

A Deplorable Mistake

by Anna Ashmore

“James,” said Mrs. Garret, while sitting at breakfast one morning, “I don’t like that new girl. I have my suspicions about her.”

“About Ann!” returned Mr. Garret, in surprise. “Why, it’s only a few days ago that I heard you boast to Mrs. Branmer you have the best cook in New York!”

“So she is a good cook. I don’t expect to get such another for twice her wages. It’s not about her work—she does all that well—but I’ve no trust in her.”

“What has she done?”

“What has she done?” echoed the lady somewhat sharply. “Nothing, of course, or I’d soon send her packing! But she’s shy and secret, and won’t tell me anything about herself; and has ridiculous airs about sleeping alone, and won’t even allow Amanda inside her bedroom door. There’s something wrong, depend upon it. If there wasn’t a screw loose somewhere she wouldn’t be here for such low wages.”

“If that’s a fault against her, you can raise them,” suggested Garret.

“There, James, you may as well go to your office, if that’s all you have to say,” cried the mistress of the house. “But mark my words, before you go, I’ll find Ann Walker out before long.”

Mr. Garret sighed as he rose to depart. He well knew that remonstrance would avail nothing, for Mrs. Garret’s prejudices were as the laws of the Medes and Persians, that changeth not, so he took himself off without another word.

“Amanda!” cried the lady, when left alone, “bring Horace up.”

In response to this summons a large, slatternly girl of eleven or twelve, made her appearance from the basement, with a little boy in her arms, who made a snatch at an egg stand and knocked it on the floor in passing the table.

“You awkward, careless gipsy!” cried Mrs. Garret, with great spirit, “that’s the second thing you have broken this morning. Who do you think is going to pay for all you destroy? Come here, Horace, love, and have a nice piece of toast. What’s Ann doing, Amanda?”

“She’s dressing the turkey, mum.”

“Did she scour the front steps this morning?”

“Yes, mum; she got up at 5 o’clock to do it.”

“Go and tell her I expect her to wash the drawing room windows before dinner.”

“Upon my word,” muttered Mrs. Garret, resentfully, as Amanda retired to carry her message. “I’ll pull her pride down a bit. Must wash steps at five in the morning forsooth least folks see her at it. I’ll take that out of her.”

In a few minutes Ann came up to clear the dishes off. She was tall and well proportioned, about twenty years of age, her face pale, refined in features, not handsome, but singularly intelligent and earnest in its expression.

She looked a little anxious and troubled as she noiselessly arranged the room, and when she was ready to go, she said, in a very soft voice:

“May I ask a favor, ma’am, that the cleaning of the front windows be put off till early in the morning?”

“No,” answered her mistress, curtly, “I want them done now.”

“I don’t wish to be seen by passersby,” she urged, almost pleadingly. “It is of importance to me not to be seen by someone who might know me.”

“You will obey my orders, girl, or leave the house!” returned Mrs. Garret, beginning to quiver with temper.

The servant curtsied and withdrew.

In a few moments she was at the windows, but in a close sun bonnet, to Mrs. Garret’s unspeakable disgust.

“I think I can see through my lady,” was her inward comment. “She’s some jailbird the detectives are after. I’ll lay a trap for her, and if she’s not caught in it, my penetration isn’t much.”

Rising from her sewing machine, which she had been busily plying in Master Horace’s behalf, she unlocked her desk, took from it a twenty-dollar note, carefully marked the number, and dropped it, as if by accident under the table. Then she cut and basted some more work, making enough rubbish about the floor to insure the servant’s having to use her dust pan before dinner. By the time this was accomplished she discovered little Horace and the machine in danger of coming to grief together that, first driving the innocent to the other side of the room, and then picked up the scattered shuttle and reels, she called Ann upstairs to put the parlor to rights, and left the room, taking Horace with her.

When Mr. Garret came home to dinner, he saw by his wife’s portentous face that something dreadful had occurred.

“James,” she said solemnly, “I have found the girl out in theft.”

“Who, Amanda?”

“Pshaw! No. Your superior girl Ann. She has just helped herself to twenty dollars of mine.”

“Good gracious!” cried Mr. Garret, pausing in the act of carving the turkey.

“Yes; it was a twenty dollar note which—ahem—happened to fall out of my desk on the floor this forenoon. I was busy with Horace so—ahem—forgot to pick it up before I left the room. When I came down to dinner I instantly missed it, and the abandoned creature actually said she might have swept it into the dust pan and burnt it. Fortunately I have the number of it, and after dinner you must go immediately after a policeman.

Bewildered and far from convinced by the proofs of Ann’s guilt which his wife cited, Mr. Garret suffered himself to be sent off in his errand of justice, soon returned in company of a detective, armed with a warrant, and Ann was imperatively rung up, while Amanda was ordered to remain, that she might take a warning from the event to take place.

“Ann,” said her master, feeling very small, “Mrs. Garret misses some money, and this man has come to—”

“Find it, my dear,” subjoined the officer, who had been regarding her with undisgusted interest. “So if you’ll hand over the keys to your kit we’ll proceed to business instanter.”

“Ann,” said Mrs. Garret sternly, “if the stolen property is found in your possession, you will go to prison, miss, that you shall.”

Ann’s face slowly kindled with a scorching red; her large, dark eyes dilated with a deep horror; her lips turned pale, her breath seemed to leave her in a gasp.

“You accuse me—of theft?” she faltered.

Mr. Garret silently put her into a chair. She looked as if the shock would strike her dead.

