



The DAY of CONFLICT

THE DAY OF THE DUEL
(A True Story)



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"AND when we pulled him out of the thickset he was as 'jick with burrs as a cushion with pins," laughed Merrick. "Seldou have I seen a sorrier sight. He stood there ruefully plucking the clanging things from him. But it would have taken half a day to get them all loose. He looked for all the world like a fat countryman clad in a rusty plough coat."

The company laughed loud and long. It was in a condition for easy laughter and the picture summoned up by the speaker was much to its liking in the prevailing mood.

"There is a catastrophe for a horseman such as Hook would have us believe he is," remarked Barrow. "Why, since he came on furlough a week ago we have heard nothing but how he clung to the saddle during some mischance or rode so many leagues without dismounting, or tamed a fiery mount that had been despaired of by the most masterful."

"Oh, 'tis naught to the discredit of the gallant Major," said Merrick. "Who has not been unhorsed at some time on a hot chase? I did but say that he cut a most laughable figure."

"And well it serves him," persisted Barrow, while smile and merriment applauded. "No doubt Major Hook is a most fearless and worthy officer. But it strikes me as most fitting that pat upon his easy boasts he should have had a fall. Right well would I have liked to see it."

"It was well worth the viewing, so neatly and completely was he transformed," said Dick North. "What did not add to his peace of mind was that Elizabeth Winn rode close behind him and was a witness to his discomfiture. Elizabeth asked him politely if he was hurt and in making answer he fussed and fumed like a man with a hundred bee stings upon him."

Another shout greeted this additional bit of color. "There you have given his real wound," said Barrow. "Elizabeth saw the fall? I'll wager he was in fighting temper at that. It is hard enough that he should plunge into a thicket of thorns, but that he should suffer such misfortune under his lady's eye was the very maliciousness of evil fate."

"Let us call him Sir Burr or My Lord Thistle, or some such title that shall serve to remind him of the matter," broke in Clinton Wright. "For myself, I have found his large mouthful of self-praise most difficult to endure."

"It would not be well to carry the joke too far," said Merrick, who was some years older than the rest of the company. "He is, after all, a man well respected and reported. Moreover, he is the guest of the Merriwells, and I would not have him say that the folk of Queen Anne county lack in hospitality."

But Wright pounded his pewter mug upon the table. "It has never been said, nor should it ever be, that the folk of Queen Anne county lack in spirit, either," he said. "He comes here, a salon soldier, and swings the high head above us mightily. I have no quarrel with the man, but I must confess that I should like to lower his pride a bit."

Barrow led the applause at this assertion, and it was plain that no great love for Major Hook held the hearts of the young, hard riding, harder drinking aristocrats of the neighborhood.

Merrick, who was more cautious, already regretted the success of his tale and sought to turn the current aside.

Elizabeth Winn.

"Come, Master Clinton, I think I see where the shoe pinches. Perhaps, now, Miss Elizabeth has given the brave Major a trifle too much of her attention to suit you, eh?"

"What Miss Elizabeth chooses to give ear or time to is none of my interest," said Clinton, stoutly, flushing a little at the ready laugh that went around the table at his expense. "If she prefers," he added, with a sneer, "to ride each morning with an escort who may be dropped into any wayide bush it is her privilege. The point is that the fellow has proved himself empty and ridiculous in his speech and that we need no longer swallow it."

Such was his statement, but as he was riding over to town the following morning he gave apparent proof of a more complicated attitude toward the visitor. For on the road he passed Major Hook on his bay mare cantering by the side of Elizabeth Winn, and he frowned angrily. Hook answered his stiff salute quite as stiffly and the girl responded with a pleasant nod.

The brevity of her greeting spurred some thought in him, for a short distance beyond them he pulled up sharply in a cloud of dust, wheeled and charged in pursuit. "Oh, Miss Winn," he called, with another and still stiffer acknowledgment of the claims of Hook, "may I have a word with you?"

She glanced at him in some surprise at the request, but Major Hook instantly drew off to one side. "What is it, Clinton?" she asked, with asperity.

"I only wanted to know whether you are willing to accompany me to the Partons' dance to-night?" he answered, switching his boot uneasily.

"What a silly boy you are, Clinton," she answered, with reddened cheeks, "to stop me on the road and intrude such a question. I said I would go with you two weeks ago."

"I thought you might have changed your mind," he answered, sullenly, looking away.

"Did you? Well, had you made many such exhibitions as this in the meanwhile I might very well have done so. However, I suppose it is too late now." With a quick turn she dotted brought her back in him and a moment later was once more at the side of Major Hook, leaving Clinton in a very unpleasant frame of mind to take what comfort he might from her parting phrase.

