

The Widow Reed

Denis McClain and Dick Renshaw were two of the most expert and successful counterfeiters ever known in the Northwest. Both were bold shrewd men, who had defied the laws and evaded justice by one artifice or another for years, and were noted for their courage and coolness in the face of danger.

Counterfeiting was their specialty, and it was said among the profession that “Dick Renshaw and Denis McClain had turned out some of the best work ever put afloat in the West.”

Their last exploit had been the counterfeiting of the ten-dollar notes of a Chicago bank, and so perfect were they that hundreds of people were victimized and the bank officers themselves could hardly tell the spurious notes from the genuine. Renshaw and McClain were suspected, and Hugh Graham, a detective of more than ordinary ability, was detailed to work out the case.

With patient perseverance, he traced the daring criminals from one haunt to another, until he finally discovered that his men had taken up their abode with a widow lady who resided about a half a mile from the little village of M——, on the Quincy and Burlington Railroad. This widow — Mrs. Reed by name — was a quiet, lady-like person, and by the village folks generally was considered a very worthy and highly respectable woman. Graham felt quite sure that she knew nothing about the true character of her boarders, who represented themselves to be real estate men looking up the value of land in that locality, and were only known as Mr. Day and Mr. Williams by the unsuspected villagers.

While Graham was making cautious inquiries about the widow and her strange lodgers, in a small back room on the ground floor of the lady’s modest cottage, these two lodgers were seated in earnest conversation. The one, tall and rather fine looking, with black hair and eyes, and somewhat slow of speech was Denis McClain. The other, short and stout, with a smooth, beardless face, and cheeks as rosy as a girl’s, was Dick Renshaw: “the best note engraver outside of the State Prison,” as a friend of his once remarked, in speaking of his talents.

Said Renshaw now known as Williams, rising and walking uneasily up and down the floor:

“I’m sure it was Graham, and the fellow with him is Jim Deming, a bandy-legged Chicago detective, whom I saw in St. Louis last winter the time we put out the fives. There’s no mistake, I tell you. I saw them get off the train at M——, not an hour ago, and they mean business.”

“Well, if they do, we must outwit them — that’s all,” replied the older man quietly.

“But how? I fear we are run to earth this time, Denis. We can’t give them the slip in a small town, and the confounded telegraph will head us off which ever way we turn.”

“No, there’s no hope of escape in that direction.”

“What are we to do then?”

“Do? We stay and take our chances where we are.”

Dick looked him in astonishment, but said nothing, and his companion continued:

“We are in a very tight place, that’s certain, but I don’t despair. Graham is good on a take. Now there is nothing here to convict us — not a dollar of the stuff on the premises, and the dies and plates are all safely out of the way. I took good care of that part of the business. It is now only 8 o’clock and if we work lively we will give Graham and his bandy-legged friend some trouble yet before they catch us.”

In a few words Denis explained his plan of outwitting the detectives, and when he had finished, Dick nodded approvingly, and they both left the room together.

It was just 9 o’clock, of a bright June morning, that two men walked leisurely up the road leading to Mrs. Reed’s dwelling.

As they neared the house they saw an elderly gentleman, with gray hair and beard, hoeing corn in the field on the opposite side of the road, and the larger of the two gentlemen, who was none other than the clever detective. Graham pleasantly accosted the old laborer.

“A fine morning you have for hoeing my friend, and your corn is looking nicely for this time of the year.”

The old man straightened himself up with difficulty, and glanced curiously at the speaker.

“Yes, it’s a promisin’ crop; but the land is good about here, sir, and good land brings good crops most generally,” answered the simple old fellow.

“Ah, that explains it,” laughed the detective. “Could you tell us if the house over yonder belongs to the widow Reed?”

The old man pushed back his worn straw hat, rested the blade of his hoe on his heavy boot and replied, with great deliberation:

“Yes, that’s the widder’s; may be you are looking for board?”

“Not exactly; but we have friends stopping with her — strangers; though I presume you have seen them occasionally at M——.”

