

The Marked Money

by A Retired Member of the Detective Police [William Russell]

The Erie Railroad, that great, puffing, driving, hospitality-destroying monster, winds through the village now.

But there was a time—

Certainly there was a time when those yelling, screeching engines did not rush at one end of the place at all unseemly hours of the day and night, wind themselves about it, rushing off at the other, after a horrifying coil, and roaring over the bridge like a great serpent, such as we read of in legend, seeming to say, “Well, I have spared you this time—only swallowed a few of your people. The next time I come I’ll take the whole of your tiny village.”

Yes, there was a time when the little place was still smaller than now. Not so very long ago, either. We can all remember it—all who can see the little lines of silver streaking through their hair. They can remember how, when they were young, this spot was a favorite on sleigh-rides, about a half-way house in the progress, where a fiddler (since become a violinist), was always to be had at a moment’s notice; where they had a way of knocking up the nicest little suppers while the hot punch (oh, whisper it low!) was being discussed, and where there was just room enough for a party to dance, and no more, no matter how large the party.

What! in the village?

Nonsense! I am speaking now of the little white house that stands about midway as you pass through. That is “The Village Tavern,” always has been the village tavern for more than half a century, until within ten years the last word was painted out, and that of “Railroad Hotel” substituted.

There was a time when, as I said, this “Village Tavern” was the great place for riding, driving, and fishing parties to stop at for dinner and supper. It was a spot, too, for travelers, when they did not scud over the land and arrive at the places of their destination in less time than they could stay at home. Many a traveler who came only for the night’s rest, for his supper and breakfast, stayed over a day or two, perhaps for a week. There were trout and pickerel in those days, that could be caught in the clear, bright waters of the mill-stream, which ran stealthily by the foot of the garden, less than a stone’s throw from the back garden, and was not banged, and whirled, and beaten by a thousand millwheels, and rumbled over by half a hundred of steam-trains daily. There was woodcock, too, five minutes’ walk away, and a partridge; or, if you liked a little longer walk, something of larger growth worthy of your powder and shot.

John Gordon kept “The Village Tavern.” Gordon was a hard-headed, stout-bodied, red-faced, jolly, humorous Scotchman. He was liberal, with an eye to the main chance. He was proud of his position as landlord, proud that his house should be known and spoken of in the great city of New York, and particularly proud that so many *connoisseurs* thought it well worth their while to drive out to “The Village Tavern,” that they might drink Gordon’s inimitable punch, made from

the peculiar whiskey of which the landlord had trace from the moment it came from the still, just close by the foot of Ben Nevis, to the hour it went gurgling down the drinkers' throats.

Of all these things was John Gordon proud. This was the pride of his profession; but there was one thing more of which he was proud, and to which all other things were but as accessories. This was his daughter Letty. Letty Gordon was the landlord's only child. He had married an American wife, and ten years after his marriage there came to John Gordon this one child. On the day that little Letty could count eight years, Mrs. Letty Gordon, senior, was called to another and a better world, leaving little Letty heiress of all the goods, chattels, and real estate of which she died possessed, the last item being "The Village Tavern," with its furniture and belongings; a comfortable little setting out, which, with true Scotch thrift, her good father had settled upon her the day she was married, and from which John Gordon had garnered some solid wealth, which lay stretched out in various farms in the country round.

Letty Gordon had great blue eyes, very blue, very large, and sparkling with suppressed mischief. Letty Gordon had light-brown hair that danced about her head, laughing all combs to scorn, and almost repudiating a ribbon. She had the whitest skin, and the whitest teeth, and the—Oh! this sounds too much like an auctioneer's summary. I shall end it by saying that she was just the merriest, sweetest, and most enticing little fairy I had ever seen, and I am not alone in so believing. There were a few of the favored guests of "The Village Tavern," who could, occasionally see Letty Gordon; but to the mass who came and went like shadows, Letty was herself a shadow. They had heard of the landlord's beautiful daughter; once in a long while, some one more fortunate than the rest, would catch a glimpse of the little maiden, but from whence she came, or whither she went, the glimpser could never tell. They drank the health quietly of the mysterious beauty of whom they heard so much, of whom they knew that she breathed the same atmosphere as themselves, and yet to them was a sealed book. This was the treasure that John Gordon watched and guarded—she, who already an heiress in her own right, was to inherit all the acres that he had been adding year by year from the overflow of "The Village Tavern." Letty was not only the admiration of the gay groups who came from the city, but she was the ambition of every rustic beau, who looked with covetous eyes upon the fair face and the broad acres of the landlord's daughter. They looked, but they looked in vain; for John Gordon had long resolved that whoever came wooing to his Letty should be no common man, but should outdouble her in wealth.

