

The Missing Will

Rett Winwood

I.

I was in the city, working busily away at my law-books, when the despatch came that Uncle Robert Collingwood was on his death-bed, and had asked to see me. Of course such a summons was not to be disregarded, so I straightway set about packing my carpet-bag, and perhaps ought to have dropped into it a few scalding tears, with the clean linen and box of paper collars that found their way there, but did not. I only set about the work quietly, and with so much attention that not a single needed article was forgotten.

Riding out in the cars, I had time for thought, but none for grief. Uncle Robert was an old man, very wealthy and very odd, and my nearest relative living; but he had seemed to utterly ignore my existence, for a few years back, and now I felt no more sorrow at the thought of his death, than at that of the merest stranger. In fact, he *was* a stranger, and as such I regarded him. He had asked for me, however, and I could not refuse to go to him.

There was no carriage waiting for me at the station, when I reached it at last, and I was obliged to find a hack. When I arrived at the house, a single glance was sufficient to tell me that all was over. A deathly stillness seemed to hover about the place, and a black streamer was fluttering from the door-knob. The servant who let me in, said that my uncle had died very early in the morning. Finding myself too late, I asked to be shown to a room where I could rest from the fatigue of the journey. The servant led the way up stairs, and we had hardly reached the landing, when a door opened, near at hand, and a figure flitted in, and paused where the sunbeams from the great oriel window that lighted the upper hall fell full and bright upon her. A figure scarcely of medium size it was, yet astounding in a certain sort of indescribable girlish grace, clad in a flowing robe of some pearl-colored material, that fitted her form to a nicety. At first sight, I thought she might possibly belong to the corps of incapables, there was so much listlessness, such a dreamy languor in her manner, and so little fire and sparkle in the limpid, sunshiny eyes. Indeed, looking at her critically, I could hardly reconcile their expression with the strong, full brow above, or the firm, decided mouth beneath.

She seemed to realize what a beautiful picture she made, standing there in the mellow sunshine, for she kept her position, tapping her foot impatiently upon the carpet, while beckoning for us to approach.

“This is Mr. Ralph Collingwood, I suppose?” she said, giving me her hand, with an easy grace. “Uncle Robert was expecting you, but you have come too late. I am Beatrice Vanstone.”

I bowed low over her hand. I had already heard of her. She was Uncle Robert’s niece, on the side of his dead wife, and so in no wise related to me.

“I regret not having been summoned earlier,” I said. “You were here when my uncle died?”

“I was. I came yesterday.”

“Did he leave any message for me, or say why he was desirous of seeing me?”

“No. But he asked for you several times, and always seemed disappointed when told that you had not come. Stay! Just before he died, he *did* mention your name, and tried to leave some message in regard to his property.”

She gave me a sudden keen glance from under her half-closed lids. It came and went like a sharp flash of lightning, and her manner instantly became as calm and listless as before. Nevertheless, from that moment, I set her down, in my own mind, as the coolest piece of still nature I had ever seen.

“And you are entirely unable to give me the substance of what he attempted to communicate, Miss Vanstone?”

“I am.” Very quietly and placidly spoken. “He did not give over looking for you till the last minute. It was with his dying gasps that he attempted to leave the message.”

She turned away, flitting through the long hall like a soft ray of mellow moonlight. I went on to my room, after a little, walking like one in a dream, so surprised had I been by this sudden apparition. Once there, and my dusty travelling-suit laid aside, I found leisure for connected thought, and somehow, Miss Vanstone’s manner, when she spoke of my uncle’s dying words, would recur to me continually, in spite of every effort. I could hardly help concluding that she *did* gather the import of his words, but was, for some reason, keeping it from me.

The funeral, and the preparations that preceded it, I shall pass over in silence. Such things are not pleasant—either to experience, or to read or write about.

A small party came back from the grave—Miss Vanstone, myself, and a few friends—to listen to the reading of the will. The Collingwoods were never a fruitful race, and we two were the only near relatives of the deceased present in that dim old library.

Mrs. Collins, the housekeeper, brought in the keys, when we were all assembled. These were handed to Mr. Blandford, the solicitor, who inserted one of them in the lock of rosewood escritoire that stood in one corner. There was a portentous click—a sharp rattle of paper—and then a surprised ejaculation. Mr. Blandford withdrew his hand from among the papers he had been fumbling, and turned, white with wonder, towards the little company gathered near.

