

## *A Bold Stroke*

A card, bearing the name “Miss Clara Howe,” was handed to Varnoe in his office.

“Let the lady come in,” he said to Mrs. Harris, and directly after a pretty girl of about seventeen summers entered, making a graceful bow on seeing the gentleman rising from his seat.

“You are Mr. Varnoe, I presume?” said she, with a fain color rising in her cheek.

“At your service,” replied Varnoe, bowing.

“We are alone here—perfectly private, I mean?” asked she, glancing round the room.

“Perfectly so, madam,” was the response.

The lady took the seat proffered her, after which the detective also seated himself and awaited her pleasure. After a momentary hesitation she began:

“I have called on you to aid me in exposing a deep-laid plot to defraud me out of a portion of a legacy left me by a deceased uncle.[”]

“Name the parties and state the means employed,” said he.

“I shall begin my story from the period that first saw us inmates of Mrs. Hull’s boarding house,” said she, “for I really believe that the plot was conceived at that date.

“Mrs. Lucretia Hull keeps a fashionable boarding house at N.— Walnut street, and my uncle and I took a suite of three rooms there. But I forgot to mention that my uncle was my mother’s brother, and his name was Francis Rowland. He was a man of considerable means and a bachelor. I am his nearest relative, and he had given me to understand that I would be his heir after his death—that, with the exception of a few small legacies to some of his old friends, the entire fortune would all to me.

“Uncle Rowland was afflicted with heart-disease, and made no secret of it, hence, before we were with Mrs. Hull one week she knew that the wealthy old bachelor, Mr. Rowland, was liable to pass away suddenly at any moment.

“Our landlady had a brother boarding with her, a man of the same age, apparently as my uncle, and possessing the same complexion and style of face and figure. He soon became intimate with my relative, and they frequently played a friendly game of checkers in my uncle’s room until a late hour at night.

“Mrs. Hull and her brother, Henry Tetlow, when conversing with each other, spoke German, a language I had been taught when at boarding school, and understood it well, better than I could speak it. I did not make it known to them, however, and the consequence was they frequently discussed family affairs in my hearing which they did not care to have generally known.

“It was by this means that I learned that they had some secret designs on my uncle, though I could not readily catch the drift of it, owing to the low tone in which they spoke.

“I have found out since his death what their object was. When it was announced to Mrs. Hull that my uncle had died during the night, she seemed greatly shocked, and hastened to his bedside and attempted to throw herself on his bosom.

“I looked astonished at such a demonstration from a woman who had known him but a few months, and as I arrested her movement and remarked that such a proceeding on the part of a comparative stranger was uncalled for, she turned and regarded me with a melancholy countenance and said:

“‘Ah, Miss Clara! you do not know what he was to me. Poor, dear Francis!’ and she heaved a heavy sigh.

“‘What has he been to you?’ asked I, in surprise.

“‘Ah, my dear, you will know in time,’ was all the answer she made me, and left my presence.

“I have a maid,” continued Miss Howe, “and I acquainted her with the singular behavior of our landlady. The girl is an intelligent and faithful creature, and from the day we entered the house she took a dislike to Mrs. Hull. She pondered a few moments on what I had told her, then said:

“‘I think this woman tried her best to ingratiate herself into your uncle’s good graces while he was living, and it wouldn’t surprise me if we found out before long that she has played a deep part of some sort.’

“Well sir, both my fears and Ellen’s suspicions have proved correct. Mrs. Hull now claims to be the widow of Francis Rowland, my late uncle.”

“Is this a mere assertion on her part, or does she produce proof of what she says?” asked the detective.

“She showed me a marriage certificate, apparently genuine; it bears the name of Francis Rowland and her own, with the name of Rev. Augustus Brainard as the officiating clergyman.”

“Do you know of such a divine?”

“When was your uncle buried?”

“Three days ago.”

“Has Mrs. Hull made any other move since?”

“Not to my knowledge. She gave me to understand, however, that as soon as my late uncle’s attorney had arranged his affairs, she would make known her claims in due form.”

“Very good,” said Varnoe, with a reassuring smile, “I shall do my best to discover whether this is a genuine marriage or an attempt at fraud. Are you still an inmate of her house?” asked he.

“Yes, sir,” replied the young girl, with considerable spirit, and shall remain until this affair is decided one way or the other.”

“I approve your course,” rejoined the detective; [“]you may be able to gather much valuable information from the conversation between her and her brother.”

