

*David Bixby's Relict*

How She Entertained a Detective

by Lizzie A. S. Chester

Mrs. Abigail Bixby was a widow lady, the number of years of her life fixed at an indefinite period between forty and sixty; and since the sad morning when the turf had closed finally over Bixby, she felt that all mankind were banded together in seeking her temporal ruin, and that she was the preordained prey of all the sharks of humanity, and more-over looked upon pretty much all humanity as of the shark species. She owned a house and garden spot, pasturage for a cow, a bit of mowing, and some live stock; and every morning she looked out of her bed-room window, before she took her night-cap off, to see if these sharks hadn't gobbled up some part of her property. She felt that any poor unwashed who had a hungry family might lead off her cow or cosset sheep; thieves might make off with her poultry; or rude boys be caught in her apple trees; the neighbor's cattle might break into her cornfield; or their pigs root up her garden; for she was a poor widow and everybody took advantage of her.

The milkman gave her short measure and diluted her milk beyond that of all her neighbors. Didn't she know good milk? In self-defense she bought her cow, or rather she asked the deacon of her church, in whom of all men she could place confidence, to buy one for her. The deacon was cheated, and the deacon cheated her. She bought a new stove and ordered it sent home. The drayman charged fifty cents for bringing it. That was an abomination! She bought some coal, and the depraved dealer sent her a poorer quality. She presumed he thought she would never know the difference! The man who made her garden charged her a quarter of a dollar a day more than he charged anyone else, and so through the whole round—the butcher, baker, and the candlestick-maker were leagued against her; for she was a poor widow and everyone took advantage of her.

If she hadn't found solace for the trials of life in her teapot, she would have nightly bedewed her pillow with tears in vain longing for the protection of the lost Bixby dear.

Now if anyone who has read thus far does not feel sympathy for the relict, they needn't read any farther. I wish they would, though. Provided they do, their attention is respectfully solicited for a moment to the following observations, not directly allied to the subject, but made during a long and close acquaintance with Mrs. Bixby's case, and similar ones:—

Observation first—Women who have laid their hopes and affections beneath the sod forever, when seeing no prospect of being invited to resurrect them, have a very acute sense of the desperate wickedness of their fellow-creatures.

Observation second—The confiding innocence and sweet truthfulness of old maid-ism get such a terrible shaking up in the devious by-ways and cross-roads of conjugal life, that the phantasmal hand in the widow's future, having ceased to beckon, crooks its fingers into horrid grasping forms, ready to seize anything the widow possesses save the widow herself.

Observation third—For a real out-and out, good, broad English dissertation on the woes and wickedness of the world, and an almost supernatural insight into the deep depravity and utter selfishness of the human heart, one may be referred to any widow, provided she hasn't laid away the dear departed's best suit in "Perry's Moth Preventive," preparatory to locking arms with his successor.

Query suggested to the uninitiated by the above observation: What is it, inherent in the matrimonial state, that has given such dark views of the disinterestedness and virtue of the world? An answer simple enough to be comprehended by woman's mind will be thankfully received by a large and curious circle.

Mrs. Bixby was unceremoniously left with her teapot. She has had time for a good, strong, soul-inspiring cup while we have been off with the observations. We will take up her case again if you like. The most and heaviest of her troubles Mrs. Bixby, of course, bears on her own account, but she has taken a goodly number on her shoulders for our village. With all its unprincipled usurers, dishonest dealers and exorbitant laborers, it's a very wicked place, and being a widow lady, Mrs. Bixby fully understands the depths of its wickedness. She wants it to reform, but in case it won't reform she wants justice, signal and unsparing, shown it. We have been getting more and more of the lights of modern civilization every year. Last year's license liquor law gave us six bright and shining ones; yet Mrs. Bixby saw no improvement. She felt sure trouble was in store for us, as it always was for her, the only difference being that it would fall upon us as a just retribution; upon her it came through the evil mindedness of us dwellers in the Valley of Destruction.

Mrs. Bixby believed that we were approaching the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah,—and she was laborious in devising methods for our destruction without resorting to any literal fire and brimstone storm. The factory dam might give away and the flood destroy us, as in the old days when the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and the imagination of his heart evil continually; or a fire might consume all our ill-gotten wealth and humble the spirit that boasted itself; or the pestilence might sweep us from the face of the earth, leaving but a name and a heritage.

