

The Counterfeit Bill

by Amy Randolph

“It is too bad!” sobbed Kitty Eldon, with burning cheeks and a throbbing heart, “it is too bad! and I won’t endure it another day—no, not another moment!”

Kitty was a plump, chubby-cheeked damsel, with a profusion of dimples, and large, wistful-looking brown eyes—a girl whose face and physique clearly betokened quick passions and a warm, tropical nature, very evidently in a state of revolt just at the present moment.

“Kitty!” remonstrated a matronly personage, who had just entered, and stood with a troubled face watching the busy hands and flushed temples of the girl, “Kitty, you surely are not going away?”

“Yes, I am going away, Aunt Myra,” said Kitty, tossing back the chestnut curls with a defiant motion, “I will not spend another night under a roof where my letters are intercepted, and—and—”

But, my child, your uncle acts solely for your good. Duval Martyn bears no enviable character, and— “

“I will not hear him aspersed!” indignantly interrupted Kitty, tying on her bonnet with nervous fingers. “I shake the dust of your threshold off my feet henceforth. I chose to take my own pathway in the world. I would sooner earn my bread as governess or ladies’ maid than be longer dependent on your cold charity.”

“But, Kitty, my darling, consider—”

Kitty Eldon drew herself haughtily away from her aunt’s detaining hand, and passed out of the door like a small embodiment of the spirit of defiance.

Out of the door! but, not until she had reached the corner of the street did impulsive Kitty pause to reflect where she was going.

“I wish I knew of some employment agency or intelligence bureau,” thought Kitty, with a strange sensation of loneliness. “Or, perhaps, I might buy a newspaper and see something among the advertisements.

This was an idea that seemed feasible, and Kitty drew out her little purse,—ah, how slender it was!—and paused opposite a news store.

“Can I sit down and read the paper here?” she asked timidly of the tall, spare-visaged female who presided behind the counter, after she had spent her six cents.

“I haven’t no objections,” was the rather ungracious reply, as the woman pushed forward a rickety three-legged stool; and Kitty sat down, to glance with eager eyes up and down the crowded columns where “Wants” and “Situations” jostle one another in bewildering juxtaposition.

WANTED—A lively and agreeable young person to act in the capacity of confidential friend and companion to a widow in affluent circumstances. Apply to Mrs. L.L., No.— —street.

The brown, dewy light sparkled into Kitty’s eyes as they lighted upon this particular paragraph.

“The very place!” she exclaimed, half aloud; “No.— — street. That surely cannot be very far off. Oh, if I only might suit her. I am lively, I know, and I would try so hard to be agreeable. At all events, I will lose no time in applying for the situation. Perhaps it is already filled by some candidate more prompt than myself.”

Kitty’s heart almost stood still at the direful possibility as she hurried along the sun-baked streets toward the street and number indicated in the advertisement.

“Is Mrs. L.L. at home?” was her faltering question.

The servant looked puzzled.

“There was an advertisement,” began Kitty, but the woman interrupted her with a look of intelligence.

“Oh, I know—I know,—it’s Mrs. Legrande Leslie. Walk in; she will see you presently.”

“Mrs. Legrande Leslie”—it was a pretty name, and Kitty felt sure she would like its proprietress.

It was quite an *a la* fashionable rural boudoir into which she was ushered—filled with flowers in huge alabaster vases, and scattered round with yellow satin chairs, tiny tables and statuettes, and ornamental brackets. To be sure, there was a good deal of dust on the carved black-marble mantel, and more newspapers crammed under the piano than Kitty had been taught to consider as exactly neat; but the lady who arose from a low divan and hurried to meet her was very pretty and engaging in her showy mourning, all jet, and bugles, and fluttering black gauze ribbons.

Mrs. Legrande Leslie was a blonde, small, smiling, and very prepossessing, and Kitty felt encouraged by the winning light in the blue eyes, and the languid pressure of the little hand, which had an allowance of at least three rings to every white finger.

“So you would like to be my companion,” she said, sweetly, when Kitty had finished her simple tale. “My darling, I know you would suit me. I am a physiognomist, and I am *sure* we shall love each other dearly; you have such a sweet, innocent face. Pray, pardon me, darling, but I *must* kiss you.”

And as her velvety, perfumed lips touched Kitty's cheek, she *felt* that the liquid blue eyes were looking her over with the keenest and most intent regards.

"As for salary," went on Mrs. Leslie, "that's a matter of no consequence whatever. We shall certainly agree on terms, my dearest Kitty,—you'll let me call you Kitty?"

"Certainly," said the "companion."

"And you'll call me Aurilla—how sweet that will be! And—"

She hesitated, and her voice died suddenly away, as a crimson drapery that shielded a door at the further end of the room was abruptly raised, and a tall figure entered—a man's figure. He was advancing into the apartment, but stopped half-way as his eye fell on Kitty.

"I thought you were alone."

"My dear Roderic, don't go," said Mrs. Leslie, recovering her smiling equanimity. "This is my friend, Miss Elden—my confidential companion. Kitty, this is my brother, Mr. Hughes."

Kitty inclined her head, but could not help thinking, in the one hurried glance she cast towards the tall gentleman, that there was no very striking family resemblance, for he was swarthy, with sunken black eyes, and a heavy under-jaw partially covered by black moustaches.

"Have you transacted any business yet this morning?" asked Mr. Hughes, contemplating the sparkle of his ring.

