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RECOLLECTIONS OF A POLICE OFFICER.

THE WIDOW.

In the winter of 1833 I was hurriedly, but as I at the time could not help thinking, precipitately despatched to Guernsey, to the largest of the islands which dot the British Channel, in quest of a gentleman of, till then, high character on the Stock Exchange, who, it was alleged, had absconded with a very large sum of money, intrusted to him for investment by a Baronet of considerable influence in official quarters. From certain circumstances, it was surmised that Guernsey would be his first hiding place, and I was obliged to post all the way to Weymouth in order to save the mail packet, which left that place on the Saturday evening, or night rather, with the Channel Island mails. Mr. — had gone, it was conjectured, by way of Southampton. My search, promptly and zealously as I was aided by the Guernsey authorities; proving vain, I determined on going on to Jersey, when a letter arrived by post informing me that the person of whom I was in pursuit had either not intended to defraud his client, or that his heir had sailed him at the threshold of crime. A few hours after I had left London he had reappeared, it seems, in his counting-house, after having a few minutes previously effected the investment of the money in accordance with his client's instructions, and was now, through his attorney, threatening the accuser and all his aids and abettors with the agreeable process that in England usually follow sharply at the heels of such rash and hasty proceedings.

My mission over, I proposed to retrace my steps immediately; but unfortunately found myself detained in the island for nearly a week by the hurricane-weather which suddenly set in, rendering it impossible for the mail or other steam packets to cross the Channel during its continuance. Time limped slowly and heavily away; and frequently, in my impatience to be gone, I walked down to the back pier, and strained my eyes in the direction in which the steamer from Jersey should appear. Almost every time I did so I encountered two persons, who, I could see, were even more impatient to be gone than myself, and probably, I thought, with much more reason. They were a widow lady, not certainly more than thirty years of age, and her son, a fine curly haired boy, about eight or nine years old, whose natural light-heartedness appeared to be checked, subdued by the deep grief and sadness which trembled in his mother's fine expressive eyes, and shrouded her pale but handsome face. He had her by the hand; often clasping it with both his tiny ones, and looking up to her as she turned despondingly away from the vacant roadstead and raging waters, with a half-frightened, half-wondering expression, of anxious love, which would frequently cause his mother to bend down, and hurriedly strive to kiss away the sorrowful alarm depicted in the child's face. These two beings strangely interested me chiefly, perhaps, because, in my compelled idleness, I had little else except the obstinate and angry weather to engage my attention or occupy my thoughts. There was an unmistakable air of "better days" about the widow—a grace of manner which her somewhat faded and unseasonable raiment rendered but the more striking and apparent. Her countenance, one perceived at the first glance, was of remarkable comeliness; and upon one occasion that I had an opportunity of observing it, I was satisfied that, under happier influences than now appeared to overshadow her, those pale, interesting features would light up into beauty as brilliant as it was refined and intellectual.

This introduces another walking mystery, which for want of something better to do, I was conjuring out of my fellow watchers on the pier. He was a stoutish, strongly-set man of forty years of age, perhaps scarcely so much, shrewdly dressed in new glossy clothes; French varnished boots, thin soled enough, winter as it was, for a drawing-room; hat of the latest *gent* fashion; a variegated satin cravat, fastened by two enormous-headed gold pins, connected with a chain, and a heavy gold chain, from his watch waistcoat-pocket over his neck. The complexion of his face was a cadaverous white, liberally sprinkled and relieved with gin and brandy blossoms, whilst the coarseness of his not over-clean hands was with singular taste set off and displayed by some half-dozen glittering rings. I felt a growing conviction, especially on noticing a sudden change in the usual cunning, impudent, leering expression of his eyes, as he caught me looking at him with some earnestness, that I had somewhere had the honor of a previous introduction to him. That he had not been, lately at all events, used to such resplendent habiliments as he now sported, was abundantly evident from his numerous smirking self-surveys as he strutted jauntily along, and frequent stoppings before shops that having mirrors in their windows, afforded a more complete view of his charming person. This creature I was convinced was in some way or other connected, or at any rate acquainted