He resumed his course at a mad gallop as the most available means of relieving the somewhat confused but none the less painful emotions that he now carried with him. For more than a year he had been



ELIZABETH CAUGHT CLINTON IN HER ARMS AND PILLOWED HIS HEAD AGAINST HER BREAST.

the accepted and favored cavalier of Elizabeth Winn. In some mysterious way quite beyond his power of analysis he seemed to have lost all his ground within the last week. Love had suffered and pride had been struck a shrewd cut but a moment before. All this was intensely galling, and but one fact was now clear before him. Major Hook was the sole cause of it all. He had decided that during the recent incident Elizabeth had her own version of the situation which she confided to her sister while they were preparing for the dance that evening.

"I hope Clinton will wear that new black suit of his," said Hetty, pensively, after important matters of rosettes and slippers and lace had been settled. "It adds three years to his age, I declare, and adds wonderfully in distinction and dignity."

"I am not greatly interested in what Clinton wears," returned Elizabeth, tartly.

A Presumptuous Boy.

"Well! Here is news indeed!" exclaimed the elder. "What is wrong now between you and Clinton?"

"I know of nothing that is right," said Elizabeth. "He is an ill-natured and most presumptuous boy. I regret that I should have allowed myself to be seen so much in his company. He has become quite unbearable."

"Marvels and marvels! What has he been up to?" "Why, it is his manner since Major Hook has been here. I am in no way bound to Clinton Wright. I can recall no authority that he holds upon my actions. In some fond and stupid mood he took a bitter dislike to the Major and has been most rude in treatment of him whenever we have chanced to be together."

"Nor is that all. Last night, while sitting in an inn with certain companions he uttered most discourteous remarks concerning Major Hook. There was a mishap in the hunt, as you may have heard; such a one as any rider is likely to have, and Clinton made it the basis for stirring comment. It was all repeated to me."

"Then it was true that the gallant Major went scrambling in a briar bush?" asked Hetty, slyly. Elizabeth's clear blue eyes snapped. "What then? An accident in the field is nothing for horsemen, or horsewomen either, to laugh at."

"Perhaps he never had time to acquire skill in handling horses, being occupied with military matters," suggested Hetty, with an artless air.

"I have never known you so ill-natured, Hetty," said her sister, with some warmth. "Major Hook is a man and a soldier. He saw service during the late war with Great Britain, and if he never took part in an engagement it was not because he did not do his duty and follow orders. He surely proved his courage as truly as most of our friends who stayed at home."

"But what has this to do with Clinton? So you cannot hold him at a disadvantage there."

"Too young! There is the paroxysm, Hetty, he is a wilful and a wayward child. He lacks true restraint and polish. I wonder at myself that I should have been so long in discovering it. He talks ill behind the back of a gentleman who is eminently his superior in all things that make for merit. That argues that he is not only a boy, but something cowardly. I am determined to call our friendship to an end."

"Elizabeth, you are wrong," said Hetty, decisively, turning her dark eyes upon her sister with a resolution as great as the younger had shown. "I know nothing to the discredit of Major Hook, but Clinton is

a spirited and a lovable and a mettlesome boy. Boy he is, I grant, and he is a boy with whom we have grown up. He loves you and I am not ready to say you do not love him. Surely, a week ago there was little doubt of it. You have allowed the attentions of an older man, a stranger to our people and our community, to turn your head. I can see the trace of his own suggestions in your words. You will be sorry if you allow this new fancy to interpose a permanent obstacle between you and Clinton."

"Heigh-ho," said Elizabeth, who had suddenly regained her composure. "That is quite enough for once, Hetty."

"Very well," answered Hetty. "But unless this affair has gone further than I think I am fairly sure how you would choose if instant choice lay between them."

"You may be sure of one thing. I should never choose one who was not manly and courageous and worthy," said Elizabeth. "And I'll leave you to guess who that may be."

The Lash of Words.

If Clinton had been bewildered and hurt by the change in Elizabeth, he was rendered quite desperate and hopeless by her treatment of him while they were together in the coach on the way to the dance. He answered him shortly, and when he strove to overcome her capriciousness she opposed so many stalling defenses to his overtures that he found his sole safety in retreat and silence.

"I take this most unkindly of you, Elizabeth," he said, as the swaying vehicle was tacking up to the Parton door.

"Take it as you like, Clinton," she answered, "and if there is any matter I particularly detest it is to hear a whine."

He jumped at the lash of words and said no more. Once inside he kept out of her way as much as possible, nursing his bitterness. In courtesy he could do no less than go through a minuet with her and he paced the steps in some fashion. After that, though he was conscious that his new black suit became him remarkably, he sulked in the background and would not accept the joy comfort offered him by kindlier maids. Meanwhile she danced frequently with Hook.

