

[Written for The Flag of our Union]

*The Death Ring.*

by James D. M'Cabe, Jr.

WHEN Dr. Edward Landsfield was a young man, and just entering upon the practice of medicine, he located himself in the then town and now city of L—. There was but one other physician in the place, and he was an old man, who was getting too far advanced in years to pay the proper attention to his business. The young doctor had a hard time at first; for the people of the place had a strange and bitter prejudice against young physicians, and for a while turned their faces from him. IT was fully a year before he had anything at all to do; and had not he been provided with money enough to support himself in a shabby way during that time, he would have starved. As it was, he was almost discouraged, and was seriously contemplating a speedy departure from the town. He was sitting in the little room he called his office, one evening, puffing away vigorously at his German pip, and pondering the question, whether to go away from L— or remain and fight it out a little longer. It was snowing heavily out of doors, and the wind was howling around the house at a furious rate. It was an excellent night for thinking, and the doctor felt that he would be perfectly safe from callers and patients, and would have ample time to discuss the important question which perplexed him. He had thought it over a hundred times before, but had never fully made up his mind either way in regard to it. He could see very little to be accomplished by remaining, if indeed there was anything. But on the other hand, to go away seemed like cowardice. It seemed like abandoning the field in disgrace, like a victory of ignorant prejudices over science. He was thoroughly perplexed. Suddenly he was aroused by the loud ringing of his doorbell. In genuine astonishment he opened the door, and saw standing before it a man well wrapped up and covered with snow.

“Is Dr. Landsfield at home?” he asked, hurriedly.

“I am he,” replied the young physician, in a state of bewilderment. “What do you want with me?”

“Old Mr. Gravely, on the hill, is very bad, sir,” was the reply, “and you must go to him right away.”

“Why don’t you go for Dr. Jones?” asked the young man.

“I have been for him, sir,” was the reply, “but he says he isn’t well enough to venture out into such a storm. You’d better hurry, doctor, for the old man is mighty bad, I can tell you.”

Dr. Landsfield needed no urging. It seemed to him an unusually lucky chance that had thrown into his hands as a patient, the wealthiest and most influential man in the place. He did not pause to think much upon the subject, but hastily attired himself for his errand, and in half an hour was standing by the sick man’s bed. Mr. Gravely was indeed terribly ill, and his case was one that required the exercise of considerable skill on the part of the physician. The young doctor, who was really a man of great ability, managed it ably, and as the storm continued for two days, and old Dr. Jones grew worse instead of better, he was not interrupted for a week; and in the meantime he was called in to see several other of the old doctor’s patients, who in that worthy’s

sickness were forced to accept a young man, or do without medical advice. He gave entire satisfaction in every case, and when Dr. Jones appeared on the ground once more, he fully endorsed the young man's practice in the case of Mr. Gravely, and even went so far as to propose to him to become his partner, with a view to making him his successor when he should retire from his practice, as he meant to do at no very distant day. Dr. Landsfield was fairly overwhelmed by all this sudden good fortune, and for a while could scarcely believe it real. He made the best of it, however, and accepted the offer held out to him. Once under the wing of the old doctor, his fortune was sure; for the people of L— seemed to think that as a partner of the man they had looked up to so long in matters of health and sickness, he was a very different person from the friendless young man they had frowned so coldly upon because of his youth.

When Mr. Gravely recovered, he took a strange fancy to Dr. Landsfield, and declared his intention to do all in his power to secure to the young man a prosperous future. With two such friends, his career could not be otherwise than prosperous; and in five years after his sudden change of fortune he was the only physician of L—, Dr. Jones having retired, and turned over to him all his large practice. Mr. Gravely was a widower, and a childless man. It had been the greatest desire of his life to have a son to inherit his fortune, but Providence had denied him this blessing. About the time of his wife's death, he had adopted a young girl whom he found in a distant country town, and she had been for six years the reputed heiress of his wealth. She had taken his name, and many persons looked upon her as the very embodiment of all the filial virtues.