“The will is not to be found,” he said, in a low, deep voice. “It should have been in this drawer. Only one week ago, I placed it here with my own hands!”

There was a general exclamation of surprise. Mr. Blandford continued the search among other private papers, but it proved fruitless. Not a trace of the missing document could be discovered.

“Can you throw any light on the subject, Mrs. Collins?” he asked, pausing at last, from sheer despair. “Mr. Collingwood has not been able to leave his bed since the will was made. If it has been destroyed, it must have been by other hands than his. Can you give us any clue to the mystery?”

“I have nothing to suggest,” answered the housekeeper. “My late master’s keys have been in my possession for the past three days. They have lain under my pillow at night, and been about my person during the day. I can hardly think any one could have made use of them without my knowledge. The will must have been removed, before they were placed in my charge.”

The servants were questioned, but without avail. There was no reason for accusing any one of them, as they were most likely to suffer from the loss of the document, and could therefore have no cause for detaining or destroying it. There was certainly some dark mystery about the affair.

“Who witnessed the will?” one of the guests asked, finally.

“Mrs. Collins, and a friend of hers who was stopping here last week—a Mrs. Blair,” answered the solicitor.

“And where is this Mrs. Blair now?”

“She went home the day before Mr. Collingwood died,” said the housekeeper. “But I should never think of suspecting her. She is a poor, feeble woman, without the spirit of a fly.”

I looked up just then, and caught the eye of Miss Vanstone. She colored the least bit, under my scrutiny, and began to toy nervously with her shawl-fringe. Somehow, those last words of Mrs. Collins’s had associated her with Mrs. Blair, in my mind, thought there did not seem to be the slightest connection between the two. Nevertheless, the idea, unaccountably enough, had come over me with the suddenness of a lightning-flash.

During the remainder of the day, the house was thoroughly searched, under the direction of Mr. Blandford. Every conceivable hiding-place was penetrated, but all without avail. The will was lost, perhaps beyond recovery.

Miss Vanstone came down to the parlor, while the search was being prosecuted in her own room. I sat by one of the windows, reading, when she entered.

“I hope I do not disturb you, sir?” she said, quietly.

“Not in the least. I am glad you have come. To tell the truth, I was getting lonely, and shall be glad for company.”

After this, there was a short silence, which Miss Vanstone broke, by saying, looking straight in my face the while:

“I suppose you and I are to inherit Uncle Robert’s property.”

I could hardly tell whether she meant it as a mere remark, or as a question. In either case, it sounded oddly enough, and I began to wonder what sort of creature my companion could be.

“Very likely,” I returned, indifferently. “We are the nearest of kin, and the fortune will naturally fall to us, unless the will comes to light, and makes a different disposition of it.”

“How will it be divided?”

“Equally, I suppose.”

She looked up quickly.

“I shall be satisfied with that, for Uncle Robert was immensely rich. He suffered me to drivel on in the most loathsome poverty, for all that. I shall always hate his memory for it, though, as I hated him while living. You look astonished, and they seem like very bitter words—those I have just spoken. He might have helped me sooner, and not have felt it. I had such an intense loathing for the life I was living! Now I am rich, thank God!”

“Do you have no regretful thoughts for the lost life that gave you your wealth?”

“Not one. Uncle Robert was old, and gray, and *stingy!* He had lost all relish for the pleasures of life, and in his hands all this money was suffered to lie idle. You and I are young, with the world before us. We needed this money, and I am glad we are going to have it. We have waited long enough.”

She laughed, a rippling, gushing laugh, wholly unlike the words she had just been saying, and tripped towards the door.

“You must think me a strange creature, Mr. Collingwood,” she said, pausing for a moment, with her hand on the knob. “It is only because I have suffered you to see beneath the surface, and behold me as I am, with I don’t know how many deformities, mental and moral, pricking out here and there. I don’t know how I happened to favor you so much, but you may charge it to your powers of pleasing.”

She laughed again, this time mockingly, waved an adieu with one tiny white hand, and was gone.

“Whew!” whistled I, to myself, as the door closed. “We have ‘caught a Tartar,’ surely, and my piece of still nature is awake.”

By-and-by, after it had begun to grow dusk, Mr. Blandford called me to one side.

“It is just as I expected, sir,” he said. “The will is nowhere to be found. But”—here his voice took a mysterious intonation—“I think I might hazard a guess as to what has become of it!”

“What do you mean, Mr. Blandford?”

“Were you acquainted with the contents of your late uncle’s will?”

“I did not arrive until after his death. I am entirely ignorant.”

