

OUR COMIC SECTION

Going Full Speed



LAWLOR, THE CLEVER DETECTIVE

By KATHERINE HOWE

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"YOU see Stella don't just exactly like my business," said John Lawlor to the comfortable matron who sat opposite to him in the tidy little living room of her home.

"Don't like your business?" she exclaimed. "Why, aren't you one of the best detectives on the force?"

"Well, the chief as good as told me that last week, and they raised my pay. But being on the police force doesn't strike Stella as being quite high-toned enough. She asked me if I couldn't get into the bank, or go into brokerage or something."

"Brokerage!" sniffed his sister. "She'd rather you'd make money—or rather swipe somebody else's money—that way than get it honestly the way you're doing."

"No! No!" he broke in emphatically. "Stella is as honest and as straight as a die—but—"

"But she's a snobbish little fool!"

"Mary!" he flashed out. "You know I won't stand hearing a word against Stella! You've got it out of me, and you've known all along she's the only girl in the world for me."

"Yes, John I didn't mean to hurt you. But I haven't any patience with such notions. Just because her grandfather was General Barker, she seems to think she ought to marry a banker or a corporation lawyer at the least. Her father squandered every penny they had, and they've been poorer than Job's turkey all their lives."

"Well, you know what's bred in the bone," began John.

"That's all right," broke in Mrs. Frink, "but any girl who don't care enough for you to take you just as you are, isn't worth thinking about."

"Oh, but she's worth it! She's a bit national about that one thing, perhaps, but she suits me," said John with the usual lover's enthusiasm.

"Oh dear!" thought his sister, as he went out. "I just wish something would happen to bring him to his senses."

Meanwhile Stella Barker, all unconscious of the wish hanging over her, went her way with the thoughtlessness and inconsequential ways of youth in general. She loved John, but not with the understanding and depth of a woman of more experience in the world might have done. She was only eighteen, very romantic, and a silly, shallow mother had not contributed much of real worth to her education.

Only about two weeks after the talk between John and his sister, a letter came to Stella telling her she had inherited about forty thousand dollars through the death of a distant relative. It was not an enormous sum, as fortunes go these days, but enough to draw around the girl a good many new acquaintances, and would-be suitors. There had never been anything more than a kind of tacit understanding between John and Stella, but the young man had never given up his determination to win her.

The change in Stella's fortunes seemed somehow to alter their relations. He could never get any time alone with her now. Her mother meant that she should now see some "real society," and entertaining absorbed the two completely. Even a more sensible young head than Stella's might have been a trifle turned by the new order of things.

A new admirer of Stella's named Cecil Brent began to pay very assiduous attentions. Mrs. Barker regarded him with favor. His manners were so polished, "so English" she was sure he must belong to a very "high family." Brent was certainly something of a dashing figure. Good looking, exceedingly well dressed, of ready wit, and pleasing address, he might have captivated a much more sophisticated young woman than Stella. He took her to the theater and suppers a few times, and spent money freely.

John felt that the time had come for an understanding. If Stella preferred this man to him, he must know it. He came in his usual straightforward way, and asked her if she was engaged to Brent.

Stella looked a bit conscious, then she laughingly asked: "What makes you think so?"

"Well, you're going about with him a great deal, and—"

"And what?" she smiled.

"Most anyone would think so."

Some vanity, and a good deal of devilry, natural to almost all young things, came to the surface.

"Let them think so if they like."

"Do you wish me to think so?"

"Why John?" she parried. "Does it really make much difference to you?"

"Does it make much difference to me?" he repeated in slow amazement. "Why do you know it does?"

"I—don't know how I was to 'know' it," she again parried. "And anyway suppose I did. What is the harm in having a good time?"

"No harm," said John. "But with him—I don't see how you can."

"What have you to say against Mr. Brent?" she asked indignantly.

"He doesn't ring true, he is not what he seems!"

"Oh!" she answered with pointed sarcasm. "Is that your acute detective talent, or just simple, unadulterated jealousy?"

"Neither one. Ordinary common sense."

"In which I must be woefully lacking," she added.

