

THE STORY TELLER.
ALL FOR A WILL.
A LAWYER'S STORY.

It was toward the close of a March day, a few years ago, as I sat in my office musing over the different cases spread out before me, when I was suddenly startled to my feet by the entrance of a man.

Not because a man is an uncommon sight; but the appearance of this one made me draw back with fear.

He was about three-and-thirty years of age, with a long, narrow face, small projecting eyes, large mouth, and nose rather long and inclined to droop at the end. His face was as smooth as an infant's, and the few mixed locks were brushed behind his ears, giving him a look of the mildest character.

In size he was of the medium height, legs not the straightest, to be sure, yet they matched well with the lean, bowed arms, which hung awkwardly by his side.

After this personage had entered he closed the door noiselessly behind him, took off his hat and placed it carefully on the table. Then, turning and scanning the room for a moment, he advanced toward me.

“Your name is — —, is it not, sir?” said the stranger; and without waiting a reply, extended his hand.

“The same, sir,” I replied, and unceremoniously put forward my hand, which was seized with a tight grip, then loosened, and the stranger sat himself down in front of me.

“Well, as you are the gentleman I desire to see, I trust that you are at leisure to hear my errand to you?”

I nodded my head for him to proceed, for I could not speak. My tongue seemed lifeless within my mouth, and every moment the cold sweat oozed out of every pore till I feared I would fall out of the chair I sat upon. Understanding my sign, he proceeded as follows.

“My name is Walker—Albert, if you please to have it—and for some years I lived out west. But things of late not going on the smoothest in that direction, I went down to mother's. I found the old lady very sick, and as there is no chance of her getting better, she wished me to call (having been recommended) and ask you to come up and see how she wished to dispose of her estate.”

“She wishes a will,” I managed to say.

“Yes—exactly. Come at once; a carriage is waiting at the door which will soon take us to our destination.”

I had some misgivings at first about trusting myself with a stranger in such a manner; but considering that I had nothing to detain me at my office, I yielded, and soon seated myself in the carriage with the stranger beside me.

I had omitted to ask where his mother resided, and this accompanied with the thought "I may be with a madman," who are so insidious in their doings, awoke the most revolting imaginations within me. My companion was leaning back against the seat, and from his outward appearance I concluded he was courting sleep. I didn't then feel at liberty to press my omitted question. Silently we rode on, my companion in his old position, while I leaned forward and endeavored to overcast my fancies by admiring the picturesque scenery without.

It was just as the sun had sunk behind the western horizon when we stopped in front of an old-fashioned cottage, partly hid by the clustering vines and standing back a little way from the river bank. My companion was aroused from his seeming stupor by the halting of the carriage, and when the door was swung open by the coachman he leaped lightly out, followed by myself. Up the stoop into the hall I followed him, and here I discovered I had forgot my papers. Without expressing to those present my oversight, I descended the steps and leaned forward into the vehicle and recovered my documents. In my endeavors to be speedy I dropped a part of them on the ground. I had just gathered them and was about to rise, when a shadow was thrown across my path. I turned slightly, and in a sort of cage, with thick iron bars in front, I beheld the form of a woman. Catching my eye she thrust her arm through the bars and pressed into my hand a piece of paper. I was about to give vent to my surprise, when seeing her fingers pressed to her lips, I checked myself, arose, and strode into the house. It was one of those comfortable, old-fashioned houses where ranges, grates and dumb waiters are held at a discount. A bright fire burned briskly upon the hearth. As I peeped through the crevice of the door I could discern the favorite black kettle swung above the lively embers and humming its accustomed tune in the kitchen.

The hall ran through the middle of the house, evidently made upon no contracted principles, for it was exceedingly long and fully proportioned in width. I was now sitting in the parlor alone, for my companion had gone above.

In about ten minutes my companion came in and invited me to partake of a cup of tea ere I commenced my duties. The offer being accepted, we adjourned to the dining room, sat down to the repast, and conversed upon various matters pleasantly. The note I had received had almost been forgotten, when I put my hand into my pocket and crushed it between my fingers. A dizziness came over me for a moment, and I conversed beneath a cloud of insensibility, for the haggard form of the woman seemed to stand before me pointing her bony finger at Walker. He perceived the change, and in an under tone, inquired if I was ill. "No, only excited and nervous; it will pass away soon," I replied.

Another cup of tea was offered and accepted, and when I had drained the contents I turned to my companion, who, with his elbow upon the table, was eyeing me sharply, and inquired if that, pointing to the servant, was the only domestic around the place. "No,

sir,” he replied, casting his eyes from me to the floor. “I have one more; she is attending to the wants of mother.”