It was worse when he took her home. He sought his own corner of the coach and gloomed, trying to banish from his mind the insistent thought of her soft, filmy draperies that touched his hand, the pressure of her shoulder when a lurch threw her toward him. For a moment, before they reached her home, he thought she had relented. She made some casual remark and he answered eagerly. But his tone seemed to bring back all her irritation and he subsided in despair.

One of his negro servants had ridden his favorite horse as an escort, and after the Winn mansion was reached he ordered the coach home empty and flung himself into the saddle. He made the distance to the inn at a rockless pace and set himself to a bout with the brown ale in petulant resolve to drown his troubles.

But even here, it seemed, his evil genius must follow. He was no more than well settled with a group of congenial youngsters than Major Hook entered the place with Merrick. He arose immediately and left the inn. Out in the cool night air once more, he was undecided whether to bow his lot to the stars or err at random with his sorrow. Starting off through a field, he forced through a growth of dried and crackling bushes. Smoothing his stockings after the encounter, he discovered that he had accumulated a number of burrs that clung tenaciously to the silk. As he began to remove them a madcap notion seized him, a humor such as an underbred schoolboy might

fall in with. His present store of temper found a sudden relief and he gathered the burrs until he held a ball of them as large as his fist. Then he returned to the inn.

The company was seated as usual about the huge round table, where pipes and tankards were served. Clinton took up his stand at the fireplace, where he leaned carelessly. In this position he was directly back of Major Hook, who was holding forth eloquently on some subject of politics and had taken no notice of his entrance. Peeling off one of the burrs from the ball, Clinton shot it with a flick of his forefinger and it lodged on Hook's back. No one was watching and the Major was unconscious of the tiny impact. Clinton continued to shoot his harmless missiles until they had gathered like a swarm of insects between Hook's shoulders. He took much satisfaction from the result, but it was necessary that the victim should be informed.

"Oh, Major Hook, he said carelessly, 'your servant has neglected to remove all the traces of your misadventure from your clothing. I perceive.'"

Hook turned around with a frown. "Did you address me, sir?"

"I did," rejoined Clinton. "I said it was evident your servant took small pains with your attire. You still bear with you the marks of your late accident on the hunting field."

A Lesson in Breeding.

In turning the gallant Major had brought his back to the company so that the layer of burrs was presented to general view. No open comment upon his mishap had yet been made, but those who bore some little ill will against him found an opportunity here to let him know that they understood the full value of the joke. The ripple of laughter left Hook white and furious. Putting up a hand, he discovered the malicious trick that had been played upon him. He left the table and walked over to Clinton, riding whip in hand.

"There are some pranks that call for a lesson in breeding," he said tensely, and reaching out a hand he caught Clinton by the shoulder.

The company fell instantly silent and Merrick and others started from their places. "By your leave, Major," said Merrick hastily, with a courteous and deprecatory gesture. "I trust you will not allow your very natural indignation to run to extremes. Clinton has been guilty of a most thoughtless and unworthy offense. I am certain that he will render all necessary apologies."

The falling of Hook's hand upon his shoulder had an effect upon Clinton's petulant passion as sudden as the sweep of an icy shower upon a heated runner. He stood erect, facing Hook quietly, aware of the childishness and bad taste of his affront. He saw immediately that it should be his part as a gentleman to make full apology. But while Merrick was speaking Hook's whip was curling in the air. "The boy needs a switching," cried the Major.

"Stop! Don't strike!" shouted several, and Merrick leaped forward just too late to intercept the stinging blow about Clinton's neck and shoulders.

"Now he's done it," breathed North, for he had a swift glimpse of Clinton's blazing eyes. The last minute had wrought its transformation in the immature youth. Under that stroke the years of boyhood fell away and he felt and knew the power of manhood, ready, controlled and firm. He threw off Hook's grasp with a slight effort and stepped back, speaking in low, even tones.

"That will do, Major Hook," he said. "I was quite ready to make the proper reparation. Your response to my heedlessness is, of course, such as makes any

further discussion unnecessary. It is now my turn to demand satisfaction."

Hook looked the figure of his opponent up and down scornfully. "What?" he cried. "You have the assurance to consider yourself entitled to a meeting?" He laughed. "Here's a crowing cockerel to a clown's rattle. I'm a lucky, my youthful friend, that I did not dust your jacket more thoroughly."

"Will you fight?" asked Clinton, steadily.

"I do not fight with children," said Hook.

"Then perhaps that will make you," said Clinton. Before any member of the surprised group could make a move he picked up a sliver of ale from the table and threw the contents into Hook's face. The next instant the company had divided, half swarming about each belligerent. Hook, spluttering and wrathful, was forced from the inn and Clinton was held there until the other had been escorted to a safe distance.

"You'll have your hands full, Clinton," said Barrow, shaking his head.

