

## *The Peculiar Advertisements*

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The Doctrine of Chance—A Night at the Girard House, Philadelphia— An Inoffensive Gentleman, My Room-Mate—I Disturb His Sleep—A Queer Tale—Nellie Wilson And Her Uncle—William Wilson, Nellie’s Dissolute Cousin—Fearful Love-Making —A Rescue—A Call to Duty—A Dead Man’s Will Missing—Studying Up the Case with the Great Criminal Lawyer, Judge S.—Fate Interposes—A Mysterious and Peculiar Advertisement—At the Continental Hotel, Waiting and Watching—An “Appearance”—William Wilson Again—An Upper Room, And The Villains Therein—A Private Conference Not All Secret—A Flash of Victory Before Utter Defeat—Notes and Documents Exchanged—Base Rejoicings —A Fatal Neglect—The Surprise—Complete Discomfiture— The End Accomplished—“Coals Of Fire,” But They Do No Good— A Violent Death— Happy Consequences—The Peculiar Advertisements Unravelled.

by George McWatters

COINCIDENCES in life and its various pursuits are perhaps governed by *some* mysterious law, and are not always resolvable by the doctrine of chance. The detective is not only brought into contact with all sorts of people without the profession, but frequently finds himself in the company of his mysterious fellow-craftsmen, to some purpose. An advertisement among the “Personals” in the *New York Herald* had directed me to Philadelphia, in the spring of 1857; or, rather, following the thread of one by which I thought I might possibly unravel a mystery of great importance to a client of mine, I had gone to Philadelphia: and putting up at the Girard House, was compelled, on account of the crowded state of the hotel, to take room for the night with a quiet, inoffensive looking gentleman, whose appearance at times, however, betokened to me that something was pressing upon his mind.

Not a little harassed by the mission I was on, I found myself unable to sleep, and while pondering over this and that device for the next day’s proceedings in my mazy work, I was conscious that I constantly changed position, rolling over in bed, etc., but as softly as possible, in order to not awaken my fellow-lodger, whom I supposed to be sweetly enjoying his dreams. The night had worn well on, when my companion addressed me: —

“Friend, are you ill?”

“O, no, —why?”

“I have observed that you have not slept any yet tonight.”

“Then you, too, have been awake the whole time?”

“Yes, fully.”

“Let me ask, then, if you are unwell?”

“O, no; but business cares press upon me, of a somewhat serious nature.”

And thus beginning, after a long period of cautious colloquy the fact became developed to each that the other belonged to the fraternity of detectives. My new friend had come from Cincinnati upon an errand which he disclosed to me in part, and I had the happiness of making him, what he was pleased to call, valuable suggestions, and which so proved in the sequel, I believe. I had aided him, and he was ready to serve me if possible. In so far as I properly might, I made him acquainted with my business, and the end which I sought; told him of the advertisement in the Herald, and how I interpreted it, and why I believed that I was on the right track. He had an illustrative case in point, very like, in many respects, the affair I had in hand; and inasmuch as a change in the program of my investigations took place in a day or two after, so that my affair was dropped, and never pressed to its full development, I will recall my friend’s story here, as perhaps not less interesting than mine might have been, had I carried out things to their possible issue.

My friend’s story was, in substance this: “Some years ago I formed the acquaintance of a wealthy gentleman, residing in this city. His name we will call Wilson, and his home was one of the most comfortable and luxurious in the city. His wife had died some years before, and his home was presided over by his very beautiful niece, Nellie Wilson, a girl of about twenty years of age, who, with his only son, constituted his ‘family.’ Miss Nellie was a most attractive person, tall, symmetrically formed, with a wealth of beautiful hair. Her eyes of that peculiar blue which is seldom seen in such richness as in hers, were among the most beautiful; in fact, to not be too sentimental, and yet to speak truth, I must say they were the most beautiful eyes I ever looked into. Her complexion was faultless, and her manners, especially in their quiet majesty, were more than faultless, —imposing and elegant. A great prize, you see. Well, I must say, and so I will say, friend, that if, when I first saw this Miss Nellie, I had not had at home one of the best wives in all my State, or in this whole country, I should have been obliged, I fear, to let myself go distracted over that embodiment of female perfections, Miss Nellie; and as ‘twas, I confess I didn’t forget her soon; and ‘pears to me, if this is really I that’s talking, I haven’t quite forgot her yet! —how is that, friend?”