It was in vain that John tried to convince her there were good grounds for his assertion; she maintained it was nothing but miserable jealousy, and declared she would not be dictated to, while John, feeling that Brent had entirely supplanted him, left with a desperate resolve to never see her again unless she asked him to come.

Stella realized after he had gone that she had not meant to really send him away for good and all; but Cecil Brent's attentions becoming more persistent, they were engaged, and she became the proud possessor of a diamond ring.

John in his efforts to forget his heartbreak, applied himself more steadily to business than ever. One day at police headquarters he was introduced to a young lady, and was told she had become a valuable assistant in the detective service.

"Miss Remson," said the chief, "thinks she has a clue to those counterfeit tens and fifties."

"One of the men I have my eye on is an elderly man masquerading as a clergyman," said the girl detective.

John Lawlor and Miss Remson were detailed to work together. They found where the "elderly clergyman" lived, and kept a close account of his going and coming. One day John saw him leave the house with a dress suit case. He followed him to the station, and took the same train, not meaning to lose sight of his man for one instant. Had he only been aware that an automobile was leading the train a close race, and had seen the occupants, he might possibly have lost sight of the man in clerical clothes.

As the train slowed into the first station, the automobile whizzed past. If John had not been so intent on watching his man, he might have seen the people in the car. The reverend gentleman walked to a small hotel, with John closely in his wake. He saw him assigned to a room, and as soon as he went up with the bellboy, contrived to get a room for himself quite near the other. He read on the register the name of "Rev. Joseph Baker," and concluded he had not come to this little town for nothing. John intended to find out what that errand was.

He had been in his room about half an hour, the short winter day had drawn to a close, he had turned on the light and was reading, when he heard speaking in the hall. The voices were so subdued he could make out nothing, and almost instantly a door closed shutting them off. He went out softly to investigate. Pausing at the minister's door, he heard low conversation within. As he paused to listen, he heard someone coming down the hall, and was obliged to go on, as no one in the house knew the nature of his business, and for the present, he did not mean they should. Miss Remson might be way off in her suspicions; it was just possible he was shadowing a perfectly innocent man.

When the coast was again clear he gilded up to the minister's door. Though the tones were low, he heard distinctly the words of the Episcopal marriage service.

John had never felt quite so foiled and foolish in the course of his detective career. Here he had been taking a wild goose chase after an innocent old gentleman who had evidently come out here at the solicitation of some friends to marry them, and the dress suit case had probably contained his cassock and prayerbook. The detective was leaving the door in disgust when he noticed that no light came through the keyhole or under the door.

Why was this marriage ceremony being performed in the dark?

The next instant he heard the words: "I, Cecil, take thee, Stella—"

John rapped loudly on the door. The voices ceased. There was no response. He knocked again still louder. Then a man's voice asked: "Who's there?"

"A friend! To warn!" said John.

The door was opened by the clergyman, and carefully closed.

Dark as it was, he at once recognized the couple going through the marriage service. They were Stella Barker and Cecil Brent.

"Friend!" sneered the bridegroom. "John Lawlor, you've only come here to stop this ceremony, but you can't do it. Now go!"

When his name was mentioned John had noticed the look that came into the clergyman's face, also the nervous way his hand went to his head. He was wearing a wig.

"I will go, but I shall have to trouble you to go with me," said John to the minister.

"I am at a loss to understand," he said with dignity. "Then seeing the business end of a revolver looking towards him, he added resignedly: "Very well. But Mr. Brent, as I could not finish the ceremony, I will hand you back your fee."

John was a bit too quick for Brent, and snatched the money.

"One hundred and twenty dollars," he said. "Rather a large fee. Mr. Brent I'll have to ask you to come, too."

After John had handcuffed his two men, and safely locked them up pending the departure of the next train, he sought the frightened girl in the hotel parlor.

"I will see that someone takes you to the train," he said. "I've got two of the slickest counterfeiters in the business to look after."

"I haven't any money for the ticket. He has six hundred dollars of mine."

"No, he hasn't. Here it is." And John passed her the notes.

"Oh, John!" she sobbed. "Forgive me! I want you!"

"Not for—just gratitude. There must be time to think," he said.

Stella must have thought hard, for in less than three months the wedding cards were out.

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