

Select Story.

A Strange Forgery.

What Grew Out of It.

(Continued.)

SHALL take a flight now over three years, during which the only event connected with the subject of my story was the receipt of a set of documents put in by Mrs. John Barrett, once Lydia Pennyacker, claiming the old house, and giving directions that it should remain closed and remain untouched until her own or her husband's return. This occurred about six months after John's departure, and the time for them to arrive at their destination, and to bring to my sixth incident which relates to the house of Pennyacker & Son.

One night—and a bitter cold night it was—there was an alarm of fire. I was returning from the theatre, a kind of alarm I now sometimes indulged in, for I was no longer under a cruel discipline. I had a young man in my eye, and took a run with the engine. Off they went to the eastern part of the city, and brought up next door to the old house, a peck-packer, which was in full blaze. It was a good thing to burn, and burn it did, with such effect that it was surprised the flames did not take the Pennyacker house and one or two more with it. At it was, the gate of the old place was knocked off, the doors burst open, the flames took full range through the building, which did not by any means improve it.

The next day came the insurance people, and in a few days the workmen to repair, under the directions of the authorities who held the property in trust.

I got a most extraordinary revelation. And now it was long before it became public, from a young man whose acquaintance I made in the office of public administrator.

The workmen, in pulling down the shattered parts, unearthed some suspicious-looking packages, and in a few moments the whole of Mr. Ephraim's lost property—bonds, stocks, money and securities—lay in the hands of the master-workmen who fortunately was an honest man. Ephraim had used as a hiding-place a wooden panel under a window, where stood a heavy desk, in a room in which he was wont to retreat at times from the office and lock himself up. He had been suddenly hurried from the office to reveal his hiding place to any one.

Of course, this was a serious matter, as there was a good deal of picking for lawyers and public functionaries. Mr. John Barrett was communicated with at Valparaiso, immediately. The return mail brought an answer, expressing great joy at the finding of the property, but regretting that the dangerous illness of Mrs. Barrett would prevent her immediate return to Philadelphia. And now, when she had permitted me to see her, within a month came a second letter from Barrett, announcing the death of his wife, a letter made by her in his own hand, and in intention of being in Philadelphia almost as soon as this intelligence, with all legal documents to dispose of the matter.

And sure enough, within two weeks I heard of his arrival. I called at his hotel, sent up my card and received the answer that Mr. Barrett was too ill to see any body. My rigid started at this. Could it be that man cutting off his acquaintance? I contented myself with sending up a second card with my address, in order that if he wanted to see me he might be able to do so, and went my way. From my friend in the law office I heard that John Barrett had put in all his property and complied with all the legal forms, after having taken possession of the property, amounting in all to about three hundred thousand dollars, he had left the city, in what direction nobody knew. He never said to call on me, and I did not meet him.

Twelve years now pass over, and I come to the seventh incident of my story, which more nearly concerns my story than all the rest put together. You know that whatever share of this world's goods I now possess I have won within the last five years. In other words, five years ago I was poor, and of course in no position to fall in love or marry, and yet absurd as it is for a man of thirty-three to talk of being romantically in love, I was in love for the first time in my life, and the object of my passion was Katie Ershaw, of whom I will say nothing except that she was as good as a pretty Kate. Kate was not a French extraction, born in New Orleans, and was slightly mixed with a foreign blood, and he thought he would suit. He was tall, dark, broad, and by exposure to a tropical sun, wore a heavy mustache and dressed expensively, and was about forty years of age. He had been but a few months in Philadelphia when I met him, but certainly in his conversation, which was slightly mixed with a foreign idiom and accent, showed more knowledge of the city than that time warranted. He was rich. (Ershaw senior was not a man to be deceived on such a point) and Katie told me she was coming from him that De Vilbe had large investments in New York, almost enough to constitute a millionaire. What chance could I have against such a rival? Of course my intentions were repudiated by Kate and mine, and as earnestly encouraged by Katie, until felt that we stood on the brink of an open rupture, and perhaps a runaway affair, providing Katie would consent to so summary a mode of settling the matter.

