

W. M. Thackeray (1811-63)

7 *The King of Brentford's Testament*

The noble King of Brentford
Was old and very sick,
He summon'd his physicians
To wait upon him quick;
They stepp'd into their coaches 5
And brought their best physick.

They cramm'd their gracious master
With potion and with pill;
They drench'd him and they bled him:
They could not cure his ill. 10
"Go fetch," says he, "my lawyer;
I'd better make my will."

The monarch's royal mandate
The lawyer did obey;
The thought of six-and-eightpence 15
Did make his heart full gay.
"What is't," says he, "your Majesty
Would wish of me to-day?"

"The doctors have belabour'd me
With potion and with pill: 20
My hours of life are counted,
O man of tape and quill!
Sit down and mend a pen or two;
I want to make my will.

"O'er all the land of Brentford 25
I'm lord, and eke of Kew:
I've three-per-cents and five-per-cents;
My debts are but a few;
And to inherit after me
I have but children two. 30

“Prince Thomas is my eldest son;
A sober prince is he,
And from the day we breech’d him
Till now — he’s twenty-three —
He never caused disquiet 35
To his poor mamma or me.

“At school they never flogg’d him;
At college, though not fast,
Yet his little-go and great-go 40
He creditably pass’d,
And made his year’s allowance
For eighteen months to last.

“He never owed a shilling,
Went never drunk to bed,
He has not two ideas 45
Within his honest head —
In all respects he differs
From my second son, Prince Ned.

“When Tom has half his income
Laid by at the year’s end, 50
Poor Ned has ne’er a stiver
That rightly he may spend,
But sponges on a tradesman,
Or borrows from a friend.

“While Tom his legal studies 55
Most soberly pursues,
Poor Ned must pass his mornings
A-dawdling with the Muse:
While Tom frequents his banker,
Young Ned frequents the Jews. 60

“Ned drives about in buggies,
Tom sometimes takes a ’bus;
Ah, cruel fate, why made you
My children differ thus?
Why make of Tom a *dullard*, 65
And Ned a *genius*?”

“You’ll cut him with a shilling,”
Exclaimed the man of wits:
“I’ll leave my wealth,” said Brentford,
“Sir Lawyer, as befits, 70
And portion both their fortunes
Unto their several wits.”

“Your Grace knows best,” the lawyer said;
“On your commands I wait.”
“Be silent, sir,” says Brentford, 75
“A plague upon your prate!
Come take your pen and paper,
And write as I dictate.”

The will as Brentford spoke it
Was writ and signed and closed; 80
He bade the lawyer leave him,
And turn’d him round and dozed;
And next week in the churchyard
The good old King reposed.

Tom, dressed in crape and hatband, 85
Of mourners was the chief;
In bitter self-upbraidings
Poor Edward showed his grief:
Tom hid his fat white countenance
In his pocket-handkerchief. 90

Ned’s eyes were full of weeping,
He falter’d in his walk;
Tom never shed a tear,
But onwards he did stalk,
As pompous, black, and solemn 95
As any catafalque.

And when the bones of Brentford —
That gentle King and just —
With bell and book and candle
Were duly laid in dust, 100
“Now, gentlemen,” says Thomas,

“Let business be discussed.

“When late our sire beloved
Was taken deadly ill,
Sir Lawyer, you attended him 105
(I mean to tax your bill);
And, as you signed and wrote it,
I prithee read the will.”

The lawyer wiped his spectacles,
And drew the parchment out; 110
And all the Brentford family
Sat eager round about:
Poor Ned was somewhat anxious,
But Tom had ne'er a doubt.

“My son, as I make ready 115
To seek my last long home,
Some cares I had for Neddy,
But none for thee, my Tom:
Sobriety and order
You ne'er departed from. 120

“Ned hath a brilliant genius,
And thou a plodding brain;
On thee I think with pleasure,
On him with doubt and pain.”
 (“You see, good Ned,” says Thomas, 125
“What he thought about us twain.”)

“Though small was your allowance,
You saved a little store;
And those who save a little
Shall get a plenty more.” 130
As the lawyer read this compliment,
Tom's eyes were running o'er.

