

Pretty Mrs. Graham

That is what I always call her to this day, and in spite of all that's come and gone, it's her true title, for I do believe she was the prettiest creature I ever laid eyes on.

And she was dressed with such exquisite taste, too, it set off her dark, bright beauty so well, and she was a dainty, childlike little thing—why, even Dick couldn't help acknowledging her beauty, though he didn't take to her from the first.

But I thought him wrong in that, much as I trusted to his judgment, for you see, Dick—well, Dick Fraser and my humble self have been betrothed for several years, and next Spring, after Bessie marries, why, I am going to keep house with Dick.

But that isn't my story.

When our dear parents died they left Bessie and me this fine old-fashioned home, a good supply of solid old-fashioned furniture and silver and household linen, a good old-fashioned servant who had lived with since Bess was a baby, eighteen years ago, and very little ready money.

So, as we could not give up our home, or be parted, we looked about us for two or three good, old-fashioned boarders, who would stay with us all the year round and be able to pay well for a good home.

Well, we found two, just what we wanted, Miss Burton, an elderly maiden lady, and Mrs. Wootton, a widow lady, who were glad to escape from the dust and noise of the city, and who were able to pay good prices for our best rooms.

And this they did, only stipulating that we should not take other boarders, but all have a quiet home together.

So we were just a houseful of women, you see—not a man on the place, unless we except Tom, the half-grown boy who milked the cow and tended the garden and drove our little carriage for us.

We had plenty of applications from summer boarders, but we never took any until pretty Mrs. Graham came. It was a melting hot day when a carriage brought her to my front door, with a lively, black-eyed little maid, and she begged so hard to be taken for just a month or two of the hottest weather, saying we looked so cool and delightful out there, and she dreaded the hotel so much, that it was hard to resist her.

Miss Burton was in the parlor when she called, and she was so fascinated by the little widow's loveliness and liveliness that she gave her consent to her coming at once.

So then we consulted Mrs. Wootton—you remember our agreement with them made it necessary—and she, too, was quite won over, and so the result was that we made pretty Mrs. Graham an exception, and took her and her lively maid, Jeannette, into our charmed household.

She took possession that very day, coming down with three large trunks from town. She professed herself delighted with our fine old home and plentiful country fare, and she certainly delighted us with her beauty, and her bewitching ways, and her lovely toilets, and her wonderful music. For she made the keys of Bessie's piano almost talk, and as Bessie herself was the only player among us, and she but an indifferent one, such a musician was a great treat.

Dick came down to take tea on Sunday, as he generally did, and then he met our new boarder.

After supper I asked him if he did not think her lovely.

"Yes, she is pretty—that can't be denied," he said, slowly.

"Well, what fault can you find?" I said, seeing he kept something back.

"None perhaps; but I don't like her, and I wish you hadn't taken her, Mary, I believe she is a little adventuress, that's all."

"Why, Dick, her references were unexceptionable, and she is a member of St. John's Church, and a teacher in the Sabbath-school."

"Is she? Well, I hope she is a good one," said Dick dryly, and there the subject dropped.

She had been with us about six weeks, when one Saturday afternoon I received from our business agent \$800, the proceeds from the interest in a coal mine belonging to Bessie and me.

It was too late to take it to the bank, where our cash was deposited, and I being half unwilling to keep so much money two nights in a lonely house full of women, felt strongly inclined to go over to the village and deposit it there till Monday morning.

But, on second thoughts, I made up my mind that it was nonsense—the afternoon was warm, I was busy, and the money would be safe enough in my own drawer.

So I counted the notes to be sure they were right, locked them in a little casket, and locked them in my desk. As I opened the door of my room to go downstairs, I met Jeanette, who said she was just going to knock. Mrs. Graham was going to walk over to the village—could she serve me in any way? I thanked her, said I would be glad if she would call at the Post office, and went my way to see about tea.

The next morning we all went to church except our servant Emma, who remained at home to have the dinner ready.

In the afternoon Emma wished to go out, and as I did not like the house to remain quite alone I remained at home myself. Having a slight headache I lay down upon the sofa in the cool parlor and took a quiet nap. I sprang up as soon as I was awakened, and went up stairs to arrange my hair, meeting pretty Mrs. Graham coming down.

“I did not know you were home,” said I.

“I have this moment come in and taken off my hat,” she said with a sweet smile, “and I was coming down for a drink of ice-water.”

I heard her go into the parlor where she sat for a long time playing grand old church music, and singing softly in tones so sweet that it made me think of heaven and angels’ music.

Next morning as we were gathering at the breakfast table, Miss Burton came in, pale and frightened, saying her room had been entered during the night by a burglar, and her watch and chain and all her valuable jewelry taken.

We all sprang up in consternation, and went to her room, where we found the window, which opened upon the roof of a veranda, partly raised and the shutters pushed open as if surely indicating the way the burglar had entered.

