

# *The Professor's Stratagem*<sup>1</sup>

BY JUDGE CLARK

Herr Karl von Krummelhauser—the Professor, he was called—was an eccentric man of science. With the exception of a few students to whom he gave private lessons, he received no visitors, and had no associates.

His daughter Mary, it was universally agreed, was an angel, and a very *arch* one at that. I am not going to tell you how pretty she was: but just do your best to fancy the utmost perfection of incipient womanhood, and, if you are blessed with a fair share of the poetic element, you may reach some faint conception of the truth.

Among the Professor's pupils were my friend Max Oppenheim and myself—at least, I was Max's friend; I believe *he* was nobody's, though I then thought differently. I fell dead in love with Mary, and made Max my confidant, and finally "spoke" to her father.

The Professor heard my proposal with a serious look.

"Have you the means to support a wife?" he inquired.

My resources, I was obliged to confess, were mainly prospective and wholly contingent.

"I am already old," he continued, "and the small annuity which barely suffices, with such additions as I am able to make to it, for present needs, will end with my life. My daughter xxx[will inherit]xxxxxxxx[should] only be given to such a union as will render her future assured. However, I will defer my decision. Mary is yet too young to marry. But if, at the end of two years, you shall be in a position to warrant a renewal of your offer, and shall not have changed your mind, I will give you an answer; till then, let the subject be dismissed."

I felt the force of the Professor's reasoning, and saw it would be useless to say more.

My resolution was taken. I bade farewell to my friend, whose languid "God speed" had little of fervor in it, compared with the worthy Professor's parting benediction, or with the darling Mary's "good-by," spoken smilingly through her tears, and to which I could only answer by a silent pressure of her tiny white hand.

At the end of two years—two years of toil and adventure in the wild and newly discovered gold regions of Australia—I returned rich, and more than rich enough to justify me in demanding the Professor's tardy answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of the original manuscript have been damaged beyond legibility. These cases are marked in the text as "xxxxxxx."

Max Oppenheim was the first acquaintance I met. It may be imagined with what eagerness I hastened to tell him of the happy change in my fortunes. He seemed less apathetic than usual. Indeed the news seemed to quite interest him.

“But your treasure—in what shape have you brought it home?” he asked.

“In good bank-notes,” I answered, giving my breast pocket a slap. “I have them here.”

“A very careless way of carrying so much money,” he remarked.

“I know it,” I said; “but I found it difficult to buy exchange at the little seaport where I landed, and so, for convenience sake, turned my gold into notes. However, I will deposit the whole to-morrow, and there’ll be but little risk till then.”

Max spent the evening with me in my lodgings. I went to bed soon after he left, placing the wallet containing my money under the pillow.

It was broad daylight when I awoke. The door of my room stood partly ajar. I was certain I had closed and locked it before retiring. My first thought was my money. Heavens! it was gone! It was but too evident I had been robbed during my sleep. A skeleton key still remained in the lock, but no other trace of the criminal was left. I at once called on the Professor.

The old man received me cordially. He listened to my story with a grave face, and was very particular in his inquiries touching the companions I had spent the previous evening with, and who had knowledge of my being in possession of a sum so considerable.

“It is a hard case,” he added. “I am not quite prepared to return the answer I promised two years ago. Call at eight o’clock this evening, and I will be ready to give it.”

“But Mary,” I mustered courage to ask—“could I see her a moment?”

“She has gone out for the day,” he answered; “but you shall see her this evening, or at furthest to-morrow.”

I made known my loss to the police, put myself in communication with detectives, and spent the day taking such measures for the recovery of my property and the apprehension of the thief, as seemed to promise any hope of success.

At the appointed hour I was ushered into the Professor’s study. To my surprise, Max Oppenheim, whom, singularly enough, I had not seen during the day, was there before me.

I was about to inform him of my loss, but the Professor, he said, had already told him.

“You have come opportunely, sir,” said the latter, addressing himself to me.

In answer to my look of inquiry, he proceeded:

“This gentleman,” with a gesture toward my friend, “has just honored me with an important proposal—no less, indeed, than an offer for my daughter’s hand. Being a man of unquestioned rank and fortune, his proposal demands, at least, serious consideration.”

