

The Detective's Wife

WITH two weeks holiday and at exceedingly moderate amount of money to devote to my pleasures, after due consideration, I had selected Rippling Beach for my airing. As a third clerk in the bank, my vacations were few and far between, and I had determined to make the best of the occasion. When Mr. Harland, the assistant teller, whose business it was to pay the employees their salaries, had given me my check, he had casually asked me where I was going, and I had expatiated on the charms of Rippling Beach, and its being one of the best places on Long Island.

Visitors at the Beach House were, though goodish people, not congenial. I was indifferent, however, to society. Boatmen and fishermen were my boon companions. I had been a week at Rippling Beach when I became acquainted with Mrs. Bland. This lady was a late arrival.

How I came to talk to Mrs. Bland I can hardly tell. I rather think that, hearing the lady express a desire to see a City paper, I had handed her one, and in this way some common-place conversation had commenced. A certain pleasant way the woman had, a fairy well-bred manner, a disinclination to indulge in tittle-tattle with the rest of the boarders, made her society rather agreeable than otherwise. Mrs. Bland was diminutive had a graceful figure, and dressed in quiet taste. Though Mrs. Agnes Bland was fully thirty, she impressed me with a certain childishness of expression, in which vague description I trust I am not paraphrasing Mr. Bret Harte. The lady's eyes were of a pale blue, without fixity of glance. No one would ever have been rude enough to even attempt to stare Mrs. Bland out of countenance. It would have been, apparently, too easy a thing to do. Without having evasive eyes, they seemed subdued and the least bit furtive. An immense volume of fair, blonde hair which she wore in one big braid, added most essentially to her charms.

If there was any trait of fixity of purpose in Mrs. Bland's regularly oval face, the only indication of it was a slight wrinkling of the forehead between the eyes. Such furrows, had, however, no permanence. You might see such winrows on a child's face when some passing matter for a brief moment had engaged its scattered wits. Conversationally, Mrs. Bland was fairly amusing. Educated she was not; but having a good amount of intuitive perception, her remarks were clear and defined. It was the day after I had given her the paper, when I said to Mrs. Bland, "Has your budget failed to reach you? It is one of the annoyances of an out-of-the-way place. Mails are dilatory, or come in batches."

"What do you know about my mail?" asked Mrs. Bland, the little wrinkles roughening her forehead.

"Why, Mrs. Bland," I replied, "if you do not receive many letters, at least you have a famous collection of newspapers coming to you every day—at least a dozen."

"How do you know that?"

“The only grocery man in the little town, who sells me fish hooks, is the post-master. I go there early in the morning before the mail is sent to the hotel. The grocer generally runs the whole mail before me into a bushel basket, prior to handing me my occasional correspondence and I see Mrs. Agnes Bland on ever so many journals. Have I the honor of addressing a lady correspondent—a literary woman?”

“Nonsense! what an idea! My husband sends the papers to me. It is a delicate attention on his part. In reading them time passes away during his absence.” Then there is a Mr. Bland, I said to myself.

“I expect Mr. Bland will be here in a few days. I hope you will like him. He is a great fisherman. Now, I notice you carry a fishing pole to the water-side every morning and bring back nothing. My husband has sent his fishing tackle down, so if you want hooks or lines I can spare you some. You come here every season, do you not?”

“No; this is the first time in my life. Good morning, Mrs. Bland, and thanks for your offer.”

“Good morning, Sir; but excuse me a moment. Would you kindly look at this bill of mine the office clerk has sent me? I am an idiot about accounts. Here are some items which I have no doubt are correct, such as express charges on some trunks and things paid for by the office, and the string of figures puzzles me. Then the handwriting is so bad. Would you, now, just make the addition for me? Oh! I ain’t afraid of your looking at the bill. There’s no sherry cobblers on the account, and one does not trust muslin dresses to sea-side washerwomen.” Mrs. Bland had hanging from her neck a delicate chain, and among numerous rattling appendages there was a dainty gold pencil. With as pretty a dimpled white hand as I ever saw, she bent over and offered the pencil.

The calculation was so simple that I ran it over in my mind without the use of the pencil, and gave the total. It differed a few cents, the advantage being in Mrs. Bland’s favor.

“It is a trifle in error, Mrs. Bland, but the people are honest. It should be \$28.67, instead of \$28.95.”

“I never could remember the figures; pray set them down. It will give Mr. Bland so much pleasure to know that I have my bill exactly right. He is such a strict man of business.”

“Willingly,” I replied, and I wrote at the foot of the bill, \$28.67. Korrect.”

“Thanks,” said Mrs. Bland. “What a wonderful head you have for figures.” She scrutinized the bill closely. “And what a queer way of making sevens!”