Letty Gordon was not the only fair attraction that brought the gallants to "The Village Tavern." There was another bright face, another comely shape, in the person of Martha Field. Martha and Letty were of an age—both eighteen. Martha was an orphan, and had been taken when a child by the late Mrs. Letty Gordon to "care for." Martha was the right hand of "The Village Tavern;" she was here, there, and everywhere, as John Gordon expressed it. If extra company came, and aid was wanted in the kitchen, Martha was able and willing. Whether Martha's hand was wanted in the bedrooms, in the parlors to wait on the guests, to attend in the bar, it was always the same—she was there. Whatever she did was well done. Many a smart farmer's son, who came as suitor to the mistress, made a desperate effort to amend the hopelessness of the case by falling in love with the maid, only to find out that his fate was the same in either quarter. Martha Field had already disposed of the little beating heart that lay beneath her trim, well-fitting bodice. She had given it, subject to certain conditions, into the keeping of David Bigelow, a smart and promising

carpenter, who by some special art lurking under his tongue, had managed to secure the little girl to himself in the face of the most startling opposition. Under these circumstances there can be no wonder that Martha should be given to reading romances, and sympathizing generally with lovers, particularly with those in distress. There were some who said that when Martha Field married, John Gordon would come down “warm” with a trifle for the couple to start with; but those who knew the landlord better declared that as long as breath was in John Gordon’s body he would not part with a dollar of all he had so carefully hoarded, and now so strictly watched. In proof of this they pointed to Letty and Martha, upon whom he never lavished a penny, putting off their desires for showy dress, so inherent in the sex, by telling them that their faces would make their fortunes without ribbons and silk.

This was John Gordon’s household, save only Aunt Judy, who reigned supreme in the kitchen department. One bright day in June, when the leaves fluttered with more than ordinary gladness, and the sun glanced over the water of the river, sending its light to the clear, gravelly bottom till it showed the lazy fish in their very homes, the Paterson stage rattled through the village, and dropped one passenger at “The Village Tavern.” He was a tall, dark-complexioned man, somewhere about thirty, with a quiet, assured manner, that told the crowd of idlers who stood always ready to stare at the stage passengers, if they were capable of receiving any impression, that the newcomer was one not easily stared down, and well accustomed to all the attentions that could be thrust upon him.

He told John Gordon, who stood ready to receive him, that his name was Philip Conger, and his intention was to spend a week with him, and try his hand at the fish. John was pleased at the announcement, and told his guest so; more pleased as he noticed that the young man’s luggage bespoke that money was plentiful; and still more pleased when he found that his liberal orders did full justice to his looks. Philip Conger fished until the venerable old trout and pickerel trembled in their watery beds. He shot with such success that he awakened the jealousy of the stereotyped sportsmen of the place. He walked, he rode, and drove, and so the week passed away, and yet he remained a guest of “The Village Tavern.” Another week, and Philip Conger was still there; but he no longer fished, no longer hunted, his walks and rides were shorter, and the house had more attraction. In a few words, he had seen Letty Gordon, had spoken with her, and from that moment all things that carried him away from where he could feel that she was near had lost their charm. And stranger still than this, Letty, who had been so invisible to all other eyes, now went flitting uneasily about the house. If Philip sat upon the settle, there were large chances but he would see her within the hour. If he walked roamingly about the garden, Letty had a bouquet to make up, some berries to pick, or something to do which he always could take a hand in. Those about the village who always see everything told John Gordon occasionally that Letty was at that moment under the charge of the stranger, being paddled leisurely along the river bank in a skiff, or had been seen at some past time walking with the stranger in some near lane, or sitting in some half-secluded place earnestly talking. They could see that the landlord’s face grew dark whenever such intelligence was brought him, and those who were most about the house could observe that he no longer treated his guest with the same attention as formerly; there was a lack of that welcome and greeting that John Gordon had always for well-paying guests; and then the gossips foretold a storm. They said that when John Gordon’s face darkened there would be lightning flashes, which would strike somewhere. There were other signs besides these

foretelling this coming storm. Letty was seen once, twice, perhaps three times, in tears, and Martha Field had been heard openly to declare all fathers tyrants.

