

## *Mr. Sterling's Confession*

by A New York Detective

MY FATHER was a respectable merchant, living in New York City. He met a terrible end perishing by fire. I was studying medicine at the time, with Dr. Betton, when I received the intelligence that my father's house, in White Street, had been burned to the ground, and that he had perished in the flames. My mother was rescued. I immediately left for New York for the purpose of consoling her under her great affliction. When my father's affairs came to be investigated, it was found that he had left my poor mother almost penniless, though I had been led to believe that he quite wealthy. It was partially this reason that made me give up the medical profession, for I knew from my mother's scanty means she could ill afford the expense necessary to prosecute it vigorously.

It was about a year ago that my friend Mr. M., the well known New York attorney, sent for me, begging my immediate presence. I immediately hurried to his residence, supposing that he wished to consult me on some case. I was shown at once into his study, where I found him poring over a parchment.

"Brampton," said he, after he had shaken hands with me, "do you know Mr. Sterling?"

"Sterling—Sterling," said I, endeavoring to recollect; "I cannot say I do. But stay," I continued, "I remember Mr. Sterling, a banker, with whom my father did business."

"Exactly," replied Mr. M., "he died last night."

"Indeed," I continued, supposing, of course, there was some mystery about his death to be investigated.

"Yes," continued Mr. M., speaking slowly, "and he has left you by will seventy-five thousand dollars."

"What!" I exclaimed, starting up from my chair, as if I had been shot.

"He has left you seventy-five thousand dollars," repeated Mr. M., in a quiet tone.

"Impossible!" I returned; "I did not know Mr. Sterling personally. I never spoke to him in the whole course of my life; in fact, I do not remember ever to have seen him."

"That may all be true, but he has nevertheless left you this money."

"But how can I take it when it rightfully it belongs to his wife and family?"

"No, Brampton, it rightfully belongs to you."

“You are speaking enigmas to me, Mr. M. How it is right that Mr. Sterling should leave me such a large sum of money is more than I can fathom.”

“Listen to me attentively, Brampton, and I will soon convince you that you are rightfully entitled to the money. You are aware that there is no profession which penetrates so deeply into family secrets as the law. The hiding place of the skeleton, which they say is to be found in every man’s house, is readily entered by the family attorney, and all the secrets of his clients are necessarily revealed to him. During my professional career I have had confided to me some extraordinary secrets, which, if I were to reveal, would make the world stand aghast. Parties who have held situations of honor and trust, who have been held by the public as model husbands and fathers, who have been looked upon as the very epitome of integrity, would appear as scoundrels, forgers, and some even guilty of the highest crime known to the law. But the sacred nature of my profession closes my lips; I dare not bring to light the hidden skeleton and stamp on it the Impress of truth by revealing the facts to the world.”

I could not understand what the exordium meant, and could only bow in reply.

“One of my best clients was Mr. John Sterling,” continued Mr. M.; “a man of considerable fortune, and who was supposed to have lived a most exemplary life. He was a member of a church, and noted for his charitable donations to the funds of the cause he espoused. No one had ever presumed to breathe a word against his private character, and he was cited as a model of philanthropy and just dealing by all who knew him. When I first became acquainted with him he was a widower with no family. I had known him for several years without discovering anything in his private history which led me to suspect that it contained anything of a remarkable character. I always thought that he was unusually reserved and silent, but supposed that it arose mostly from his natural disposition than from any secret preying on his mind. I hope you are listening attentively, Brampton?”

“Certainly,” I replied. “I hear every word.”

“Three days ago, I was summoned to his house in a great hurry. The messenger stated that my immediate presence was necessary. Somewhat surprised at this sudden summons, I lost no time in obeying it. When I reached his house, which was situated in Fourteenth Street, near Fifth Avenue, I found his household in great confusion; several doctors were in attendance, and alarm was expressed on every feature. It appeared that Mr. Sterling had been seized that morning with a paralytic stroke, and no hope whatever was entertained of his recovery. I was immediately shown in his bedroom, where I found the sufferer reclining on a sumptuous couch. He presented a sad spectacle; one half of his body was dead and his mouth was distorted. He did not, however, suffer much physical pain, but his face wore an expression of intense anxiety. The moment he saw me a smile flitted across his distorted features. He made a sign for me approach his bedside.

“I am glad you have come;” said he, in a hoarse whisper; “I want you to make my will. It is a duty I ought to have attended to before. Set about it at once, for I feel that my end is fast approaching. Who knows how soon this feeble flicker of life may leave me?”

I procured writing materials and set about my duty. I soon finished the preliminary writing, and paused for him to instruct me to the disposal of his property. The invalid anxiously awaited for this moment, and then in a tone of voice which was firmer than when he first spoke, he said:

“I bequeath the sum of seventy-five thousand dollars to Mr. James Brampton, detective officer, son of Mr. Thomas Brampton, late of White Street, in the city of New York.’

“But your relations,’ I ventured to suggest.