with the young and graceful widow. He was constantly digging her steps and I noticed with surprise and some little irritation, that his vulgar bow was faintly returned by the lady as they passed each other and that her recognition of him, slight and distant as it was, not unfrequently accompanied by a blush, whether arising from a pleasurable emotion or the reverse I could not for some time determine. There is a mystery about blushing, I was, and am quite aware, not easily penetrable, more especially about those of widows, I was soon enlightened upon that point. One day, when she happened to be standing alone upon the pier—her little boy was gazing through a telescope I had borrowed of the landlord of the hotel where I lodged—he approached, and before she was well aware of his intention, took her hand, uttering at the same time, it seemed, words of compliment. It was then I observed her features literally flash with a vividness of expression which revealed a beauty I had not before imagined she possessed. The fellow absolutely recoiled before the concentrated scorn which flushed her pale features, and the indignant gesture with which she withdrew her hand from the contamination of his touch. As she turned confusedly and hastily away, his eyes encountered mine, and he muttered some unintelligible sentences during which the widow and her son left the spot.

"The lady," said I, as soon as she was out of hearing, "seems in a cold bitter humor this morning; not unlike the weather."

"Yes, Mr. Wat—I beg pardon, Mr. Wat's your name, I would say?"

"Waters, as I perceive you know quite well. My recollection of you is not so distinct. I have no remembrance of the fashionable clothes and brilliant jewelry, none whatever; but the remarkable countenance I have seen."

"I dare say you have, Waters," he replied, re-assuming his insolent, swaggering air. "I practice at the old Bailey; and I have several times seen you there, not as now, in the masquerade of a gentleman, but with a number on your collar."

"I was silly enough to feel annoyed for a moment at the fellow's stupid sarcasm, and turned angrily away."

"There, don't fly in a passion," continued he, with an exulting chuckle. "I have no wish to be ill friends with so smart a hand as you are. What do you say to a glass or two of wine, if only to stop this confounded wind out of our stomachs? It's cheap enough here."

"I hesitated a few seconds and then said, 'I have no great objection; but first, whom have I the honor of addressing?'"

"Mr. Gates, William Gates, Esquire, attorney-at-law."

"Gates! Not the Gates, I hope, in the late Bryant affair?"

"Well—yes; but allow me to say, Waters, that the observations of the judge on that matter, and the consequent proceedings, were quite unjustifiable; and I was strongly advised to petition the House on the subject; but I forbore perhaps unwisely."

"From consideration chiefly, I dare say, for the age and infirmities of his lordship, and his numerous family?"

"Come, come," rejoined Gates, with a laugh, "don't poke fun in that way. The truth is, I get on quite as well without as with the certificate. I transact business now for Mr. Everard Preston; you understand?"

"Perfectly. I now remember where I have seen you. But how is it your dress has become so suddenly changed? A few weeks ago, it was nothing like so magnificent!"

"True, quite right. I saw you observed that. First rate, isn't it? Every article genuine. Bond and Regent Street, I assure you, he added, scanning himself complacently over. I nodded approval, and he went on—"You see I have had a windfall; a piece of remarkable luck; and so I thought I would escape out of the dingy, smoky village, and air myself for a few days in the Channel."

"A delightful time of the year for such a purpose truly. Rather say you came to improve your acquaintance with the lady yonder, who, I dare say, will not prove ultimately inflexible?"

"Perhaps you are right—a little at least you may be, about the edges. But here we are; what do you take—port?"

"That as soon as anything else."

"Mr. Gates was, as he said, constitutionally thirsty, and although it was still early in the day, drank with great relish and industry. As he grew flushed and rosy, and I therefore imagined communicative, I said 'Well now, tell me who and what is that lady?'"

"The reply was a significant compound gesture, comprising a wink of his left eye and the tap of a fore-finger upon the right side of his nose. I waited, but the pantomimic action remained uninterpreted by words."

"Not rich, apparently?"

"Poor as Job."

"An imprudent marriage, probably?"

"Guess again, and I'll take odds you're guess wrong; but suppose, as variety is charming, we change the subject. Whi

is your opinion now of the prospects of the ministry?"