Julia Gravely was in her twenty-third year. She was tall and stately. Her dark, rich complexion, large, lustrous black eyes and luxuriant hair at once revealed her parentage. Her parents had died when she was a mere child, and she had been taken, out of pity for her lonely condition, by a worthy couple, who reared her until her sixteenth year, when Mr. Gravely, who chanced to meet her, was charmed with her beauty and vivacity, and adopted her. Her father had been an Italian artist, possessed of genius and its usual accompaniment—poverty; and her mother had been an actress of some reputation in her native land, who had forsaken a promising career there to follow her husband to America. Julia united in her own character the impassioned and unstable disposition of her father and the fierceness and subtlety of her mother. She was radiantly beautiful, and she knew that it was that which had first drawn Mr. Gravely to her. She made good use of it to retain the hold she had gained upon him; though, in spite of all the kindness he had bestowed upon her, she really cared very little for him, yet managed to make both him and every one else believe she was devoted to him. She overwhelmed him with her demonstrations of affection, which were as hollow as they were violent. She gained her end by them, however, and succeeded in convincing the old man that she was as entirely devoted to him as though she had been his own child. When Dr. Landsfield appeared on the scene, she regarded him with an intense dislike. There seemed to exist in each qualities tense dislike. There seemed to exist in each qualities which at once repelled the other, and which would keep them forever apart. As she marked the growing fondness of her adopted father for the young physician, she became jealous of him. She feared that he might either deprive her of the fortune which she had always believed would be hers one day, or divide it with her, and she coveted it all herself. Sometimes, as she thought of this, she felt that she could destroy the intruder so deeply did she hate him.

Dr. Landsfield was sincerely attached to Mr. Gravely. He had from the first regarded the old man

as his best friend, and the many earnest proofs of friendship that he had received bound him to Mr. Gravely by the strongest ties of esteem and gratitude. One day he was sitting with the old man in his library, when the latter, producing a paper, handed it to him, and said:

“Edward, since I have known you I have looked upon you as I would have regarded a son, had I been blessed with one. I am a very old man, and I may die at any moment. In view of this, I have prepared my will, which I wish you to read.”

The doctor took the will and read it in silence, but the flush and strange look which passed over his face as he did so, showed that he was not a little astonished by it. The will gave to him the entire estate of his friend, upon the condition that he would marry Julia Gravely. In case the marriage did not take place, he was given the bulk of the estate—about two hundred thousand dollars—while Julia was given one hundred thousand.

“I feel deeply grateful to you for your generosity,” he said, after a pause; “but I hope it will be many years yet before I shall profit by it. But why do you wish me to marry your adopted daughter?” he asked, abruptly. “She has never shown any preference for me. Indeed, I have always thought she disliked me.”

“I wish to leave her safely provided for,” said his friend, with a smile. “A young woman with so large a fortune and without a protector, is in danger of being badly treated in the world. If you can marry her before I die it will make me very happy. She is a good girl, and you will hardly find one more beautiful and accomplished.”

“Does Miss Gravely know of this?” asked Dr. Landsfield.

“No. I shall show her the will to-day, and to-morrow I will have it executed in due form.”

The conversation was abruptly changed, and the doctor soon afterwards took his departure. A few hours later, Julia Gravely, sitting by her adopted father, read the draft of the will. Her face was turned from him, and he did not see the fierce and almost fiendish expression that swept over it as she learned the contents of the paper. There was still a dangerous expression in the eyes as she turned to him, but her face was calm and smiling.

“I thought I was to have been your sole heiress,” she said, carelessly.

“True, dear. There is now a will at my lawyer’s, signed and sealed, constituting you the sole heiress of my fortune. But this suits me better. I shall leave you perfectly comfortable, and if you see fit to marry Edward Landsfield you will have all I have to give. To-morrow I shall take up my former will and replace it with this. But tell me, dear, what do you think of it?”

“It is so sudden that I cannot make up my mind,” she said, seriously. “To-morrow I will talk more freely with you.”

She left him, with a kiss, and sought her room. Once there, her calmness vanished, and she gave way to an uncontrollable outburst of fury. She paced the floor hurriedly, talking to herself angrily

in her native tongue, and her small hands were clenched so tightly that the nails drew blood from the delicate palms.

When she went down to tea that evening she was quieter, and as she met her adopted father every trace of passion had vanished. There was a strange and brilliant light in her eyes, but he did not notice this. While sitting at the table, he saw that she wore a strange and curious ring that he had never seen before, and he asked her how she came by it.

“When my mother died,” she replied, composedly, “she left a little casket containing a few trinkets for me. In a note which accompanied it she stated that this ring had been in the possession of her family for over two hundred years.”

Nothing more was said concerning the ring, and when Julia left the old man at his library door, she pressed his hand tenderly, and said in a strained and unnatural tone:

“To-morrow, my father, we will talk about that will.”