"No—and that reminds me, I really ought to do a little shopping before it gets any warmer. You'll go with me, won't you, Kitty?"

Certainly Kitty would go anywhere with Mrs. Legrande Leslie; was it not appropriate to her position as "companion?"

And so Mrs. Leslie, in a tumbled black tulle bonnet, and a lace shawl pinned awry, preceded Kitty into her elegant little brougham, which rolled as softly along the streets as if its springs were made of velvet.

"Dear me," sighed Mrs. Leslie, glancing over the pockets of a dainty purple porte-monnaie, "I haven't anything smaller than this fifty dollar note. Kitty, would you object to stepping into one of these stores and getting change?"

"Not at all," Kitty said; but nevertheless, in her inmost heart, she wished that Mrs. Leslie had not asked her.

As the brougham drew up in front of one of the marble-fronted emporiums of the great thoroughfare, Kitty stepped out, carrying the bill in her hand.

“Tens and fives, if you please, my dear,” called Mrs. Leslie, musically, after her.

Kitty stood at the counter, waiting for the change—three, five, seven minutes slipped away, and still the “tens and fives” were not brought back. She could see the heads of the cashier and two or three clerks close together, as if in deep consultation, and then the young man who had taken the bank-note returned, looking curiously at Kitty’s innocent, expectant face.

“I do not think you are aware that this is a bad bill,” he said, gravely, returning it to her.

“Bad!” echoed Kitty.

“Counterfeit.”

As she stood staring at him in speechless amazement, he was called away to attend to some other customers.

“Surely Mrs. Leslie cannot know it,” thought Kitty as she began to retrace her steps.

“Bad!” repeated Mrs. Leslie, scornfully. “What nonsense! It’s because they didn’t want the trouble of changing it. Kitty, darling!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Is—is that young man in the door-way behind those shawls the one that refused to take it?”

“Yes.”

What a deep shadow the crimson silk linings of the brougham threw over Aurilla Leslie’s lovely face, as she drew back behind them.

“There’s a large drug-store a step or two further down, Kitty. They are always accommodating at drug stores. Suppose you try there, my dear.”

“But—”

“Nonsense, Kitty! I tell you I *know* the bill is good!”

She was deadly pale now, and her full lips quivered as she almost pushed Kitty away from the carriage.

The girl obeyed. Surely it was impossible that Mrs. Leslie could be mistaken. The bald-headed old gentleman behind the drug counter took the bill and scrutinized it closely from behind his gold spectacles. Then he looked suspiciously at Kitty.

“I would like the change in tens and fives, sir, if convenient,” said Kitty.

“But it isn’t convenient just now, my girl,” said a gruff voice behind her, as a stalwart policeman laid his iron grasp on her arm. “You are my prisoner.”

Kitty grew pale as death, and uttered a wild scream, as she caught the counter for support.

“What—what do you mean? There is some mistake!” she gasped.

“Very well acted, my dear; but I guess there isn’t any mistake,” said the policeman, jocosely, winking at the clerk she had seen at the first store, who stood beside him. “Come along with me, and we’ll settle this little matter out of hand.

“Indeed, indeed,” pleaded poor Kitty, through her convulsive sobs, “the lady in the carriage—Mrs. Leslie—said it was quite good, or I should never have tried to pass it a second time.”

“What lady? Where is she?”

“In a carriage—at the door.”

“Where?”

Kitty eagerly hurried out; but, to her infinite horror and dismay, Mrs. Leslie, brougham and all, had vanished as utterly as if they never existed. In vain she gazed wildly up and down the street, and rubbed her tearful eyes—no trace or vestige of the blonde widow and her carriage remained. Kitty fainted away on the sunshiny pavement, with the coming and going crowds eddying past her, like the troubled currents of some vast, never ceasing stream.

When she returned to the possession of her senses, she was lying on the sofa in a snug little back parlor, with Aunt Myra wetting her temples with some cool, delicious perfume, and Uncle Edmund industriously fanning her.

“It’s all right, my dear! it’s all right!” began Uncle Edmund, the moment he saw the brown eyes begin to uncloze. “Don’t fret, Kittikin! you’re going home with us the very minute you’re strong enough!”

“Oh, aunt, aunt!” sobbed Kitty, hugging Aunt Myra’s plump neck, until the good lady grew purple in the face. “Was it all a horrible dream? Where am I? And how came you here?”

And then Aunt Myra explains, with a good deal of interjectional assistance from Uncle Edmund, that one of Kitty’s cards being found in her pocket, led to her friends being sent for; that a little of Uncle Edmund’s common-sense explanation to his friend, the magistrate of that particular precinct, had set all the complications straight; and that she was now exonerated from any blame whatever, and free to return with them.

“And first, my dear, Judge Brayne wants a little talk with you about this Mrs.—Mrs.—What’s her name?”

So Kitty told the kind and genial judge all she knew.

“I’m afraid [you’re] too late,” said the judge, as he mechanically jotted down her words in a memorandum-book. “However, we’ll make the attempt.”

Judge Brayne was right. Neither Mrs. Legrande Leslie, nor her brother, Mr. Roderic Hughes, were to be heard of.

“I’m sorry,” said the policeman who returned from this bootless errand; “if I’d caught ‘em, I could have broken up the worst counterfeit gang this side of the Pacific!”

And Kitty, trembling at the perils she had so narrowly escaped, resolved never again—no, not for forty lovers!—to leave the home of Uncle Edmund and Aunt Myra.

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