

CAPITOLA'S
PERIL

SOUTHWORTH

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BY MRS SOUTHWORTH



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A Sequel to "The Hidden Hand"

By

MRS. E. D. E. N. SOUTHWORTH



"And such a night "she" took the road in
As ne'er poor sinner was abroad in.
That night a child might understand
The de'il had business on his hand."

— *Burns.*

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CAPITOLA'S PERIL.

A Sequel to THE HIDDEN HAND.

CHAPTER I.

THE ORPHAN'S TRIAL.

"We met ere yet the world had come
To wither up the springs of youth,
Amid the holy joys of home,
And in the first warm blush of youth.
We parted as they never part,
Whose tears are doomed to be forgot;
Oh, by what agony of heart
Forget me not! – forget me not!"
– *Anonymous.*

At nine o'clock the next morning Traverse went to the library to keep his tryst with Colonel Le Noir.

Seated in the doctor's leathern chair, with his head thrown back, his nose erect and his white and jeweled hand caressing his mustached chin, the colonel awaited the young man's communication.

With a slight bow Traverse took a chair and drew it up to the table, seated himself and, after a little hesitation, commenced, and in a modest and self-respectful manner announced that he was charged with the last verbal instructions from the doctor to the executor of his will.

Colonel Le Noir left off caressing his chin for an instant, and, with a wave of his dainty hand, silently intimated that the young man should proceed.

Traverse then began and delivered the dying directions of the late doctor, to the effect that his daughter Clara Day should not be removed from the paternal mansion, but that she should be suffered to remain there, retaining as a matronly companion her old friend Mrs. Marah Rocke.

"Umm! umm! very ingenious, upon my word!" commented the colonel, still caressing his chin.

"I have now delivered my whole message, sir, and have only to add that I hope, for Miss Day's sake, there will be no difficulty thrown in the way of the execution of her father's last wishes, which are also, sir, very decidedly her own," said Traverse.

"Umm! doubtless they are—and also yours and your worthy mother's."

"Sir, Miss Day's will in this matter is certainly mine. Apart from the consideration of her pleasure, my wishes need not be consulted. As soon as I have seen Miss Day made comfortable I leave for the far West," said Traverse, with much dignity.

"Umm! and leave mama here to guard the golden prize until your return, eh?" sneered the colonel.

"Sir, I do not—wish to understand you," said Traverse with a flushed brow.

"Possibly not, my excellent young friend," said the colonel, ironically; then, rising from his chair and elevating his voice, he cried, "but I, sir, understand you and your mother and your pretty scheme perfectly! Very ingenious invention, these 'last verbal instructions.' Very pretty plan to entrap an heiress; but it shall not avail you, adventurers that you are! This afternoon Sauter, the confidential attorney of my late brother-in-law, will be here with the will, which shall be read in the presence of the assembled household. If these last verbal directions are also to be found duplicated in the will, very good, they shall be obeyed; if not, they shall be discredited."

During this speech Traverse stood with kindling eyes and blazing cheeks, scarcely able to master his indignation; yet, to his credit be it spoken, he did "rule his own spirit" and replied with dignity and calmness:

"Colonel Le Noir, my testimony in regard to the last wishes of Doctor Day can, if necessary, be supported by other evidence—though I do not believe that any man who did not himself act in habitual disregard of truth would wantonly question the veracity of another."

"Sir! this to me!" exclaimed Le Noir, growing white with rage and making a step toward the young man.

"Yes, Colonel Le Noir, that to you! And this in addition; You have presumed to charge my mother, in connection with myself, with being an adventuress; with forming dishonorable 'schemes,' and in so charging her, Colonel Le Noir, you utter a falsehood!"

"Sirrah!" cried Le Noir, striding toward Traverse and raising his hand over his head, with a fearful oath, "retract your words or— —"

Traverse calmly drew himself up, folded his arms and replied coolly:

"I am no brawler, Colonel Le Noir; the pistol and the bowie-knife are as strange to my hands as abusive epithets and profane language are to my lips; nevertheless, instead of retracting my words, I repeat and reiterate them. If you charge my mother with conspiracy you utter a falsehood. As her son I am in duty bound to say as much."

"Villain!" gasped Le Noir, shaking his fist and choking with rage; "villain! you shall repent this in every vein of your body!"

Then, seizing his hat, he strode from the room.

"Boaster!" said Traverse to himself, as he also left the library by another door.

Clara was waiting for him in the little parlor below.

"Well, well, dear Traverse," she said, as he entered. "You have had the explanation with my guardian, and—he makes no objection to carrying out the last directions of my father and our own wishes—he is willing to leave me here?"

"My dear girl, Colonel Le Noir defers all decision until the reading of the will, which is to take place this afternoon," said Traverse, unwilling to add to her distress by recounting the disgraceful scene that had just taken place in the library.

"Oh! these delays! these delays! Heaven give me patience! Yet I do not know why I should be so uneasy. It is only a form; of course he will regard my father's wishes."

