

A Lawyer's Courtship

by Melville Dorano, Esq.

I had only a short time previously graduated from the law-school, and opened an office in the city of P——. Clients did not flock to me all at once. One or two small suits had fallen into my hands, but they had been disposed of and forgotten, and I was again inclined to wish that I had accepted a partnership in the large shoe business of my father, instead of adopting the profession of the law.

I was sitting in my office ruminating on the difficulty of getting a start in the practice, when the door opened softly, and a young woman entered and sank down on the first chair she came to.

“Oh! sir, are you an attorney?” she asked, faintly.

I barely had time to reply when her eyes closed, and she fainted dead away.

I was a bachelor, and not a physician, and this situation was anything but agreeable to me.

What was to be done?

I seized a glass of ice-water which stood near my hand, and rushing to the place where she sat, sprinkled it copiously on her face. In a few minutes consciousness returned.

“Oh! save me from him, do save me from him, kind sir,” she said, “and God will bless you for it, indeed He will.”

“Yes, I will save you from him,” I said, assuringly. “Who is he?”

“Why, Ole,” she said, in a wild way, which showed that she had not fully come to her senses.

In those days I was very fond of French brandy, and generally had a flask of it in my office, though I am glad to say I have long since abandoned its use. I thought a little of it might revive my mysterious client; and mixing some with water and presenting it to her lips, she swallowed it without resistance, and seemed to be very much refreshed by it. While she was coming to, I had an opportunity of taking a good look at her.

She was apparently about eighteen years of age, somewhat under the medium size, of slender but stylish figure, and decidedly pretty. Her luxuriant hair was brushed down over her ears, and fell in ringlets upon her shoulders. Her eyes were large and lustrous, and when her rich red lips parted with an expression of anguish, they revealed a set of teeth with uncommon regularity and whiteness. Her dress was rich, but much crushed and soiled, and the style of it struck me as a little strange, but I was a poor judge of such things.

Before I had got through administering the brandy and water, I came to the conclusion that I felt a deep interest in her, and that I would stand by her and help her to the last.

“Sir, you are very good,” she said, as soon as her strength returned, “and you will really save me from him, and get me a divorce?”

At that moment the office door opened suddenly, without a warning knock, and in strode a finely dressed man in a terrible excitement.

“What are you doing here, you hussy?” he said. And as he spoke he seized the girl’s arm and gave it such a jerk that she screamed with agony.

This was the worst thing for him, that he could have done. I judged from his appearance that he was a scoundrel and that the girl was imposed upon by him in some way. I knew I could easily thrash him if necessary. I had a strong arm, a hard fist, and a grip like a vise.

I took no time to think, but seized the intruder by the nape of the neck with my left hand, and compressed his windpipe with the fingers and thumb of my right hand, until his eyes closed and his tongue protruded three inches from his mouth. I then lifted him by the throat to my consultation room, and flinging him to the further side of it, closed and locked the door. Then, having touched my electric alarm and summoned a policeman, I resumed my seat by the lady, who sat with her head bowed on my table, weeping and rocking her body to and fro, as if terrified and heartbroken beyond recovery.

“Now, madam,” I said, “please proceed. The blackguard will not trouble you any more, I promise you.”

“My experience has been a terrible one.”

“Then tell it without delay.”

“I will, sir. My heart is broken, and my nerves all unstrung, so that I can hardly speak, but I will try to tell you enough, at least, to enable you to befriend me.”

“My name is Elsie Markham. I have lived all my life, until three weeks ago, in Liverpool, England. My mother died when I was quite young, and I was the only child. My father was a book-seller, and for many years did a good business and made money. We had a comfortable home, and I had every advantage.

“On my mother’s side, sir, I came of a noble family, and my associations were mostly with my mother’s people. But at last, sir, the great business depression and collapse came. My father’s business gradually grew worse, and he kept holding on to it, in hopes of a change, until at last he got completely involved and lost every shilling.”