“Well, yes, I’ve seen a couple of strangers thereby — city fellers,” said the honest toiler thoughtfully; “but I never seen ’em to speak to. They don’t be social like to country folks, and keep pretty much to themselves. That is my house you see over there,” pointing a finger to a tumbled down old building perched on a hillside at some distance across the Sokle. “I’ve lived here nigh on to twenty years and I’ve often seen the widder’s boarders around of a morning long afore most people are up. My wife thinks they must be queer sort of folks for they burn a light all night. I hear they may be inventors, makin’ a new kind of machine to keep steam boilers from bustin’, and don’t want their secret to get out.”

The detective’s face beamed with satisfaction.

“Here’s a trifle for you,” he said, well pleased, and passed on.

The laborer pocketed the “trifle,” and bent again to his toil, piling up the rich earth around the root of the young corn with renewed energy.

The widow Reed was a small delicate featured woman of perhaps forty, with innocent blue eyes and soft brown hair which was just beginning to show a trace of “silver threads.”

And it was the little widow herself who opened the door to Graham’s respectful knock. To her look of inquiry, he said:

“I called to see Mr. Williams. Is he at home?”

“I will see,” she replied, politely and tripped away to ascertain.

She soon returned, and announced that neither Mr. Williams nor his friend, Mr. Day were in their room, adding:

“They usually take a walk about this time, but are seldom gone more than an hour. Would you like to wait or leave cards?”

The callers decided that they would wait, whereupon the widow hospitably remarked:

“Perhaps you would prefer waiting in their room, as it is cooler there than here.” Glancing at the dazzling sunlight, which was just commencing to flood the windows of the little parlor.

Both visitors eagerly assented to the lady’s proposition, and were at once shown to the room of the absent counterfeiters. There the unsuspecting widow left them, and returned to her household duties.

As may readily be supposed, the detectives were not scrupulous about examining the apartment and its belongings in a most thorough and businesslike manner. But nothing

was found — not a sign of anything calculated to implicate the inmates with the crime of making bad money.

For a “den” of counterfeiters it was certainly all very natural and homelike. The detectives looked puzzled, but were still confident that they were on the right track.

Minute after minute passed away, and no sound broke the stillness save the splashing and rubbing of a stout servant girl, who was washing in the little summer kitchen adjoining the room in which they sat. To-and-from she walked from the tub to the boiler and starch-bowl, her sleeves rolled up, an old blue sun-bonnet drawn over her heated face, and girt around her waist by a wet, sudsy apron.

An hour went by. Mr. Williams and his companion had not returned; and the detectives were about to summon Mrs. Reed for the purpose of making further inquiries when the good lady presented herself at the door, and said, in a tone of gentle apology:

“I am afraid you find it rather tiresome waiting. It is quite unusual for them to remain away so long.”

“Did they leave no message?” asked Deming.

“Not that I know of,” she answered simply enough.

“Have you any objections to asking your servant?”

“None at all. I should have thought of it before.”

She instantly withdrew, and a moment after the listening detectives heard her interrogating the stout domestic, who appeared in no amiable mood.

“Did Mr. Day leave any message with you Amanda when I was out this morning?”

“Leave a message with me?” snapped Amanda, giving the sheet she was ringing a vicious twist around her arm. “Why should he leave a message with me? But come to think of it, Mr. Williams left a note as he was goin’ out and told me to give it to you if you asked about him.”

“Then why did you not do so, Amanda, without keeping me waiting all this time? Give me the note now, if you please.”

“Because you did not ask me. And with washing and a hundred things to do besides, it went clean out of my mind. The note’s around somewheres; I forgot just where I put it. Oh, it’s there on the winder sill!”

And with this waspish information, Amanda snatched up her basket of clothes and went to hang them upon the line in the backyard, while her mistress glad apparently to be rid of

her ungracious servant took the note and immediately returned to her anxious visitors, who had overheard every word of the above conversation.

“You are right in your conjectures,” she said, “Mr. Williams did leave a message, or a note which amounts to about the same thing, and no doubt will explain what now seems so strange.”

