

## *A Bold Stroke for a Wife*

by Judge Clark

It was my first visit North since I had taken up my abode and entered on the practice of my profession in New Orleans.

In the city of New York I had a very dear friend, my old chum and classmate, George Dickson; and as he was the only person I knew in the great metropolis, of course I lost no time in looking him up.

Three years had passed since our last meeting, but *ten* could scarcely have produced a change more marked than had taken place in the appearance and manner of my friend.

Our first greetings and friendly inquiries over, I longed, yet forbore, to ask the cause of my friend's melancholy. I felt sure, in due time, of being made the confidant of the secret, provided no motive of delicacy prompted its concealment.

That evening, in my room at the hotel, George told me his story. He had formed an attachment for a young lady, whose graces of mind and person he portrayed with all the fervor of a lover's eloquence. She had returned his affection, but her father had opposed his suit, having set his heart on the marriage of his daughter to a nephew of his.

This nephew was a young physician, of profligate character, my friend assured me—but that may have been prejudice—who had long but unsuccessfully wooed his cousin, to whom his proffers were as repugnant as to her father they were acceptable.

Some months since, Mr. Parsons, the young lady's father, had gone south on business accompanied by his nephew. At New Orleans he had been seized by a sudden illness, which terminated fatally in three days.

On the day preceding his death he had executed a will, (which had since been duly proved by the depositions of the attesting witnesses,) containing a solemn request that his daughter, to whom he left the whole of his estate, should accept the hand of his nephew in marriage, coupled with a provision that in case the latter offered, and she refused, within a specified period, to enter into the proposed union, the entire estate devised to the daughter should be forfeited to the nephew.

To sacrifice her fortune to her heart's choice would not have cost Julia Parsons a moment's hesitation; and nothing could have more delighted George Dickson, than so fair an opportunity of showing how superior his devotion was to all considerations of personal advantage. But her father's dying request, in Julia's eyes, was sacred. It had surprised and stunned her, it is true, for, in their many conferences on the subject, he had never gone beyond the most kindly remonstrance, and had never even hinted at anything like coercion.

Young Parsons had not the magnanimity to forgo his ungenerous advantage. He *might* have been content with his cousin's fortune alone, but his right to that depended on *his* offer and *her*

rejection of an alliance which she felt in conscience bound to accept. The brief season of grace, which she had been compelled to beg even with tears, had already almost passed, and a few more days would witness the condemnation of two lives to hopeless misery.

At the conclusion of my friend's narrative, in which, for reasons that my hereafter be developed, I felt a peculiar interest, I prevailed upon him to accompany me to a place of amusement to which I had previously procured tickets.

When we reached the theatre, the performance had already begun; but we succeeded in finding seats which commended a fair view both of the stage and the audience.

In a few moments George touched my elbow.

"Observe the gentleman nearly opposite, in the front of the parquette, seated next the column, leaning his arm on his cane," he whispered.

I looked in the direction indicated, and saw a face whose striking resemblance to one I had seen before caused me to start with surprise.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"Eldridge Parsons," was the reply.

"The nephew of whom you spoke?"

"The same," my friend answered.

"Does he resemble his uncle?" I was on the point of inquiring, but just then the stranger drew the glove from his right hand, and I saw that *the first joint of the middle finger was wanting*, a circumstance, which for sufficient reason absorbed my attention.

"Do you know the exact date of Mr. Parson's death?" I asked, when we had gained the street at the close of the performance.

"Yes," said George, "it was the twenty-third of December. His daughter received a telegram from her cousin announcing the fact the same day. But why do you ask?"

"I have a reason which may or may not prove a good one," I returned; and stating that I had business engagements for the whole of the next day, I parted with my friend, promising to meet him on the following evening.

Next afternoon found me at the office of Dr. Parsons.

"Dr. Parsons, I presume?" were the words with which I accosted the gentleman I had seen at the theatre.

"Yes, sir."

“You may not remember me, Doctor, but I believe we have met before.”

“I beg pardon, sir, for not recollecting the occasion.”

“You were in New Orleans last winter, were you not?”

“I was,” he answered, with some embarrassment.

“I am the gentleman on whom you called to draft a will.”

He turned pale, but made no reply.

“I saw a record of that will in the Surrogate’s office this morning,” I resumed, “and—”

“You speak of my *uncle’s* will,” he hastily interrupted.

“And yet,” I continued, “you said it was *yours* when you applied to have it written. You represented yourself as desirous of executing such a document preparatory to embarking on a perilous voyage. The paper was drawn in accordance with your instructions leaving the date to be filled in at the time of signing. Your locks were *gray* then, and you certainly *looked* old enough to have a marriageable daughter, but your disguise was not *perfect*,” and I pointed to the *mutilated finger*.

“What do you mean?” he shouted in a defiant tone, springing to his feet.

“Simply that your uncle’s signature to that paper is a *forgery!*” I answered, rising and confronting him. “He died on the *twenty-third* of December. Your own telegram to that effect is in existence. It was on the *twenty-fourth*, the day before Christmas, that you called on me to prepare the paper now on record as his will. The inference is plain; you undertook to manufacture this spurious testament *after* your uncle’s death, and wishing to clothe your villainy in legal form, you procured from me the required draft. You, or someone at your instigation, simulated the signature of the deceased. The witnesses, who have since perjured themselves in their depositions, were procured in some manner best known to yourself—”

“Enough, sir!” he ejaculated, placing his back against the door; “you have shown yourself in possession of a secret the custody of which may prove *dangerous!*”

“I am not unprepared for your threat,” I replied. “In the first place, I did not come here unarmed; in the next, I have prepared a full written statement of the facts to which I have alluded, with information, besides, of my present visit to yourself. This paper will be delivered to the friend to whom it is directed, unless within an hour I reclaim it from the messenger who has been instructed for that length of time to retain it.”

His face grew livid. His frame quivered with mingled fear and rage, and his eye gleamed like that of a wild beast at bay.

“What is your purpose?” he exclaimed, in a voice hoarse with suppressed passion.

“To keep your secret while you live,” I answered, “on *one* condition.”

“Name it.”

“That you write instantly to Julia Parsons, renouncing all pretensions to her hand, and absolutely withdrawing your proposal of marriage.”

After a moment’s pause he seated himself at his desk, and hastily penned a brief note, which he submitted to my inspection; it was quite satisfactory.

“Be so good as to seal and address it,” I said.

He did so.

“I will see that it is delivered,” I remarked taking it and bowing myself out.

When I met George Dickson that evening his old college look had come back. He had great *news* to tell me. The next thing was to take me to see Julia, and it is needless to tell what a happy evening we three spent together, and what a happy marriage followed not long after.

Eldridge Parsons, I have just learned, joined one of the late Cuban expeditions, and was killed in a recent encounter with the Spaniards.

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