“It is for that purpose I have decided to remain,” returned she, with a determined expression.

“That is well, Miss Howe,” rejoined Varnoe. “I shall proceed to work up this case at once, and may be absent for a few days, therefore, if you have anything to communicate, do so by note.”

The girl promised to do so, and took her departure.

The detective sat pondering over the matter for some time after Miss Howe’s departure. He had been very favorably impressed with her manner, and her story had enlisted his sympathy. Then, too, the case was of such a nature as to excite his professional pride, and he determined to make every possible effort to ascertain the facts of the alleged marriage, and expose the fraudulent attempt, if such it should prove to be, to deprive the girl of her rightful inheritance.

Varnoe’s first move was to hunt up the Rev. Mr. Brainard. He ascertained that the gentleman resided in Germantown, and accordingly paid him a visit, and became satisfied that such a [marriage] had taken place and that the reverend gentleman had performed the ceremony.

On the following day, Mrs. Hull had a new boarder, a middle-aged gentleman, somewhat deaf, but a very affable and entertaining gentleman. He called himself Stanley Fallis, and represented himself as a retired merchant. It was Varnoe in disguise, and so cleverly disguised that Miss Howe never dreamed that it was he.

In a few days he became sufficiently intimate with her to address a few words to her occasionally when they met, and Miss Clara thought him a very agreeable gentleman.

One evening they were quite alone in the parlor, when Mr. Fallis startled her by abruptly asking, in a low voice:

“Have you made any discoveries yet, Miss Howe?”

“I do not understand you, sir,” said she, gazing at him with apprehension.

“Be calm, I beg of you,” said he. “I am Varnoe, the detective, and am here to see and hear what I can. So be careful not to betray me to Mrs. Hull. Call me by my assumed name whenever you

address me. I also understand the [G]erman language, and have learned something. Now, please tell me what you have learned?"

The young girl was too much surprised to reply at once, but, when she was finally convinced that it was indeed the detective, she spoke without reserve.

"I have called on the Rev. Mr. Brainard," said she, "and find that Mrs. Hill has spoken the truth in respect to her marriage with a Mr. Francis Rowland, but I cannot believe that it was my uncle, for he did not like her, for the reason that he thought her a designing woman."

"What else have you discovered?"

"Nothing worth speaking of," replied she, with a sigh; only she and her brother appear to be in a very happy frame of mind."

"I have also seen and spoken with the Rev. Brainard, and saw the marriage of Francis Rowland and Mrs. Lucretia Hull in the marriage register," said the detective, in return, "and I copied the date in my note book, besides other matter which will come in play when the lady puts in her claim."

"And that will be pretty soon, I'm thinking," was the rejoinder, "for Mr. Harvey, the attorney, has informed me that in a day or two he would be ready to place my uncle's property in my hands."

"Did you apprise him of this woman's claim?"

"I did, and he said I should resist her to the end."

After a few moments' pause, Varnoe said:

"I shall stay here until she makes her first move, when I shall leave the house and take sides with you at court. I have gathered a few items of importance, which will be made known at the proper time, and I may promise you in advance that Mrs. Hull had but once chance in a hundred to gain her ends."

"Oh, I thank you so much for this consolation," responded the young girl, "not that I would keep anyone out of his or her rights, only the idea of my dear uncle secretly marrying a woman whom he had known but a short time, is simply preposterous, and more so when it is a well known fact that he has forsworn marriage from the day his betrothed bride was borne to her grave."

Two days after the above conversation took place, Miss Clara Howe came into possession of her inheritance, and the day after Mrs. Hull put in her claim for a third of it. Miss Howe informed the attorney that she did not recognize his client's claim, and was prepared to contest it.

. . . . .

Court was in session, and the case of Hull vs. Howe came up. The court room was crowded, and every one was eager to hear the celebrated case, as mentioned in the daily papers.

Mrs. Hull was present, smiling and confident in all appearances. Her brother sat beside her, but did not look as cheerful as his sister.

Miss Clara Howe was there, quiet and determined. Varnoe sat beside Jessie Sell, whom he had brought there for a purpose, as will be seen.

After the attorney had opened the case, stating the grounds on which his client based her claim, Mrs. Hull took the stand, and in a plain, straightforward manner related how she and Mr. Rowland had come to an understanding, and became mutually pleased with each other, and agreed to a secret marriage—this being his own proposition—and that they were finally united by the Rev. Mr. Brainard.