One day John Gordon, with redder face than usual, and quicker step, went from bar to stable, from parlor to cellar. Something there was in the wind more than common. The busybodies looked around and abroad for the cause, and were not long in finding it out. There, almost opposite the house, and in full view, lay the little skiff fast at anchor, while Philip Conger, with Letty Gordon as his pupil, was back at his old employment of fishing. Now they said the long-gathering storm would burst; but they were to be woefully mistaken when they believed it would break with violence over the head of Philip Conger. In their own good time the couple came back; they were too happy to hasten much; and then John Gordon, with his vials of wrath all charged, sought Philip. For an hour they were together in the room of Philip; but those who listened for the thunder of the storm heard nothing. There was only the confused sound of the two voices, sometimes that of Gordon above the other, then as instantly calming down. What the mesmerism was that held the usually violent man was a mystery, but at the end of the hour John Gordon came forth pale and silent, and in another hour Philip Conger had turned his back on "The Village Tavern," never to be its guest again.

It was for his daughter all his harshness was reserved, and poor Letty had now not only to bear with her father's dark looks and stern words, but, what was worse, with a curtailment of her liberty. How she would have borne this it would be hard to tell but that Martha had brought to her a letter from Philip, written within that hour before he left the house, filled with his promises of love, and his declarations that he would not depart from the vicinity, and would find means to communicate with her. How well these declarations were kept she knew the next day, when Martha brought her intelligence that Philip Conger was within a mile, having found quarters at a farmhouse scarcely that distance away, on the opposite side of the river. It may be held as a certainty that John Gordon was not long in knowing this; and further, he knew that many days would not elapse ere the lovers would find means of correspondence. Nor was John Gordon wrong in this. To Martha Field, Letty had confided everything, and Martha was now the Mercury that managed, if she did not carry the correspondence between Letty Gordon and Philip Conger, and David Bigelow the worker who, at the bidding of Martha, performed the postman. Without actually knowing this, John Gordon suspected, and with him suspicion generated active measures. David Bigelow was at once forbidden the house, and the full weight of his displeasure rained down upon the head of Martha.

For weeks things remained in this uncertain state. Whatever measures John Gordon intended to take were locked within his own breast. There was a mystery in progress through which none could fathom, and to which Letty Gordon bent her ear seriously and tremblingly when Martha Field brought her the gossip she had heard stirring. John Gordon had been known to have several private interviews with old Brown, the village constable. The old man had been seen lurking around the village suspiciously, as if smelling out some trouble. He spent a great deal of time at the tavern in talks with the landlord, or sitting watching everybody and everything under his lowered brows. The gossips were busy again. They declared that between John Gordon and old Brown there was something that would bring trouble to Philip Conger or David Bigelow. They had heard the landlord declare his intention of driving them both out of the village, and of turning Martha Field into the road to seek a home where she would. Perhaps he would not go so

far; but every one who knew John Gordon knew that he would not stop half way in his efforts to reach any end upon which he started. Of late he talked much about ingratitude—about those he had fed turning from him—about conspiracy—about nursing vipers in his bosom that turned and stung him; and for a long time these pickersup of unconsidered domestic trifles were divided in opinion whether the old man made allusion to his daughter or to Martha Field. They were soon satisfied when they perceived that he ceased to speak with Martha unless forced by necessity to do so, and then only with an expression that betrayed his unwillingness. Martha laughed at the threats of John Gordon to expel her from his house. She knew that she was essential to the success of “The Village Tavern,” and that if its landlord did not understand when he had a good and faithful servitor, she knew enough that would, and to these she would go. Martha Field set him at defiance, and still continued, with the aid of David Bigelow, to carry the letters of the lovers.

It was one evening in the early autumn, following a day that John Gordon and old Brown had been engaged in numberless consultations. The plot seemed to thicken, and those who had been peering about until they knew more of the matter than the actors themselves, said that it was near its catastrophe. The habitual redness had deserted John Gordon’s face; it was pale instead—very pale for John Gordon. He stepped more quickly that night than was his custom, from the bar to the parlor, and so upstairs to where Letty and Martha sat. Those who spoke of it afterwards said that many things passed that evening that were strange, but were not thought of in that way until the next day. They said that soon after dark a rower, in a skiff looking very like the one Philip Conger was sometimes seen in, came slowly up the river, and lay for some minutes under the great willow that grew at the foot of the garden; and one of these gossips, living on the opposite side, says he saw this single rower leave the skiff and stand under the willow, where in a few moments he was joined by one in a light dress; that they stood together for a short space, and parted—the skiff and its single rower returning the same way that it came. Another, equally as veritable, two hours later saw a carriage and horses, entirely unknown in that part of the country, travelling at great speed on the road toward New York, and declared this carriage to contain a lady and gentleman, who, with corroborating circumstances, were believed to be Philip Conger and Letty Gordon.