Miss Burton had slept soundly, and heard nothing, she said, but had noticed her window when she first awoke, and upon searching, found all her jewels gone.

“We might all have been murdered in our beds!” cried Mrs. Wootton, pale and trembling, while pretty Mrs. Graham fell to crying like a child, declaring she would not dare to stay another night under a roof where there was no man in the house.

“Did any of the rest lose anything?” asked Bessie.

“I haven’t noticed in my room,” said Mrs. Wootton, “let us all go and look.”

And to our rooms we went, I opening my bureau drawer with a sinking heart. It was as I feared—my casket, which had only contained the money, was really gone.

Some unaccountable impulse prompted me to conceal my loss from the rest when I joined them again, and I hardly noticed that Mrs. Graham stopped crying and looked queerly at me when I reported that my things were all right.

And then she fell to crying again, saying hers were all right, too, but she never doubted that it would be her turn next, and that she dared not stay there another night.

Mrs. Wootton reported that every article of jewelry and all the money she had in her purse were gone, and Bessie said the same.

This was a serious case, and we were at a loss what to do. I said I should inform the village inspector and then go up to town and consult Mr. Fraser and a lawyer, and I begged them to do nothing till I came back.

They all promised, but pretty Mrs. Graham said I must come back before night for she knew she was a dreadful little coward, but she must go over to the village and stay at the hotel for a few nights. She would only take a little satchel, and when we got all quiet once again she would come back.

I was not willing she should go, but I thought she would get over her fright by evening and stay, so I asked her if I could do any errands in the city for her.

She said no—then yes, if I would be so kind, I might stop at Welling’s and match a piece of lace for her—she wanted five yards more, and she gave me the money to pay for it.

It seemed to me that the trains went at snails’ paces that morning, but at last I was in Dick’s office.

“Um—um—yes, to be sure!” said Dick, stroking his moustache with a thoughtful air. “Very bad, Mary! Very bad indeed! And your pretty little widow is the only person who wants to leave, you say?”

“Yes. And I don’t want any one to leave with such a stain on our house, Dick.”

“You must by all means keep your pretty little widow till I come down with an officer and search her trunks.”

I sprang to my feet.

“Why, Dick, are you mad?” I cried.

“Neither mad nor deluded, my dear little woman,” said Dick, coolly: “but I have a little theory about this thing, Mary, and if you will let me work it out I may help you. Got errands to do this morning?”

I was too worried to attend to any shopping for myself, but I remembered Mrs. Graham’s lace and answered—

“Yes—one. “

“Well, go and do it, and then come back here, will you? I think I’ll have a plan perfected by that time.”

I went to Welling’s, stopped at the lace counter, and held out the scrap pretty Mrs. Graham had given me.

“Can you match this?” I asked of the polite shopman who stepped up. “I wish to purchase some more of it.”

He took the bit of lace, and I noticed a queer look come over his face. I also saw two or three of the young men draw near and eye me curiously, and I began to feel embarrassed.

“I don’t know,” said the shopman, slowly. “Mr. Jones, ask Mr. Welling to step this way.”

The young man addressed hurried away, and in a moment the gentleman named came up, which was a relief to me, for I saw something was wrong, and I knew him well, as he was an old friend of my father’s.

“This is a bad business, and requires explanation, Miss Mary,” he said. “A week ago a lady exactly answering the description you give of Mrs. Graham came here and bought twenty yards of this same lace. After she was gone it was discovered that the money she paid was bad. We have been trying to trace this lady ever since, but had not the least clew till now. What do you think?”

“I think,” I tremblingly said, “that I must tell you the bad business at our house last night, which brought me to town today.”

So I told him my story, and then he went with me to Dick’s office. And when I went home I knew all I had to do.

I told Mrs. Graham that I could not find her any more of the lace, and returned her money.

As I had planned, Dick came by the 6 o’clock train, and we were all at tea when Emma came in with the quiet announcement —

“Mr. Fraser is in the parlor, ma’am.”

I excused myself a moment, and hastening to the parlor found Dick and a detective.

We hurried quietly upstairs—I was so glad Jeannette was out of the way—and into pretty Mrs. Graham’s room. One of her trunks was gone, but her hat and shawl lay upon the bed and under the pillow we found her Russian-leather handbag.

Mr. Detective made short work of opening that bag, and lo! he had no need to look farther! There we found all Miss Burton’s jewelry, all that belonged to Bessie and Mrs. Wooton, and my lost money, besides a bunch of skeleton keys. And then his course was plain, and before I hardly knew what happened, we had astonished the group at the supper table, and pretty Mrs. Graham was a prisoner.

Afterwards we found proof enough that her work was done on Sunday afternoon, while I lay asleep in the parlor, and the window opened at night by her lively maid Jeannette, to throw suspicion aside.

But we never heard any more either of pretty Mrs. Graham or Jeannette.

Both, no doubt, got their just deserts, for Mr. Welling prosecuted, though I refused to do so.

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