“Oh in the bank I am in I do little else than add up figures for hours at a stretch. There is nothing queer about my sevens. I always cross my sevens. Then they do not look like ones. In a great

many banking-houses in New York that is the rule. Scientific calculators always use the crossed seven.”

“Ah, indeed. If you want to see a ludicrous 5 or 3, look at mine—such wormy, twisting things. Look,” and Mrs. Bland drew the numerals.

“They are quite ludicrous, indeed,” I said. “There, make your 3 this way, and don’t bring the tail of your 5 below the line, like a French 5,” and I made the figures.

“Thanks, for the lesson. I will detain you no longer. I must go now and pay my bill—\$28,67, you say?”

With a bow I left Mrs. Bland, and, hurrying to the water-side, got my boat, and was off after blue-fish. I had better luck than usual, and brought home that afternoon some fine blue fish cooked for supper, a portion of which I sent to Mrs. Bland, who seemed to partake of it with relish. I was not idiot enough to think, though it was three years ago, that the lady was especially pleased with me for the attention, but in the evening, a fine moonlit one, Mrs. Bland lingered on the veranda. I was smoking a cigar, seated at the bottom of the steps, within speaking distance of her.

“You very kindly offered me the use of Mr. Bland’s tackle. Now you have not congratulated me on my luck,” I said.

“I do, I do,” said Mrs. Bland, quickly, with a certain amount of expansiveness. She rose from her chair and held out her hand, and it fairly trembled. I was surprised. What possible sympathy could there exist between us? I did not care to even have a passing flirtation with her. How the deuce had my fish called for so marked an expression on Mrs. Bland’s part?”

“Five blue fish, which would weigh 30 pounds, not counting the weak-fish, and a dab or so,” I said, in the most common-place way.

“Yes, yes,” said Mrs. Bland apparently absorbed.

“But I have broken my squid, my best one, and I would really like to borrow a hook or so from you to make another. Could you really lend me some hooks until I send to New York?”

“Willingly. Wait here a moment,” and Mrs. Bland rose and went down the hall to her room. Just then David the colored waiter, came in with a telegraphic message for Mrs. Bland. She returned at once, and took the message, read it under the hall lamp; then she went to her room.

“David,” I asked of the waiter, “I did not know that you could telegraph to such an out-of-the-way place as this?”

“It ain’t often that it is done, Sir. The telegraph station on the road is fourteen miles from here, but you can get messages sent by the coach—tho’ Mrs. Bland’s messages comes on horseback, with a man a-kiting.”

It was none of my business how Mrs. Bland’s message came, though now I remember that on hotel bill there were a number of charges for telegraphic messages. In a moment more Mrs. Bland was down stairs, holding in her hand quite a number of large hooks. It was not my fault, but the lady had taken up with the package a small fly-hook, which as she opened the parcel, punctured a rosy first finger, so that a drop of blood started. “I am so sorry,” I said, “may I not tie this handkerchief around it?”

“What, with the hook in my finger? Pull it out. Please, no fuss.” Here Mrs. Bland’s face looked rigid, and the wrinkles between her eyes made a series of archings.

“But, but,” I exclaimed, really disturbed, “I can’t pull it out. Can you bear the merest cut with my pen-knife?”

“Can I? Nonsense; of course I can,” and she held out a taper white finger, and I felt my heart sink within me as I made a careful probe, and, fortunately extricating the barb, drew out the hook, which I deliberately put in my pocket-book. “Would Mrs. Bland faint now?” I asked myself.

“A glass of water?” I said anxiously.

“What for? To dip my finger in? Ridiculous! I will put it in my mouth. Please do not destroy your pockethandchief. You will excuse my sucking my thumb like a baby while I talk. There, it is all over now, young gentleman. I never screamed at a mouse, got into hysterics over a caterpillar, and do not blink at lightening.”

“You are a very brave little woman, then. Here, take this telegraphic message which you have dropped,” and I handed the message to her.

“I heard the waiter tell you I received ten messages a day. Now can you put that together with my dozen newspapers?”

“I cannot—do not care to. It is not any of my business, Mrs. Bland. I am not curious,” I replied.”

“Well, I am—very much so—and my business is to—ah!—” here she stopped, for David just then rang a bell, which meant that the stage-coach with the passengers from the railroad was coming. This coach stopped at the house first, then continued on its journey to a small tavern further up the coast.

“All I can tell you is this, Sir, that in that coach you will find a man you hardly expected to see. Go and look.” With that Mrs. Bland fanned herself quite composedly, and went to her room.