"I saw that it was useless attempting to extract any information from so cunning a rascal; and hastily excusing myself, I rove abruptly, took my leave, more puzzled to account for the evident connection, in some way or other, of so fair and elegant and woman with a low attorney, struck off the rolls for fraudulent misconduct, and now acting in the name of a person scarcely less disreputable than himself. On emerging from the tavern, I found that the wind had not only sensibly abated, but had become more favorable to the packet's leaving Jersey, and that early the next morning we might reasonably hope to embark for Weymouth. It turned out as we anticipated. The same boat which took me off the roads conveyed also the widow—Mrs. Grey, I saw by the cards on her modest luggage—and her son. Gates followed a few minutes afterwards, and we were soon on our stormy voyage homewards."

The passage was a very rough, unpleasant one, and I saw little of the passengers in whom, in spite of myself, as it were, I continued to feel so strong an interest, till the steamer was moored alongside the Weymouth quay, and we stood together for a brief space awaiting the scrutiny and questionings of the officers of the customs. I bowed adieu as I stepped from the paddle-box to the shore, and thought, with a feeling of regret, that in all probability I should never see either of them again. I was mistaken, for on arriving early the next morning to take possession of the outside place booked for me by the coach to London through Southampton, I found Mrs. Grey and her son already seated on the roof. Gates came hurriedly a few minutes afterwards, and concealed himself snugly inside. The day was bitterly cold, and the widow and her somewhat delicate looking boy were but poorly clad for such inclement weather. The coachman and myself, however, contrived to force some rough, stout cloaks upon their acceptance, which sufficed pretty well during the day; but as night came on rainy and tempestuous, as well as dark and bleak, I felt that they must be in some way or other got inside, where Gates was the only passenger. Yet so distant, so frigidly courteous was Mrs. Grey, that I was at a loss how to manage it. Gates, I saw, was enjoying himself hugely to his own satisfaction. At every stage he swallowed a large glass of brandy and water, and I observed that he cast more and more sardoniously triumphant glances towards Mrs. Grey. Once her eye, though studiously I thought averted from him, caught his, and a deep blush, in which fear, timidity, and aversion seemed strangely mingled swept over her face. What could it mean? It was however, useless to worry myself further with fruitless conjectures, and I descended from the roof to hold a private parley with the coachman. A reasonable bargain was soon struck; he went to Mrs. Grey and proposed to her, as there was plenty of room to spare, that she and her son should ride inside.

"It will make no difference in the fare," he added, "and it's bitter cold out here for a lady."

"Thank you," replied the widow, after a few moments' hesitation; "we shall do very well here."

I guessed the cause of her refusal, and hastened to add, "You had better, I think, accept the coachman's proposal; the night weather will be dreadful, and even I, a man, must take refuge inside." She looked at me with a sort of grateful curiosity, and then accepted, with many thanks, the coachman's offer.

When we alighted at the Regent Circus, London, I looked anxiously but vainly round for some one in attendance to receive the widow and her son. She did not seem to expect any one, but stood gazing vacantly yet sadly, at the noisy, glaring, hurrying scene around, her child's hand clasped in her's with an unconscious, lightning grasp, whilst her luggage was removed from the roof of the coach. Gates stood near, as if in expectation that his services must now, however unwillingly, be accepted by Mrs. Grey. I approached her, and said somewhat hurriedly, "If, as I apprehend, madam, you are a stranger in London, and consequently in need of temporary lodgings, you will, I think, do well to apply to the person whose address I have written on this card. It is close by. He knows me, and on your mentioning my name, will treat you with every consideration. I am a police officer; here is my address; and any assistance in my power shall, in any case, and I glanced at Gates, "be freely rendered to you. I then hastened off, and my wife an hour afterwards was even more anxious and interested for the mysterious widow and her son than myself.