“The tortoise and the hare, Tom,
Set out at each his pace;
The hare it was the fleeter, 135
The tortoise won the race;

And since the world's beginning
This ever was the case.

“Ned's genius, blithe and singing,
Steps gaily o'er the ground; 140
As steadily you trudge it,
He clears it with a bound;
But dulness has stout legs, Tom,
And wind that's wondrous sound.

“O'er fruits and flowers alike, Tom, 145
You pass with plodding feet;
You heed not one nor t'other,
But onwards go your beat;
While genius stops to loiter
With all that he may meet; 150

“And ever as he wanders,
Will have a pretext fine
For sleeping in the morning,
Or loitering to dine,
Or dozing in the shade, 155
Or basking in the shine.

“Your little steady eyes, Tom,
Though not so bright as those
That restless round about him
His flashing genius throws, 160
Are excellently suited
To look before your nose.

“Thank Heaven, then, for the blinkers
It placed before your eyes;
The stupidest are strongest, 165
The witty are not wise;
Oh, bless your good stupidity!
It is your dearest prize.

“And though my lands are wide,
And plenty is my gold, 170
Still better gifts from Nature,

My Thomas, do you hold —
A brain that's thick and heavy,
A heart that's dull and cold.

“Too dull to feel depression, 175
Too hard to heed distress,
Too cold to yield to passion
Or silly tenderness.

March on — your road is open
To wealth, Tom, and success. 180

“Ned sinneth in extravagance,
And you in greedy lust.”
 (“I faith,” says Ned, “our father
Is less polite than just.”)
“In you, son Tom, I've confidence, 185
But Ned I cannot trust.

“Wherefore my lease and copyholds,
My lands and tenements,
My parks, my farms, and orchards,
My houses and my rents, 190
My Dutch stock and my Spanish stock,
My five and three per cents,

“I leave to you, my Thomas” —
 (“What, all?” poor Edward said.
“Well, well, I should have spent them, 195
And Tom's a prudent head”) —
“I leave to you, my Thomas, —
To you IN TRUST for Ned.”

The wrath and consternation
What poet e'er could trace 200
That at this fatal passage
Came o'er Prince Tom his face;
The wonder of the company,
And honest Ned's amaze?

“Tis surely some mistake,” 205
Good-naturedly cries Ned;

The lawyer answered gravely,
 'Tis even as I said;
'Twas thus his gracious Majesty
 Ordain'd on his death-bed. 210

"See, here the will is witness'd.
 And here's his autograph."
"In truth, our father's writing,"
 Says Edward, with a laugh;
"But thou shalt not be a loser, Tom; 215
 We'll share it half and half."

"Alas! my kind young gentleman,
 This sharing cannot be;
'Tis written in the testament
 That Brentford spoke to me, 220
I do forbid Prince Ned to give
 Prince Tom a halfpenny.

'He hath a store of money,
 But ne'er was known to lend it;
He never helped his brother; 225
 The poor he ne'er befriended;
He hath no need of property
 Who knows not how to spend it.

"Poor Edward knows but how to spend,
 And thrifty Tom to hoard; 230
Let Thomas be the steward then,
 And Edward be the lord;
And as the honest labourer
 Is worthy his reward,

"I pray Prince Ned, my second son, 235
 And my successor dear,
To pay to his intendant
 Five hundred pounds a year;
And to think of his old father,
 And live and make good cheer." 240

Such was old Brentford's honest testament,

He did devise his moneys for the best,
And lies in Brentford church in peaceful rest.
Prince Edward lived, and money made and spent;
But his good sire was wrong, it is confess'd, 245
To say his son, young Thomas, never lent.
He did. Young Thomas lent at interest,
And nobly took his twenty-five per cent.

Long time the famous reign of Ned endured
O'er Chiswick, Fulham, Brentford, Putney, Kew, 250
But of extravagance he ne'er was cured.
And when both died, as mortal men will do,
'Twas commonly reported that the steward
Was very much the richer of the two.

1841

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