But if we went by water Mrs. Bixby and Mrs. Bixby's cow and cosset and hens would be likely to go too; if we went by fire her real estate would be likely to depreciate in value; and if the cholera took us off Mrs. Bixby, being very susceptible to contagious diseases, would, in all likelihood, go early, without the satisfaction of seeing righteous vengeance executed. So all that she feared for the village threatened to have a reflex action on herself. It would be possible for burglars to spoil us and Mrs. Bixby remain unharmed, but burglars seemed not to occur to her. Nevertheless we had burglars.

We are a village on the Boston and Albany railroad, of few years and small size, but with large prospects and a taste for metropolitan institutions; so when I say that instead of burglars proving a salutary discipline, we took a degree of pleasure in having them; you will understand my meaning.

We had an account of our experience in the newspaper, and read over the item with some inward gratulation at our importance. The manufacturers' wives, from the night of the burglary ceased to speak of their servants as "hired help;" and before the close of the first day after the event, building lots had risen ten per cent.—A wholesome awe fell upon all persons of ten years of age and under after dark, and older persons were supplied with a great desideratum of life, something to talk about. Everyone advanced theories, suggested possibilities and laid plans long, deep and wide, in adroitness. But there is a palpable difference between speculating upon burglars with the sun high in the heavens, and getting out at night to hunt up the camphor bottle, and running into the arms of a big man carrying a dark lantern. So that, while everyone speculated, everyone purchased patent locks and patent firearms. Men slept soundly through thunder storms, cat-fights, and the breaking up of Good Templars meetings, with loaded revolvers under their pillows, and women lay awake all night to listen to the mice gnawing through the garret stairs.

The facts of the case of Villagers versus Burglars were something as follows: Potter & Brother's store had been broken open and thirty-seven cents, very little of which was counterfeit, taken from the money drawer. Two pieces of handkerchief and a half dozen pairs of stockings were also taken. The stockings were thrown into the river,—an evidence of good judgment of the quality of stockings on the part of the burglars. Potter & Brothers sent for the constable, for there was strong circumstantial evidence. A gimlet had been found, and the boot-track pointed toward Pittsfield. Three persons knew men who had purchased gimlets, and five persons knew men that had been seen going in the direction of Pittsfield.—Potter & Brothers would have sent for the sheriff, but the constable believed that he was empowered with sufficient authority to act in such cases. The burglars were not apprehended, but Potter & Brothers took an inventory, and sent for five varieties of patent locks and three qualities of gunpowder.

A week after, Miss Samantha Fish was awakened at dead of night by some improper person removing the putty from around a pane of glass in her parlor window. Miss Fish, being a woman of great spirit, put her head out of the chamber window and inquired who was there, no one answered, and Miss Fish being a woman of great presence of mind as well as spirit, seized the water pitcher and emptied it into the yard just as the improper person ran around the street corner.

Soon after, Potter & Brothers and Miss Fish were called to share their honors with various people who had heard persons come up their front walk and go away again, with various dogs who are supposed to bark at their supposed burglars, and with numerous small boys who had glimpses of 'strange men' about town.

Mrs. Bixby, being a lone woman with her natural protector lying under the daisies, took the alarm from nocturnal demonstrations to such a degree that she had very little pleasure in them as judgments. She locked up her purse in the north-west corner of her upper bureau drawer and hid the key under the rocking chair cushion, doubled locked her doors and fastened her windows; yet went to bed with a weight of uncertainties on her troubled bosom. She hired a big dog, bargaining to give the dog's board and ten cents a day for his protection. The dog took Mrs. Bixby and all her neighbors for burglars, and attacked them with such vigor that Mrs. Bixby gave a man fifty cents to chain her protector in the barn, and then hired the dog's owner to take it away.

After that, Mrs. Bixby declared, dolorously, that she expected to be robbed. Now I tell you confidentially, that she no more expected it than you or I expect the troubles which we sometimes say are sure to come upon us, but which we should be very much surprised,—very much surprised indeed—to see walk in and take a seat in our house familiarly. Yet Mrs. Bixby said she expected it, and she probably did look for it in a general kind of a way, as she did for all manner and circumstances of trials.