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"I sincerely hope so," returned Clinton. "Will you act for me, Tom?"

And Barrow, who had not quite adjusted himself to this new Clinton Wright, made haste to consent.

The mutual feeling of the adversaries would not permit the matter to rest over night. Within an hour Merrick came riding back as Hook's representative, bearing a formal challenge and personally most chagrined over the affair. He, too, had failed to gauge the full importance of the change in Clinton and undertook to berate him for his impetuosity. Clinton stopped him sharply.

"I will ask you to remember, Mr. Merrick," he said, "that your business is to confer with Mr. North. I am quite capable of censoring my own actions whenever occasion arises." Merrick stared at him a moment and then decided that he had best hold his peace.

Just at daybreak on November 15, 1816, Clinton and his second left the inn and started on a clearing at the top of a low hill some two miles distant, which had been chosen as the place of meeting. They arrived to find Hook, Merrick and a surgeon of the neighborhood waiting for them. The ground was quickly paced and marked, the pistols loaded and the two men took up their positions.

They were placed ten feet apart. Hook had donned his uniform and made a handsome martial figure as he stood waiting for the word. Clinton still wore the black suit in which he had attended the dance, as it seemed to him, ages ago. He was perfectly calm, his brain was abnormally clear and he concentrated his thought with purposeful intensity upon the right breast of his enemy. To Barrow and Merrick he was a total stranger. To Hook he was an impudent, presuming lad who must be taught his manners. Within himself he rejoiced in his new found strength.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?" came the grave voice of Merrick.

"I am ready," said Clinton.

"Ready," said Hook.

"Present!" Both duellists raised their weapons to a level. There was nothing to choose between them in steadiness and deliberation of aim.

"Fire! One!" The pistols spoke with a single voice. Clinton held his arm extended a moment, then dropped it with a groan and sank limply to the ground. Hook, for a moment, remained erect at his mark.

Barrow and the surgeon hurried to the wounded man and found that the bullet had passed through his side. He was in great pain, but retained full possession of his faculties.

"Barrow," he said, faintly, "I demand another shot."

"Impossible, Clinton," returned his second, bending over him. "You are not able to go further with the affair."

"I demand another shot, Barrow," repeated Clinton fiercely. "Carry that message to Hook. My proposal is that we be placed side by side on the ground while we fire again."

Barrow had no choice but to carry the request of his principal to Merrick who communicated it to Hook. After some minutes Barrow came back with the answer.

"Hook is willing to give you another shot if you are able to stand. Very properly, I think, he refuses to fall in with your suggestion of fighting a prostrate foe."

"Barrow," said Clinton, "feel in my coat pocket." Barrow obeyed and drew out a large bandana handkerchief. "There is a stout sapling just back of us," continued Clinton. "You and the surgeon must prop me against it and secure me in an upright position with that handkerchief. I'll have another shot at any cost."

"But, Clinton," said Barrow, aghast, "this is unheard of. You are mad."

"Damn you," said Clinton, weakly, "have I got to fight you too? Do what I tell you."

Barrow dared offer no further objection and, with the assistance of the surgeon, dragged his principal to the tree. By passing the handkerchief under Clinton's arms they were able to support him, but leaning half hanging, so that his feet touched the ground. Hook watched these preparations with a frown. He had given his answer with the full belief that his adversary would be unable to meet the conditions. But it was too late to draw back now.

Hook's position was changed so that he stood ten feet from the tree and the weapons were loaded once more. Clinton was not a reassuring figure to face. Pale, with drawn, distorted features and blazing eyes, he glared upon his opponent with a terrible look of hate and despairing resolve. They eyed each other a moment with lowered pistols. Then the signal came again.

"Are you ready, gentlemen?"

"Ready," they answered.

"Present!" Up came the pistols, barrels flashing in the newly risen sun.

"Fire!" There was no delay this time. Merrick had no more than started the word when a sharp double explosion rang out. Hook spun on his heel and dropped instantly. Clinton, peering eagerly through the smoke, caught a glimpse of the fallen man. Then his limbs relaxed, the pistol slipped from his grasp and he sank fainting against his support.

At that instant a shrill cry startled the three spectators. They looked to see a horsewoman dash out of the woods and into the open space. It was Elizabeth Winn. She threw herself from her horse and stood, wide-eyed and panting, looking from one to the other of the adversaries. The surgeon had just saved Clinton's handkerchief and was lowering him, limp and unconscious, to the ground. Elizabeth hesitated a moment, then, with another cry, ran forward, caught Clinton in her arms and pillowed his head against her breast.

The lives of both men hung in the balance for days. Ultimately both recovered. Major Hook returned to the army as soon as he was able to travel. About a month after his departure Clinton Wright and Elizabeth Winn were married.

"THE SIGN OF HONOR"—NEXT WEEK