“Do you deny,” demanded Mrs. Garret, none the less spitefully for this attention, “that you picked up that twenty dollar bill that was dropped on the carpet, just on this spot, this forenoon? Haven’t you got it in your pocket or trunk, or hidden about your bedroom at this moment? Go on with the search, Mr. Officer; she is determined not to confess. It was a National Park Bank bill for twenty dollars, number 108,943.”

“Seems to me I’ve seen your face before this, my girl,” muttered the officer, confidentially. “You’ll please fork over the key of yer kit, young woman.”

As she gave it to him a sort of sob shook her, and large tears rushed in a torrent down her cheeks.

“I’ll show you the way,” said the mistress of the house, sure by these signs of sorrow that the note was about to be discovered. “James keep your eye on the unprincipled wretch, for there’s no knowing what she may do.”

Very neatly arranged were poor Ann Walker’s simple belongings. Some daintily frilled underclothing, smelling of lavender; her modest Sunday apparel folded by itself in silver paper; a box of plain linen collars and cuffs, one or two books of unexpected titles as ‘Longfellow’s Hyperion,’ ‘The Holy Grail’ by Tennyson, and some of Madame Michelet’s in original French, and a beautiful mother-of-pearl desk in the very bottom with the initials ‘A.W.A.’ in silver monogram on the top.

“Now, I’m blessed if this ain’t a pretty kit for a servant girl,” remarked the detective, taking out the desk and proceeding to pry it open with his penknife.

“A wholesale robber,” groaned Mrs. Garret, “and to think I have harbored—”

“Hallo,” cried the detective, opening the lid, and taking out a silver photograph case, richly chased, and garnished with an elaborate monogram. “Who’s this?”

Then the pair had a fine surprise.

Opening the case, they saw two *cartes*—one a majestic looking military man, apparently about sixty, the other of a young girl, clad in silk and richest lace, whose face bore the exact similitude of Ann Walker’s.

“By the hooky!” ejaculated the officer, a light breaking all over his face, and astonishment prevented further articulation.

Taking a greasy pocketbook out of his breast pocket he opened it, and drew forth a photograph, which was Ann Walker’s vignette.

“Them’s two’s the same gal?” asked he eagerly.

“Yes,” answered the lady with a glance.

“I thought I had spotted that gal the minute I set eyes on her”; cried the man, exultingly; “and to think of me finding her after all, and three of us huntin’ for her these six months. I’m a made man. Won’t the General plank down the thousand pounds reward! Hoorar!”

“What do you mean?” asked Mrs. Garret.

“What do I mean?” grinned the detective. “Why, that you have made the orkardest mistake, misses, you ever made in your life. You’ve heard of General Arnim as lives in the marble palace up the Hudson?”

“Of course I have—indeed, have some acquaintance with him.” “Or would give the universe to scrape one,” she might have with truth added.

“That’s unlucky—for you,” observed the officer, with an obvious absence of sympathy; “for you see this here cook as you’ve accused of stealing is his only daughter and heiress—”

“What?”

Mrs. Garret sat down on a chair, with a face as pale as a sheet.

“How in heaven’s name can I apologize for my mistake?” she gasped. “I’ll die of shame outright!”

“Meantime we haven’t found the banknote,” observed the officer, with some malice prepense. “Shall I go on with the s’arch?”

“No, no! For goodness sake leave me! Let me think!” groaned our friend in real anguish of mind.

Meantime the following interview had taken place between the master of the house and the accused:

“Sir,” said the latter as soon as they were alone, “I think you have the feelings of a gentleman. Further concealment is useless, and before I leave this house, I owe you an explanation.”

Mr. Garret thought this was the beginning of a confession of guilt, and said:

“Yes, Ann,” very sadly, but kindly.

“I am not what I seem,” pursued Miss Arnim, in an agitated manner. “You may have heard of, six months ago, General Arnim’s daughter who disappeared—”

“Heavens!” muttered Mr. Garret. He now feared poor Ann was insane.

“My father,” continued Miss Arnim, “wished me to marry a gentleman who was in every way repugnant to me, I having already given my heart to another, whose want of fortune was his own fault. I would not disobey my father by following the dictates of my heart, yet how could I go through the daily sorrow of thwarting his expressed wishes? I resolved to escape from both temptations for a time, and I could think of no way in which I could more securely hide myself than by going into service for a time. I confided my story to the good manageress of the ‘Domestic’s Training Institution’ who was a friend of mine, and through her influence I came here with the determination of doing my duty as conscientiously as possible. You have seen the result, Mr. Garret.”

She burst into tears, though her eyes flashed through them with proud indignation.

By this time the earnestness of her manner, and the calm refinement of language had carried the conviction of truth to her listener's heart. He gazed at her in amazement and distress, while a flood of shame dyed his brow.

The detective now entered, and with a deeply respectful obeisance to the woman he had treated so insolently ten minutes ago, said:

"Please to accept my humble service, Miss Arnim, and to pardon my mistake. What can I do for you, Miss?"

"Bring me a cab, if you please," said Miss Arnim. Then, turning to her former master, she said, pleadingly:

"Let me ask a particular favor, sir, that I may be permitted to go without meeting Mrs. Garret again. I can imagine now,' she added, with a trembling voice, "what innocent and friendless girls feel when they are suspected wrongly."

Little more remains to be said. The young lady had her wish, and returned to her father's house without another encounter with her amiable mistress; and so overjoyed was the general to receive back her whom he had bitterly mourned as lost by his own cruelty, that her engagement to Mr. Melville, a virtuous and accomplished young lawyer, was immediately afterward arranged, with much rejoicing.

Little master Horace proved, some weeks afterward, to be the real cause of that banknote's disappearance. It was found stuffed into the cavity under the shuttle of his mamma's sewing machine.

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