“Do as I bid you,’ continued the dying man. ‘I leave my relatives the rest of my property, to be divided equally among them.’

“I had no course left but to obey, and drew out the will as he requested. At the same time I thought it very strange that he should leave such a large sum to you, Brampton. The will was properly attested. When all was completed, a load appeared to be taken off the invalid’s mind and a placid smile overspread his features, and he made a sign that all should leave the room but myself.

“Mr. M.,’ said he, as soon as we were alone, ‘draw your chair close to my bedside, get your writing materials, I want to make a confession to you. I can see that you are surprised at the provisions of my will; but hear my history, and you will then learn that I have only performed an act of reparation.’

“I remonstrated with him, and advised him to remain quiet and not excite himself by conversation, but he insisted, and said that if he did not ease his mind he would suffer fearful torture in his dying moments. Seeing that he was determined, I drew close to his head, as he requested, and took down the words as they fell from his mouth. Here is his confession.”

So saying, Mr. M. handed to me a dozen pages of MS., and begged that I would read them. I did so, and the following is his strange history:

“Fifteen years ago I was engaged in Malden Lane as a banker. I did a large business, and soon accumulated a considerable amount of money. But reverses came; I speculated, and soon found myself involved beyond redemption. There was no other course open to me but to flee the country. I made my preparations, and soon arranged everything to my satisfaction.

“The very evening before my intended departure, as I was examining my books after bank hours were over, I was interrupted by a knock at the door of my private study. In answer to my summons to ‘come in’ the door opened, and a friend of mine, Mr. Thomas Brampton, entered.

“‘How are you, Sterling?’ said he, advancing and shaking me by the hand. ‘Excuse my calling after banking hours, but the fact is I want particularly to see you on a little business. You know the mortgage I had on Blanchard’s property; he paid it off this afternoon. I want you to invest it for me.’

“‘Certainly,’ I returned. ‘You know anything I can do—’

“O, yes, I know all about that. I would rather put this money in your hands than in the United States Bank. There is the amount, fifty thousand dollars. Give me a certificate of deposit.’

“I made out the receipt and handed it to him. He placed it in his pocketbook, saying: ‘This is all my dear wife and boy have to depend on. Thank God it is now in safe hands and I can sleep easy in my bed at night.’

“How came Blanchard to pay off the mortgage?’ I asked.

“I suppose he wanted to free his property, I have not mentioned the matter to my wife yet, nor shall I until you have made a fresh investment. You know what a nervous body she is.’

“You are right,’ I replied; ‘women don’t understand these things. But I will make your mind easy on that now. Tomorrow I will look out for some good security.’

“After a little further conversation, my visitor left. When he had gone, I seated myself by my study fire, and pondered long and anxiously. This fifty thousand dollars, so opportunely placed in my possession at such a critical moment, would release me from most pressing embarrassments. But then it was impossible for me to use it. I must invest the amount at once. I could not take the sum with me, for I had given a certificate of deposit, and to appropriate the money to myself would be felony, and I could be pursued and arrested for it to the very ends of the earth. I did not know what to do. The golden bait, so temptingly placed before me, stifled as it were every good sentiment in my heart and I felt that I could be guilty of every crime to further my ends. While pursuing these reflections, a sudden thought entered my brain, and to show how lost I was to all sense of moral rectitude, my soul did not fall back appalled at the suggestion made me by my depraved heart. I might get rid of him and appropriate the money to my own use. Then I dwelt on all I could do with such a sum. It would preclude the necessity of my leaving the country. Yes, I made up my mind that I would put him out of the way. I said that it must be done speedily, too.

“After I had thought over the matter in every possible light, I went home. I lived at that time in Canal Street, which was then the fashionable part of the city. I suppose my countenance must have expressed my anxiety, for my wife no sooner saw me than she interrogated me very closely. And here, Mr. M., I must make another confession. I have been a bad husband. The world gives me credit for having been affectionate and loving to my wife, but it only shows how mistaken the world oftentimes is. I hated my wife, and in private treated her very brutally; and yet she was a kind, devoted woman. I have often seen her eyes fill with tears at some cruel speech of mine; and yet not one word of reproach fell from her lips, and God knows she had cause enough. Poor Emily! I broke her heart.

“But I am digressing. I replied surlily to my wife’s interrogation, and bade her hold her peace. I knew it was only love for me that prompted her interference. She did not refer to the subject again.

“I went to bed that night turning over in my own mind my plan of action; one thing I had firmly resolved, namely that, Mr. Brampton must be sacrificed. The only thing that I could not decide upon was how the deed was to be done. In the midst of these murderous thoughts, I slept. My dreams were of a varied character that night. Suddenly, in the midst of my slumbers, a thought occurred to me, which, for a moment, completely paralyzed me. I started up in bed, and exclaimed:

“Fool that I am! I forgot the certificate of deposit!”

“What is the matter, John?” said my wife; ‘what do you mean by a certificate of deposit?’

“Peace, woman, with your ceaseless babbling,’ I returned.