Those who were nearer home saw, that same evening, a car drawn up in front of “The Village Tavern,” with old Brown as its driver. They saw him and John Gordon go together to the vacant parlor, where, after a talk, Martha Field was sent for. Within a few minutes the more inquiring, who pressed out of the bar-room for that purpose, saw Martha Field, John Gordon, and old Brown drive away together from “The Village Tavern;” Martha without bonnet or shawl, and with a calm, scornful look; John Gordon with white face, and pale, tight-shut lips; and old Brown with a complacent expression of face, that would leave the impression with all who did not know him that he had just performed one of the most benevolent and praiseworthy of actions.

The next day the village was startled from its sleep with the intelligence that Philip Conger had carried away Letty Gordon, and they were believed to be in New York; that Martha Field, at almost the same moment that the runaway couple were commencing their flight, had been arrested on a charge of stealing money at various times from John Gordon, and was now in the county jail, entirely refusing to confess; that the stolen money had been directly traced to her by a plan of John Gordon and old Brown, the different coins having been marked to lead to

detection, and spent by Martha Field at different places in the village; and that John Gordon, upon his return from the squire's, where Martha was committed, and finding that Letty had fled, started in pursuit, and was brought in half an hour afterwards with a broken arm, having been thrown from his cart. This was news indeed for the gossips, and great capital they made of it. The stories that flew from mouth to mouth did not lose in the telling. Some had it that Martha had robbed John Gordon of many hundreds of dollars, in revenge for his refusal to bestow a marriage portion on herself and David Bigelow; others, that Martha was thrown into prison by the landlord in revenge for her assisting Letty in a marriage that would surely throw him out of the tavern stand. These cried shame, and asked each other if John Gordon was not rich enough to give Letty her little property, and if he was not old enough to give up to young men. It was strange how many had seen and foretold all these things to themselves long ago; how many knew it would be so, and were not surprised in the least; and how many were ready with the charitable hope that it would be a lesson to John Gordon, and lead him to see that there was an instability in wealth, and nothing really true but their advice.

A week rolled by, and John Gordon left his room, with his broken limb in splints hanging by a sling. He had altered, people said, in that week to be at least ten years older. His face was drawn and haggard, and the rosy, healthy hue had gone out of his cheeks. His eyes were dim, and there was no loud, hearty laugh ringing through the house as in the old days. The loungers and gossips watched the old man as he went vacantly about the place with something like awe. They watched him as he was confronted in his own bar, that spot which only one short week before was his stronghold, by another face as pale and haggard as his own, who asked for justice on behalf of Martha Field, and was refused. Then this man, who was none other than David Bigelow, stood up before the landlord and the curious crowd, and told how Martha Field was guiltless, and that John Gordon knew it when, in his base anger and desire to remove the means of communication between his daughter and Philip Conger, he sent all innocent girl, who should have been as dear to him as a child, to a criminal prison. John Gordon trembled with the rage he was obliged to suppress, and David Bigelow went on. Yes! he knew that the money which he had marked as a trap was taken by his daughter Letty, as she had a perfect right to do; for was not the house and all within it—ay, and all its profits, even to the last penny, even the lands he had bought with those profits—hers? Yes! And he, John Gordon, knew this, and more. He knew that Letty Gordon had taken this money as she would take any other thing that was her own, and had given it to Martha Field to purchase such articles as her father wrongfully denied her—paper, pens, and ink, that she might write to the man to whom she had betrothed herself, and such things as were necessary to have when she fled from the home where she was a prisoner.

This he said, and more. That Martha Field had refused to say any thing on the night of her arrest, knowing that Letty would step forward for her protection at the proper time; that it was Letty's intention to have left her home with Philip Conger within a few days of the one on which Martha was arrested; but why the flight should have occurred on that evening, so prematurely, was an unexplained mystery. One thing was certain, that when Letty Gordon left home she did not, nor did she now, know of the arrest of Martha Field, or she would come forward at any risk and show her entire innocence.