This affair stood, when one day, as I was walking slowly down Walnut street, running on the situation, a lady came from a building used for lawyers' offices, and approached me. She was on the shady side of thirty-five, rather handsome, but with a complexion that indicated that much of her life had been spent in Southern lands. As she came near she gazed inquiringly into my face, stared slightly, colored, and stood still. There was something in her look which memory recalled, but only in a vague way.

"Where?" she said.

"My name, madame."

"You do not remember me?"

"I am sorry to say I do not."

"I am Lydia Pennyacker?"

mind after a lapse of twelve years, and I said:

"But your husband produced evidence that you died at Valparaiso!"

"Not my husband, but an impostor. I never was in Valparaiso in my life!"

I was struck dumb.

"Do you mean to say that John Barrett was not your husband?"

"I never saw John Barrett from the day before I left my father's house. My husband was Alexander Graham. We were married in this city the day I left home, and I went with him to Rio de Janeiro, and from there into the land country, where he became engineer on a large sugar estate, and where we lived until his death, one year ago."

Good Heavens! what a revelation! I could not speak. I could do nothing but look at the little woman's arm under my arm, and watch her off to my office, that I might gather breath and know all about it.

"I have come back to Philadelphia," she said, "after fifteen years a stranger, having during that time secretly met an American, left alone a native of this city and rarely caught sight of a newspaper. I came back to see the spot I was born in, and to forgive those who drove me out into the world, and I find that an impostor has personated me and received my rights! What! Heaven! I shall not suffer for the want of it! I am independent."

"But Barrett—where is Barrett?"

"My attorneys can find no trace of him. He turned all the estates and securities into money, and went abroad."

"And the woman he called his wife—

"Some one he married in this city, immediately after my departure, and who assumed my name. This far the detectives have reached, but who she was they cannot discover. We have the evidence of a gentleman who saw her at Valparaiso, and he describes her as a blonde (I am the opposite) with a cold, blue eye, and a hard expressive face."

"It all flashed upon me in a moment. This was the woman who forged the check, and John Barrett's wife. As rapidly as I could I went through the story to Mrs. Graham."

"Why," she said, "you are valuable evidence in working up our case. But what little use now? The regime, as well as the property is gone."

True enough, the story was all out, but too late. John Barrett had been the forger of that check, the woman only the pretence. The woman I saw upon the road that night was she—the one the next evening only a changing wearing the same clothes. John Barrett had known of Ephraim Pennyacker's habit of boarding, and doubtless knew that somewhere he had withdrawn from the bank, and after the old man's death he had been unable to find it. He knew of Lydia's flight out of the country, and where she was, and so determined on the plot to so successfully worked. But there was another point which at this moment had never crossed my mind. Might he not have murdered the old man, and more quickly to consummate his crime; the thought made me shiver; the fact was possible, my probable. He had called almost every crime but murder; why not murder too?

"All this Lydia and I canvassed, but alas! too late."

And now I come to the mention of a strange physiological fact—something for which I cannot account. That evening, when I went to bed, I found that I could not even find room in my head for Katie Ershaw, I spent at her house. The parlor was brightly lighted; the bell rang there was a step in the entry that made me start, the door opened and John Barrett stepped into the room! I started to my feet, horror-stricken, and stood before him, as plainly as on the day I had last met, nothing changed but by the years that had been added, and the broadening of the skin.

John Barrett, and yet Waring de Ville! Before this moment I saw no trace of the first John Barrett; now I could see nothing of the last. I stood there transfixed, ever after all those years seated, wondering whether I retained my senses, or whether they had left me under the influence of too day. For an hour I remained gazing at the man and wondering; and then, commencing myself for the presence of mind that had withstood me from denouncing him on the spot, I withdrew.

That night I could not sleep until I had seen Lydia, and after the next morning we met at her lawyer's. It did not take long to find two able detectives to make up a party of five, including Mrs. Ershaw, and my attorney, and my friend Mr. Waring de Ville, at his hotel. As I went, I took the water into his room. I wondered, now that I saw him by day-light, how I ever could have thought he was anybody but John Barrett, though Lydia declared to me afterward that her heart felt as she entered his room, for the ever not the first point of resemblance.

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