

The Mysterious Advertisement

by A New York Detective

The nature of my profession brings me in contact with every description of person. I have formed through its agency many pleasant acquaintanceships, to which my memory often reverts with pleasure. Some years ago I became acquainted with a Mr. Norval, a wealthy merchant, who resided in West Fourteenth Street. He was a widower, and the only person living with him were two in number, a niece and an only son.

Mary Norval, his niece, was a beautiful girl, about twenty years of age when I became acquainted with her. She was tall and gracefully formed. Her hair was a dark brown, and her eyes a heavenly blue, shrouded with long eyelashes which gave a dreamy expression to her lovely, oval face. Her complexion was white as the driven snow, and her form was gracefully rounded. Her neck and shoulders might have served for a model for a sculptor, they were so exquisitely chiseled. When she moved it was with that undulating grace so charming in the other sex.

Such was Mary Norval when I first knew her. Had I not been married and possessed of the best wife in the world, she would have been just the woman I would have chosen for a wife, for her natural disposition, the cultivation of her mind, and the amiability of her character fully equaled her physical beauty. She had so won upon her uncle's heart that he loved her better than he did his own son. This, however, might be accounted for, from the fact that Charles Norval was a most dissipated young man. He had long ago exhausted his father's affection for him by a dissolute life, and was only permitted by sufferance to be an inmate of his house.

One day Mr. George Norval invited me to dine with him. I accepted the invitation, and we passed a very agreeable hour together at the so-cial meal. After dinner, being something of an invalid, my host excused himself for half an hour while he went to lie down. I amused myself in the meantime examining some illustrated works placed on the drawing room table. The apartment in which I was seated was only separated from an adjoining one by folding doors. I should have stated that Miss Norval had also excused herself, under the plea of having some letters to write. Left alone to my reflections I fell into a reverie, which I suppose ended in a doze, for I was suddenly awakened to consciousness by the sound of voices in the adjoining apartment. The evening was somewhat advanced, consequently the noises in the street had almost entirely ceased. Owing to this fact I heard distinctly every word that was said. It was Mr. Norval's son Charles's voice that had awakened me.

"Mary, listen to me," he exclaimed, with a peculiar thick utterance which showed that he had been drinking; "you know I love you. Yes, dear girl, I adore the very ground you walk on. Your beauty is so transcendent that you appear more like a fairy creature of the brain than a human being."

"Have done with your senseless compliments, Charles," returned Mary. "Why do you persecute me so? I have already made known my decision to you. It is irrevocable."

"Dear girl, do not say that. O, if you did but know how deeply your image is engraven on my

heart! Every thought is for you; every pulse of my heart beats for you—angel—smile on me!”

“Charles, you are intoxicated. How dare you address yourself to me in this manner!”

“Dearest cousin, I adore you, and by Heaven, you shall be mine!”

“I pity your condition, and I beg, sir, you will leave my presence.”

“Never, my charming cousin, until you say that you love me. I would sell my soul for one kiss from those ruby lips. I could sit all day and gaze wonderingly into those glorious orbs. Dearest—darling—lovely Mary, be mine—be mine!”

It was evident the young man was working himself into a passionate frenzy.

“Mr. Norval, unless you leave the room I will call for assistance.”

“No, you shall not. It is true you have supplanted me in my father’s love. It is true he has left you the bulk of his fortune, while he has only bestowed a miserable pittance on me. Not content with having effected all this, you despise my love—but by the great heavens above us you shall be mine.”

I could hear the rustling of a silk dress, by which I knew that Mary had risen from the chair, doubtless to ring the bell.

“Mary, you shall not escape me thus,” continued the young man. “I repeat it, you shall be mine. Dearest girl, come to my heart—let me fold you to my breast.”

A half-suppressed scream now reached my ears, and I heard the infatuated young man rush towards her. I thought it was high time to interfere. I ran to the folding doors, threw them wide open, and just saw the inebriate seize the shrinking girl in his grasp. When he saw me, he loosened his hold, a demoniacal expression lighted up his features, and he hurried from the room, shaking his fist in my face as he made his exit. I caught the fainting girl in my arms and conveyed her to a sofa. A few simple restoratives restored her to consciousness, but it was some time before I could make her believe that the danger was past.

I thought it my duty to acquaint Mr. Norval with the whole transaction, that proper means might be adopted to prevent a recurrence of this persecution. Charles Norval was forbidden the house. About a month after this occurrence, business took me to a southern city, where I was detained a week. The very night I returned to New York, I received a visit from Mr. M—, the famous attorney.

