

Major Truslow's Mistake
by Amy Randolph

It was a mellow spring day upon the Sound, the blue water sparkling in the noon sunshine, the far off Long Island hills diademed with yellow rings of mist, and Major Truslow, leaning back in his easy-chair, as he carelessly glanced up and down the columns of the morning paper, passively enjoyed the golden beauty of the day, the rush of the steamer's bows through the shining flow of the deep, and the merry sounds of life and vivacity around him.

As he sat there, his Panama slightly tipped forward over his handsome middle-aged brows, the voice of one of the boat servants struck on his ear.

"She's a sittin' there, cryin' as if her heart would break; and there's no kind o' use tellin' her it's all her own fault."

Major Truslow lifted his head. As a general thing, it was not his custom to interest himself in business not his own, yet he had acquired the habit of hearing and noticing all thar went on around him.

"A pretty little thing too, an't she?" said the mulatto stewardess. "An't it strange folks can't have a little more common-sense!"

"What is the matter?" asked Major Truslow, now tilting the Panama back into its proper place. "Whom are you talking of?"

"It's a young girl, sir, as has taken the wrong boat, and never found it out until there was two good miles atween us and the slip," answered the man; "and she do take on awful. Perhaps, sir, if you was to speak to her—she won't pay no attention to what we says?"

"Where is she?"

"In the upper cabin, sir."

Major Truslow laid down his paper and walked aft.

Crouching on one of the sofas, with her face hidden in the pillow, and a profusion of light brown hair, shot with burnished gleams like gold, was a singularly graceful figure, dressed in some sober gray stuff—a figure whose slender shoulders seemed to shake with suppressed sobs.

"Why, she's nothing on earth but a little school-girl," thought the Major, with a thrill of pity at his kindly heart, as he laid his hand on her arm.

"Look up, child!" said he. "What are you crying so piteously about?"

She sat up, disclosing an oval, flushed face—one of the very few faces which weeping cannot disfigure. In truth and in fact, it looked all the prettier for the tears which sparkled on lash and

cheek, and the deep, quivering crimson of the lips. The soft, brown hair grew low on the forehead, the long-lashed eyes were of softest hazel, and a deep dimple nestled on the chin.

Major Truslow's man heart was stirred within him at so much innocent grief and childish beauty.

"What is it?" he repeated, sitting down beside her, and assuming an air of paternal kindness. "Don't cry any more, but tell me all about it."

"Oh, sir, I have been so foolish!" she faltered, the brown eyes cast shyly down. "I came on board the boat to say good-bye to a schoolmate who was going to New Haven, and I must have mistaken the landing, for they tell me this is not the New Haven boat—and—and I have no money, and mamma don't know where I am, and they won't let me land again!"

And she burst into fresh tears and sobs as she spoke.

"But there is no sort of necessity for all this tribulation, my dear child," soothed the Major, this time smoothing down the brown curls that felt like silken floss beneath his touch. "We shall reach Bridgeport in a few hours, and the fare is only a dollar. You must allow me to pay it for you, just as I would for a sister of my own, or even a daughter."

"But mamma wouldn't like my accepting money from a strange gentleman."

"Nonsense, nonsense," cried the Major. "Why, I'm old enough to be your father. Here, stewardess—a ticket for this young lady!"

"Oh, sir, you are too kind!" faltered the distressed damsel, but she resisted no further. "Only—mamma—"

"We can telegraph to her when we reach Bridgeport, and you can easily reach her tonight by the evening train."

"Or I might go to a friend I have there," suggested the girl. "I have been ill, and I am easily tired. Perhaps I ought not to travel so far in one day."

"That would be better still," said the Major. "I will take you to your friend's house, if, as I suppose, you are a stranger in the city."

"Entirely so," was the dejected answer. "Oh! How *could* I be so careless!"

There was every sign of a relapse into the hysterical weeping which he had at first witnessed, but the Major made haste to avert such a calamity.

"My dear," said he cheerfully, "do you want to know what *I* think would be the best thing for you to do?"

"What, sir?" she asked, with the ready, innocent docility of a child.

“Just to dismiss all care and regret from your mind, and to enjoy this beautiful sail as much as possible. After all, there is no great harm done—nothing to justify all the unavailing tears you have shed. Cheer up; let’s make believe I am your old bachelor uncle or far-away cousin, and we will go out upon the deck.”

“I don’t know why you are so kind to me?” she murmured, with the prettiest upward look of gratitude, the Major thought, that he had ever witnessed. “You are a stranger to me, but I know I can trust you.”

And, tying a blue ribboned hat over her brown ringlets, and knotting a scarf of the same colored silk around her shoulders, she took his arm, and accompanied him out.

It was amazing how brief was the journey up the Sound, after Alice Brooks—that was her name, as the Major soon ascertained from her artless confession—became his travelling companion. Her pretty ignorance, her childlike confessions, her interest in everything he told her, were all so new and so charming to our war-worn veteran, that he caught himself more than once wishing that Providence had been kind enough to bestow upon him just such an innocent, lovely young daughter as this.

