

A Lady's Hairpin

A Detective Story

by J. Mycatt

HOLWORTHY—In Paris, France, Thursday, May –, 18—, Mary Theresa, daughter of the late Isaiah Holworthy. 36 yrs. 3 mos. 4 ds.

My friend, whom I had known for some time, but only in a casual way, handed me a slip of paper with the above death notice printed on it. He was a medium-sized man, with dark-hazel eyes, brown beard and a clean-cut, intelligent face. I had known him as Mr. Nodell, and had an indefinite idea he was a retired business man. As he handed me the clipping, he stroked his beard and looked at me in a demure way, as if studying my thoughts.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

“Well, I don't see anything peculiar about it,” I replied. “Why do you show it to me?”

“Thereby hangs a story. You have never asked me my business, and I have never told you; but as you seem to be a pretty good sort of fellow, and know when to say a word and when to hold your tongue, I don't mind telling you the tale.”

“Hold on a minute, till I light a fresh cigar, and then you can fire away,” I exclaimed. We lighted our cigars, and I bent forward to hear what my acquaintance might have to say. Settling himself back in his chair, and taking two or three long puffs at his cigar, he began:

“I am a detective and, of course, meet with some strange experiences.”

To say that I was surprised would hardly express my feelings. He seemed to me more like a dreamer than a detective.

“I see you are surprised,” and his eyes lighted up with a quiet twinkle of amusement. “Yes, I am one of the men who try to know other people, and not let them know me. As I was saying that little death notice opens up quite a train of reminiscences. It was way back in the fifties when I first became acquainted with the subject of that paragraph. At that time she was a young girl and I was just beginning to feel that I was a young man. It had been my father's intention to make a lawyer or doctor of me, and I was in a rather unsettled state of mind as to which profession I should take up.”

“I was attending — college at the time, and Mary Holworthy's father lived next door to my boarding-house. I met the girl quite frequently in my trips back and forth between the college and my boarding-place. After a time I was introduced to her, and a mutual liking sprang up between us. I can fancy I can see her now as she looked at that time so long ago.”

My friend meditatively made a pause and snapped the ashes from his cigar.

“Her blonde hair and steely-blue eyes would make a sensation anywhere,” he resumed; “she was a lovely girl.”

Again my friend stopped, and I thought I detected a half-stifled sigh.

“As I said,” he continued, “a mutual regard took possession of us, and we spent many happy days together, and after a time an engagement was entered into between us. We were young and foolish then, you know. I had been at college some three years, and had almost decided to devote myself to the law and take a course at the law school, when the opening of the storm of the rebellion began to form. My father’s affairs became embarrassed, and from a student at school I was summoned home to enter his store and try to make retrenchments in our family expenses. I was very reluctant to leave college, and dreaded the parting with Mary most of all. I had never informed her father of our engagement, and, as I was to leave town, I felt it incumbent upon me to ask his sanction to the union at some future time, when I had succeeded in establishing myself on a comfortable footing. When I called on Mr. Holworthy he seemed very much pleased to see me at first, but as I gradually unfolded my story to his ears he seemed to withdraw into himself, and at last, when I told him I must leave college and make my own way in the world before I could hope to marry his daughter, he was positively frigid.

“He hemmed and hawed, and hoped that we might meet at some future day under more pleasant circumstances, and then, perhaps, he could consider my proposition, provided his daughter’s feelings did not change in the meantime. To say that I felt considerably humiliated hardly expresses the state of my feelings at that time, for it was only by great self-control that I could hide my mortification and rage at his cool demeanor.

“Well, I left him, and went to see Mary and inform her of the answer I had received. She said it was just as she had expected, but that we were young, and could wait years and years if necessary. So we parted, with protestations of love on my part, and a quiet acquiescence to all I said on hers.

“I was a fool in those days.”

My friend looked dreamily out of the window, and I, not wishing to disturb his meditations, puffed vigorously away at my cigar. After a short silence he turned towards me and resumed his story.

“She was beautiful—that’s it, only beautiful. I left college for home and found my father’s affairs would be all right if the war cloud held off long enough to secure some return from his Southern debtors.

“But the hope was short-lived, and when the first shot was fired at Fort Sumter it sounded the knell of my father’s business, and in a few short months the store was closed. He saved enough out of the wreck to keep the house he owned over the heads of his wife and children. As for me, it was hard work and plenty of it for the next year.