Here she stopped, sobbing, and I thought it best to let her grief have its own way for a few minutes.

“Now, then,” I said, when she seemed to be a little calmer, “go on with your story.”

“Well then, sir, when my father failed in business, he determined to come to America and begin life over again. An aunt of his, who has plenty of money, and who intended to leave it to him at her death, anyway, lent him a thousand pounds to come to America with and go into business.

“Three weeks ago he and I sailed from Liverpool. His aunt went with him to the steamer, and was very much affected at the parting. And just as the bell began to toll for all but passengers to leave the ship, she presented him with this little cross as a keepsake. It is an heir-loom, sir, and very old.”

She laid it on the table. It was a small cross, richly studded with different colored stones, and had a small ring at the upper end, as if intended to be suspended from a necklace. On the back were engraved the words: “Elsie Markhem, Dec. 4, 1742.”

“Is this your name?” I asked.

“No, sir. It is the name of one of my father’s female ancestors, ever so far back, when the family spelled their name with an e.”

“Indeed! And has it been in the family ever since?”

“Yes, sir. When my father’s aunt gave it to him he was as much surprised and proud as if she had given him her fortune; and if she had not gone ashore so suddenly, I am doubtful whether she could have induced him to accept it, for he thought she was going too far and honoring him too much. After we got out to sea he was looking at it and showing it to me nearly all the time.

“When we were about six days out,” she continued, “my dear father fell overboard and was lost. At least, so we all thought for awhile. He used to be on deck until very late at night, long after I had gone to my berth; and on this fatal night he was heard to utter a scream, and immediately afterward there came a faint splash.

“The men on watch ran to the part of the ship from which the sound proceeded, but saw nothing, and my dear father was never seen again. Indeed, few knew that a man had been lost overboard until the next morning; and when we found that he was missing, every one was at a loss to account for his falling overboard. The sea was smooth at the time, the guards of the vessel were high, and my father was never known to venture into the rigging; so that it appeared impossible that he could have fallen overboard accidentally. Then, when it was known that he was heard to scream, and that he had at least one hundred pounds in money on his person, suspicions were excited on foul play. Conferences were held in the cabin by the passengers and the crew, and it was not long before it was agreed to search the whole ship for evidences of the murder.

“It was thought possible that some one might have stolen my father’s money, and then thrown him overboard to make it appear that it was lost with him. Search they did, in every part of the ship, but nothing was found which furnished the slightest clew to a murder. But since I arrived in P—— I have discovered that my hus—no, I will not call him my husband—that that wretch in the other room murdered my father!”

Here the poor girl leaned her head upon the table, and was very soon wild with grief again.

Meanwhile a knock at my front door informed me that the policeman had arrived.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Durand?” he said, in a deep bass voice.

“I have got a man in the next room whom I suspect of throwing this lady’s father overboard at sea, a week or so ago, and drowning him. I want you to go into the room and watch him until I can finish my conversation with the lady. Meanwhile, talk to him and see what you can get out of him.”

“Very good, sir,” he replied, as he entered the room, and locked the door after him.”

“Now, madam,” I said, be kind enough to proceed with your narrative.”

“Well, sir,” she replied, making a powerful effort to compose herself, “before we had been out at sea a day, I made the acquaintance of the man in the other room. I know nothing about him, except from what he told me himself. He is a Swede, and his name is Ole Anderson. As you see, he is a very handsome young man. When you have heard him converse, you will discover that he is also a very eloquent and persuasive person.

“As his appearance was so genteel, I was willing to make his acquaintance on shipboard, and as he was so handsome and entertaining I grew very fond of him. He said he sprang from a noble family in Sweden, that he was in good circumstances and was traveling for pleasure. He professed great admiration for me, and I could not deny that I liked him.

“My poor father was wiser than I, and took a violent dislike to him. This mortified Anderson exceedingly, and he often walked the deck with my father until midnight, trying to convince him of his [respectability] and to obtain his permission to cultivate my acquaintance but all in vain. Meanwhile he had extracted from me a minute account of my father’s circumstances, even down to the exact amount of money he was carrying with him to America.