"I do not see well how he can avoid doing so, especially as Doctor Williams is another witness to them, and I shall request the doctor's attendance here this afternoon. Dear Clara, keep up your spirits! A few hours now and all will be well," said Traverse, as he drew on his gloves and took his hat to go on his morning round of calls.

An early dinner was ordered, for the purpose of giving ample time in the afternoon for the reading of the will.

Owing to the kind forbearance of each member of this little family, their meeting with their guest at the table was not so awkward as it might have been rendered. Mrs. Rocke had concealed the insults that had been offered her; Traverse had said nothing of the affronts put upon him. So that each, having only their own private injuries to resent, felt free in forbearing. Nothing but this sort of prudence on the part of individuals rendered their meeting around one board possible.

While they were still at the table the attorney, Mr. Sauter, with Doctors Williams and Dawson, arrived, and was shown into the library.

And very soon after the dessert was put upon the table the family left it and, accompanied by Colonel Le Noir, adjourned to the library. After the usual salutations they arranged themselves along each side of an extension table, at the head of which the attorney placed himself.

In the midst of a profound silence the will was opened and read. It was dated three years before.

The bulk of his estate, after the paying a few legacies, was left to his esteemed brother-in-law, Gabriel Le Noir, in trust for his only daughter, Clara Day, until the latter should attain the age of twenty-one, at which period she was to come into possession of the property. Then followed the distribution of the legacies. Among the rest the sum of a thousand dollars was left to his young friend Traverse Rocke, and another thousand to his esteemed neighbor Marah Rocke. Gabriel Le Noir was appointed sole executor of the will, trustee of the property and guardian of the heiress.

At the conclusion of the reading Mr. Sauter folded the document and laid it upon the table.

Colonel Le Noir arose and said:

"The will of the late Doctor Day has been read in your presence. I presume you all heard it, and that there can be no mistake as to its purport. All that remains now is to act upon it. I shall claim the usual privilege of twelve months before administering upon the estate or paying the legacies. In the mean time, I shall assume the charge of my ward's person, and convey her to my own residence, known as the Hidden House. Mrs. Rocke," he said, turning toward the latter, "your presence and that of your young charge is no longer required here. Be so good as to prepare Miss Day's traveling trunks, as we set out from this place to-morrow morning."

Mrs. Rocke started, looked wistfully in the face of the speaker and, seeing that he was in determined earnest, turned her appealing glances toward Traverse and Doctor Williams.

As for Clara, her face, previously blanched with grief, was now flushed with indignation. In her sudden distress and perplexity she knew not at once what to do—whether to utter a protest or continue silent; whether to leave the room or remain. Her embarrassment was perceived by Traverse, who, stooping, whispered to her:

"Be calm, love; all shall be well. Doctor Williams is about to speak."

And at that moment, indeed, Doctor Williams arose and said:

"I have, Colonel Le Noir to endorse a dying message from Doctor Day entrusted to my young friend here to be delivered to you, to the effect that it was his last desire and request that his daughter, Miss Clara Day, should be permitted to reside during the term of her minority in this her patrimonial home, under the care of her present matronly friend, Mrs. Marah Rocke, Doctor Rocke and myself are here to bear testimony to these, the last wishes of the departed, which wishes, I believe, also express the desires of his heir-ess."

"Oh, yes, yes!" said Clara, earnestly. "I do very much desire to remain in my own home, among my old familiar friends. My dear father only consulted my comfort and happiness when he left these instructions."

"There can be, therefore, no reason why Miss Day should be disturbed in her present home," said Traverse.

Colonel Le Noir smiled grimly, saying:

"I am sorry, Doctor Williams, to differ with you or to distress Miss Day. But if, as she says, her lamented father consulted her pleasure in those last instructions, he certainly consulted nothing else—the proprieties of conventionalism, the opinion of the world, nor the future welfare of his daughter. Therefore, as a man of Doctor Day's high position and character in his sane moments never could have made such a singular arrangement, I am forced to the conclusion that he could not, at the time of giving those instructions, have been in his right mind. Consequently, I cannot venture to act upon any 'verbal instructions,' however well attested, but shall be guided in every respect by the will, executed while yet the testator was in sound body and mind."

"Doctor Roche and myself are both physicians competent to certify that, at the time of leaving these directions, our respected friend was perfectly sound in mind at least," said Doctor Williams.

"That, sir, I repeat, I contest. And, acting upon the authority of the will, I shall proceed to take charge of my ward as well as of her estate. And as I think this house, under all the circumstances, a very improper place for her to remain, I shall convey her without delay to my own home. Mrs. Roche, I believe I requested you to see to the packing of Miss Day's trunks."

"Oh, heaven! shall this wrong be permitted?" ejaculated Marah.

"Mrs. Roche, I will not go unless absolutely forced to do so by a decree of the court. I shall get Doctor Williams to make an appeal for me to the Orphans' Court," said Clara, by way of encouraging her friend.

"My dear Miss Day, that, I hope, will not be required. Colonel Le Noir acts under a misapprehension of the circumstances. We must enter into more explanations with him. In the mean time, my dear young lady, it is better that you should obey him for the present, at least so far as retiring from the room," said Doctor Williams.