# *A Make-Believe Story*

## A Clever Woman's Ruse with a Supposed Detective

George Dunlap was hurrying through the railroad station at Springfield to catch the train for Montreal. He was a little late, and the knowledge of this fact so heightened the susceptibility of his nerves that, when a tall woman with her arms full of parcels fell heavily against him, dropping her parcels, some of which burst and scattered their contents in every direction, only the sense of the politeness due to her sex kept him from using an ejaculation that would at least have expressed great impatience. She had clutched him nervously as she slipped and he supported her a moment while he inquired if she was hurt.

"I don't know," she said, panting, "I turned my ankle—I feel terribly jarred."

When she recovered herself sufficiently to stand without his help, he could do no less than to offer to gather up her parcels, and he had the satisfaction of feeling that he was doing his duty, and seeing his train steam out of the station at one and the same time.

"Well, as I have lost my train—" he began, as he stood holding some of her bundles in his arms.

"Was that your train?" she exclaimed, still visibly agitated. "It was mine, too, I think—I am not sure—I am a stranger, I want to go to Hartford."

"This was not your train then," he answered, "yours starts from the other side."

"I was late, I had no time to get a ticket. What time does the next train go to Hartford?" she murmured, brokenly, lifting appealing eyes to his.

"I will find out for you," he said, feeling quite compassionate toward her, though she was neither young nor pretty, and therefore had no legitimate claim to a stranger's protection.

He conducted her to the waiting room and presently returned from the ticket office with the information that she would have to wait over three hours—until after dark in fact, for the train.

"Three hours alone!" she exclaimed, with an unconscious naïve stress on the "alone" that Mr. Dunlap found very interesting.

"I, too, must wait until evening for my train," he said, smiling, "and as it rains so that we shall have to stay in the depot, if you will permit me to sit here, I will do myself the pleasure of waiting with you for a time at least."

"You are very kind," she answered simply, moving some of her bundles so that he could sit closer to her than he had perhaps first intended, "and that, too, after my awkwardness made you miss your train. You heap coals of fire—which ought not to be the less hot because they are getting rather trite—chestnut coals in fact, if you will pardon the expression—upon my head."

Mr. Dunlap had already made up his mind that she was neither young nor pretty; he now, as she looked at him with a bright audacious smile, revised his opinion to the extent of adding that she looked interesting.

She was tall, slender, and very thin; with sharp, old features, but her eyes, he decided, were her strong point, they were so changeful in expression and exhibited the different phases of her emotions with such an intensity, such a singleness of purpose from the appealing gaze of a frightened, helpless child, to the humorous quizzical glance she had thus given him.

"Will the delay incommode you very much?" she added, seriously.

"I did think it was quite necessary for me to be one of the passengers on that particular train, but now I am not sure. I think I shall be happier here."

"I hope you will forgive me," she said gravely, ignoring the implication of the last remark.

"I most certainly shall if you continue to be as agreeable as you have already been," he said, with a boldness which even some ordinary polite men will use toward a woman they meet under unconventional circumstances.

She colored deeply, and he felt that he had risked losing her society by his last remark. For a moment she looked very grave and nervously fumbled with the leaves of a book she held in her hand. Then she seemed to him to swallow her annoyance and take a sudden resolution. It was as if she had said to herself: "Life is too short and the periods spent in waiting for trains too long to waste the one and prolong the other by servile deference to useless conventionalities."

"I hate waiting in railroad stations," she said, presently.

Mr. Dunlap lived back among the Berkshire hills where the only communication with the outside world was by means of a rickety, rumbling, clattering old stage which connected his town with the nearest railroad station.

He was a country farmer of very moderate means, but for all that, he had read, he had observed, he never doubted but that he was much more a man of the world than others who had had much better advantages for becoming so. The very bulk of his conversation was carried on in the common vernacular, but he felt that he could be courtly and ceremonious to the last degree. When he read a sentence that seemed to him to be the thing in the way of polite repartee or gallant address, he reread it until he had made it his own. That sort of thing was doubly effective, he thought, from a man who commonly used the old-fashioned Yankee dialect. It gave him the effect of being conversant with several languages.

"I have sometimes found it rather dull waiting here, but to-day I quite reckon on it," he replied, with his most polished manner.

