

A Doctor's Story by Judge Clark

During my six weeks' attendance on him, how I learned to hate the old miscreant! How often I regretted that it was only his arm, and not his neck, that had been broken! Of course I was bound to do so, and *did* do all I could for my patient.

"Only bring me round in time for the wedding, doctor," was the earnest exhortation of which Ananias Skinner was accustomed to greet me on my daily visits. Ugh! how repulsive he looked, as he lay leering and peering out of this wicked gray eyes, his arm in splints and an ugly black cap on his head.

The wedding he was so anxious about was none other than his own. It would have come off before, but an unlucky—pardon me, I meant just the reverse—slip up on an icy pavement, resulting in a fractured bone, had compelled an adjournment.

It was a shame, everybody said, that a young girl like Alice Gray should think of marrying a man of Mr. Skinner's years.

It was the old case, people thought, of youth and beauty making barter of themselves for money; and many there were to sneer at, and none to pity poor Alice Gray, whose saddened look and drooping form betokened anything but a heart at ease, or one filled with bright anticipations of the future.

"And there was Herbert Blake to whom she was engaged, and who sailed two years ago in a vessel never since heard from—how *could* she forget *him* so soon!" sighed the dashing Mrs. Jones, a widow of two months' standing, whose grief was fairly inconsolable at the thought that it must be kept up ten months longer.

At first I was uncharitable enough to join in the common opinion that, in contracting a marriage necessarily so repugnant to every feeling of maidenly delicacy, Alice Gray was but engaging in a heartless speculation, and was more designing than designed against. But when I came to know the truth, and how exalted and entirely pure were the motives that influenced her conduct, and how utterly devilish was the plot that environed her, I felt that to attempt her rescue was the only fitting atonement I could make for my past injustice.

But how to set about it was the perplexing question. I had gained my knowledge in a manner that engaged my professional honor against divulging it.

However, no time was to be lost. My patient had nearly if not quite recovered, and tomorrow was the day fixed for the important event to which he had so long looked forward. I had at least the right to speak freely to *him*, and determined to do so at once.

He seemed a little astonished at my call. There had never been any personal intimacy between us, and some days before I had given him to understand that, unless some

unexpected change of symptoms intervened, there would be no need to continue my professional visits.

“I have come to talk to you about a private matter,” I began, after the exchange of a few commonplaces—“one of which I feel at liberty to speak to you alone.”

He looked at me attentively, but said nothing.

“You will remember,” I continued, “that previous to setting your arm I gave you ether.”

“I do,” he answered.

“It was administered at your own request,” I added; “I did not think it required in a case so simple, but yielded to your wishes.”

“I am very sensitive to pain, doctor,” he whined apologetically; “but surely you don’t think any harm has resulted.”

“Of that I shall leave *you* to judge, when you have heard me further.”

He nervously motioned for me to proceed.

“The inhaling of ether,” I resumed, “sometimes produces singular effects. A not unfrequent result is a high degree of intoxication, under the influence of which the patient will talk incessantly, often betraying his profoundest secrets without the slightest recollection of it afterward.”

Ananias turned deadly pale.

“Such,” I proceeded, “was the case with yourself. You spoke unreservedly of what seemed uppermost in your mind, your approaching marriage, divulging the fact that the hand of Alice Gray was the price you exacted for the liberty of her father, whom you possessed the power of casting into prison for debt, [it was in the days of debtors’ prisons] he being bound as surety on a note you held for money loaned to Herbert Blake, the young man who was lost at sea.”

“Well, sir,” he defiantly retorted, “have I not the right to collect or compound my honest dues in my own way, without being called to account by officious intermeddlers?”

“But this is *not* an ‘honest due,’” I said sternly, looking him full in the face.

“Who—who says it is not?” he stammered.

“Yourself,” I replied; “you disclosed much more than I have yet related. You let out, for instance, that *Herbert Blake had paid you the amount of the note before sailing*; that in consequence of its having been deposited for safekeeping with your banker, along with

other papers, the note was not present to be surrendered when paid; but that you had signed a receipt against it, which was probably lost with the unfortunate man to whom it was given.”

“But Doctor,” he abjectly faltered, “you would not surely place reliance on the statements of a man laboring under an unnatural excitement, such as that you have described. Besides, what you know you are in honor bound to keep to yourself.”

“You reason ingeniously,” I answered; “but unfortunately for *you*, and fortunately for the truth and justice, you gave the name of a witness who was present when the money was paid, and who now happens to be easily accessible.”

“It is false!” he cried, forgetting himself; “there was no one present but my secretary, and he is no longer in the country.”

“He has returned, and I have already seen him,” was my quiet response.

The effect was electrical. He fairly shook with fear. His jaw drooped, and his wicked eyes were riveted, as if spellbound, to mine.

“What is your purpose?” he gasped.

“Immediately to put the intended victims of your villainous plot in communication with the witness I have mentioned!” I exclaimed, as I rose and hastened from his presence.

But I had no occasion to keep my word, as it was my intention to do betimes in the morning. I was turning over for another nap, when I was summoned to “go down to Mr. Skinner’s right away!” by a messenger, who hastened off without further explanation.

I hurried on my clothes and sallied forth, but on reaching my destination, found I might as well have taken my time. Ananias Skinner was hanging, like a bundle of old clothes, from a hook in the wall, as dead as Dives.

But the best of my story is left to be told. Herbert Blake *wasn’t* dead, after all. The vessel he sailed in had been captured by pirates and sunk, those on board having been set ashore on a desert island, whence, after many hardships and adventures, those who survived—Herbert among them—succeeded in escaping, and eventually reaching home. He had preserved Ananias Skinner’s receipt, and was not a little surprised to learn the use that had been sought to be made of the paid-off note.

Herbert and Alice have been married for many years now; but whether the match was in harmony with Tabitha Raddles’ views of “*suitability*,” is a question I am not quite prepared to answer.

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