Mother! A hollow voice seemed to echo through the silent hall, and fancy sketched grinning Death recording, “She’s mine.”

Having finished, my companion led the way up the winding stairs, and opened a small door a few feet from the landing. I had followed on tip-toe for he had whispered that his mother was very sensitive to the least noise, and of course I had no motive to prompt me but a desire to follow his intimation.

In a few minutes we reached a second door by means of a narrow passage. When the door was opened I found myself standing in a room, neatly but not extravagantly furnished. Near a large window stood a sideboard profusely ornamented with numerous bottles, cups, glasses, decanters, and, in fact, all the auxiliaries pertaining to a sick room. A little further to the left was a large double bedstead; and by the aid of the almost exhausted candle, I could discern the face of a woman.

My companion called her attention to my presence, and when I had recognized the slight nod of her head, she thanked me for my kindness in coming, as she wished my services in executing her will.

“I have a copy of the manner in which I wish to dispose of my estate, and I pray you,” she added, “to follow it exactly.”

She then handed me a folded sheet of paper, and I hastily glanced over its contents.

The whole estate, valued at many thousand dollars, was to be divided between her son Albert and Alice Brewer, her sister. Across the back, in a large hand was the name “Mary K. Walker.”

I folded it up, and as I did so I assured the woman of my willingness to follow her directions.

She turned a little in bed, and as she did so I thought I saw massive black hair beneath the white which was combed carefully back from her forehead.

I choked down the suspicions which were alive within me, and bent my ear to the woman as she spoke.

“I had a daughter, sir, three weeks ago, but she is no more—she is dead—I’ll be with you, child! I’ll soon come. Yes,” she added, “I’ll be with you soon.”

My companion beckoned me, and rising from my chair I bid her good night and left the room.

We descended the stairs without exchanging words, and walked into the parlor. Here my companion pointed to a seat, drew up another to me and said:

“You see how the case stands, Mr. —, and it behooves you to apply your attention to this matter at once. Tomorrow, I trust, you can draw up the paper, and before I bid you good bye, you will have the satisfaction of”—here he paused, as if he had unconsciously gone too far; but quickly recovering himself, he added— “of seeing all done for the comfort of mother.”

Without replying to his remarks I carelessly asked—

“Ah, you intend for me to remain here all night, then?”

“Certainly. You could never think of getting to the city before daylight, and besides, there is no train until tomorrow.”

Under the circumstances, I must submit to his proposal, and being weary I was, upon my request, shown to the room I was to occupy, situated just above the apartment of the seeming invalid.

I bade my companion good night, closed the door, and then wheeled a cushioned chair near the window and sat down, diffusing my thoughts throughout the many channels of the world's doings.

Thus I sat nodding at the even tick of my watch, or stretching myself to arouse me from this inviting trance.

“Ah!” I exclaimed, as the thought of the singular woman in such a singular place rushed across my mind; and I plunged my hand into my pocket, and drew forth the document she had given me. Upon a coarse piece of paper, in a cramped hand, were written a few words, blotted as if by the tears of the writer. They read as follows:

“I am a prisoner. For God's sake, rescue me—for the sake of my dead mother.”

There was no signature, and for a moment a terrible thought arose in my mind, and I was forced to rise to shake off the spell that bound me—walk, walk, until recollecting myself, I paused at the window.

It was a beautiful night. The blue canopy above was studded with twinkling stars, and the moon was just riding up the heavens in all her power and brightness. For a few moments I contemplated the scenery without, and then turned into the room.

The woman below haunted me. She seemed to have written to me to release her.

“I will! I will!” I muttered, between my clenched teeth, as I pulled off my boots, took them in my hand, and swung the door open.

I listened—not a sound. Yes, feet are on the stairs, and a light reflects the shadows of two men upon the wall beneath me. I stooped over the banisters, and caught a fading glance of Walker, ere the door was closed behind him. I paused upon the landing, pondering whether to proceed or return to my room. A little hesitation, and then determined upon the former.

With all the care I could command I began my descent. It was extremely dark, and great judgment was required to save me from a fall on those winding stairs. In one hand I held my boots and with the other grasped tightly the banisters. Down, down. A loud squeaking noise met my feet upon the third step. I paused before I resumed.

“No one has heard me,” thought I, as I stepped briskly down until I had reached the bottom. I heard feet upon the floor, and I slunk into a corner, covered by a column.

The door opened, and Walker, with a light held above his head, peeped out, only for a moment, in breathless anxiety, until all was again still. I reached safely the main hall, after forming no clue of the seeming invalid.