“How can you be so unkind to me, dear?’ sobbed my wife.

“Have done with your useless repinings!’ I answered.

“O, John, John, once you loved me, and now I believe you hate me! yet God is my witness that I have endeavored to do my duty to you as a wife. Do tell me, John, what can I do better?”

“Will you hold your cursed tongue!’ I replied, and I kicked her. Yes, Mr. M.; I brutally kicked her. The poor thing shrank away close to the wall, and I could hear her endeavor to stifle her sobs by thrusting the sheet into her mouth. God has now punished me for my inhuman conduct. The lower portion of my body is dead, and I can feel death gradually creeping upwards.

“But to return. The sudden thought that Mr. Brampton had the certificate of deposit in his possession completely nonplussed me. If I were to kill him, he had in all possibility deposited the paper in some secure place in his house, and after his death it would be brought to light, and I should be no nearer my end than before.

“It was after turning the matter over again in my mind that a hellish thought entered my head. I would destroy the house and all its contents by fire! The idea was no sooner conceived than it was matured and the next night I determined to put it into execution! I went about my business the following day as usual. No one that saw me had the least idea that I was harboring any thought of so desperate a character. I do not know how it was, but it seemed to me as if I were the plaything of some mysterious power. The thought of two innocent people perishing in the flames gave me no concern whatever. The only aim and end that I had in view was to destroy the certificate of deposit. To do this I would have sacrificed all my relatives and friends. I believe if I had any children and knew that by throwing them into the flames I could have accomplished my wish, I should have done it.

“Mr. Brampton called on me during the day. I told him that I was in treaty for a splendid investment for his funds, and that there could be no doubt but I should succeed in making the arrangement in a day or two. He appeared to be perfectly satisfied, and left me after an hour’s conversation on indifferent subjects, during which term I learned that he had said nothing to his wife nor any other person about the matter. I passed that day as usual. I had the same smile on

my lips as if my heart were guiltless as a child's. And yet the hellish thought was harbored there, festering its way to the innermost core.

“Evening came, I retired home as usual. I found my wife had been weeping all day, for her eyes were red and swollen. The sight maddened me, I no longer hesitated to use personal violence, and vile, cowardly blows followed each other in quick succession. She rushed to her own chamber and locked herself in. This was exactly what I wanted. It left me a free field for action.

“At midnight I left the house and started for Mr. Brampton's residence. It was a cold winter's night, and the wind blew violently from the northeast. The very elements seemed to conspire in favor of my diabolical design.

“Mr. Brampton lived in White Street. I soon stood before his house. Not a soul was in the street. A small alleyway ran by the side of the house, and some wooden shanties leaned against one of the gable-ends. With the aid of a flint and steel, I easily procured a light; I then thrust a quantity of shavings through a small window, and set fire to them with a brimstone match. I also set fire to the shanties in two or three places. This done, I retired exultingly away to the corner of the street, to witness the effect.

“When I came to analyze the feelings I experienced at that time, I found they were actually feelings of pleasure. For some minutes no manifestation appeared—then came a bluish smoke—then smoke of a much more dense description, and lastly the whole building burst out into a sheet of flame. Even then, the alarm was not given for some time. At last, I heard footsteps on the pavement, and suddenly the words, ‘fire! fire!’ broke the stillness of the night. These words were uttered by others in the distance. Watchmen's rattles were sprung, and the street was soon a scene of bustle and confusion, as the engines began to arrive. But amidst all this din there was one sound which could be heard above all others, and which proceeded from the burning dwelling. It was a woman's shriek. You may judge of the condition of my heart at that moment, when I tell you that those cries of agony and suffering fell mute on it.

“The scene which followed was so quick and rapid in its execution, that I can scarcely remember it. One part of it, however, is indelibly impressed on my mind. I saw one of the heroic firemen place a ladder against the burning pile, and fearlessly ascend it. A woman appeared on the balcony, clothed only in her night dress. She was conveyed safely to the ground. Mr. Brampton perished in the flames. The receipt was undoubtedly destroyed, for I have heard nothing more about it.

“When Mr. Brampton's affairs were investigated it was found that he had been paid a large sum of money; but no one knew what became of it. It was afterward supposed that some robber had entered the house, and, appropriating the funds, had set fire to the dwelling for the purpose of destroying the evidence of his crime.

“Fortune prospered with me after this diabolical act. Money flowed in fast, and I became a millionaire—but I had no happiness. The gnawing tooth of remorse has been undermining my existence ever since. But still the demon of avarice had taken such possession of me that I could not refund the wealth I had so criminally obtained.

“Mr. M., I have done. In leaving Mr. James Brampton the sum I have done, I only perform an act of retribution. It is a tardy act of justice, and can by no means wipe out my sin. My only hope now is in a merciful God—to him I commit my soul.”

Thus ended Mr. Sterling’s confession. I need not say how deeply I was affected by it. The sum restored to me was sufficient to enable me to give up my profession, and since the day I came in possession of it, I have ceased all business.

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