

An Outrageous Will

By W. R. Gilbert.

She was as sweet as a June morning. Its early roses were in her cheeks; its evening skies colored her eyes under their straight black brows; and the suggestive shadows of its half forgotten night were thick in her black soft hair. She leaned close to the window and watched the flying landscape go by in a meaningless jumble of farm houses and fields and stretches of lonely woods. There were tiny puckers in her small round chin, and a mist of tears gathered before her sight to be shaken bravely away, and persistently return.

She was going over the whole tragic tangle again—the abominable will of her grandfather, who had just died in his nineties, which cut off the family without a penny—on one condition. She thought of the years of struggle to keep up appearances, of the debts contracted, the going beyond their means to give Ada, Tilly and herself a good start in the eternal feminine race towards the goal of comfortable matrimony—all in the expectation of her grandfather's thousands. And now these thousands were as if they had never been.

She saw the stricken whiteness of her father's face as the lawyer read the document, the tightness of his locked fingers, and her heart ached anew. And then she heard the dry voice reading that one condition—that abominable, silly condition, which gave the bulk of the Thornton fortune "—to my beloved son James, on condition that his third daughter, Louie, shall marry, within one year the best man I have ever known—namely John McAllan. In the case of the death within the year of John McAllan, either before or after his marriage to Louie Thornton, this amount shall be divided equally between the said Louie Thornton and the said James Thornton, her father. In case of the death within the year of Louie Thornton, either before or after her marriage to John McAllan the whole amount shall go to my son John Thornton."

This was the strange bequest of her biased half silly old grandfather, who had quarrelled with every member of the family save her father and herself, and thus he sought to traffic in such dainty flesh and blood, such a straight backed honest character as this pretty Louie who watched the landscape fly past the windows of the train.

Two months had passed since the reading of that will, and she had seen her father grow thin trying to find a way out of the labyrinth of debt, and facing a future of failing health. Not a word was said to the harassed girl, but she read the signs in the eyes of her good hearted, extravagant little mother, and she knew not where to turn.

And as for John McAllan—John McAllan of all men—the thought was abomination. How long had that name been a household jest in that merry, loving, easy going Thornton family? John McAllan the paragon, the idol of the childish old man, a "goody goody" a player for good graces!

The thought was a horror to the girl who though she had never seen this miracle of masculine perfection who formed the other end of her grandfather's love of travel, had heard him so highly extolled that he had become a plague. And to be sold like a slave, even though it be for her beloved father.

The tears fell faster and faster. What of her own fine dreams of romance—of a woman's right to love after her own fashion?

She was running away from it all, flying for refuge to the haven of Aunt Mercy's broad breast, and deep heart, away on the lonely farm, where she could think it all out, and could ask for comfort and advice. It might be that she could make the sacrifice; it might be that she couldn't, and would have to take advantage of that last doorway of escape, the grim clause "in case of the death of the said Louie Thornton." Louie pressed her face to the window pane, and stared out into the flying night. It seemed that the darkness was swallowing them up.

And then it happened without so much as a second's warning. The whole forward part of the carriage, rose upwards in a long slanting glide even before the awful shock crashed through the train, wavered from side to side, and curved over sickeningly to roll over with sound of splintering to dull the ears. Lights were wrenched out, and darkness swept in with momentary silence and cessation of motion. Then the humans in the

broken mass of wreckage roared forth in terror and pain. Screams and cries, hoarse shouts of fear, strange noises of anguish, all combined to make the sudden stillness horrible.

To the pretty girl lying under a monumental weight that grew in volume every moment, it sounded like the cry of doom. But she was game and bit her lips upon her fright. At first she was too stunned to move, then as realization bore down upon her she was seized with panic, and struggled with every ounce of her strength to free herself from the crushing weight. Her hands beat on splintered wood across her breast, and her limbs were numb.

She heard people crawling about her, the rustle of garments, a little sound in the great sounds and at last she added her own helpless cry to the turmoil.

"Father! Father! Father!" she pealed like a silver bell, high above the rest.

The rustle of garments near ceased, and a voice answered—a deep voice, calm and gentle. "Yes," it said, "Where are you?"

"Here!" she cried, "Here!"

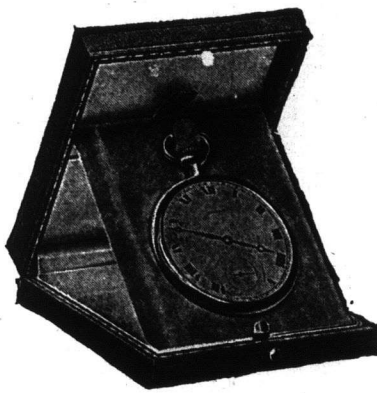
A hand came groping in the darkness and touched her face, and her fingers frantically closed upon it.

"Are you hurt?" asked a voice, with an indescribable inflection of anxiety.

"I don't know," said Louie trying to calm her own wild tones, in deference to those quiet ones. "But—oh I can't move! I'm pinned down!"

"Then be still," said the voice (and suddenly the panic subsided as quickly as it had come) "and we'll see about it."

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