I could hear sharp talking, but I had no time to listen. My mission was below. Here I was in the dark, not knowing which way to turn with safety. I could now hear the rattling of glasses and the sound of voices above me; but I had made a discovery, and I pushed boldly forward toward a narrow stream of light straight through an opening over a door. I found it a little open, and, pushing more, I peeped with caution within.

Thick heavy curtains hung to the windows, and all was darkness; only a small hole in the outer edge of the curtain admitted the light; which shone through the opening near the door. I stepped softly across the room, pulled back the curtains, admitted a stream of light, which, as I moved, oh heavens! fell upon the upturned face of a corpse.

I uttered a suppressed cry, started backwards, and my knees shook until I was forced to lean on the window for support. Regaining more courage, I made a survey of the room and the body now lying before me. The place was neatly furnished with a plain carpet, several chairs, sofas, tables, a book-case, and several small ornaments on the mantel. These constituted all, if I add an old portrait hanging against the wall, which resembled the corpse upon which I turned my attention.

It was the lifeless form of a woman of sixty-five, very small in size, laid out to all appearances in the very habiliments she wore prior to her decease. Her hair was of a silver gray.

I now raised the window to make my exit.

I leaped upon the steps, and trod safely to the balcony. Looking carefully around I grasped the column which supported it, and slid to the ground.— Once there, my heart beat freer. I put on my boots and then sought out my client.

I found the prison, and in one corner, shivering with the cold, sat a woman.—I could not forbear for a moment to study the features as they were revealed by the moon. She was a woman of about twenty years, face pale, and thick curls falling promiscuously over her forehead. Yet with all the marks of privation, want, and misery defined upon her, there was yet a look which denoted one who had seen better days.

Upon the door I made as much noise as was consistent, till the inmate awoke, and when she did, she flew to the place where I was standing, exclaiming:

“I knew you would come—I knew it!”

“Hush, hush!” I repeated in a whisper. “Be quick. Your safety depends upon it.”

“Safety?” she replied.

“Your safety and with freedom.”

Her jet black eyes sparkled at my remarks.

“Where is the entrance?” I asked.

“There is only one, and that is at the foot of the cellar stairs.”

I saw there was no hope in that direction; so seizing a bar lying at hand, I with one desperate effort, wrenched out the bolt, and the girl was free.

By chance I looked upward and saw the flash of light in the room I had so recently occupied. There was no time to be lost. I was missed, and knowing search would follow my absence, I wrapped my coat around the woman and hurried up the road, leading her by the hand.

She told me Walker was her brother, “and yesterday, he and my aunt Alice taunted me with saying that ‘the old woman’s dead, and you’ll soon follow.’”

I saw it all in an instant. “The villain!” I muttered, and felt the woman’s hand grasp me tightly as the word fell on her ear.

On we went till we arrived at a neighbor’s house. I aroused the inmates, and then, telling our story, the gentleman called up his sons, and with them I marched boldly back to the house.—Gaining admittance by means of a window, we rushed upstairs as several people dashed out of the room above.

“Catch him!” I cried, as Walker fled downstairs in front of me, and with one blow from the fist of one of the sons the wretch and murderer was laid out lifeless in the hall.

Up I mounted into the room, and lo! beheld the invalid—the dying woman standing in a corner, with a white wig at her feet, and her own black hair hanging in disorder round her shoulders. She, with Walker, and the two domestics, were seized and in the morning marched off to prison.

But now for the sad tale—now to lay bare the diabolical plot, which encompassed forgery, robbery, and swindling within its folds.

Walker made a confession to the following effect:—That his mother had died the day previous to my coming, and seeing that the will which she had made gave him but a pittance of the estate, he destroyed it, and was determined to have one of his own. So, by his advice, his aunt answered the mother's place in bed, and she was to make the will, and leave it, as I have related. Then Mrs. Walker was to be buried, and when his sister, whom it was his intention to murder, was out of the way, he could then show the will, and he and the deceiving aunt were to divide. He had shut his sister up three weeks before his mother's death, and with all the coolness imaginable, he said he presumed by his reporting her drowned, he had hastened her on the road faster than anything else.

The poor girl corroborated that part relating to herself; and when I had given my evidence, a man stepped forward and produced a warrant for the arrest of Walker upon a charge of murder.

“He murdered a man,” replied the officer, “some time ago, and then escaped to this place. I have been on his trail a long while, and yesterday tracked him here.”

The aunt received a severe sentence—also her domestics, accessories to the act; while Walker perished as a criminal upon the gallows. The woman, or Miss Rachel, as I should term her, regained her estate, and gained a victory over all they had done for a will.

One of the deepest and darkest plots man could conceive to defraud was brought to light by an unsuccessful effort to gain a will.

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