"Did you ever try to make the time pass away by imagining the pursuits and destinations of the various persons you see around you?" he added.

“No,” she added quickly. She still seemed nervous from her shock. “I should think it would be very interesting. Let’s begin now.”

Mr. Dunlap looked helplessly around the room.

Their fellow travelers seemed of a hopelessly neutral, non-committal cast of countenance.

“Nobody here looks ez ef they’d ever done any thing of much account an’ couldn’t ef they set out to,” he said, after a pause. “I tell you what less do,” he added, brightening, “less put ourselves inter a story. To begin with, we met by chance, the usual way, an’ while settin’ here I take an awful shine to you. What d’ yer say?” and he nudged her in what he considered a jocose but not indelicate manner.

She had looked at him sharply as he dropped into his ordinary habit of speaking, and then apparently made up her mind that he was acting some part.

“Don’t you think that the beginning would lack originality just a trifle?” she suggested. “There are so many stories that begin just that way. Now, perhaps, if I fell in love with you it would be less obvious.”

Mr. Dunlap had an idea that she was laughing at him.

“Such things ez that hez ben known to happen,” he said rather sulkily.

“O, certainly!” she asserted. “I have heard of such instances, but we must imagine some rather unusual causes and circumstances—for instance, suppose that I am married—”

“Be you?” he asked abruptly; “I took you for a single woman.”

“This is a make-believe story,” she answered with a bright, mischievous smile.

“It’s gittin’ rather common for married women to fall in love with other men, now-a-days,” he observed, rather revengefully.

“I accept your objection,” she said; “but of course there must be ‘attenuating circumstances,’ as [someone says]. My husband, for instance,” she added, with a far-away, inscrutable look, “we’ll suppose, for the sake of argument, is cross—brutal to me. He strikes me on the slightest provocation.”

“Git out,” murmured Mr. Dunlap, with sympathetic incredulity.

“He takes delight in thwarting all my wishes, he makes my life wretched. I meet you—you are kind and don’t swear at me when I tumble against you, and you pick up my bundles, which is something so foreign to all my experience that I fall in love with you at once. But of course I don’t know it, people are not apt to know these things—in stories—so I don’t dream of it. Then by a series of coincidences which couldn’t happen anywhere except in stories—we’ll fill in the details after we’ve sketched out the plot—we met accidentally several times, and all the time out

of deference to the opinions and prejudices of the reader I still don't suspect the state of my feelings, and you of course are equally in the dark.

"Well, now, about that time, something must happen to reveal to us as by a lightning [strike] that we love one another, for by this time you, moved by the spectacle of, not beauty in distress, but by more distressing exhibition of ugliness suffering a trifle more than her just deserts, are feeling that pity that is said to be akin to a commoner sentiment.

"Now we must find some situations that will reveal all this to us without shocking the delicacy of the most rigidly conventional reader, who must be made to see and admit that we couldn't have done differently.

"Let me see, the presence of death generally comes in to countenance people in similar situations."

"We might be drowning," suggested Mr. Dunlap. "You fall in, I rush to save you, you know, an' jist ez we was sinkin' for the last time, while everything in our past lives was a comin' up before us, we both remember the time when I rescued your bundles and then it comes to us both that we love each other. Folks couldn't find no fault with that, couldn't they?"

"Well, no," said the lady, thoughtfully, "I don't think the most rigid moralist could object to two people finding out that they love one another when they are sinking for the last time with their lungs full of water, and the proverbial straw of the drowning man is slipping from their nerveless grasp. But what I object to is that it makes the story too short. I haven't suffered enough yet to satisfy the practiced reader. We must be brought near enough to the verge of this world so that we feel ourselves beyond the reach of ordinary regulations and still be left with articulation enough to reveal our innoxious love. Then there must be a rescue and resuscitation for the purpose of overwhelming us with shame, contrition, and remorse."

"Somebody can come along and pull us out of the water," suggested Mr. Dunlap, who felt that he was not contributing his share to the story, "and bring us to by rolling us on barrels."