On being cross-examined, she produced the marriage certificate, and Mr. Harvey, counsel for Miss Howe, smiled as he perused it, then wrote the date of the marriage on a slip of paper, after which he handed it to the judge, who looked it over with an indifferent air, and returned it without any remarks.

Henry Tetlow was next called, who testified that his sister had informed him of her engagement to the late Francis Rowland, and he and Mrs. Hull had frequently discussed the approaching marriage.

When asked was he present at the wedding, he replied in the negative, saying that Mr. Rowland did not wish to excite the curiosity of the other boarder, hence he left the house alone, meeting Mrs. Hull a few squares away, when they took the cars for Germantown.

In the cross-examination he was asked:

“Where were you during the time the wedding took place?”

“I was away on business,” replied he, with some confusion.

“Not getting married, too?” asked the attorney, facetiously[,] while the audience was convulsed.

Mr. Tetlow stared at the lawyer with dilated eyes and livid features. Was it rage that produced this singular effect upon him?

Varnoe telegraphed to Jesse Sell with his fingers, and then they both smiled as if they were enjoying a rare joke.

Both judge and jury gazed at the witness in surprise, while the counsel for the defendant stood awaiting the answer, his lips apart with the smile he could not suppress.

Tetlow suddenly recovered himself, however, when his sister’s eyes met his, and she had favored

him with an angry glance. His face became scarlet as he glanced at the attorney, and replied to the question he had asked him.

“Sir,” said he, with quivering voice, “do you mean to insult me by asking such an absurd question?[]”

“Not at all,” was the mild reply; then he asked; “Then that was not the business that engaged your time on your [sister’s] wedding day?”

“No, sir,” was the reply with strong emphasis.

“The business was probably of a secret nature, that you manifest such reluctance to mention it,” observed the attorney.

“It concerns only myself, at least,” was the tart reply.

“In that case we will not detain you any longer. You may take your seat.”

He resumed his seat beside Mrs. Hull, and engaged in a whispered conversation with her. They spoke in [G]erman, but Varnoe, who sat just back of them, kept his sharp ears open, while his eyes were looking around the court room, and he learned by the few stray words that reached his ears that Mrs. Hull was rating him soundly, and charged him with “making a donkey of himself.”

The servants of Mrs. Hull next testified, but their evidence was of little importance. They merely had heard Mrs. Hull say, previous to her marriage with Mr. Rowland, that she would soon be in a better position, and after that had taken place she announced it to them, but enjoined them to keep it a secret from his niece, as [she] did not want her to know it for the present.

The Rev. Mr. Brainard was the last witness called by the complainant. He gave his evidence in a calm, deliberate manner, and nothing ruffled his calm demeanor during the time he was on the stand.

During his cross-examination, the attorney asked him if he had known Mr. Rowland previous to his marriage.

“No sir,” replied he.

“In conversing with him, did you notice any peculiarity about him while speaking?”

“Well, yes,” was the somewhat hesitating reply, “I did notice a peculiarity.”

“What was it?”

“A peculiar uplifting of his head [every] two or three seconds. I noticed it almost as soon as he began to speak.”

As he uttered the concluding words, his eyes wandered to where Mrs. Hull and her brother were seated. The latter gazed at her brother as if he had been fascinated, while his feature assumed an unearthly hue. Mrs. Hull seemed also to be in mental distress, but she did not look at the last witness. She stared into vacancy, as if her thoughts were wandering in the past.

“Did you notice this peculiarity we speak of in any other person before or since?” asked the attorney.

“Not before, but since,” was the absent rejoinder, as his gaze lingered on the pallid face of Henry Tetlow.

“When and where as it, and who was the person possessing this peculiar habit?”

“Today, in this court-room, and the person is the gentleman witness who testified a short while ago,” replied the reverend gentleman, as he turned to the attorney.

“Can you point him out?”

“I can; he is sitting over there with Mrs. Rowland—”

He stopped abruptly, as his eyes rested on the vacant seat lately occupied by Henry Tetlow.

The lawyer also noticed the vacated seat. Mrs. Hull had her veil over her face now, but her pale features were plainly visible through the flimsy veil. It looked like a face of marble.

Mr. Harvey smiled and exchanged glances with the detective, who smiled in return.

Jesse Sell was no longer seated beside Varnoe. He had left the court room at the same moment Tetlow had gone out.