It was soon after Mrs. Bixby avowed her expectations that the Detective arrived. She found him on the back-door steps when she came home from the ‘Society.’ She was suspicious, at first, that he was an insurance company man or tax collector, and told him he might sit down on the steps and she would bring him a piece of bread and butter.

“I beg pardon,” said he, politely, “this is Mrs.—”

“Bixby,” said the widow, grimly.

“Yes, Mrs. Bixby,” blandly; “I called, Mrs. Bixby, to see if I could get board at this quiet little place for a few days.”

The gentleman’s appearance certainly was prepossessing, but that was no presumption in favor of his honesty, with Mrs. Bixby, for villainy hypocritically concealed under smooth words and a smile, was what she especially prided herself on discerning.

“I don’t know anything about ye,” said she, sententiously.

“I understand ma’am,” politely; “I shall be very happy to explain. We hear at the office of the chief police, in—, that you have been annoyed by burglars in this vicinity. We believe them to belong to a gang that infest our city, and I am detailed from our corps of detectives to work up the case here.”

Mrs. Bixby was mollified, but not convinced. The Detective showed her a pin with a singular device, which he wore on the inside of his blue broadcloth coat, and which he explained to be the badge of the detective corps to which he belonged. He also drew from his pocket a very blue, official looking document, which he deferentially handed her for inspection. It was written in blind characters, and had a large sprawling signature against a big seal at the bottom, which made it a very genuine looking paper, and satisfied Mrs. Bixby of the entire reliability of the individual before her. She handed back the document, her confidence strengthened by having utterly failed in reading the first line, and invited the Detective in.

He was a fine looking, well-dressed man, but with a slightly melancholy countenance; and when Mrs. Bixby, setting the table for supper, incidentally remarked that this was a lonely world, he replied that he had found it so, and furthermore remarked that it was a cold, unfeeling world. All Mrs. Bixby’s sympathies were aroused.—She inquired if he had lost his wife, and he assented with a sigh; but signified that the subject was such a painful one that he avoided saying much about it.

Mrs. Bixby's opinion was formed in regard to him, and she was glad that she had some 'cold victuals' in the house. The lost Bixby was fond of 'cold victuals,' and his widow felt intuitively that the Detective would be. There were also warm biscuits for supper—those, Mrs. Bixby told the Detective, had a little too much saleratus in them. There were pickles—the vinegar hadn't quite struck through those, Mrs. Bixby said. There was huckleberry pie and there were four slices of cake that Mrs. Bixby kept down cellar in a tin pail and only brought forth to light and air when she had company.

The Detective proved himself to be fond of the 'cold victuals;' and he also ate a piece of huckleberry pie with great apparent relish. He said he never ate such sweet-cake, when Mrs. Bixby passed the stirred loaf, but he would take another piece of the huckleberry pie, and after the second piece of pie he took another biscuit.

"You have very nice butter, ma'am," said he. "Did you make it?"

Mrs. Bixby replied that she did, and she told the sympathizing Detective how she had been cheated in her cow, swindled in her churn, and slandered about her butter.

"It is very nice butter, I am sure, ma'am"—the Detective spread it over on the side of his biscuit when he said that—"I should like to buy a few pounds to send to my brother in Boston."

Mrs. Bixby said she could let him have it.

"I'd like to have you put it up to-night, so that I can send it by the morning express," said he, "and I will pay you before I forget it."

The Detective gave Mrs. Bixby a bill, fresh and crisp, and Mrs. Bixby went into her bed-room to change it.

The Detective betrayed a curiosity then that might have been professional. He leaned over the platter of cold victuals to a point whence he could look into Mrs. Bixby's bed-room. He saw her take her bureau key from under the rocking-chair cushion, saw which drawer she opened and from which corner she took her purse. When Mrs. Bixby came out he was gazing still fondly at the remains of the huckleberry pie.

Among the change that Mrs. Bixby brought him was a ten cent silver coin. He held it in his fingers for a few seconds, turned it over on his palm, and then spun it around on the table cloth—a freedom which made the widow glad, he seemed so much at home.

"We don't see much silver now-a-days," said he.

"No," replied Mrs. Bixby, "it's nothing but miserable, ragged paper money."

"A great many people laid by specie during the those uncertain war times?" said the Detective interrogatively.