“Well, I drew it up. It gave two-thirds of the whole property to you, and less than one-third to Beatrice Vanstone! Now do you catch my meaning?”

For a moment, surprise held me silent. The suspicion hinted at was so new, so utterly unexpected.

“I think I do,” I returned, slowly. “But, believe me, you are sadly mistaken in your surmises.”

“Well, consider the matter for yourself. Miss Vanstone is a poor girl, to whom this money will be a godsend. She learned from the housekeeper, Mrs. Collins, the disposition Mr. Collingwood had made of his property. At the least calculation, she would gain thirty thousand dollars by the suppression of the will. Now are you not convinced?”

“Why don’t you have her arrested, if you are so positive?” I asked—not because I would have allowed it to be done, but more to hear what answer he would make.

“Because such a step would surely ruin all. Strategy, with a woman, above all things. There is our only hope. If you wish to recover the missing document, we must go to work in some underhand way. Miss Vanstone is too clever a woman to leave herself open to a certain detection, from any laxness in concealing the proofs of her guilt.”

“You talk as though there was not a single doubt in your own mind.”

“Nor is there. I heard, long since, that Miss Vanstone had sworn to get possession of her uncle’s property. I believe she meant it. You will be a fool, if you do not act upon my suggestions.”

“Well, say nothing of your conjectures, at present,” I said, after a little time for reflection. “I may take some measures for finding out the truth of them, by-and-by. It will be better to let the whole matter rest just now.”

II.

I WENT back to my office in the city, the next day, leaving Mr. Blandford to settle up affairs. His instructions were to do his utmost at finding the will, but not to trouble Miss Vanstone in any way, and, should it be finally traced to her possession, as he was convinced it might be, to write me before resorting to extreme measures.

Six months went slowly by. During this time, I very often thought of the missing document, and sometimes felt inclined to prosecute the search, in person, just for the novelty of it, for nothing had been discovered in all these months. Oftener yet—I must fain acknowledge it—did my mind wander back to that witching, wonderful figure I had first seen in the glancing sunbeams

creeping in through the oriel window at the old country-seat of the Collingwoods, where my Uncle Robert had lived and died. But, whatever fancies I might have had, I did not suffer them to keep me from my law-books. I was devoted to the profession I had chosen, and it held the foremost place in my heart, as in all my plans. I even gave up nearly all social pleasures, for the purpose of perfecting myself in it.

By-and-by, there came a very urgent invitation to a party given my Mrs. De Wolf, one of the most aristocratic families in the city. She had long professed to be a particular friend of mine, and I could not risk offending her by a refusal, though it was really quite a trial to give up my pre-conceived plans of remaining steadfastly at home; so, although loth, I went.

It was rather late, and most of the guests were already assembled, when I reached Mrs. De Wolf's splendid mansion on Fifth Avenue. After paying my respects to the hostess, I would have passed on in the crowd, but she caught my arm as I was passing her.

"Whither away so fast? I should think we were some frightful ogre, by the hurry you are in to leave us."

"I beg pardon, Mrs. De Wolf."

"Granted, if you will stop and attend to me. I have been looking for you this long time. My niece is here, and I am particularly anxious to give you a presentation."

"If she resembles her aunt," and I bowed politely, "I shall be most happy to form her acquaintance."

"Ridiculous, Mr. Collingwood! I am an old woman, and your gallantries are quite thrown away on me. But, seriously, *entre nous*, she is not really my niece, though a mere distant relative—second cousin, or something of that sort. It suits my whim to play the role of aunt, just now, however. It is only quite lately that I found her out. But come—we mustn't lose the presentation."

We walked towards the upper end of the room, where a little crowd seemed to be gathered about a lady sitting there.

"It is she," whispered Mrs. De Wolf, with pardonable pride. "She is a rare creature, and can count her conquests by the score, already."

The crowd gave way at our approach, and, while I stood like one suddenly bewildered, I heard our hostess's voice, introducing us:

"My niece, Miss Vanstone, Mr. Collingwood."

It was indeed she—the woman of whom I had so often dreamed. She was dressed in a robe of some sort of misty white, looped over a satin skirt, by means of precious gems, that burned like fire in the light of the chandeliers. Aside from these, there was very little color about her toilet,

excepting the deep tinge that glowed and deepened on cheek and lip, and the wondrous lustre of her eyes, for they seemed to have entirely lost their old, sunshiny limpidity. It was indeed she, but a thousand fold more beautiful than ever, now that she had found her true place in the world. She held out her hand, a rare smile parting the red lips.