“Well,” said I, in reply, “it would seem so to me, if I’d let it, but I won’t trouble you with that. Go on with your story, for I am all interest.”

Resuming, he went on to say that it wasn’t strange that such a girl as Nellie, whose disposition was as sweet as her beauty was great, had captivated the kindest affections of her uncle, to the disparagement of the son, who was an eyesore to his father, being exceedingly dissipated. His dissolute life had deeply tried his father, whose blasted hopes of his son’s ever becoming reformed had only tended to deepen his regard and tenderness towards Miss Nellie. In fact, the son and father lived, if not in a sort of perpetual petty warfare, in very uncongenial relations.

Charles Wilson, the father, was a sort of *bon vivant* (bating the use of liquors), and took great pleasure in inviting to his table such persons as pleased his fancy. Inviting me one day, I went, and enjoyed a most capital dinner, and with it an hour or more of very pleasing sociality. Mr. Wilson had the habit of retiring to rest for an hour after his dinner, and bowed himself out of the room with due explanations. I occupied myself in conning over some books in the studio, which was divided from the adjoining apartment by sliding doors. Miss Nellie had withdrawn soon after dinner to see, I suppose, after sundry household duties. A little weary of my solitude, I fell into a sort of doze in the capacious and inviting arms of a luxurious “study-chair,” out of which I was awakened by voices which evidently proceeded from the adjoining room.

Our dinner had been partaken of at a late hour, and by this time the evening had advanced well on, so that the uproar of the street had ceased, leaving that quiet silence which one can almost feel by the touch, and rending audible almost the least sound. I was not obliged to listen, but was rather forced to hear all that was going on in the next room. It must have been, I saw, the voice of William Wilson, the son, that had broken my reverie, and as I discovered something husky and gross in it, I concluded he was intoxicated, muttering, —

“Hear me *now*, Nellie! Curse you! You—*know*—I—love—you,”—drawing out his words with the peculiar utterance of a drunken, but a very earnest man. “Yes, I worship the very dust under your feet. Your beauty makes me crazy. It transports me in imagination into fairy regions. Yes, it’s the fairy regions themselves, in its complete self!”

“Away with your ridiculous praises; I will have none of your compliments now. Why do you continue to persecute me? Have I not made my decision plain to you? I cannot recall it. I will not change,” she replied.

“Dear Nellie, do have mercy! —don’t say so! If you but knew how utterly I worship you! I have no thoughts but of you! Every pulse of my being beats for you! O, I beg you, sweet, blessed idol! —do, do smile once upon me!” the intoxicated brute responded.

“William, you are grossly intoxicated. How dare you come to me thus?”

“My own cousin Nellie, drunk or sober, I will be yours: and by all the gods, you *shall* be mine!”

“I pity you, William, but I beg you to leave me now, or I must and will leave your presence.”

“Never! my beautiful cousin, until you own that you love me. I would barter all the hopes I ever had of future happiness for one moment of your love. I could stand a whole year gazing in rapture into your sweet face. O, darling one! blessed Nellie! swear that you will be mine!”

Thus the young fellow went on, working himself into a great passion.

“Mister—Wilson!” here broke in Miss Nellie, “unless you leave the room, or let me, I’ll call for help.”

“No, you shall not! I know that my father loves you better than he ever did me, and I know that in his will he has left you nearly all his property, and left me with next to nothing. So much you have won upon him and to add to my misery you scorn my love; but there’s no power on earth to forbid you being mine, and you shall be!”

There was a movement in the room, as if Miss Nellie was proceeding to some action.

“Nellie, you shall not avoid me so. I tell you, you shall be mine. O, dearest! own that you love me! Come, let me fold you to *my* breast!”

There was a slight, fitful scream, and I heard the delirious fellow rushing towards her; and feeling her peril. I jumped to the sliding doors, pushed them apart just as the drunken wretch had wrapped his arms about the girl. But when he saw me he let go his grasp, and with a maddened expression on his face, hastened from the room. I caught the frightened girl in my arms, and bore her to the sofa; but it was some time before she recovered from her swoon.

Fearing that this might not be the last wrong which the drunken son would inflict upon that beautiful girl, I felt it nothing less than my duty to inform his father of the son’s outrageous course; and William was banished from the house.