About six weeks had glided away, and the remembrance of my fellow-passengers from Guernsey was rapidly fading into indistinctness, when a visit from Roberts, to whose lodging I had recommended Mrs. Grey, brought them once more painfully before me. That the widow was poor I was not surprised to hear; but that a person so utterly destitute of resources and friends, as she appeared from

Robert's account to be, should have sought the huge wilderness of London, seemed marvellous. Her few trinkets, and nearly all her scanty wardrobe, Roberts more than suspected, were at the pawnbroker's. The rent of the lodgings had not been paid for the last month, and he believed that for some time past they had not had a sufficiency of food, and were now in a state of literal starvation! Still she was cold and distant as ever, complained not, though daily becoming paler, thinner, weaker.

"Does Gates the attorney visit her?" I asked.

"No—he would not see [him] but letters from him are almost daily received."

Roberts, who was a widower, wished my wife to see her; he was seriously apprehensive of some tragical result; and this, apart from considerations of humanity, could not be permitted for his own sake to occur in his house. I acquiesced; and Emily hurriedly equipped herself, and set off with Roberts to Sherrard Street, Hay-market.

On arriving at home, Roberts, to his own and my wife's astonishment, found Gates there in a state of exuberant satisfaction. He was waiting to pay any claim Roberts had upon Mrs. Grey, to whom, the ex-attorney exultingly announced, he was to be married on the following Thursday. Roberts scarcely believing his ears, hastened up to the first floor, to ascertain if Mrs. Grey had really given authority to Gates to act for her. He tapped at the door, and a faint voice bidding him enter, he saw at once what had happened.

Mrs. Grey, pale as marble, her eyes flashing with almost insane excitement, was standing by a table, upon which a large tray had been placed covered with soups, jellies, and other delicacies, evidently just brought in from a tavern, eagerly watching her son partake of the first food he had tasted for two whole days! Roberts saw clearly how it was, and stammering a foolish excuse for having tapped at the wrong door, hastened away. She had at last determined to sacrifice herself to save her child's life! Emily, as she related what she had seen and heard, wept with passionate grief, and I was scarcely less excited: the union of Mrs. Grey with such a man seemed like the profanation of a pure and holy shrine. Then Gates was, spite of his windfall, as he called it, essentially a needy man! Besides—and this was the impenetrable mystery of the affair—what inducement, what motive could induce a mercenary wretch like Gates to unite himself in marriage with poverty—with destitution? The notion of his being influenced by sentiment of any kind was, I felt, absurd. The more I reflected on the matter, the more convinced I became that there was some villainous scheme in process of accomplishment by Gates, and I determined to make at least one resolute effort to arrive at a solution of the perplexing riddle. The next day, having a few hours to spare, the thought struck me that I would call on Mrs. Grey myself. I accordingly proceeded towards her residence, and in Coventry street happened to meet Jackson, a brother officer, who, I was aware, from a few inquiries I had previously made, knew something of Gates' past history and present position. After circumstantially relating the whole matter, I asked him if he could possibly guess what the fellow's object could be in contracting such a marriage?

"Object!" replied Jackson; "why money, of course; what else? He has by some means become aware that the lady is entitled to property, and he is scheming to get possession of it as her husband."

"My own conviction! Yet the difficulty of getting at any proof seems insurmountable."

"Just so. And by the way, Gates is certainly in high feather just now, however acquired. Not only himself, but Rivers, his head clerk as he calls himself, has cast his old greasy skin, and appears quite spruce, and shining. And—now I remember—what did you say was the lady's name?"

"Grey!"

"Grey! Ah, then I suppose it can have nothing to do with it! It was a person of the name of Welton or Skelton that called on us a month or two ago about Gates."

"What was the nature of the communication?"

"I can hardly tell you; the charge was so loosely made, and hurriedly withdrawn. Skelton—yes, it was Skelton—he resides in pretty good style at Knightsbridge—called, and said that Gates had stolen a cheque or draft for five hundred pounds, and other articles sent through him to some house in this city, of which I think he said the principal was dead. He was advised to apply through a solicitor to a magistrate, and went away, we supposed for that purpose, but about three hours afterwards he returned, and in a hurried and hurried sort of way, said he had been mistaken, and that he withdrew every charge he had made against Mr. Gates."

"Very odd."

"Yes; but I don't see how it can be in any way connected with this Mrs. Grey's affairs. Still, do you think it would be of any use to sound Rivers? I know the fellow well, and where I should be pretty sure to find him this evening."