"Rolling on barrels may be the scientific method of resuscitation, but science is notoriously unavailable for poetic purposes. Besides," she continued, with extreme gravity, "it seems to me that two well-meaning persons like ourselves are going to suffer sufficiently from our consciences without the additional anguish of being rolled on barrels. Let us be 'just before we are generous,' even in punishments. Now, I think, as our acquaintance began in a railway station, we might preserve the unities by mixing up the railroad with our affairs whenever we can. A railroad accident at this point is necessary to the evolution of the story. Can you arrange one that will be about what we require?"

The lady had been talking so rapidly that Mr. Dunlap had followed her in rather a gasping condition. This would never do in a man who prided himself on his conversational ability, and he dashed boldly into the breach.

"The train must be derailed and thrown down a steep embankment. We are caught together under the seats and debris. (Mr. Dunlap rhymed the word with remiss), and to add to the horrors of the situation the car takes fire from the overturned stove, and there we are! I clasp you in my arms

and say ‘I would save you if I could, darling, but as I can’t we will die together;’ ” and he paused for breath, convinced that he had established his reputation as a man who could say “pretty things as well as the next one when he took a notion to.”

“That’s it exactly,” replied is companion. “I murmur some appropriate reply, and just as the fire is getting so uncomfortably hot we hardly know where we are, [someone] breaks in the window and rescues us. I am so mortified at my ill-timed confession I don’t know what to do, and you say that as we can never forget our declarations, suppose that we go to Europe together. Now there’s a strong situation. A horribly brutal husband in the background and love and Europe urged upon my acceptance. Europe, that I have always passionately longed to see and the man I love to go with me—ah—”

She drew a long breath and her keen, restless eyes grew soft with a look of inexpressible gentleness; her odd, anxious features wore an expression of infinite yearning and tenderness.

Though not vainer than the generality of men, Mr. Dunlap felt that perhaps this story was not wholly a make-believe as far as her love for him was concerned. It was barely possible that she had fallen in love with him at first sight and was making up this story to test his feelings. He was strangely moved and murmured: “And we go to Europe and are happy forever after.”

“No, indeed,” she exclaimed, “that would never do. Have you forgotten the scandalized reader at this point? No. I refuse sadly but steadfastly, and turning away with a look of stern resolution and renunciation I part from you forever, and go to look after my fellow-travelers who are less mortally wounded than myself. The bored reader lays down the book and says with a yawn that the story didn’t come out well. The husband ought to have died.”

The short, rainy afternoon had drawn to a close, and the lamps about the station were all lighted.

“Well, I have had a pleasant afternoon but I suppose it’s most time for us to part,” said Mr. Dunlap.

“Yes,” she answered, sadly.

The sparkle had all died out of her face and tones; she looked worn, discouraged and woe-begone. Her companion was more and more convinced that her story was founded on her love for him and the fact of an inhuman husband. He was filled with pity, but could think of nothing to say.

“It’ll be rather dismal going to Montreal in the dark,” he said, after a pause. “I had counted on seeing something of the country.”

“Why not wait till to-morrow or next day?” she asked with suppressed eagerness.

“Oh, I must go,” he answered, vaguely.

She looked down at the floor for some time with a look of inexpressible sadness. She seemed trying to make a difficult resolution. At last she looked up with a strange, inscrutable expression, and said in a low, forced tone:

“Please don’t go for a day or two. I want to see you again. I can’t bear to think that after this pleasant afternoon we must part, never to meet again. Can’t you stay in Springfield until day after to-morrow, and meet me again here, in the afternoon?”

Mr. Dunlap hesitated. His companion was pale and trembling.

“What’ll your husband say?” he asked, after a pause.

“My husband,” she exclaimed, in a startled manner, as if she had forgotten his very existence. “O, it’s about that and other things that I wish you to advise me,” she went on with terrible earnestness. “I am in a great deal of trouble. I want to tell you about it. You look kind, you can help me if you only will.”

Mr. Dunlap knew perfectly well that it was very imprudent to make an appointment with an entire stranger, but as he was equally sorry for her, and sure of his own ability to take care of himself, he gave the required promise. A look of inexpressible relief came over her face and her eyes filled with tears.

She thanked him fervently, begged him not to trouble himself to see her to the train, and after a warm pressure of his hand disappeared.

Mr. Dunlap’s pity for her did not prevent him from the disloyalty to her memory of searching his pockets to see if any of his valuables were missing. Finding them all intact he went to a hotel to await the appointed day.