Mr. Gravely drew his hand from her with an exclamation of pain.

“Your ring has cut my hand, I believe,” he said, abruptly. He held it up to the light, but discovering no sign of a wound, passed into the library.

Towards midnight Dr. Landsfield was hurriedly summoned to attend Mr. Gravely. The old man had been suddenly smitten with apoplexy, and the case was urgent. Without a moment’s delay the doctor hastened to the house. He found Mr. Gravely lying insensible upon a sofa in the library. Julia and the housemaid were standing by him—the former calm and silent, and the latter overwhelmed with grief. He was informed that the old man had been found lying on the floor in an unconscious state by one of the servants who had gone into the library for some purpose. How long he had lain there no one could tell. It might have been several minutes, or perhaps several hours, as he had been in the library ever since supper. As soon as he learned this, the doctor set to work.

It was indeed a bad case. There was every symptom of apoplexy in its most fatal form, and at a glance the doctor saw that human skill would avail but little. He used every exertion that science was aware of, but in vain. Death had claimed the old man.

As Dr. Sandsfield sat by the side of his dying friend, with his hand on his pulse, and anxiously noting every beat, he could not help wondering that death should have come to him in such a form. Mr. Gravely had never manifested the least tendency towards apoplexy, and the doctor was truly perplexed in his effort to account for his being attacked with it. He was utterly at sea, and his medical skill was of no assistance to him. Suddenly his eyes rested upon Mr. Gravely’s hand. It was a smooth, white hand, one that would show a cut or scratch instantly. As he gazed at it, Dr. Sandsfield saw on the inside of the middle finger two small marks of a nature so singular that he bent down to notice them. They were very small, but seemed as though they had been made by the claws of some diminutive beast, and from the appearance of the wounds he felt sure that they had been made very recently. Something, he could not tell what, impelled him to look up,

and as he did so his gaze encountered that of Julia Gravely. She was standing back of the sofa, and looking at him with an intensity of expression that startled him. Her face was ghastly pale, and her eyes shone with a kind of wild terror. As he met her eyes, a sickening feeling crept over him, and with an involuntary shudder he dropped his glance upon the hand again.

Mr. Gravely died that night, and Julia informed the doctor that the funeral would take place the next afternoon. Mr. Gravely had frequently said while living that he wished them to bury him within twenty-four hours after his death, and Julia was determined that his wishes should be carried out. The doctor told her that although the symptoms in his friend's case all pointed to apoplexy as the cause of his death, he was not convinced of it, and wished to make a post-mortem examination of the body, to ascertain the true cause of the affliction that had fallen upon her. Julia started violently, and exclaimed, hastily:

“No, no! not for worlds.” Then she added, more calmly, “I could not bear to have his body treated so.”

Dr. Landsfield urged her to consent to the examination, but she steadily refused, and throughout the interview manifested the greatest horror at the idea. Finally, the doctor gave up the attempt and went home.

As Dr. Landsfield sat in his office that night, he thought long and earnestly over what had just transpired. The more he dwelt upon the subject the stronger became his conviction that Mr. Gravely's death was not caused by apoplexy; and he could not help believing that the marks on the hand were in some way connected with it. But what could they be? Perhaps they were the marks of the bite of some poisonous insect. But no, that could not be so, for there was no insect known to him that could leave such a print behind it. The marks looked as though they were the impress of the claw of a diminutive lion. Then the doctor thought of Julia Gravely's strange conduct, and of her vehemence in refusing to allow the post-mortem examination. It was all very strange, and he shuddered as he thought of it. Still he was not satisfied. The day was breaking when he rose from the deep reverie into which he had fallen, and went out to his stable. Saddling his horse he rode rapidly to a neighboring town, where he had a long interview with a brother physician who was established there. From the grave surprise of his friend it seemed that Dr. Landsfield's communication was one of unusual importance.

The funeral of Mr. Gravely took place in the afternoon of that day. It was largely attended by the people of the town and surrounding country, and among them was the physician upon whom Dr. Landsfield had called in the morning. When the funeral was over, he went home with the latter.

It was fully midnight when two men drove hurriedly into the yard of Dr. Landsfield's office, and removing a long, heavy box from the wagon, carried it into the house. As the light fell upon their faces, it revealed the countenances of Dr. Landsfield and his friend Dr. Ellis. Without speaking, they proceeded to secure the room. The coffin, for the box they had brought was nothing else, was placed on a couple of chairs near a long table, the lid taken off, and the body of Mr. Gravely laid on the table. The examination as speedily begun, as the proper instruments were all ready at hand.