It was arranged he should do so, and I proceeded on to Sherrard Street. Mrs. Grey was alone in the front apartment on the ground floor, and received me with much politeness. She had, I saw, been weeping; her eyes were swollen and blood-shot; and she was deadly pale; but I looked in vain for any indication of that utter desolation which a woman like her, condemned to such a sacrifice, might naturally be disposed to feel. I felt greatly embarrassed as to how to begin; but at length I plunged boldly into the matter; assured her she was cruelly deceived by Gates, who was in no condition to provide for her and her son in even tolerable comfort; and I was convinced he had no other than a mercenary and detestable motive in seeking marriage with her. Mrs. Grey heard me in so totally unmoved a manner, and the feeling that I was really meddling with things that did not at all concern me grew upon me so rapidly, as I spoke to that unresponsive countenance, that by the time I had finished my eloquent harangue, I was in a perfect fever of embarrassment and confusion, and very heartily wished myself out of the place. To my further bewilderment, Mrs. Grey, when I had quite concluded, informed me—in consideration, she said, of the courtesies I had shown her, when we were fellow-travelers—that she was perfectly aware Mr. Gates' motive in marrying her was purely a mercenary one; and her own in consenting to the union, except as regarded her son, was scarcely better. She added—riddle upon riddle!

—that she knew also that Mr. Gates was very poor—involvent, she understood.

I rose mechanically to my feet, with a confused notion swimming in my head that both of us at all events could not be in our right senses. This feeling must have been visible upon my face, for Mrs. Grey added with a half-smile, "You cannot reconcile these apparent contradictions; be patient; you will perfectly comprehend them before long. But as I wish not to stand too low in your estimation, I must tell you that Mr. Gates is to subscribe a written agreement that we separate the instant the ceremony has been performed. But for that understanding, I would have suffered any extremity, death itself, rather than have consented to marry him!"

Still confused, stunned as it were, by what I had heard, my hand was on the handle of the door to let myself out, when a thought arose in my mind. "Is it possible, Mrs. Grey?" I said, "that you can have been deceived into a belief that such a promise, however formally laid down, is of the slightest legal value?—that the law recognizes, or would enforce, an instrument to render nugatory the solemn obligation you will, after signing it, make to love, honor, obey and cherish your husband?" I had found the right chord at last. Mrs. Grey, as I spoke, became deadly pale; and had she not caught at one of the heavy chairs, she would have been unable to support herself.

"Do I understand you to say," she faintly and brokenly gasped, "that such an agreement as I have indicated, duly sealed and witnessed, could not be summarily enforced by a magistrate?"

"Certainly it could not, my dear madam, and well Gates knows it to be so; and I am greatly mistaken in the man, if, once the irrevocable deed be over, he would not be the first to deride your credulity."

"If that be so," exclaimed the unfortunate lady with passionate despair, "I am indeed ruined—lost! Oh, my darling boy, would that you and I were sleeping in your father's quiet grave!"

"Say not so," I exclaimed with emotion, for I was afflicted by her distress. "Honor me with your confidence, and all may yet be well."

After much entreaty, she despairingly complied. The substance of her story, which was broken by frequent outbursts of grief and lamentations, was as follows: She was the only child of a London merchant, Mr. Walton, we will call him, who had lived beyond his means, and failed ruinously to an immense amount. His spirits and health were broken by this event, which he survived only a few months. It happened that about the time of the bankruptcy she had become acquainted with Mr. John Grey, the only son of an eminent East India Merchant, but a man of penurious disposition and habits.

"Mr. Ezekiel Grey!"

