was a child's name. And his father hadn't liked that. Henry was his name now; the name of a man.

How far had his father fallen? In literal terms, Henry knew it was forty-four floors; he had heard his mother say so. But the economic plane crash of 1929? He could only guess as to how hard his father had been hit. Henry would never know.

It was his fault though, and he would have to live with that fact 'til his dying days.

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He was scared...but he was a man.

So he would keep it bottled up. As his father had done; and his father before him.

He had a responsibility; a duty to those who had passed through the pearly threshold years ago, awaiting their judgement day. He would meet them soon, in thunder, lightning or in rain. It would happen.

His early purges would be cleansed. The ghosts of his past would haunt him no longer and he would be able to rest, at ease and free from the life he had spent so long trying to escape.

Death and Taxes.

Like father, like son. Yes. He was.

The Last of the Rites.