The old man sneered at David's story. There was law, he said, and justice for all. If the girl was innocent, let her show it, and all would be right. She had chosen silence when she was examined

before the squire; now let her wait until her trial. There was law and justice for all, and protection for him too, and he would have it. John Gordon accompanied this last declaration by a blow upon the table with his clenched, uninjured hand, that brought back to the listeners some memory of the week before, when it would have been dangerous to have provoked his wrath. David Bigelow drew himself to his full height, and speaking as calmly to the maimed man before him as though his address were the commonest topic, he told him that from that time forth no appeal should be made to him again for mercy; that he would go forth, and, if Letty Gordon was alive, he would find her and bring her there to do Martha Field justice, and to confound his villainy. From that time John Gordon could look upon him as his deadly enemy, and remember that, as he had denied mercy, so would it be denied to him. David Bigelow strode out of the room, while the old man glared fiercely at the group, who murmured their admiration of the carpenter, and one by one followed him out.

David Bigelow had left the village, none knew exactly where, but the surmise was that he had gone to New York. Days and weeks slipped by, and nothing was heard of him. Martha Field was still a prisoner awaiting trial. John Gordon was gaining strength in his arm; the bone was knitting finely, the doctor said, but he was not gaining strength in "The Village Tavern." The neighbors came less, and gossiped less. The story crept about. Even those who drove up from the city knew something about it. There was one thing they could all see, which was that John Gordon's face was pale, and the strength of his welcome gone. The day for Martha Field's trial came. There was great sympathy for her through all the country. Her story was believed, but there was no evidence. The prosecution made its case very clearly and distinctly. The loss of the money was proved, the marking, the tracing of the marked money to the village shops, where it had been passed by Martha. There was no defense; the very able counsel that had volunteered for her said, he could only make the statement on behalf of the prisoner; and then he gave Martha's story of how she became possessed of the marked money. There was a dead silence in the courtroom as he closed a beautiful appeal for mercy for the prisoner. In its midst came a loud groan, and in a moment after a shuffling of feet, and several persons were straining to lift a man, who had slipped from one of the benches and lay prostrate upon the floor. It was John Gordon, the strong man. Weak enough now he was, as they strove to raise him to his feet. His eyes were wide open, and looking eagerly toward the judge. "Acquit her," he said. "I am sorry. I know she tells the truth."

"Put that man back upon the stand," the judge says sternly.

The man was put back upon the stand; but he had nothing to say, only that his heart had softened, and he could see truth in the story the prisoner told now, when he would not see it before. And so they carried him away to his cart, and drove him home.

As they bore the old broken-down man out by one door there were eyes met Martha's from the other that made her heart leap. Each of that jury said, when speaking of the case afterward, that they would have acquitted the prisoner through sympathy, without any evidence for the defense. When the eyes of David Bigelow and Letty Gordon met Martha's she knew that she wanted no sympathy now to send her out upon the world with a stain upon her name for ever. The truth had come; and when Letty Gordon, now Mrs. Philip Conger, threw her arms about the prisoner's neck and kissed her, while she cried and laughed by turns, everybody knew the story as well as

though it had been told. As a form the evidence must be given, and before the tears had dried upon Letty's cheeks the verdict was rendered—"Not Guilty." How the people shouted until the judge was obliged to adjourn the court for an hour, to allow the enthusiasm time to cool! How the news spread like wildfire through the country town, and the ladies looked out of their windows and waved their handkerchiefs to Martha as she passed up the street from the courthouse. And how all the little boys burned up all the stray barrels and boxes that night in her honor!

John Gordon retired from being host of "The Village Tavern," and David Bigelow and Mrs. Martha Bigelow took his place, and for twenty years dispensed its hospitalities; after which period, rotund in purse and person, they gave way in turn. John Gordon lived many years after, undisturbed in the wealth that by legal right belonged to Letty. Philip Conger was not rich, but fortune prospered with him, and he grew so.

On the night of Martha's arrest, with the instinct of love, he knew that something was being plotted by John Gordon, without knowing what, and believed it to be a scheme to remove Letty. Watching, he saw old Brown drive to the door with his cart. He stole noiselessly to the back of the house. He heard Martha summoned to the parlor. There was no time to lose. He knew every step of the house, and in a moment was beside Letty. There was no time for preparation, for thought. While the two men were accusing Martha in the parlor the lovers were flying through the garden, ignorant of all that occurred until David Bigelow, by never-ceasing search, found them and told the story.

I hope that it is not taking away the romance of my tale to tell that Letty Gordon and Martha Field, that were, are both grandmothers, comely and handsome at that.

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