The same. They became attached to each other, deeply so; and knowing that to solicit the elder Grey's consent to their union would be tantamount to a sentence of immediate separation and estrangement, they unwisely, thoughtlessly, married about ten months after Mr. Walton's death, without the elder Grey's knowledge. Gates, an attorney, then in apparently fine circumstances, with whom young Mr. Grey had become acquainted, and Anne Crawford, Maria Walton's servant,

were the witnesses of the ceremony, which after due publication of banns, was celebrated in St. Giles' Church. The young couple, after the marriage, lived in the strictest poverty, the wife meagrely supported by the pocket money allowance of Mr. Ezekiel Grey to his son. Thus painfully elapsed nine years of life, when, about twelve months previous to the present time, Mr. Grey determined to send his son to Bombay, in order to the arrangement of some complicated claims on a house of agency there. It was decided that, during her husband's absence, Mrs. John Grey should reside in Guernsey, partly with a view to economy, and partly for the change of air, which it was said their son required—Mr. Gates to be the medium through which money and letters were to reach the wife. Mr. Ezekiel Grey died somewhat suddenly about four months after his son's departure from England, and Mrs. Grey had been in momentary expectation of the arrival of her husband, when Gates came to Guernsey, and announced his death at Bombay; just as he was preparing for the voyage to England! The manner of Gates was strange and insolent; and he plainly intimated that without his assistance both herself and child would be beggars; and that assistance he audaciously declared he would only afford at the price of Marriage! Mrs. Grey, overwhelmed with grief for the loss of a husband by whom she had been so constantly, as tenderly beloved, and dizzy with ill-defined apprehension, started at once for London. A copy of the will of Mr. Ezekiel Grey had been procured, by which in effect he devised all his estate, real and personal, to his son; but in the event of Mr. John Grey dying unmarried, or without lawful issue, it went to his wife's nephew Mr. Skelton—

"Skelton of Knightsbridge!"

Yes; in case of Mr. John Grey marrying, Skelton was to be paid an immediate legacy of five thousand pounds. So far, then, as fortune went, the widow and her son seemed amply provided for. So Mrs. Grey thought till she had another interview with Gates, who unobliquely declared that unless she agreed to marry him he would not prove, though he had abundant means of doing so, that the person she had married at St. Giles' Church, was the son of Ezekiel Grey, the eminent merchant!

"The name," said the scoundrel, "will not help you; there are plenty of John Greys on that register; and as for Anne Crawford, she has been long since dead. Mrs. Grey next called on Mr. Skelton, and was turned out of the house as an impostor; and she having parted with every thing upon which she could raise money, and Gates reiterating his offer, or demand rather, accompanied by the proposal of an immediate separation, she had consented."

"Courage, madam!" I exclaimed, at the end of her narrative of which the above is the substance—and I spoke in a tone of joyous confidence which, more than my words, reassured her: "I already see glimpses of daylight through this maze of villany. Gates has played a desperate game, certainly, but one which she shall, you may rely on it, easily baffle." A knock at the door interrupted me. I peered through the blind and saw that it was Gates. "Silence—secrecy!" I emphatically urged in a low voice, and with my finger on my lip, and left the room before the street door could be answered; and by the merry Roberts' contrivance, I was in a few minutes afterwards in the street, all the time unobserved by the intruder.

The next day early Jackson called on me. He had seen Rivers, but he seemed to know nothing, except, indeed, that it was quite true Gates had received a five hundred pound draft from a house in India, which he (Rivers) had got notes for at the Bank of England. There were also in the same parcel a gold watch, he knew, and some jewelry, but from whom it all came, he (Rivers) was ignorant. Nothing but that had Jackson been able to discover.

"Call you that nothing?" said I, starting up, and hastily swallowing my last cup of coffee. "It is enough, at all events, to transport William Gates, Esq."

I had to wait that morning on special business on the commissioner; and after the business upon which I had been summoned had been despatched, I related the case of Grey vs. Gates as clearly and succinctly as I could. He listened with great attention, and in about a quarter of an hour I left him with as clear and unmistakable a path before me as it was possible to desire. I was passing down the stairs when I was re-summoned.

"You quite understand, Waters, that Skelton is not for a moment to be lost sight of till his deposition has been taken!"

"Certainly, sir."

"That will do then."

Arrived at home, I despatched my wife in a cab for Mrs. Grey. She soon arrived, and as much as was necessary of our plan confided to her. Mrs. Gates had pressed her earnestly that the ceremony should take place on the following morning. By my directions she now wrote, although her trembling fingers made an almost unintelligible scrawl of it, that as it