When the designated time arrived, Mr. Dunlap, though he had thought constantly of the fair unknown in the interval and had mixed up the thoughts of her with his conscientious study of the city so that all about the view he was able to see from the Armory tower was the vision of a bright eyed woman making violent love to himself, and had studied the architecture of the public library with the question: “Is it ever justifiable to get a divorce for intolerable cruelty?” uppermost in his mind, was sill unable to arrive at any definite answer to either supposition.

He strolled aimlessly up and down the platform, now and then stopping to peer furtively into the waiting-rooms.

“I will tell her,” he finally decided “that this is very sudden, but that after long and careful deliberation, I have decided that, though I appreciate her kindness and the confidence she has reposed in me, I have conscientious scruples against marrying a divorced woman, but that I will be a brother to her.”

There had been no definite time set for the meeting, and Mr. Dunlap began to grow impatient. Suppose that she had decided on renunciation instead of leaving that agreeable duty to him! He acknowledged that if she had come to a realizing sense of her forwardness in making an appointment with a perfect stranger, it was perfectly right and extremely proper, but it was very tiresome and stupid wandering about a smoky old railroad station, waiting for a person who had not a sufficient sense of moral obligation to keep her engagements. He was rapidly growing ill-humored when he met Fred Richmond, an acquaintance of his who was beginning to do quite a

little in detective work. Richmond accosted him jovially, and, turning around, walked along with him. Dunlap was rather impatient at the interruption. He thought Richmond would be a much more pleasant companion if he had not been so exclusively enthusiastic on the subject of detective work, so inclined to manifest a hardiness toward anything that was not closely connected with this hobby.

"You have no sympathies with any thing but sleuth-hound instincts," he had told him once, and Richmond had laughed and said that in order to be successful one "must whoop on his own side."

"That was a fine piece of work capturing Williams, the absconding bank cashier," he began at once, as they walked along together.

"I saw something of it in the papers, I believe," Mr. Dunlap responded indifferently.

"I think sometimes that you think the whole business of mankind is to detect or be detected."

Richmond laughed. "Well, I confess it does look so sometimes from my point of view," he said. "People are concerned in these things more than they always know. Do you know yet how closely you were mixed up in Williams' capture?"

"Me mixed up!" said Mr. Dunlap, staring.

"Yes, you," returned the other; "it's too good to keep now it's all over with. Anna Brown, the girl I saw talking with you the day before yesterday, must have caught on the fact that [someone] was lying for Williams, for I saw her loitering round here for an hour or two before the train for Montreal [started]. She didn't see me watching her, mind you, but she was studying time-tables and looking this way and that, and I made up my mind she had some scheme for hindering the process of law. She just worshiped Williams, and she's just that kind of woman that would go through fire and water for the man she loved.

"Isn't she married, you say?"

"No, never was. He never cared so much for her, but he made her think so, I suppose. He was the cashier in a big bank and she a poor girl who worked here in a button shop, though she had a good education and is as smart as steel. Well, he must have confided his trouble to her so's she could help him, and a mean trick it was, too, for he had it all planned out to meet another woman in Canada and they were to be married and go to Europe. Probably he made Anna think he was going to marry her and take her to Europe. She doesn't know anything about the other one. Well, I saw her sauntering around here day before yesterday, and I made up my mind she meant to help him get off. I had put a detective on every train that went out that day, but I thought that that was the one he would take. Just as I was passing her I said to a fellow that was with me, just as if I didn't know she could hear, "that's the most famous detective in the country,["] and pointed to you. She didn't seem to notice, but I watched her and saw her stop you and make you lose your train as cleverly as could be. She probably thought it hadn't got out much and that if she could detain you a day he'd get off. But, bless you, the fellow I put on the train hooked on to Williams before they got out of the State. She's smart, and when I saw her talking to you I made up my mind that you wouldn't get away that day. She's quite equal to making love to you or any other

man to keep you away from her lover. O, you needn't look so mad! I'm not going to ask you about it. I'll bet if she did no one could tell it from the genuine article. The joke of it is that she's so proud she'd rather have died than done it if it hadn't been for him. It'll be rather rough on her when she finds out about the other woman."—*Ethel Gorman Clarke, in Hartford Times.*

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