I went to the coach, not understanding what the woman meant. Some three women got out of the vehicle, followed by an old gentleman, who had to be helped out—evidently an invalid. On the box by the driver was a man who, as I approached lit a fuze, and with it his cigar. His face I did not recognize. I then felt some little curiosity to find out what Mrs. Bland meant about the man “I hardly expected to see.” I did peer into the coach. I was aided by David, who, with the lantern, was looking for a parasol one of the lady passengers had left. There was a man, apparently asleep. Though it was Summer, a handkerchief was thrown partly over his face. One glimpse was enough. Though his whiskers had been cut, and his reddish hair stained black, it was the face of George Harland, the assistant teller of our bank! He looked at me in an agonized way, then put his finger to his lips, and said in a low, broken voice: “My God! Henry, I am a thief, trying to escape—to escape. I know they are after me.” Then he shuddered. “I am mad—crazed—have lost my head. You here? Do not betray me!”

“To Dickerson’s,” cried the driver, and off went the coach. From Dickerson’s I knew that the small fishing-boats ran to Martha’s Vineyard and the Massachusetts coast. I stood appalled, dazed and speechless.

Mrs. Bland met me on the veranda with some flowers in her hand which exhalted a deep luscious perfume. The odor quite sickened me. “Ladies and gents,” cried the good-natured, familiar landlord in his shirt sleeves. “It isn’t down on the bill of fare, but we have been quite short of fruit, peaches and sich, for the last three days, and nary a boarder has grumbled. I came across a fine lot of fruit this afternoon, and they is sot in the dining-room, and do you all jess go in and help yourself.” Mrs. Bland was near me, and clapped her hands with childish glee, notwithstanding her pricked finger. “Will you take me in?” she asked quite naturally.

I had no heart for peaches, still I offered the woman my arm. There was a group of noisy boarders at a long table, but, through David’s care, Mrs. Bland secured a small kitchen table, on which was placed a dish of peaches, flanked with huge half-moons of watermelon.

“You saw him?” asked Mrs. Anges Bland, paring a peach with a silver pocket fruit-knife, which she drew from her pocket. “Dear me! the juice of the peach gets into my cut finger, and really stings.”

“Saw him, Mrs. Bland!” For God’s sake, what does this all mean?”

“I like cling-stones better than free-stones. I should be so much obliged to you if you would pare a peach for me. My finger makes me so awkward.”

“Are you a Nemesis, Mrs. Bland?”

“A what? I don’t know what that means.”

“Explain!”

“Oh! the man in the coach? Now, Sir, listen. The ‘\$28,67, Korrect,’ you wrote on that bill of mine gave me the clue to your handwriting. Mr. Bland—there is a Mr. Bland—sent me down here after you. Those figures and K-o-r-r-e-c-t cleared you. There were no figures like yours in the altered accounts. George Harland was the thief. I was glad when I could congratulate you on your luck.”

“Luck, Madam! what do you mean?”

“You were the only gentleman here—all the rest of them were cads and muffs. Your society was not unpleasant to me, and I should have disliked to have been the means of bringing theft to your door. Mr. Bland was on that coach, with the driver. You may have noticed first a blue splutter and then a red splutter from his match. That meant ‘All right, Mrs. Bland.’ George Harland has misappropriated \$75,000 belonging to your stupid old bank, and did it, clever as you are in figures, right under your nose, Sir. The papers for the last week have had an inkling of it—not where you would look for the news, but in the personals and advertisements. That is why I read the papers. Please don’t go; any sympathy I might have had—and I have not much to waste—was really that of thankfulness that quite a decent young man like you was safe. Mind, I never suspected you, though Mr. Bland might have done so. Geo. Harland ought to have \$50,000 in notes with him, on his person, this very moment.” There was a base look of greed in the woman’s face.

“You are, then, Madam?”

“The wife of Mr. Bland. I am afraid,” and here Mrs. Bland smiled, showing me a set of white teeth, a single black melon seed increasing their pearly lustre by contrast, “that you do not like me as well—at least my society—as you did say an hour ago.” There was a little bit of killing disdain about the woman, I suppose the scorn upon my face was manifest, for I made no effort to conceal it.

“Great Lord save us!” said David, coming in and addressing us, “something drefful happen—dat man in stagecoach—”

“Not run away—escaped!” said Mrs. Bland, springing to her feet with the latent energy of Jonathan Wild. Her eyes had lost their pale blue shimmer, and glinted like coal steel; the furrows between her eyes took strange, arabesque, sinister tracteries. It was a dreadful face to see.

“No, Ma’am—woss nor that. He blow his brains out, right in de coach.”

“David,” said Mrs. Bland, now as quiet and unrippled as a dish of milk in a diary; “David, bring me a napkin; and I will take another bit of melon—if you will help me, Sir?”

But I did not help Mrs. Bland, the detective's wife.

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