“Here,” said Dr. Landsfield, taking the slightly discolored hand, but from which the marks on the finger had not yet vanished, “here are the marks I spoke of.”

Dr. Ellis examined them closely, and then looking up, said abruptly:

“We had better go on. We have scarcely time enough to finish our work.”

“What do you think of the marks?” asked his friend.

“I think you are right; but I will talk about them when we get through.”

The clothing of the body was removed, and the examination began. It was close and searching, and made in silence. Suddenly Dr. Landsfield exclaimed, impulsively:

“By Heaven, Ellis, I was right after all.”

“What is it now,” asked Dr. Ellis, pausing.

“Mr. Grvelly did not die of apoplexy. He was poisoned. See here,” he continued. “Here are traces of a strong mineral poison which has produced effects precisely similar to those of that disease. See it was infused into the blood in some way, and has done its errand well. I am confident now that this poor man was the victim of foul play, and that those wounds on the finger were the cause of his death.

“You are certainly right,” said Dr. Ellis, musingly. “Poison was the cause of this man’s death. But who could have administered it?”

“That is what perplexes me,” was the reply.

“May not Mr. Gravely have taken his own life?” asked Dr. Ellis.

“No, I am confident he did not. I know he had the strongest motive for wishing to live.”

“I am inclined to agree with you that the wounds on the finger were the cause of his death,” said Dr. Ellis, “and that fact induces me to believe that this is a case of suicide. They were beyond a doubt made by a singular instrument of which I have lately read in a curious old Italian work left me by my father, who was profoundly learned in the mysteries of poisons. I refer to the ‘death ring,’ as it was called. It was very common in Italy during the seventeenth century. It is a broad, flat circling of gold, with a movable slide on one portion of the outer surface. By slipping back this slide, two claws of fine sharp steel, steeped in just such a poison as this we have discovered, are disclosed. The wearer of this ring, wishing to exercise his vengeance, has but to press his enemy’s hand, when the sharp claws will be sure to make a slight scratch upon the skin. In this manner the poison will be infused into the blood, and death will surely follow. Now, as these rings are at present among the rarest things in the world, and as Mr. Gravely was fond of collecting old relics, I think it extremely likely that he may have had one, and may have used it upon himself.

“No, no. I am sure he did not. I know it.”

“No one else here could have one,” said Dr. Ellis, positively. “But tell me, do you suspect any one?”

“No one,” replied Dr. Landsfield.

He shuddered as he spoke, for there flashed across him the recollection of a strange and antique ring which he had seen upon Julia Gravely’s hand the night her adopted father died. He said nothing, however, but assisted his friend to replace the body in the coffin and screw down the lid again. After this it was carried to the wagon by them, and driven back to the village cemetery, and re-interred in the grave from whence they had taken it. When they returned to the office again, the day was breaking. After breakfast Dr. Ellis set off for his home.

Dr. Landsfield was sorely perplexed. He knew not what to do. He knew now that his friend had been poisoned, and he was equally certain that Dr. Ellis was wrong in supposing that Mr. Gravely had committed suicide. He was sure, in his own mind, that Julia Gravely had murdered the old man to prevent the execution of the will, but he had no proof of it. As several days passed away, and he heard nothing of the intended will of Mr. Gravely from her, or from her lawyer, he became convinced of this. He determined to test the matter as soon as he could, by obtaining possession of the ring he had noticed on her finger.

To accomplish this he prepared a powerful compound, which, if dexterously used, would enable him to render her insensible, and thus secure the ring.

He had not long to wait, for in less than a week he was called in to see the young woman, who was suddenly taken ill. As he stood by her bedside he saw that the ring was still upon her left hand, where he had noticed it at first. She was even more beautiful than ever, and it seemed hard to think that so lovely a woman could have been guilty of so foul a crime. But as he felt that his suspicions were not unfounded, he was resolved to test them as far as lay in his power.