“Yes, we had considerable in the house when Bixby died, and while his estate was being settled I laid up all I could. Esquire Hunt advised me to buy government bonds with it during the war time, but I told him I didn’t want any bonds until I knew whether there was going to be any government or not, and I had better lose the interest on it than to lose principal and interest both.”

“Exactly so, ma’am,” responded the Detective emphatically. “Those were terrible uncertain times. Money affairs very unstable.”

“I expected every day to hear that the country had gone to smash,” continued Mrs. Bixby, “and now the world is full of sharpers, swindlers, and sly thieves who would cheat a poor woman out of all she has. I think my silver is safest where it is.”

“You don’t happen to have any of the old Spanish dollars that you would sell, I suppose?” questioned the Detective indifferently.

“I believe I have,” replied she hopefully.

Mrs. Bixby went to her bed-room again, and she this time partly closed the door; had she turned around when she poured the silver out of Bixby’s best pair of stockings she would have seen two sharp eyes watching her through the crack in the door.

When she came out the Detective stood in the kitchen door which opened into the garden, and his first remark was a compliment upon her cabbages.

“Ah!” said he, recollecting himself, “you went after the silver.”

Mrs. Bixby had a couple handfuls of dollars partially concealed in her apron. She held up two or three.

“Only two?” said he.

Mrs. Bixby showed him the others.

“I will pay you a dollar and a half a piece for six.”

Mrs. Bixby assented, and he paid her in fresh, crisp bills again.

“Old dollars have often been made up into spoons and pieces of tableware. I have a silver teapot which was my mother’s last gift to me, and is a very precious relic”, said the Detective with emotion.

He proceeded to describe his mother’s silver teapot fluently, and concluded by saying that those who had not sacred associations connected with their silver ware knew little of its value.

Mrs. Bixby was pleased with that sentiment. Stepping into her parlor, she opened a cupboard and

brought out for the Detective's inspection a silver tankard which had descended to her from her grandfather. She gave the Detective its history, and he appeared very much interested and said reverentially that it must seem priceless in her eyes. She brought out a pair of small silver candlesticks which had also belonged to her ancestor.

"You leave your silver rather too much exposed, I think," said the Detective. "In our profession we meet with many instances of inexcusable carelessness in the security of silver."

"I always lock that cupboard at night or when I am going out and put the key in the lock. No one would think of looking there for it."

"Certainly not," said the Detective.

Mrs. Bixby cleared off her table, washed the dishes and milked the cow, while the Detective, swaying back and forth tranquilly in Mrs. Bixby's chintz-covered rocking chair, read the Watchman and Reflector.

When Mrs. Bixby came in from milking, she found him in an attitude of admiration before a remarkable work of art that hung on the wall between the chamber and cellar door.—This was a picture frame made of pine, hemlock, balsam and larch burrs, with a sprinkling of beechnuts and acorns, glued on paste board. The picture which it surrounded was entirely subordinate in interest to the frame and was simply intended to give a semblance of a purpose to the latter.

The Detective expressed his appreciation of the widow's handicraft, and after straining the milk, she lighted a lamp and offered to show the gentleman her parlor, where more elaborate specimens of high artistic taste were to be seen.

Here was another burr frame surrounding the death of Stephen, done in high colors, and a similar one, with the addition of walnut shell roses, framed a very sanguineous and struggling sketch of Bull Run battlefield.

The Detective surveyed the impure looking streams of blood that flowed prodigally through the latter picture with some complacency.

"I also bled for my country in that engagement," said he.

"Is that natural?" inquired Mrs. Bixby.

"Very like."

On the opposite side of the room was a wreath of immortelles surrounding a silver coffin plate, on which was inscribed the name, age and date of death of Bixby dear. On the mantel, just behind, with touching pathos was reared a pasteboard monument fourteen inches high, covered with black beans and highly varnished. Mrs. Bixby called the attention to the Detective to these memorials, but this was entirely unnecessary, for his practiced eye had caught the glitter of the silver the moment he entered the room; nevertheless, he expressed great interest. Mrs. Bixby put

one hand on her lip, and holding the lamp up in a range with the plate, read in tones of much solemnity, "David Bixby, aged sixty-five, died June 18th, 1862."