“I am glad to meet you, Mr. Collingwood. We are old friends, aunt.”

Mrs. De Wolf ran away, with a little exclamation of surprise, and, by a dexterous manoeuvre, I drew my companion apart from the crowd, to the embrasure of one of the windows.

“I told Aunt De Wolf that we were friends,” she said, speaking quick and sharp. “Perhaps you are hardly ready to recognize me as such. I don’t know why you shouldn’t, though.”

A sudden thought occurred to me. I remembered Mr. Blandford’s suspicion in regard to the will, and immediately resolved to test the truth of it.

“At least, we can make a pretence of friendship,” I returned; “though it would only be natural if we were enemies.”

“Why?” with a sudden, keen glance. “I do not understand you.”

“You forget our first meeting—the missing will—and the thousands I lost by means of it!”

Speaking thus, I eyed her mercilessly. Some of the rich coloring went out of her face, in spite of every effort at self-control.

“I know what you mean,” she broke out, after a short pause, “and it is useless to pretend ignorance. I heard something about it that very night after we met in the library at Uncle Robert’s. You think the missing document is in my possession.”

“I never said as much, Miss Vanstone.”

“No; but you have thought it. Well, granted that I have the will—what then? You are welcome to get it, if you can. You are a man, and versed in the law, I a poor, weak woman. It seems to me the odds are on your side.”

“But you forget, my dear Miss Vanstone, that man’s wisdom is seldom a match for woman’s cunning!”

“That is your own look-out, Mr. Collingwood. I will tell you what I should do in such a case, though. I should meet strategy with strategy,” shutting her lips hard together.

“That is what I intend to do; so be on your guard,” said I, smilingly. “Really, I am glad to cross weapons with so worthy an opponent, if it must be done.”

“Then we are declared for open war?”

“As you choose, though I should prefer to have the flag of truce very frequently displayed, in that case.”

A few more words, and we turned back to mingle again with the crowd. The music was just sounding the *Deux Temps*, and I drew her along, nearer the dancers, until we were within the magic influence. Soon my arm slid gently around her waist, and before swaying in time to the soft, languid music, in the midst of the waiters—the very poetry of motion.

The dance ended at last. After that, I saw very little of Miss Vanstone, she was so monopolized by other admirers. Before I went away, she came back to me, for a moment.

“You must call to-morrow, Mr. Collingwood,” she said. “We are cousins, in some sort, you know, and I could not be formal with you, if I should try. Besides, I am sure you would never like to shun an enemy, and that ought to be enough to decide you.”

She tripped away, turning back for a significant smile. That night, I dreamed of her. The confession may as well be made first as last. I thought she came to me, looking more lovely than ever, holding the lost will in her hand, but when I attempted to take it, it shrivelled to ashes beneath my touch. Waking, I wondered whether the dream was a good or ill omen.

Walking down to Mrs. De Wolf’s, the next day, I resolved to be constantly on my guard, and keep a sharp look-out for Miss Vanstone. She was gaining too great an ascendancy over me, already, else she could not have drawn me from my office so easily. I must harden myself against her wiles, and—try to get possession of the will. She had dared me, and I was not one to give up an object, without due effort.

She was looking more beautiful than I had yet seen her, clad in an elegant morning-robe, and in her presence I very soon forgot all my commendable resolutions. Her conversation charmed me, it seemed so original, and was spiced with such delicate touches of humor and pathos. I was very fast becoming enthralled, when she herself broke the spell that had bound my senses.

“Very likely, you think, Mr. Collingwood,” she broke out, abruptly, “that I ought to be dressed in black, and shut up in a nunnery, so soon after Uncle Robert’s death. To tell the truth, unlike most women, I’m not at all interesting in tears; and then mourning don’t suit my complexion. Besides, I have no taste for the ‘lachrymoseful.’”

I looked up at her. The expression of her face was inscrutable; but I knew, as though by instinct, that these words were not her real sentiments, but only spoken for a purpose.

“Are you quite hardened and heartless?” I asked.

“Not heartless,” she returned, slowly; “but too happy. Would you learn the reason? Whereas I was once poor, now I am rich. I could sing all the day long for very joy.”

She said it with such a radiance breaking over her countenance, that I could not entirely withhold my sympathy. After all, it might be better so. Perhaps she would make a nobler use of the money than Uncle Robert had ever done.