Not long after I left for the West, and was absent a week or so. The night of my return I received a call from Judge S—, the great criminal advocate, who told me that he had been hunting me all day, exclaiming, “And thank a blessed Providence I have found you at last.”

“You are a little excited, judge; what’s the matter?”

“I am in a great perplexity, and I want your aid to get out of it, for I know that you knew George Wilson—didn’t, you?”

“*Knew* him? Yes, and know him perfectly well. He’s a great friend of mine, I’m glad to believe.”

“Hadn’t you heard that he is dead?”

“Dead! It isn’t possible —is it?”

“Yes; died night before last.”

“How sudden! Is there any suspicion of something wrong about his death?”

“No; for he had been unwell for quite a while. He died of heart disease. You, perhaps, don’t know that I was his attorney; but you do know how wretchedly he lived with that infamous son, William. A few months ago I drew Mr. Wilson’s will. He had been so long complaining that he began to fear that he could not last long, and wanted to make all things secure for his niece, Nellie, who, by the will, was made legatee of nearly all his property, he leaving but a small annuity to his son—and—“

“But, here let me ask you if William knows about the provisions of the will?”

“Not that I know, for a surety; but let’s see. I do remember that when the will was witnessed, we were disturbed by a slight noise, as of one disposed to obtrude; but I saw no one.”

“You may be sure that it was William whom you heard, for I chance to know that he understood the chief contents of the will;” and then I recited to him what I had overheard William say to Miss Nellie.

“This may be a thing in point,” said the attorney, when I had concluded; “but let me finish what I have to tell you. The will was placed in my care, and I enveloped it and placed it in my private drawer. When I heard of Mr. Wilson’s death, I reverted to my drawer, took out the envelope, but found no will within it—only a blank piece of paper there! You can hardly judge of my thrilling surprise.”

“Ah! some scamp, or interested person then, had played you a trick?”

“Precisely. I was so taken aback that I was quite nonplussed—more than ‘thunder struck.’ But after a while I recovered my self-possession, and began to revolve in my mind the proper course to pursue under the circumstances. As good luck had it, I was alone, and nobody knew my discomfiture.”

“Do you entertain any special suspicions of anybody?”

“I am at a loss whom to suspect; but you give me a valuable hint, perhaps, in what you have related. It seems very probable that William Wilson could give me light upon the matter, if so disposed. Nevertheless, I feel certain that it was impossible for him to get access to my drawer.”

“But you have several clerks?”

“Yes, five; but I have full confidence in each of them. None of these knew what the envelope contained, for I never confide to anybody more than I think he has need to know; and of the existence of the will none of my clerks had any occasion to be apprised. I made the loss known to no one; but locked up my drawer, and plunged into my business in my usual manner.”

“You were wise in so doing. Did you notice anything at all disturbed in your desk?”

“Nothing. It must have been carefully manipulated, and opened by a skilful hand.”

“And on reflection, you have no just reason to entertain suspicion of any of the clerks?”

“No. I have studied them closely, but can see nothing unusual, nothing guilt-like in the manner of any of them. But thus outwitted, as soon as I heard of your re-appearance in the city, the thought flashed upon me that perhaps you could unravel the mystery.”

“Well, now I have your story, I’ll see what I can do. Something tells me that that will can be found. Do you believe in Fate? Sometimes I have premonitions which come as suddenly as lightning, and prove in the end of worth. I guess I shall be able to serve you.”

After the usual leave-taking, the attorney departed, and I leaned back in my chair, and threw my feet listlessly upon the table in the room, and set about conjuring up schemes. A score of plans flitted through my mind; but the case was a perplexing one, and I knew not which plan to adopt for action. But here Fate again; for in the midst of my greatest distraction, I chanced to note on the table a copy of the *New York Mercury*, of date a day or two before, which I picked up for diversion, and running almost unwittingly over a column of advertisements, my eye lighted upon this: —

“LET THE SEEKER AFTER KNOWLEDGE TAKE HEED. *Will will be pleased to know the WILL of the unwilling, at nine o’clock, Monday night, next? for success and joy, perhaps, await him.*  
HIS CONTINENTAL FRIEND.”

Looking back upon it now, I don’t see why I was startled at this. But I was. Perhaps it was because of the frequent repetition of the word “will;” but so it was at any rate; and I thought I had a clue at last. “His Continental Friend”? —

“O, I have it! The Continental Hotel is a place of rendezvous. I’ll watch and wait.”