“Or perhaps a wife,” thought the Major, with a curious stirring beneath his left ribs. “I’ve known people married from stranger beginnings than this; and though she is only sixteen, and I am forty-six—Pshaw! what am I thinking about?”

And the Major colored involuntarily, as Alice Brooks lifted her wine-colored eyes to his, with some casual question. Forty-six centuries wouldn’t be much of a protection to him from the dangerous arrows of such eyes as those.

He was unfeignedly sorry when they reached Bridgeport, and he helped fasten an enveloping water-proof cloak all round the slight little figure, and to knot a vail so as to hide the bronze-brown curls.

“People stare so!” said Alice impatiently.

“You are limping!” cried the Major, in alarm as they passed up the gangway plank. “Have you hurt yourself?”

And he started as he looked down. Had some evil genius spirited away the beautiful young girl, and left an ancient, paralytic old dame in her stead? How had the child contrived to transform herself so suddenly?

“It’s nothing,” whispered Alice. “Only I slipped on a bit of orange peel.”

“Shall we stop and rest a minute?”

“Oh, no, no! It will be better presently, and I do so long to be out of this crowd.”

She got with difficulty into the carriage which Major Truslow had signaled; and as they drove away and she lifted her veil, he could see that she was very pale.

“You have hurt yourself seriously, my child!” he cried. “Let me drive to a doctor’s office.”

“No,” she persisted. “It was only the least twist of my ankle; it is better already, only I am such a sad coward at bearing pain!”

How Major Truslow would have liked to draw the pale, lovely face to his breast and soothe her as one soothes a petted darling! But he forbore. And never in all his life had he felt so solitary and lonesome as when he turned away from the cozy old house on Main Street, shaded with huge silver maples, with Alice Brooks smiling and waving an adieu to him, as she stood on the broad stone steps. She would not let him wait until the bell was answered—she had detained him sufficiently long already, she declared, neither would she allow him to telegraph; her friends would do all that. Oh! she never, never could tell him how grateful she was for all his kindness.

“Drive to the Severn House,” said the Major, once more entering the carriage. It had been a fairy chariot before—now it was nothing on earth but a rattling box of musty leather, cracked glass, and warped wood.

As they neared the hotel, the Major bethought himself as to what time it might be, and essayed to draw out his watch—the watch was gone!

“Hallo!” he exclaimed aloud, “it must have been taken on the boat, when my duster lay on a chair. Very careless of me to carry it so—very careless indeed! Here hackman, drive back to the boat as fast as you can,” he bawled, jerking at the check string, “and a dollar extra for you, if you get there in ten minutes.”

Stimulated by this greenbacked inducement, the hackman rattled merrily over the stones, and in less than the stipulated ten minutes Major Truslow sprang out of the carriage at the boat landing.

He plunged his hand into his pocket to pay the man—his pocket was empty.

Pocket-book, keys, memorandum case were alike gone. And while he still fumbled vacantly in the empty chasm, a stalwart policeman stepped up to him, and the stewardess’ voice was heard crying:

“‘Ere’s the man, police; ’ere he is!”

The Major indignantly shook off the grasp of personified Law.

“What, man? What are you about here? What does it all mean?”

“Why, you’re the gent, as was with Slippery Maggie all day, and took her ashore. Come, now, don’t stand starin’ there, but tell us where you’ve took her.”

The Major was thunderstruck.

“Slippery Maggie! whom on earth do you mean?”

And a chorus of voices explained to him that the dove-eyed lassie of his morning’s adventure was no other than a noted New York pickpocket, flying from necessary consequences of a bolder depredation than usual. The New York police, too late to arrest her departure, had telegraphed to Bridgeport; but the votaries of Justice in that unsuspecting town had been completely thrown off the track by the limping old lady who leaned on a gentleman’s arm, whereas they were looking for a young woman alone by herself.

“Bless you, sir!” said Detective Kingsley; “she’s a ’cute one. Twenty-eight year old, and married twice; and looks like a gal o’ fourteen; talks as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth; and would coax the eyes out o’ your head, let alone the watch out o’ your pocket. So she’s riddled *you*, has she? Well, beggin’ your pardon, sir, who’d a thought it, at your years?”

“But I know where she is!” shouted Truslow, growing fairly purple with passion. “At No. — Main Street. Let us drive there at once!”

“Humph!” said the detective quietly; “that was nothin’ but a blind. ’Tan’t no ways likely you’ll find her there.”

Mr. Kingsley was right. The dwellers at No. — Main Street, respectable old inhabitants, could only testify that a pretty young girl had called there, and inquired if Mrs. Mortimer resided in the house. She had then gone away, and there ended all clue.

Major Truslow never saw nor heard of Slippery Maggie again, nor his watch and purse. And to this day he is sensitive on the subject of chance acquaintance in travelling.

It was rather an expensive lesson, but it is not likely to need renewing very soon.

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This story was accompanied by a single in-text illustration that spanned two columns.