She tore open the note, and it did explain with vengeance. It ran thus:

DEAR MRS. REED: — Business of great moment calls us away at once. We will not return. Inclosed please find remittance for two weeks’ board, in addition to which we also give you our personal effects, which we find inconvenient to take with us at the present time.

With thanks for your many kindnesses, I remain respectfully,

“G.W. WILLIAMS”

Poor Mrs. Reed was astonished.

“I don’t understand it!” she gasped, sinking into a chair. “I don’t understand it at all!”

“But I do!” cried the enraged Graham, springing to his feet. “Deming, we are completely fooled, and, while waiting here like a couple of idiots, they have given us the slip.”

“Who are you? What can you mean?” exclaimed the widow in great alarm.

“We mean, madam, that your late boarders are two of the most accomplished counterfeiters in the United States. — We are detectives and are here to arrest them — that is we came for that propose, but —”

“Gracious heavens! What do I hear? Counterfeiters! And I thought them such perfect gentlemen,” interrupted Mrs. Reed, now terribly agitated, and trembling in every limb.

“Perfect scoundrels! This is a devil of a business after all the trouble we have had,” said Graham turning to his companion. “They are off on the train that left M—— half an hour ago, and all we can do is telegraph and stop them, if possible, before they reach Quincy.”

Mrs. Reed was pale with fear and consternation. To know that she had been innocently harboring two such dreadful characters naturally filled her with horror and dismay.

“Perhaps they are concealed somewhere about the place, and have not gone off at all;” she faltered, hardly daring to speak above a whisper. “They may be hiding in the barn or the woodshed or the house at this very moment,” looking around apprehensively and with a visible shudder. “Amanda and I are alone — what could we do if they should be here? They might murder us in our beds, or burn the house! It is frightful to think of it; and they were so gentlemanly, and paid their board so promptly!” hysterically bewailed the

widow, sinking back into her chair, quite overpowered by the horror of her unprotected situation.

“Don’t alarm yourself madam. They are far enough away, I’ll warrant you, to prevent our presenting them with a pair of bracelets today,” was the baffled Graham’s grim reply.

But the poor woman was still skeptical, and tearfully implored them to at least search the house, and not leave her at the mercy of a brace of villains, who might be secreted within sound of their voices, for all that they knew to the contrary.

This the officers did not believe, feeling convinced that the game had taken wing; nevertheless, they made a hasty search of the house and out-buildings, running against and nearly capsizing the irritable Amanda, who was carrying a tub of suds, and who resented the indignity by an offending jerk which came near deluging the heckles Deming with its soapy contents.

Of course, the search was useless. No counterfeiters were unearthed, nor anything belonging to their dangerous occupation. It was all time thrown away, and bidding the terrified Mrs. Reed good morning, the disappointed officers hurriedly took their leave.

The old laborer, leaned thoughtfully on his hoe, saw the detectives depart at a much faster pace than they had come and, when they were fairly out of sight, he shouldered his hoe and quickly left the cornfield.

The widow stood in the doorway, and watched them disappear with a smile of quiet satisfaction hovering dreamily on her lips. Poor, over-worked Amanda untied her wet apron, rolled down her sleeves, and with the old man who came in at that moment, retired to the room so recently ransacked by the “lynx-eyed” detectives. The false beard and gray wig were laid aside, the heavy boots and shabby clothes removed, and, lo! Denis McClain was himself again.

Amanda speedily divested herself of her be-draggled female apparel and was Amanda no longer, but Dick Renshaw, the skillful bank-note engraver.

“We played it well,” he remarked, complacently. “Well, indeed, Mrs. Reed is an admirable woman. They are off the scent — outwitted handsomely, and we can now finish our work and depart at our pleasure.”

Clever Mrs. Reed! Yet she was a little woman with innocent blue eyes and soft brown hair just beginning to show the gleam of “silver threads.”

Star and Sentinel [Gettysburg, PA], May 13, 1880, 1/8