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The Trail of a Valentine

By HOWARD FIELDING

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IT was a surprise to Mr. Bailey that the office of a detective agency should present an aspect so wholesome and so ordinary. He had pictured it a shabby den of tricksters whose trade was deservedly ill paid, and he had come upon an impulse wholly at variance with the usual currents of his life, dreading to be seen on such an errand and slinking in at the street door in the manner of a man who makes his first distressful visit to a pawn shop.

Mr. Bailey was one of those men in whose knowledge of life there are blank spaces. In his case these gaps were due to obstinacy. When he had a prejudice against a person, a place or an occupation he seemed deliberately to cultivate ignorance and to shun information, as if upon a scruple of conscience. Because of this peculiarity his notion of a detective's share in the world's activities had become constantly more absurd from the day when he first attempted to dissuade a certain young man from choosing that profession. To this young man he had now come as a client, surely at the spur of no small need.

Upon the receipt of Mr. Bailey's card Harley Bertrand dropped a half read letter and made all haste to usher in his visitor. The obvious sincerity of the welcome went far to relieve Mr. Bailey of embarrassment, and the businesslike appearance of the inner office helped still further to put him at his ease.

"Harley," said he, somewhat in the manner of the old days when he was legal guardian to Bertrand and distantly affectionate—"Harley, I'm glad to see you so well situated. You must be getting on."

"Pretty well, I thank you, Uncle John," responded Bertrand. "And how is it with you? At least you've grown no older in the year since I've seen you."

"It needn't have been so long," said Bailey. "I'm afraid you took our differences too much to heart and thought that I—er— Well, you might have known that I didn't want you to stop coming to the house."

"It's very kind of you to say so."

"I'm frank and outspoken," continued Bailey defensively, "and I don't like your occupation. That's a fact that can't be altered, but we needn't quarrel about it. We'll be debarred from that in future anyway, because I've come to consult you professionally, which may seem to put me out of the argument."

"Unless I fail to help you," said Bertrand.

"Well, I'm bound to admit that if you fail I can't blame you," responded Bailey. "I'm prepared to hear you say at

"I'M GLAD TO SEE YOU SO WELL SITUATED."

once that the thing is impossible. It's a matter of some delicacy and one that I couldn't discuss with a stranger."

Bertrand looked dubiously across the desk at the white haired, ruddy old man, who was beginning with nervous fingers to unloose the cord around a square, thin packet. When the wrapping was removed there appeared a frame of white cardboard with a design in colors and gilt inclosing a photograph which upon inspection proved to be a reproduction of a detail from a painting of Chartran's, a Brittany peasant girl holding a bridal veil in her hands.

"This thing seems to be a valentine," said the detective, "if one may judge by the design upon the frame."

"That's what it is," responded Bailey, "and a fine one, as you'll admit. My daughter got it by mail yesterday, and I want you to find out who sent it."

Bertrand's mouth and eyes expressed a painful amazement.

"This is indeed a—a somewhat delicate matter, as you intimated," he said. "May I ask whether Charlotte has expressed a wish that I should do this? Doesn't she know who sent it?"

"She says she doesn't."

"I shall ask for no further evidence on that point," responded Bertrand. "But there was another question"—

"No. She hasn't expressed a wish that you should investigate this matter. She doesn't know that it is being investigated. But I am doing only my plain duty in trying to find out whether this

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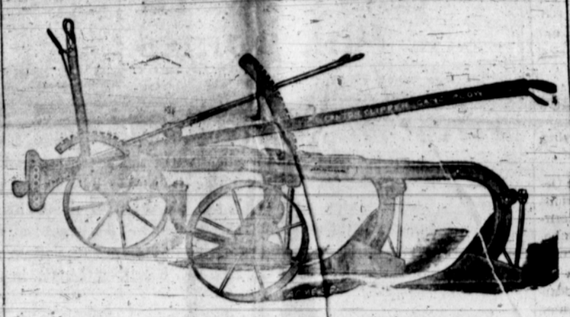

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is the beginning of further attentions on the part of young Steve Temple. I knew his father for a rascal; I know the son for another. I sent him about his business once, and I am prepared to do it again."

"Pardon me for saying that I think you took too serious a view of this matter a year ago," said Bertrand, with hesitation. "I did not believe at that time that Charlotte felt any deeper sentiment than a certain natural recognition of the fact that Temple is a very handsome fellow. He has the gift of fascination."

"He has the gift of all the vices that disgrace humanity," said Bailey, with decision. "He inherited them. But this is not prejudice on my part. I looked him up. I know him to the backbone."

"What reason have you for supposing that Temple sent this?"

