

## The Wisdom of Miss Susan.

By CLARISSA MACKIE.

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"Your Aunt Susan was a remarkable woman, Miss Molly," said the lawyer, looking keenly at the black gowned young woman before him, "and we must therefore not be surprised that she should have made a remarkable will." He tapped a folded document that lay on the table.

"I am quite sure Aunt Susan has made a wise disposition of her property. I only wish she had been spared longer to enjoy it," said Molly Fancher, her pretty eyes red from weeping.

"As you are the only relative Miss Wood had, and as your name is the only one mentioned in her will, I may as well proceed to make you acquainted with its contents. Ahem!" The lawyer unfolded the document and held it close to his spectacled eyes as he read slowly and impressively:

"I give and bequeath all the property of which I may die possessed, as per items below, to my beloved niece, Mary Wood Fancher, on condition that she does not become the wife of Ralph Newcomb. If she—"

"Stop, please," said Molly quietly. She had arisen and now stood, with pale face and flashing eyes, beside him. "You need not finish reading the will, Mr. Jones. The conditions are repulsive. I can hardly believe that my dear Aunt Susan could have asked such a thing of me. She knew of my engagement to Mr. Newcomb and sanctioned it. She welcomed him into the family as a son and—"

"Pray compose yourself, Miss Molly," said the perturbed lawyer. "As I said before, your Aunt Susan was a remarkable woman, and—"

"The will cannot interest me now," said Miss Fancher gravely. "I intend to marry Mr. Newcomb at the appointed time, and you may follow out the terms of the will—whatever they are. How soon will it be necessary for me to vacate the house?"

"Not under six months, as a generous income is provided for that period. In case you refuse to comply with the conditions of the will, Miss Wood has left a sealed document in my hands which definitely disposes of the estate."

Molly bowed soberly. "I think my aunt must have concealed some prejudice against Mr. Newcomb. I hope I am sorry"—Her voice faltered again. "You are sure you are not making a mistake, Miss Molly? Pardon me, but it is a large estate—about a million."

"I don't care if it is ten millions," retorted Molly, indignation drying her tears. "I would not barter my love for any amount." She blushed warmly as she met the lawyer's honest, admiring glance and drew down her black veil. "Good afternoon, Mr. Jones. I am quite sure you will execute my aunt's last wishes in the same conscientious manner that you have always handled her interests." A moment later she had passed from the building and entered her waiting carriage.

When she entered the sober, old-fashioned mansion that had been the home of Susan Wood for half a century and which had been her own birthplace, Molly Fancher's overstrained nerves gave way for the first time since the lingering illness of Miss Wood had resulted in her death a week before.

In spite of the old lawyer's repeated requests that she should hear the terms of her aunt's will the grief-stricken girl had refused admittance to Mr. Jones until this morning, when she had roused herself from her sorrow and made ready to take upon herself the responsibilities that she had been taught to believe would be hers after Miss Wood's death.

The reading of the will was a shock to her. The loss of the inheritance was as nothing compared to the knowledge that her aunt had secretly cherished a dislike if not a distrust of Ralph Newcomb, his accepted lover. It was this thought that rankled in the girl's mind all that long afternoon while she awaited his coming in the evening.

"Dear heart," he cried cheerily as he entered the drawing room, "if you shut yourself up in this gloomy house much longer without companionship save that of Mrs. Rogers, why, I shall—"

He paused as he turned her face to the soft light of the lamp. "Something unusual has happened, Molly. Tell me what it is."

She smiled bravely at him and stilled her trembling lips. "I have been to hear Aunt Susan's will read," she said slowly.

"Well?" Molly found herself listening for some note of anxiety or even unusual interest in his tone as he asked the question that he had always accorded when riches was a topic of conversation, and she sighed relievedly. "She leaves everything to me—conditionally."

"And the conditions?"

"That I do not marry you!" The softly uttered words startled him strangely. His arms loosened their hold upon her and dropped to his sides.

"You cannot mean it. There must be some mistake, Molly," he said gravely. "Miss Wood surely did not distrust the quality of my love for you. It is very strange."

and I will be poor with you, and we will live in that delightful studio building!"

Newcomb gathered her into his arms tenderly. "You have made your decision?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"Do you know what you are giving up?"

"I am only sorry that I am bringing you nothing but love, dear," she said earnestly.

"We can get along on that," he said grimly, "with a few little added frills in the way of meat and drink that I may be able to worry out of the editors, but—it isn't fair to you, darling—to leave all this." He looked about the richly furnished room and then back into her eyes.

"You cannot believe that I really love you, Ralph," she murmured protestingly.

"I do now, sweetheart," he said, kissing her lips reverently, and then, a few moments later, he added, "I shall prove my trust in your love, Molly—will you marry me at once—this week?"

"Yes, Ralph," she said.

It was perhaps six months later that Lawyer Jones mounted the last long step flight of stairs that led to the Eyrle, as Ralph Newcomb called his studio apartment. He looked about the bare, uncompromising hall that could not be dignified by the name of corridor and then rapped smartly on the door in front of him.

Molly opened the door—the same Molly who had never lifted a dainty finger in household matters. Her brown hair was in sweet confusion about her pink cheeks and the sleeves of her linen frock were pushed above her elbows. A great gingham apron enveloped her slim figure.

She welcomed him with all her old charm of manner and ushered him into a long, many gabled room, where Ralph Newcomb sat pale and weary eyed before a glowing fire.

"My husband has been very ill," said Molly seriously as the men shook hands cordially. "He has been working too hard and— But he is so much better now. It has been a most trying siege for him." Her red lips closed firmly, and the old lawyer guessed at the unuttered story that lay behind those lips. A glimpse of the bare studio, the remains of a very simple meal, a portfolio of drawings on a chair, over the back of which was thrown Molly's coat and hat—it all spoke of poverty, and the sort of poverty that perhaps is hardest to bear.

The thought of lovely Molly Fancher trudging the streets in and out of editorial offices with a portfolio of drawings and never losing her bright, brave smile of hope and sweet content stirred the lawyer strangely.

"I have come to inform you of the final disposition of your late aunt's fortune," he said rather gruffly, adjusting his eyeglasses and taking an envelope from his pocket.

"I don't believe we are interested in that," remarked Ralph smilingly. "Miss Susan gave us our knockout blow several months ago. You certainly haven't come to gloat over us, Mr. Jones? Eh, Molly?"

She laughed softly. "We are awfully poor, but we are likewise awfully happy, Mr. Jones. Poor Aunt Susan didn't know—"

"My dear young people," interrupted the lawyer gravely, "Miss Wood did know. In her youth she chose between love and riches, and she preferred the latter, and except for her little niece she was a very lonely and unhappy woman. She gave Miss Molly the same choice, not that she distrusted either of you, but she did want you both to be sure of each other's love." He paused and cleared his throat as he rustled the document. "I will read: 'I give and bequeath my entire estate to be equally divided between Ralph Newcomb and his wife, Molly Fancher Newcomb.'"

"Poor Aunt Susan! I misjudged her so," cried Molly contritely when they had recovered from their amazement. "But I love to think that she had such faith in us both after all! We have been very happy, Ralph, dear, even if we have been poor." She moved to her husband's side and slipped her hand in his.

"We will never be any happier," he said solemnly.

Mr. Jones paused when he reached the lower entrance of the studio building and leisurely lighted a cigar. "Very wise for a woman—Miss Wood—very wise, indeed," he said thoughtfully.

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