“It was in the second year of the war, and I had decided to attend a reunion supper of the college class to which I had belonged before I met Mary Holworthy again. I had written to her early and often, but her letters had gradually grown shorter and colder, and came at longer intervals, until I released her from the engagement which we had entered into. I thought there was a tone of relief in her last letter to me, not unmingled with triumph.

“I remember the day I stepped from the train into the tunnel-like depot at the place of her home and ascended the stairs to the ground floor of the station. Stepping out on the street I started to walk up to the college campus, hoping to meet some of my old cronies. How familiar the stores looked, and as I stopped to examine some books on Judd’s book stand I was attracted by a figure coming down the street. How well I knew it, although I had not seen it for so long. As it came towards me I stood motionless and faced directly towards it.

“It was Mary Holworthy.

“She looked me fair and square in the eye, and, while her pink cheeks assumed a brighter hue, she passed me by with a cool nod, as if nothing had ever been farther from her thoughts than a love episode with me.

“She had a companion, a handsomely dressed young man, who seemed most devoted to her.

“Oh, a queer world, ain’t it?

“I attended the class supper that night, and of course got all the gossip of the college. It seems that this young man was rich, and that Mary Holworthy had the credit of having successfully netted him. By the way, it was also reported that her father was not financially solid as formerly, and that this young man had used his influence effectively to prop up old Holworthy’s business.

“At the supper I met one of my old chums, who asked me why I had not answered his invitation to his wedding. As I had not received an invitation, I told him, of course, that I could not accept it. It seems he sent the invitation, but it had miscarried in the mails. So after an explanation I found that I had not only come on to a class supper, but that the next day I should have to attend my friend’s wedding.

“The wedding came off, and among the guests were Mary Holworthy and her ‘catch.’ They seemed very devoted, and I felt a kind of cynical pleasure in watching the couple. The usual ceremony at church, followed by the conventional wedding breakfast and the good wishes of all present, and the departure of the bride and groom, made the day seem very short.

“I had stayed to bid goodbye to the mother of my chum, after the guests had departed. We had stepped into the room where the presents were displayed, as I had wished to examine one or two pretty souvenirs that had caught my fancy. A sudden exclamation from my friend’s mother made me look towards her.

“‘Mr. Nodell, do you know that there is a bracelet missing?’

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “Didn’t your son’s wife take it with her?”

“I think not, as she said she would not care to carry but one or two pieces of jewelry with her, and asked me to look out for this bracelet in particular.”

“I stepped to the spot where she stood, and there lay the empty case, without an indication of disturbance. I asked her if any strangers had been admitted to the room. She told me not one. I felt a little uncomfortable. I was younger then,” said Mr. Nodell, apologetically. “I had not had the hard experience I have had since. I took up the jewel case and looked it over and laid it down with a feeling of uneasiness. Why it should make me feel uncomfortable I could not explain; but nevertheless a kind of uncanny sensation took possession of me. I turned toward my friend’s mother, and tried to allay her fears that it had been stolen. She was positive that someone must have taken it. I again looked at the case, and just under the card that rested beside it I found a bent hairpin. I took it up and held it in my hand, and then tossed it up and down.

“After trying to allay the fears of the lady, I at last told her I would go and see a detective, and see what could be done to recover the bauble. I immediately went to the detective office, and told the story to the chief, who detailed a man on the case immediately. Afterwards I returned to my room at the hotel where I was stopping, and as I lifted my hand to take my hat off I felt the bent hair-pin in my hand, which I had unconsciously carried about with me. As I threw it on the dressing case a little streak of light seemed to come from it, and out of curiosity I bent forward to see what caused it.

“It was a tiny length of hair, of the blond shade of Mary Holworthy’s.

“I took the hairpin up again, and for the first time noticed that it was bent in a peculiar way, such as I had often seen her do in the halcyon—yes, I’ll say halcyon—days of old.”

Here my friend Nodell got up and paced back and forth across the floor once or twice, took a fresh light, puffed fiercely at his cigar two or three times, and then threw it from him with an air of disgust. After a moment he resumed his seat and continued his story.

“Well—let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes; the detectives worked away on the case for a day or two, and then were inclined to give it up. In the meantime I had telegraphed to my friend and had received the reply that the bracelet had been left at home. I was loath to give up the search, and felt positive that if sufficient effort was put forth the thief would be found. All the servants had been examined and the house searched high and low, and yet no clue.