“Brampton.” said he, when he entered the room, “I have been here to see you a dozen times dozen times today. Thank God, you have come home at last!”

“Why, what’s the matter, Mr. M—?”

“I am in great trouble, and I want you to help me out. You knew Mr. Norval, I believe?”

“Certainly, I know him well—he is a particular friend of mine, but why do you use the past tense?”

“Are you not aware that he is dead?”

“Dead! Is it possible?”

“Yes, he died yesterday.”

“Is there any suspicion connected with his death?”

“None at all, he has been ailing for some time. He died of disease of the heart. A postmortem examination has settled that question satisfactorily. You are aware, perhaps, that I was his lawyer; and you also know the terms on which he lived with his son. About three months ago Mr. Norval sent for me to make his will. As I have before said, he had been in failing health for some time past, and did not know how soon he might be called away from this earthly scene. I drew up his will as he requested; by its provisions Mary was made an heiress, a small pension payable at certain intervals being only left to his son. This will was properly signed and attested.”

“Excuse me for interrupting you,” said I, “but was Mr. Charles Norval cognizant of the provisions of his father’s will?”

“Not that I am aware of, but now you come to mention it, I distinctly remember at the time of witnessing it, a sudden rustling was heard at one end of the apartment, and a door opening into an adjoining room was heard to close, but no notice was taken of the circumstance at the time.”

“Exactly, that must have been the young man who was listening, for I have reason to know that he was aware of the contents of his father’s will.”

And I then related the conversation I had overheard between Mary and Charles Norval.

“This may be very important,” said M—, as soon as I had concluded; “but let me conclude what I have to say. The will I had drawn up was confided to my care. I placed it in an envelope and locked it up in my private desk. The moment I heard of his death, I opened my desk and took out the envelope in which I had placed the will. Judge of my surprise and horror when I found it contained only a blank sheet of paper!”

“A blank sheet of paper! The will had been abstracted, then?”

“Exactly. When I made the discovery I was completely thunderstruck. I could neither speak nor act. I sank down into a seat utterly prostrated both in body and mind. After a little time I somewhat recovered my faculties, and then began to turn over in my own mind the best course for me to pursue under the circumstances. Fortunately I was alone.”

“Do you suspect no one?”

“I don’t know whom to suspect. But from the conversation you have related to me, it is very probable that Charles Norval has something to do with it. But still it is utterly impossible that he could have obtained access to my private office and desk.”

“How many clerks have you?” I asked.

“I have three clerks, and they all enjoy my most implicit confidence. In the first place none of them knew the will was there. They have been with me many years, and I cannot entertain the slightest suspicion against them. Long intercourse with the world has taught me, however, to be cautious, and I determined to keep my own counsel, so I have not mentioned the fact to them at all. I closed and locked my desk again, and went about my business as usual.”

“You did quite right. Did the desk show any evidence of having been looked into?”

“Not the least in the world. Whoever entered it must have possessed a duplicate key.”

“And you have discovered no reason to suspect your clerks since?”

“No—when they entered I watched them narrowly, but could not detect any evidence of guilt in their manner. I then determined that I would apply to you, Brampton. I assure you I have eaten nothing since the fatal discovery. The thought that Mary Norval will be reduced to penury is horrible to me.”

“Leave the matter in my hands. I will do what I can. If the will is not already destroyed, I trust I shall be able to restore it to you.”

M— took his leave. I then threw myself back in my easy chair and tortured my mind for some means to discover the missing will. I formed half a dozen different plans, but was at a loss to know which to adopt, for the case was involved in much difficulty. While I was thus engaged, my eye fell upon a copy of the New York Herald which lay on my desk. I mechanically took it up, without, however, intending to read it. My eyes rested on a column of advertisements. Suddenly they were arrested by the following, under the head of “Personal:”

“A strong will can overcome every obstacle. Eight o’clock tonight. Love and joy await you!”

I started from my chair like one bereft of his senses. A sentiment which I can never explain told me that I had found a clue. The mysterious advertisement seemed to me as plain as daylight. “A strong will can overcome every obstacle,” evidently referred to the missing document. “Eight o’clock tonight,” was the time appointed for a rendezvous. “Love and joy await you,” meant that the place of meeting was to be Lovejoy’s hotel.

I was very much pleased with this discovery, for, besides my wish to oblige Mr. M—, I really felt great esteem for Mary Norval, while on the other hand I knew her cousin to be a worthless young man. I felt perfectly certain that he was at the bottom of the conspiracy, and that he had in

all probability bribed one of M—'s clerks. I almost fancied that I had the will again in my possession, and pictured to myself M—'s joy at recovering it again from my hands. My mind was immediately made up what to do. I deter-mined that I would visit Lovejoy's hotel, and be present at the interview.