This much decided, I turned in reverie upon the beautiful Nellie, and felt more than usual joy in the prospect of being of avail to her, and, I confess, not a little ugly towards William, whom, what I had seen of him had led me to despise. But he was a fellow of some ability, and must have been the prompter of the work of abstraction: and, having money at times, might have corrupted one of the clerks into his interest. Thus I reflected, till I became, indeed, convinced. At the Continental I resolved to be, at the time appointed in the advertisement, or before.

I was on hand at an early hour, watching all that passed. The time went on very sluggishly, and I was getting nervous. A quiet stealthily-lookmg person came in at last, and ordered a room for the night. I watched the number on the register; and posting myself on the street, being partially disguised, I waited till William should come, which he did, in a half-intoxicated mood. He scanned the register in a maudlin way, and sent up his card to the room, which, as good luck would have it, was on the topmost floor, so crowded was the hotel that night.

The servant who bore the card returned, saying.—

“He says, ‘Send the gentleman up.’ ”

I waited till the clumsy steps of William sounded as from on the second, flight, when I quietly followed, increasing my pace as I neared him; so that I was near upon him when the door opened.

“Halloo, Wilson! Here all right! Well, I’m more than glad to see you!” exclaimed the inmate, as Wilson entered, and the door closed.

Tripping to the door, I listened, and heard William quite distinctly, his cups having added emphasis to his somewhat gruff voice.

“Well, Mr. Roberts, my very legs tremble, for I feared it might not be you here after all. I’d most forgot the name we’d agreed on for the register, but I knew your handwriting. *Was* it Hyde? I thought it was Hood we’d fixed on. But no matter now. Here you are, and that’s enough.”

Instantly that I heard the name Roberts, I knew it must be the attorney’s chief clerk, for he had spoken of this clerk as having been longest in his employ, and you can well understand how I became at once all ears.

“But you have that important paper all secure?”

“Of course I have, or I wouldn’t have advertised. I feared you might have left New York, and wouldn’t get the notice in time.”

“But how did you get it—and when? Tell me the story, my brave boy,” said William, with the patronizing voice of a new-made millionaire.

“Never mind now—tell you some other time. It’s enough, isn’t it, that it’s here?”

“All right, then. Let’s take up the ‘business in order,’ as they say in Congress. How much shall I give you for that precious will?”

“It *is* a ‘precious’ document, I assure you, Mr. Wilson,” said the scheming Roberts. “Do you know its provisions?”

“Yes, I know all about it; or all that’s important; for luckily I overheard most of it read. My blessed father left everything of consequence to my cousin Nellie; but, ah! ha! that will’s got to be probated, and who’s to do it? That fireplace” (pointing to the grate in the room) “will tell no tale, and here’s matches. But fix your terms—what shall I give you for the document?”

“One hundred dollars down, for I am about visiting my old home in Canada, and want a little more ready cash; and say, if you don’t think it’s too much, your promissory note, made negotiable, but with a private agreement bad? from me that you shall not be pressed to pay it till you get in full possession of your estate, for ten thousand dollars.”

“A *little* ‘steep’—aren’t you, Roberts? But you are a brave fellow, and it shall be done! Here’s ink, I see, and here’s paper,” said William, fumbling his pocket evidently for an old scrap, for he seemed to meet delays. “There, there’s the note—now your agreement.”

Papers rustled lightly on the table, and “All right,” said Roberts; “there’s the document, read it at your leisure, and do what you like with it.”

At this point, in my eagerness, I had bent lower down by the door, and discovered a small, old keyhole, for the door had been evidently newly trimmed with locks, through which I could see with some distinctness.

William read over the will; and with many oaths, and in his delirium of success, losing sense of caution, half shouted, as he swung the document in the air at the tip of his fingers, and half danced about the room: —

“There, now! my blessed, sweet little child, cousin Nellie, you’re outwitted—and—you—are—in—my power! Love me, and tell me so, or you shall beg. No! I vow I’ll buy your graces. I’ll bring you to my feet, but I will never marry you! Confound you! Roberts, give me a match.”

Roberts plunged his hand into his vest pocket, and drew out a portable safe, took a match therefrom, and struck it, handing it to William, whose hand trembled in the flush of victory, as he touched it to the paper.