It was the second day after the occurrence, and I had just returned from a students’ gathering, and sat in my room looking idly out over the town common, admiring the graceful elms, when the thoughts of the bracelet and the hair-pin found beside the empty case came to my mind, and I found a sudden faintness come over me.

“Could it be possible that Mary Holworthy had taken it?”

“I was overpowered with the thought, and I threw open the window to get a little fresh air and restore my equilibrium. Just at this moment, who should be passing but Miss Holworthy and the young man of whom I have before spoken. It seems but yesterday.”

Nodell stopped, as if overcome by his emotions. He took a deep breath, and then went on in a cool, calm manner.

“I knew intuitively that she had taken the bracelet. But how could I prove it, and if I did prove it, what good could it do to me? Only pain and sorrow for her, only pain and remorse for me. How I wished I had never seen that hairpin! As I said, she was passing, and she raised her head, gave a cool nod, curled her little lips, while her steel-blue eyes seemed to mock me. In a minute I had made up my mind that I would humble her for my own sake. With this resolution in my mind I waited until evening. After supper I lighted a cigar and took a walk around the college grounds and through a part of the city, debating in my own mind whether I should leave town and say nothing. I finally decided I would settle the matter at once.

“Going to Mr. Holworthy’s house I rang the bell and asked if Miss Holworthy was in. The servant said she was, but thought she was engaged. I told the servant to give my name and inform Miss Holworthy that I must see her on a very important matter. The servant returned in a few minutes and told me to enter. I followed the servant into the parlor, where I found Miss Holworthy and the young gentleman before mentioned. She immediately arose and, advancing, said:

“‘Allow me to introduce you to Mr. Innes.’

“I bowed and immediately asked her if she could grant me a few minutes’ private conversation.

“‘I have no secrets from Mr. Innes, and whatever you have to say to can be said before him,’ replied Miss Holworthy.

“‘I had rather not have his presence, as it will be very embarrassing to you and to me also,’ I replied.

“‘I object to leaving the room, and I wish you to distinctly understand that I shall stay,’ said Mr. Innes.

“‘All right,’ I said, as I was nettled by his manner. ‘Miss Holworthy, you may not know that I have come to get the bracelet you took from the table at the wedding of my friend. I want it, and want it at once.’

“She turned as pale as if death had claimed her, and sank back in her chair. With an oath, Innes sprang forward, his face filled with anger.

“‘You lie! You cur, you are doing this because I supplanted you in Miss Holworthy’s regards.’

“Hold up! Hold up! I want that bracelet, and if I do not get it, then you can call me anything you wish.’

“I felt as cool as an iceberg, and stepped over to where Miss Holworthy sat. I told her that I had grounds for believing her guilty, and that I would have the house searched instantly if she did not produce it. With a despairing cry she flung herself at my feet and implored me for the sake of the old days not to expose her and she would immediately get the bracelet and return it to me. As she said this, Mr. Innes’ face turned ghastly, and he appeared as one dazed. Miss Holworthy started up to leave the room and I stopped her. Taking her hand, I said:

“No one but us three shall ever know of this while you live, so do not be frightened; but I had to do my duty.’ She left the room, and in a few minutes returned with the bracelet done up in some soft tissue paper. I asked her why she took it. She replied:

“I hardly know myself, but it was a sudden temptation and it overcame me. I wish I had never seen you or the bracelet,’ and for a moment the steel-blue eyes flashed at me.

“You are perfectly secure if Mr. Innes or yourself never mention this incident, and I am sure I never care to see you again,’ I could not help adding.

“I carried the bracelet back to its owner, and they were endless in their inquiries where it came from, but I never told them. I went to the detective’s office and told the chief that I had recovered the jewelry, and, without giving names, gave him an outline of the way in which I succeeded. He was very much pleased, and through his influence I became a detective, so now I am able to do what I wish and let the men under me do the rest.

“After the recovery of the bracelet I did not hear anything of Miss Holworthy for some years, and then it was in connection with some secret service work. I was shown photographs of one of the English leaders of the demi-monde in Paris and her best friend, and what was my surprise to recognize in the pictures the subject of this sketch and Mr. Innes.

“You see now why I save this little clipping?”

Mr. Nodell gazed at the little piece of paper, folded it up and put it in his card case, rose, stretched himself, and said he guessed he would go to supper.

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