I sat watching the clock until the hour should arrive. How slowly the time passed! At last the hour pointed to half-past seven. I rose up, put on my overcoat, and departed on my errand. It was a bitter cold winter's night. The snow was drifting directly in my face, but still I pressed on. I soon reached the hotel and entered one of the private supper rooms. These rooms, as every frequenter of Lovejoy's knows, are di-vided only by a thin partition from each other, so that a conversation carried on in the adjoining apartments can, by attentive listeners, be overheard. I ordered my supper, and while pretend-ing to eat it I kept my ears open. Some time passed and no sound reached me. At last I heard the sound of a door shutting, and one per-son entered the room on my right; a few minutes more elapsed, and again the door shut. The first person had been joined by another. I crept cautiously up to the partition and fixed my ear to it.

"Mr. Norval," exclaimed a voice which I did not recognize, "I am glad to see you."

"And I assure you, Mr. Mills, I am more pleased to see you. I saw your advertisement in today's Herald, and am here in consequence."

I knew Mr. Mills was M—'s confidential clerk. The other speaker was of course Charles Norval.

"Yes, I worded it as agreed," continued the clerk. "I was almost afraid, however, you might have forgotten it, and feared it would be too obscure. But it was necessary, you know, to blind others' eyes."

"O, yes, I understand all about that. When did you get hold of the precious document?"

"Only yesterday. You know he has left the will in his private desk, and it was only by chance that I obtained the key. The moment I did so I seized the document, and put in its place a piece of blank paper."

"Do you think he has discovered the loss yet?"

"O, no, I am certain he has not. I have watched him well all day."

"Well, then, now to business," said young Norval. "How much do you want for the will?"

"It is a very valuable paper. Mr. Norval," replied the villainous clerk. "I suppose you know its provisions?"

"O, yes, I overheard M— read it over after he had drawn it up. I know father has left my cousin Mary everything, while on me, his lawful heir, he has only settled a miserable pension. When that document is burned I will bring her haughty spirit down. She will cringe and fawn on me then. But come, what am I to give you for it?"

“You shall give me your note of hand for \$5,000, payable when you come into the property.”

“Agreed—agreed! Here, I will write it, on the spot.”

I could hear them arranging some papers on the table. I cautiously left the apartment, and crept noiselessly to the door of the room where this worthy pair were seated. I applied my eye to the keyhole and saw that Norval was in the act of writing a promissory note. This done, he handed it to my clerk, who, after examining it, placed it carefully in his pocket-book. He then drew out the will and handed it to Norval. The latter eagerly perused it, a smile of gratification overspreading his features.

“Now,” said he, “my fair cousin, Mary, you are in my power—and, by heavens, I will teach you how to love me. So, so, you are a beggar now! and I am the wealthy Mr. Norval. They say money can buy anything. I will soon see if cannot buy your smiles. But I will not marry you! That idea has passed. To the fire, then, commit the only thing between me and my rightful property.”

So saying, he placed his hands on the will in order to cast it into the flames, but at that moment I burst into the room and pinned the legal document to the table with my hand. My motion was so rapid that the two conspirators must have thought that it was something supernatural.

“Hold!” I exclaimed in a loud voice; “your villainy is not yet perpetrated.”

I shall never forget the looks of horror revealed on the countenances of the two villains. I quietly folded up the will and transferred it to my pocket. M—’s clerk rushed from the room, and from that day to this I have not seen him. I have heard, however, that he is in Australia. Young Norval was completely crestfallen, and left my presence without uttering a word. That same night I restored the will to Mr. M—’s possession, and the delight with which he received it was beyond all bounds.

Mary Norval had no difficulty whatever in proving her right to the property, in fact there was no one to dispute it. It was her desire that her cousin should not be prosecuted for the part he had taken in the nefarious transaction. She increased his allowance to double the amount that had been left him by his father. He did not live long, however, to enjoy it, for he died of delirium tremens a year after his father’s death. Mary was soon after married to a wealthy Bostonian; I had the pleasure to be at her wedding. She is now the mother of a happy family, and beloved by all who know her in her new home. M— was so much delighted with my share in the transaction, that he became a staunch friend of mine, and materially increased my business by recommending me to all in want of the services of a detective officer.

Ballou’s Dollar Monthly Magazine, July, 1862

The [Newark] Delaware Ledger, September 4, 1886