"It looks foreign to me, and he's been abroad. He has just got back. No other young man of Charlotte's acquaintance has been across the water. I think Temple bought this on the other side and brought it over with him."

Bertrand examined the frame.

"The anatomy of these Cupids suggests Germany surely," said he.

"Temple's been there," said Bailey.

There was a plain, thin sheet of paper which was folded like a cover protecting the frame and the photograph. Bertrand held it up to the light and pointed out to Bailey two letters, "E. G.," unmistakably German.

"That's evidence," declared Bailey; "but, of course, it doesn't really prove anything. I can't open my mouth without having something more definite. But how to get it? This valentine was mailed in this city. I saw the post mark on the envelope. But there's no way of finding out who mailed it. The address was typewritten."

Bertrand spent but a minute in meditation, rubbing his yellow hair into a strange tangle meanwhile. Then he slowly walked to the steam radiator in the corner and laid the valentine upon it.

"There is another point," said he. "You may remember that about a year ago your cousin, Mrs. Ewing, was visiting you just after returning from abroad. She had a photographic reproduction of the picture of which we have here a detail. Charlotte cared very little for the picture as a whole but she admired this particular figure."

"I remember," said Bailey. "She tried to find a large photograph of the painting in this city, but couldn't. It is the likeliest thing in the world that she told Temple and that he found this somewhere in Europe."

"My excellent alleged uncle," said Bertrand, smiling, "there is no difficulty at all in the matter. Barring the luck which may defeat the invincible, nullify certainties and—to all intents and purposes, for you and me—prevent the sun from rising tomorrow I will show you the way to obtain positive proof as to who sent this valentine, and I'll do it without rising from my chair.

"Now, then, in the first place, we'll consult the valentine itself. How was it made?"

"Bless your soul!" cried Bailey, "I don't know anything about the technical details of getting up such a thing."

"You can see, however, that it never was made to hold this photograph. There's nothing to hold it. It's pasted on, and very crudely. Didn't that strike your eye? See how neatly all the rest of it is got up. Contrast that with the pasting. What do you make of it?"

"Well, I don't know; really, I don't know," repeated Bailey, alternately peering at the back of the valentine and at the face of the detective.

"There was another picture here originally," said Bertrand. "It was attached in a different way from this one. The frame was made in two parts, back and front. The picture was laid between them, and they were glued together. If you look closely you can see that that picture was cut out with the sharp point of a penknife probably, and then this one was affixed to the back so that it shows all right from the other side. It was done very recently, long after the original valentine was made."

"Eh?" said Bailey. "How do you know that?"

"The paste is not thoroughly dry. The heat of the radiator has wrinkled the edges of the photograph even with only a few minutes' trial. But the heat has had no effect upon the older portion.

"If the man had bought the picture and the frame aboard he would have done this work long ago. Indeed, with so much time at his disposal he probably would have had some more skillful workman do it for him. I infer that the idea of sending this picture as a valentine came to him suddenly at the last moment and that he hunted through the stores for a frame that would fit it. That means that the frames were imported by some firm in this country, most probably in this city. There are only a very few in that line of business. It will take us only a little while to talk to them by telephone."

This task Bertrand delegated to an assistant, who within twenty minutes gave him the name of the firm importing the valentines of which the frame in question was a part and a list of nine stores where they were sold at retail.

"But the clerk won't remember," objected Bailey. "In the rush of this valentine business how will a salesman be able to tell who bought one of these things? Probably a dozen or more were sold."

"Our particular purchaser," said Bertrand, "was looking not merely for a pretty valentine, but for one into which this photograph could be fitted. Undoubtedly he carried the photograph with him and told the salesman what he was hunting for. That will fix the purchaser in the salesman's memory. At any rate, we'll try."

He called up four of the stores without result, but from the fifth he obtained a favorable reply.

"They have sent for the salesgirl," said Bertrand. "Suppose you speak with her." And Bailey, who was already leaning across the desk, snatched the telephone eagerly.

"Hello!" he cried after a brief interval of impatience. "Hello! Are you the young lady who sold a valentine to a man who wanted to paste a photograph into it? * * * What did he look like? * * * Very handsome? Yes. Go on. * * * Light hair and blue eyes. * * * You say he didn't have any mustache or beard. What? Spell

"HARLEY! GOOD HEAVENS!"

it. * * * Swell, eh? How big was he? * * * Very tall. Over six feet. Anything more that you remember?"

There was a pause, and then Bailey turned to the detective with an acid grin.