“Which is the gentleman?” asked Mr. Harvey.

“He was seated beside Mrs. Rowland a moment since, but is no longer there,” replied the clergyman; then he added, “Probably he went out to get the fresh air, for I noticed he was looking very ill.”

“No doubt of that!” as the significant rejoinder.

The last witness for the prosecution left the stand, and after a few pointed remarks from Mr. Harvey, counsel for the defendant, Miss Clara Howe was called to give her evidence. She stated in a clear and comprehensive manner her friendly relations with her late uncle; his early attachment to a lovely girl; her death by a runaway accident while riding in a carriage with her affianced, and his subsequent vow of celibacy.

In the cross-examination by the opposite counsel, she adhered to her previous story, and all his artless attempts to make her contradict herself were entirely futile, and he was obliged to let her

go without having gained anything by detaining her.

The next witness called was Dr. Wood, physician to the deceased.

“How were you occupied on the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> of August, 1865!” asked the counsel.

“Attending to my professional duties,” replied he.

“Visiting your patients, I presume?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was Mr. Francis Rowland a patient of yours at that period?”

“He was.”

“Did you visit him on that day?”

“I did.”

“How do you know that?”

“By my visiting book, in which I write every visit I make, with the name of the patient, his or her malady, and the [patient’s] condition at every visit.”

“Can you tell the court and jury the condition in which you found your patient, Francis Rowland, on the 16<sup>th</sup> of last August?”

“I can,” replied the doctor, and he took a large note-book from under his coat and opened it, when he read this entry:

“Found Mr. Rowland greatly prostrated from a severe attack of heart disease. He was unable to leave his bed, and I remained with him from two o’clock until nearly three, when he fell into a slight slumber from the opiate I had administered to him. After he fell asleep I left him in the care of his [niece,] Miss Howe.”

The journal was passed to the judge, and from him to the jury, Mr. Harvey impressing on their minds to observe and remember the date of the entry.

Dr. Wood was dismissed without cross-examination, and Miss Howe re-called, when her counsel asked:

“What was the duration of your uncle’s sleep after the doctor gave him the opiate, on the day mentioned?”

“He slept until supper time,” replied she. “I remember, now that it has been brought to my



notice, that I called him when the supper bell sounded, but he declined partaking of any, and soon fell into a doze again, and slept until nearly eight, when he awoke and said he felt much better.”

Miss Howe left the stand and the Rev. Mr. Brainard was re-called, and Mr. Harvey asked him in what month, and on what day of the month he had performed the marriage ceremony between Francis Rowland and Mrs. Lucretia Hull.

“On the afternoon of the 16<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1865,” replied he, referring to a note-book.

“Was the ceremony performed at Mrs. Hull’s residence?” was the next question.

“No, sir;” it took place at my residence,” was the divine’s reply.

“Why, how could that be?” asked the council, in feigned surprise. “Mr. Rowland’s medical adviser has just stated on oath that the gentleman, Mr. Rowland, was confined to his bed on the afternoon of that day, and was quite unable to leave it and Miss Howe testified that her uncle slept from two until six or about supper time. How then could he have accompanied Mrs. Hull to Germantown at the time?”

“In the face of these indisputable facts I can only suppose that it was another Francis Rowland,” was the grave rejoinder.

Before another question could be asked, a piercing shriek rang out in the court-room, then a cry, “A woman has fainted,” was heard.

It was Mrs. Hull who had fainted after giving vent to that despairing cry. Her courage had given way when she saw that she was exposed and punishment would follow. She had planned well, aided by her unscrupulous brother, who personated Mr. Rowland by disguising himself into a resemblance of the deceased and but for the journal kept by Dr. Wood might have succeeded in their bold stroke for a fortune.

The unhappy woman was conveyed to an apartment back of the court-room until she recovered, which she did just in time to hear that the case had been decided against her, and that warrants for her arrest and that of her brother were in a tipstaff’s hands, the charge against them being attempted fraud and willful perjury.

She was conveyed to prison, where her brother soon after found lodgings, Jesse Sell being his escort.

Miss Clara Howe compensated Varnoe very liberally for the part he took in bringing the old schemers to justice.

The fashionable boarding house on Walnut street was closed, while Mrs. Hull and her brother languished in a prison cell.

*Weekly Chillicothe* [MO] *Crisis*, July 26, 1883

This story was one of a number of stories, likely written by different authors, all featuring Mr. Varnoe, the detective.