The unwise fellows had neglected to bolt the door, —probably from the fact of being on the highest flight, —so I had not the obstacle of a lock to overcome, as I quickly turned the knob, and rushed in upon the astonished pair, and snatched the paper from William’s hand while only a corner of it was burned.

“Ah, you scamps!” I exclaimed, “I am in the nick of time, it seems. You are caught in the last and important act. Do you think there’s no God in heaven to watch over innocents like your cousin Nellie?”

The look of stupid horror which the countenances of Roberts and William Wilson revealed, remains as fresh on my mind as if it were only yesterday that I surprised them.

I lost no time in getting the will safely into my pocket, and bade them defiance. Roberts rushed, out of the room, as if he had been shot, and from that hour the strictest search in Philadelphia couldn’t discover him. Nobody knows where he went. As for William, he was too much overcome to stir, and I left the room with him in it; and I didn’t sleep that



night till I had relieved myself of the possession of the will, placing it in the attorney's hands.

Of course Miss Nellie had no trouble in getting possession of her property, but she would not allow her now penitent and subdued cousin to be pursued at the law for his nefarious conspiracy. Indeed, she gave him nearly double the amount his father had provided in annuity. However, it didn't serve him long; for in less than six months from that time, while partially intoxicated, and driving a fractious horse, he was thrown from the carriage, and so injured on the head that his broken constitution could not recover from the shock, and he died in a few days.

And now comes what to me is the most cheerful part of the story. One day, a couple of years after that eventful night, being here, and meeting by chance a handsome cousin of mine, Dr. Charles R., of St. Louis, who had just returned from Europe, where he had pursued his medical studies, in Vienna, and having only a short time to spend with him, for I was obliged to be off early next morning, I ventured to ask him to accompany me to the home of Nellie, for she had bidden me to always call on her when in Philadelphia. We went. She is very handsome, and so is cousin Charles, and I reckon both discovered this fact of the other instantly, and appreciated it, for Nellie, though very kind and courteous to me, managed to occupy herself mostly in entertaining 'the stranger.'

To cut the story short, we left the house duly.

"Why, John,"—for that is my name,—"why didn't you tell me beforehand what a glorious creature you were going to see? I'd been a little more particular about my dress, or probably refused to accompany you," said cousin Charles, half complainingly, as we got well out of doors.

"Ah! ah! Charley, —aren't you glad, on the whole, though?" said I, touching him under the chin, "that I *didn't* tell you, my boy?"

"Indeed—no—yes—well, I don't know as I care, after all; but *isn't* she elegant. And if I'm any reader of human nature she's as good as she is beautiful."

I saw that he was thoroughly "smitten;" and as we went on to my hotel, narrated to him the story of the will. The romance of the thing served to engage him the more. Well, I needn't repeat all. They loved, and were married, and are the happiest couple out of heaven, I reckon.

Such was my room-mate's tale, for which I thanked him, and we both then managed to sleep thereafter. But perhaps the reader will have curiosity to know what was the peculiar advertisement which had drawn me to Philadelphia at that time.

It was this: —

"*Astor discounts, Wednesday, the 9th. So does Independence Hall. RUDOLPH, Cashier.*"

“Astor” I had read by contrary. It meant “Girard,” I thought, —Girard Bank. “Independence Hall” I construed as signifying a place of meeting in front of that building; and “Rudolph”—for this was the point—was a notorious bank robber, on whose track I wished to get, by the name of Ralph Seeker, among his “aliases,” but Ralph was his real name —”Rudolph” being the German for the same; and doubtless I was right in my translation; but as nothing came of that, as I have said before, I here leave “peculiar advertisements” in general, to the unravelling of the curious. But it is a science of itself, which, in its subtleties, sometimes baffles the keenest wits. I am prompted, as I write, to add hereto, for the pleasure of the curious reader, sundry of the “blind methods” (in advertisements usually) by which one scoundrel intimates to another his whereabouts, and what he has accomplished, or where he would meet another to aid in some crime, etc., under circumstances which forbid their communicating through the mail or by telegraph. But I have hardly room in this article, already too long.

McWatters, George. *Knots Untied: Or, Ways and By-Ways in the Hidden Life of American Detectives*. Hartford: Burr and Hyde, 1871 (848 pages)