"What eyes these silly girls have! She says he wore a dark green necktie." Then to the telephone, "Thank you—thank you very much." And again to Bertrand, after hanging up the receiver: "Well, that settles it, and you have done a great piece of work for me. It's Temple beyond a doubt. He must have shaved off his mustache. Otherwise it's the man to the life. I can foresee another painful interview with that young scamp."

"It occurs to me," said Bertrand thoughtfully, "that perhaps— But I have no right to advise in such a matter."

"Yes, you have," responded Bailey. "Go right ahead. I've got some new ideas about the value of your advice. Let's have it, my dear boy."

"I am in a fair way of business here," said Bertrand, looking around the office. "My income seems well assured, and besides I have made fortunate investments. My little property which you managed so well when I was a boy has grown more rapidly than you would readily believe."

"I'm glad to hear it, my dear fellow. But what the deuce has this to do with"—

"It is in my mind that if I might see Charlotte and speak to her as my heart would prompt me"—

There was a long silence, the two men looking intently into each other's eyes. Then Bailey suddenly stretched out his hand.

"I thought of this years ago, Harley," said he, "when you were a lad and she a child at my knee. I thought of it many times afterward, but somehow of late our ways have not lain together. But—but I feel differently today. Perhaps I've been a fool."

"You do yourself a great injustice, uncle," responded Bertrand, with a smile. "Your intellectual powers may not perfectly fit you for the detective's profession, but"—

"Don't crow over me, my boy," exclaimed Bailey. "Do you know I think I should have worked this problem out just as you did if I'd really set my mind to it? It looks very simple."

Bertrand shook his head.

"No, uncle, no," said he. "By one detail of this affair I see clearly that you weren't cut out for a detective. Your inferences are swayed by previous opinion, not by the reasonable probabilities." He checked a remonstrance with a wave of his hand. "Let us illustrate. The essence of this case, it seems to me, was that Charlotte had expressed a desire for a certain picture, which was subsequently sent to her anonymously. Now, there are two tall men with light hair and blue eyes, one wearing a mustache the last time he was seen, the other always smooth shaven. The man wanted in this case is described by an eyewitness as having no hair upon his face. Moreover, a dark green necktie is mentioned, and at this very moment one of our tall, light men is wearing such a tie. Again, we know positively that Charlotte mentioned her desire for this picture to one of these men, and we only guess that she may have spoken of it to the other.

"Yet despite all these indications you persist in believing that the man who is not known to have shaved off his mustache or to have worn a dark green tie or ever to have heard that Charlotte admired a certain picture is the one who sent that valentine. Can you wonder, then, that I hold you for a very bad detective?"

"Harley! Good heavens! Do you mean"—

"Certainly, uncle. I sent that valentine to Charlotte myself. We had a talk about it by telephone while you were on your way to this office. She called me up on suspicion, to use the language of my craft. And some words she said to me in thanking me for my little remembrance raised my hope that you need think no more of Stephen Temple."

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Mr Jennings has been an unswerving republican for 40 years. He was born in Iowa in 1845, and came to Oregon in 1875, where he has since resided continuously. In the darkest days of the civil war, when but a mere boy, he responded to his country's call, serving in the 9th Iowa Cav., faithfully and well for two and a half years, till the close of the war. During this service he twice received honorable mention and recommendation for promotion for meritorious service. Returning home from the war he engaged in school teaching and merchandising for nine years. Coming to Lane county in 1875, he engaged in farming chiefly, teaching and keeping books and managing the Grange warehouse as side issues until 1894. At the session of the legislature in 1887 he was elected chief clerk of the house and in 1889 was elected a member of that body and to which he was re-elected in 1901. At the close of this session it was said of him by prominent newspapers of the state that he had killed more jobs than any other member of the house. At a special session of 1898 he was again selected chief clerk of the house and also at the regular sessions of 1899, 1901 and 1903 and at that time was said to be as well posted in all details of legislative work as any man in the state. During his long service in the legislature he has formed an extensive acquaintance and has many warm friends in almost every county in the state. In 1894 Mr Jennings was elected county clerk, and re-elected to the same office in 1896.

At the present time he is engaged chiefly in sheep breeding, having several small bands leased out on shares, and while in but moderate financial circumstances no man in the county stands higher for honesty and integrity and he is peculiarly well fitted to fill the office to which he aspires, in an able and satisfactory manner. Having been identified so many years with the public and leading men of the state, and acquired a very extensive acquaintance with Oregonians, Mr Jennings appears to be a formidable candidate for the office of state treasurer. So far as known, says the Eugene Register there is no other aspirant for the office in this section of Oregon, and it would seem that Mr Jennings will have a good lead should others develop. His platform, while short and to the point, covers everything the voter would require of a state treasurer.

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