“And is it you, wretch!” I exclaimed, casting a furious look at Max, “that have dared to take advantage of my misfortune to supplant me in that wherein you had my confidence, and wherein I had a right to count on your aid and sympathy.”

Hot words followed, ending in a challenge.

“Come, gentlemen,” said the old Professor, “I have a proposition to make,” and passed into an adjoining apartment. After a brief absence he returned, bearing a salver, on which were a couple of glasses, partially filled with some liquid.

“There,” he continued, placing the salver on a table, “are two glasses of wine. In one of them is a subtle and tasteless poison. He who drinks it will experience no pain, but will within an hour’s time, sink into a calm and peaceful slumber, from which there will be no waking. I would bestow my daughter on no man not ready to peril his life for her sake. Your readiness to do this I propose a more rational mode of testing, than the senseless combat in which you are about to engage. Let each drink the contents of one of the glasses. To the survivor, I pledge the gift of my daughter’s hand. All traces of the other’s remains I have in my laboratory the means of speedily destroying, and the secret of his disappearance need never be known.”

Heavens! how weird the old man looked! Could it be that he was really insane? or was there more in the popular superstition with regard to him than was commonly accredited?

My mind shrank from the idea of suicide. “But, after all,” I reflected, “what difference is there in principal between staking my life on such a hazard, and the more unequal one, it may be, of bodily conflict? There is at least as favorable a chance of rescuing from a villain’s hands an innocent victim.”

My purpose was formed.

“I accept the test!” I exclaimed.

Max hesitated.

“Why not settle our difference in the usual mode?” he expostulated.

“*Cowards* may fight duels,” I replied, “confiding in superior skill, or schooled by custom. To face death in a new and unexpected shape requires courage. If you have a spark of it, which I doubt, do not waver now. Take your choice,” I said, advancing to the table, and pointing to the glasses.

His face was ghastly pale, but pride was stronger than fear. With an almost tottering step he approached the table, and, with a trembling hand, took up one of the glasses. I took the other. Simultaneously we raised them to our lips, and drained the contents.

The Professor at once conducted us to separate chambers, remarking, as he did so, that an hour would tell the tale.

Left to myself, I began closely to study my sensations. For a time, I was conscious of nothing unusual. At length a feeling of drowsiness began to steal over me. Still, it might be only fancy, or, more probably, the natural reaction after a day of excitement. But no; it was becoming too marked for that. Besides, I could not shake it off. My eyelids grew preternaturally heavy. A gradual numbness pervaded my members. I could not be mistaken. It was I who had drank from the poisoned cup! Dragging myself with my little remaining strength to a couch that stood near, I dropped upon it, and decently composing my limbs, breathed a prayer to Heaven for forgiveness, and, with Mary's name on my lips, *fell asleep!*

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The sun was shining brightly when a voice recalled me to consciousness. If I was dead, I had surely gone to *Heaven*, for there stood an angel! But a second look assured my bewildered senses. I wasn't dead, after all. It was darling little Mary, whose smiling face and musical tones were giving me sweet welcome.

Goodness knows how many foolish things I would have said, or how many kisses of greeting I would have snatched, in spite of Mary's blushes, if the old Professor, who *ought* to have been busy among his retorts and crucibles, hadn't made his appearance just then.

With an air of mystery he led me to his study, where, to my inexpressible astonishment, he handed me my lost wallet, its contents intact.

"Few men have the courage," he said, "to face death with a great crime unconfessed and unrepented of. Before making my singular proposal last night, I had reason to suspect that your supposed friend was not altogether innocent of your recent loss; not that he had been  
xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx blast your hopes in a quarter which I need not mention. The event has justified my suspicions. Both the glasses contained a powerful but harmless sleeping potion, and when Max felt himself giving way to an unnatural drowsiness, believing the poison was at work, and that his doom was sealed, he summoned me to hear a confession, of which you have happily reaped the fruits. He has already taken his departure, and will never return."

What the Professor's answer was to my proposal of two years' standing, and what came of it, I leave the reader to guess.

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