After that, I saw her quite frequently—indeed, was with her nearly every evening, and sometimes was invited to dinner. Times without number, I tried to turn the conversation upon the will—hoping to get some inkling in regard to its destiny, from a lengthy discussion—but she parried every attempt with the skill of an old diplomatist. She led me a worse chase than McClellan was led, in a time we all wot of! There was no end to the expedients she would resort to—her sudden manoeuvres, her deceptive movements, and all that, until I finally began to feel really afraid of being outgeneraled, unless I could muster all my forces, and come down from some unexpected quarter.

One night, we went to the opera. She was passionately fond of music, and that evening, it was really divine. She sat like one in a trance, her beautiful face all in a glow, the crimson stains burning hotly into either cheek. She seemed to forget everything but the glorious notes that rolled, and gushed, and rippled, all around us. In one of the finer passages, she leaned forward breathlessly, her hand drooping over the cushioned sill of the box.

Her dress was of some rich, heavy silk, that glittered in the lamp-light. Suddenly, something within the lining of her sleeve seemed to give way, and a folded paper rustled out, and fell among the crowd below. She started up, with a faint cry, and turned deathly white. I hesitated, at a loss what to do.

“You have dropped something, Miss Vanstone,” I said, finally. “If you will excuse me, I will go for it.”

“No,” she returned, with sharp eagerness; “it was nothing. I am tired. Take me home.”

Of course, I could but comply; but, before going, I leaned over the box-sill, to glance below. One of our office-boys sat directly beneath, and he was looking up towards our box, with the paper in his hand. He caught my eye, and I bowed, with a significant glance.

I led Miss Vanstone out. On the drive home, very little was said by either of us. She did not ask me in, but, pleading fatigue, bid me good-night on the steps.

Early the next morning, the office-boy, of whom I have spoken, came to me, bringing the paper Miss Vanstone had dropped. My conjectures were proven correct! It was the missing will, but sadly crumpled, and rolled in the smallest possible compass. Miss Vanstone had taken it from the escritoire, as Mr. Blandford had surmised, but had feared to destroy it, lest some rival claimants for the property Uncle Robert had left should afterwards appear, in which case the will could be produced. She had kept it secreted upon her person, as I eventually learned, for greater security.

After a little deliberation, I dressed myself carefully, and left the office, to call on Miss Vanstone. She came down to the drawing-room, looking somewhat pale and discomposed. I led her to a seat, and entered into an easy conversation. By-and-by, I said, suddenly:

“I suppose peace is declared, now the will is lost?”

“What will?” she asked, blankly, pretending ignorance.

“Uncle Robert’s, of course. You dropped it last night.”

“Last night! Are you quite bereft of your senses, Mr. Collingwood?”

“I believe not. But do you mean to say that you did not drop the will over the box at the opera, last night?”

“Most certainly I do.”

“And you did not lose any kind of paper?”

“No.”

I stared at her, in undisguised astonishment.

“Beatrice Vanstone,” I said slowly, “are you the most consummate of intriguants, or a great liar?”

“A great liar!” she returned.

She quite bewildered me, with her strange beauty, flashing eyes, and singular ways. The rich color had flamed into her cheek while we were speaking. At that moment, I recognized her as she really was—a strong, true woman, at heart, but given up, body and soul, to one fell purpose. At the same time, I realized the hold she had already gained upon me, despite my knowledge of her doings.

“Beatrice,” I said, after a little, “you can have the whole of the Collingwood property, if you will only say the word.”

“How?” she asked, flushing.

“By taking me as a portion with it. What do you say?”

She stood close beside me, looking searchingly into my eyes, her head thrown back, and her lips, pulped with dewy crimson, offered most temptingly. What would any sensible man have done in a like situation? Just what I did!

“There,” she cried, starting back, “you have my answer! But one man can never touch my lips. I believe I will take the whole of the Collingwood property, if you please.”

“Then do you love me, Beatrice?”

“I did long ago; from the time when we first met at Uncle Robert’s.”

There was a happy silence, for a brief space, and then I went on:

“You did not drop the will at the opera, last night, now did you not, dear Beatrice?” very persuasively.

“No sir, I didn’t!” spoken very emphatically.

And she clings to the same answer this very day—woman’s perverseness, no doubt; for you and I know better, don’t we, dear reader? As for the Mrs. Blair spoken of in the first part of our story, I have lately discovered that my Beatrice is very good at masquerading.

The Flag of Our Union, July 28, 1866