“When it was discovered that my poor father was drowned, I was prostrated with anguish and Anderson was my greatest comforter. I fell violently in love with him at once, and he with me. I was about to land in a foreign country, where I had not a friend nor a shilling, and I thought it a gracious providence that I had, during my voyage, gained not only a friend but a lover—wealthy, intelligent and devoted—who could protect and support me under any circumstances. Before we landed I had promised Anderson to marry him before the sun went down on us in America.

“I was as good as my word. We put up foot in P—— at six o’clock in the morning. We proceeded at once to the Jenks House and had breakfast. By half-past nine o’clock Anderson had brought to the hotel a marriage license and a minister, and I stood up with him before I married the man who murdered my precious father. But, sir, I am far more concerned about how to be released from this disgusting union than I am about forming a new one.”

“I shall do my utmost to assist you in doing both,” I replied. “But let us see what discoveries Baxter has made.”

I stepped to the door of my consultation room and called Baxter out, taking care to lock

Anderson in still.

“Baxter,” I said, “what do you think of him.”

“He is a tailor.”

“A what?”

“A tailor.”

“How do you know?”

“Because, when I went in there, I found him sitting on the lounge with his feet under him. He straightened out when I went in, but it was too late. He had given himself away.”

“Then you do not think he is a Swedish nobleman, or anything of that kind?”

“No, not much.”

“Wouldn’t he say anything?”

“Yes. He said he had married this lady in England, and she had run off with another man to America, and he had come after her on the next ship. He said he supposed that she was after a divorce, but that he would see that she didn’t get it.”

“Well, now, Baxter, the fact is that this fellow is a robber and a murderer. This little cross, which was the keepsake of the murdered man, was cut out of the lining of Anderson’s overcoat, and I will be greatly surprised if other evidences of the crime do not remain in the same article. Suppose you bring his overcoat out.”

“By all means,” he said, starting for the room where Anderson was.

The lining of the coat was ripped open, and we found in it every penny of poor Mr. Markham’s money. Of course no doubt of Anderson’s imposture and guilt remained. Miss Markham—for I will not style her Mrs. Anderson—was deeply agitated, and the officer departed at once to swear out a warrant.

“Now, Miss Markham,” I said, when the officer was gone, “I am ready to give you my advice.”

“Do, sir, I beg of you; and may God reward you.”

“No; you will have to reward me.”

“Indeed I will, sir, too.”

“Well, of course this man Anderson has murdered your father in order to marry you. And I propose to hang him so that I can marry you.”

“Indeed, sir, I have conceived a good opinion of you, but you may rest assured that I will never again be so hasty as I was with this vile impositor.”

“Quite right, my charming girl,” I said. “I would be the last one to counsel you to be rash again. Take your own time. But sooner or later you must be mine. When Anderson has been convicted, your divorce will be a mere matter of form, and then I will claim you, both by the right of discovery, and the right of conquest.”

“We will see about that, sir.”

I made my home at this time, with my father, and I constrained Miss Markham to accept our hospitality until she was free from the villain Anderson. In due time the murderer was indicted for murder on the high seas, tried in the United States district court, convicted, sentenced and hanged. Before this event, however, Miss Markham was divorced. And long before that she and I had become so well pleased with each other that neither of us had any hesitation in plighting our trust to each other. The marriage followed hard on the heels of the divorce. She has made an excellent wife. She has always been easily led. Her affections are very powerful and confiding, as her great misadventure proved, but in every other respect she collected great credit on her noble lineage. Her father’s aunt died soon after she heard of Mr. Markham’s death, and left her entire estate of twenty-five thousand pounds to Elsie. So that she and I have been, all through our lives, which are now drawing to a close, crowned with the twin blessings of wealth and love—but the greatest of these is love.

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