She sighed heavily as she lowered the lamp, and silence fell in the room, which was broken by the Detective inquired in subdued voice if she had his picture. Mrs. Bixby referred him to the daguerreotypes on the table.—He looked them over very quietly, while she, standing by his shoulder, told him the names. Coming to a very elaborately-dressed representation of Mrs. Bixby herself, he observed that she wore gold beads. "That was a pretty fashion," said he. "I always like to see them. My mother wore gold beads."

Mrs. Bixby put down the lamp and turned to the cupboard. She opened a small pasteboard box and brought to the Detective two long strings of the shining yellow beads. He took them in his hands and looked at them half sadly. He saw in that sad glance that they were eighteen carats fine.—"They remind me very forcibly of my mother and the days of my youth," said he. His eyes were humid and his voice very sorrowful as he replaced the beads in Mrs. Bixby's hands. He dropped his face into his hands, probably to reflect on his mother and the days of his youth; but peeped through his fingers to see where Mrs. Bixby put the beads.

Mrs. Bixby thoughtfully waited a few moments for the Detective to regain his composure, and then led the way to the kitchen. He entertained her throughout the evening with anecdotes of his professional life. She would make an excellent detective, he said. There were a number of women in the department to which he belonged. It needed a person of great penetration. Mrs. Bixby took the compliment quietly. She felt that her experience in battling with the world and selfish human nature, during her widowhood had given her a deep insight into character.

Just before retiring the Detective took out his watch to wind it up, and was very much surprised on finding that he has lost the key.

"You haven't a key you could lend me, with which to wind up my watch," asked he.

Mrs. Bixby brought out a heavy old fashioned watch with a key on the black cord chain. The Detective used the key, and then asked to be directed to his room. On being showed the door he politely bade Mrs. Bixby good night, and expressed a hope that she would sleep well.

Mrs. Bixby fastened the back door and went to bed with a stronger sense of security than she had before felt since Bixby dear had finished his earthly course. The last thing she thought of before falling off into a delicious sleep was that she would get hash and huckleberry pie for the Detective's breakfast.

Mrs. Bixby was in the habit of waking up punctually at six o'clock. At about that time the next morning she opened her eyes, and closed them sleepily. In a few minutes she opened them again, and observed that her upper bureau drawer was partly open, and the key in the lock.

She opened them wide at that, saw that the trunk that held her silver was pulled out from beneath the bed, and open! Bixby's best woolen stockings, and all their contents, were—gone!



She sprang from bed, and pulled open the bureau drawer. Her purse was not there. A pile of handkerchiefs, that had been in the corner opposite the purse was not there; a valise that had stood beside the bureau, was not there.

She gave a little scream, and went out into the kitchen. The back door was open, and a strange cat had walked in and was smelling about the pantry.

The parlor door was ajar. The wreath of immortelles lay on the floor, and the table commemorative of the lamented Bixby had been torn from its place. His watch was gone from the cupboard, and the pasteboard box, with the string of gold beads, the gold hoops which Mrs. Bixby sometimes wore in her ears, and the brooch with a lock of Bixby's hair in it. The tankard also was gone and the silver candlesticks, and the butter-knife, and all the spoons and forks.

Mrs. Bixby swung on a wrapper and went upstairs to arouse the Detective. His chamber door was open, and the Detective also was—gone!

A bureau stood in that room, and most of the drawers were out upon the floor, their contents in great confusion. Mrs. Bixby saw at a glance that three fine shirts, that had been Bixby's, and a mink muff and collar, that were Sister Sarah's had been taken. The closet door was open, but, Bixby's best broadcloth and Mrs. Bixby's new black silk were not on the hooks.

The Detective's badge was pinned in a conspicuous place on the chamber door. Mrs. Bixby seized the badge and hurled it from the chamber window in a trice, but made no exclamation. She went down and opened the front door, no one was to be seen, nothing to be heard. Mrs. Bixby said nothing. It was too fell a blow. She shrank down in a little heap on the step-stones; and when at 9 o'clock the fish-man came around, she shook her head. She wanted neither "fresh cod, halibut, mackerel, or salmon." The fish-man left her on the steps in the same attitude of despair that he found her, and thus also must we leave her. But if any one going up to this land flowing with milk and maple molasses, would like to give her consolation, they shall be introduced by her biographer, with pleasure.

*The Tiffin* [OH] *Tribune*, March 4, 1870