Quietly producing the compound that he had brought with him, he arranged it so that she would experience its full effect, and in a few minutes he saw a gentle and dreamy languor steal over her, and in less than ten minutes she was helpless. The effect of the drug would not last long, and he had but little time to carry out his plan. Drawing the ring from her finger, he moved back the slide which he quickly discovered, and saw two fine claws of steel, lying underneath it, and coated with a dark gray substance. They were, beyond a doubt, the instruments that had made the wounds on Mr. Gravely’s hand, and all his suspicions were confirmed. Only one thing remained, and that was to prove by actual experiment that the ring was poisoned, and capable of producing death. How to do this, was a difficult question. Glancing around the room, he saw a cat dozing quietly in one corner. With an exclamation of joy, he sprang to it, and seizing it gave it a sharp scratch with the claws. Then re-adjusting the ring, he slipped it back on the young woman’s hand, and sat down to watch the cat. In less than half an hour she manifested signs dizziness, and finally fell to the floor. Her breathing became more difficult, and her frame withered and swelled frightfully, until at last she lay quite still. After waiting for a few minutes Dr. Landsfield

examined her, and found that she was dead. Raising the window, he threw the cat out on the lawn, and then turned his attention to bringing Julia back to consciousness. She soon revived, and he left her, and hastened to his office, carrying with him the cat which he had picked up on his way. A careful examination showed him that she had died from the effects of a poison similar to that which had been fatal to Mr. Gravely. This was all he wanted. He was determined to have the murderess brought to justice for her crime, and he was equally resolved to charge her with it before causing her arrest. Perhaps this latter resolution was not very wise, but he wished to carry it out in order to set his mind at rest concerning the affair. Waiting until Julia had fully recovered, he called on her one afternoon.

She met him calmly and with distant politeness. Adroitly turning the conversation to suit his purpose, he said at length:

“I have been thinking of the death of your adopted father, Miss Gravely. I have always doubted that it was caused by apoplexy.” She started, and turned ghastly pale, but he affected not to notice this, and went on. “That was my reason for wishing to hold the post-mortem examination to which you objected so strongly. I feel confident that he was not a victim of apoplexy.”

“What do you think was the matter with him?” she asked, nervously, and making a visible effort to be calm.

“I think he was poisoned,” replied the doctor, quietly.

She sank back in her chair with her face perfectly livid, but the doctor still affecting to be unconscious of this, continued:

“There are certain mineral poisons that will produce almost every symptom of apoplexy, and as my friend was not subject to the disease, I think he must have fallen a victim to one of these. But let me tell you a singular dream I have had lately, which has influenced me greatly in my belief. I dreamed I had determined to make the examination in spite of you, and that on the night after the burial, I, in company with a brother physician, had the body exhumed, and taken to my office. There we made the examination, and found that poison had caused your adopted father’s death. There were strange marks on one of his fingers, which we had reason to suppose were caused by some instrument which had been used in implanting the poison in the system.. The body was re-buried, I thought, and I determined to leave nothing undone to find the murderer. I had reason, in my dream, to suspect a certain beautiful woman of this place, and shortly afterwards, as I thought, I was called in to see her during an attack of sickness. By means of a powerful drug I rendered her insensible, and drew from her finger a mysterious ring which I had supposed was the instrument used in causing my friend’s death. With it I killed a cat, and then replaced it on her hand, fully satisfied of the correctness of my conclusions. This dream has influenced me so greatly that I have determined to cause the arrest of the party I suspect.”

Julia lay back in her cushioned chair, with her eyes closed, and her face the hue of the grave. Her forehead was damp with a painful perspiration, and her breath came heavily and with difficulty. As the doctor finished speaking, she opened her eyes and gazed at him with an expression that haunted him to his latest hour.



“It is useless for me to contend against you,” she said, in a strange, unnatural voice. “It was no dream which you have told me, but a fearful reality. This is the ring, and its powers have not been exaggerated by you. See,” and she drew back the slide, and exposed the claws to his view. “They are terrible for good or evil. I used them on him to escape you, and now they are equally powerful to prevent your triumphing over me.”

As she spoke she raised her hand, and pressed it against her forehead. With a cry of horror, Dr. Landsfield sprang forward, but he was too late. The print of the fatal claws was visible upon her brow, and the physician knew of no antidote that could save her.

“What have you done?” he exclaimed, in a trembling voice.

“Baffled you,” she replied, and she swept past him to her chamber.

In a few hours the young woman was a corpse. She refused the remedies which the physician offered, although he did not know that they could save her. She was calm and composed until she became insensible, and died in a short time afterwards. Dr. Landsfield was horror-stricken by the terrible tragedy, and as he left the unhappy house that had witnessed it, he looked a dozen years older than when he entered there.

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