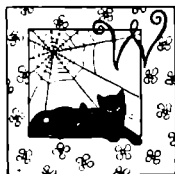


My Detective Instinct.

BY EMMA M. WISE.



WHEN I answered the advertisement for a woman detective I was somewhat surprised to learn that I was expected to catch myself. There were a number of minor surprises leading up to that dramatic climax, that ought to have prepared me, in a measure, for the final shock, and which would no doubt have done so had I not been of a peculiarly unsuspecting nature. As it was, the truth struck me with the force of the proverbial bolt from the cloudless sky.

It was my first experience as a detective. It was also my first experience in double dealing. Up to that time I had never played a part except in amateur theatricals at home. Since then — well, this story will speak for itself and me, too.

This is the advertisement responsible for all the mischief: —

WANTED.— A lady detective for about a week in a private boarding-house. One who can make acquaintances easily preferred. Address, stating price per day, by whom employed in the past, reliability, and references. (Letters confidential.) XYZ, *Daily Telegram*.

The advertisement appeared in the *Daily Telegram* of Sunday, July 10. I read it at first indifferently, then thoughtfully, and finally, impressed suddenly by the dramatic possibilities of the rôle of private detective, with a thrill of a great resolve. After six months spent in china decorating, menu painting, carpet designing, and the general hackwork with which I filled in gaps between rare portrait commissions, the adventurous spirit that had sent me to the city to mend my broken fortunes still craved an outlet. Under the glow of its influence I indited the following letter to XYZ: —

Having no case on my hands at present, I will investigate the trouble at your boarding house for \$5.00 per day, exclusive of room and board. I am reliable, energetic, and faithful. My business is always kept strictly private, therefore I must beg to be excused from giving the particulars asked for. Neither do I sign my name when communicating with a total stranger. Should you care to hear from me further, address me under cover of L.M.N., *Daily Telegram*.

I read my answer over several times before dropping it into the box at the *Telegram* office. Even then I could perceive that my soul had been inoculated with the virus of moral degeneration, which was appearing like a virulent rash in my written words; but so alluring was this opportunity for creating a new rôle, that I exulted in what to my mind seemed a masterpiece of diplomatic correspondence. So replete it was with truths that were in reality that many lies, and with lies that were really true.

In spite of my ingeniously contrived sentences, I did not count much on hearing more concerning the matter; but on Tuesday morning, when I called at the *Telegram* office for my mail, I was given a reply to my letter. Then I received my first surprise.

Call at my home to-morrow (Tuesday) at three o'clock for interview.

(MRS.) JANE RENNECKER, 360 Oak St.

P. S. Do not delay. There is a thief in my house.

The purport of the letter was not in itself startling. It was nothing unusual for a woman who kept a boarding house to find a thief lurking around the premises. Neither was it strange that she should wish to get rid of him without delay. As for the time set for the interview, three o'clock was the most ordinary hour she could have hit upon. The surprise lay in the fact that the writer of the letter was my own landlady!

For more than six months I had been living in fancied security at 360 Oak Street, to be aroused now to the realization that I had been resting all that while in a nest of vipers. In half a year I had become pretty well acquainted with all the boarders, and the first shock of my surprise having worn away, I rapidly took a mental photograph of all the habits, peculiarities, and dispositions of each, as I remembered them. In the first place, the servants, Mrs. Rennecker, her son Jasper, and I—Constance Stewart,—were undoubtedly above suspicion. The guilty person must

be one of the six young men living on the second and third floors. It might be Mr. Baker, who sat at the foot of the table, and ate all the celery before anybody else got down to dinner. I had never liked Mr. Baker very well, anyway, but in view of that morning's developments, it seemed possible that he might be sticking the spoons, and salt and pepper boxes into his pocket and selling them at second-hand stores. Or it might be Mr. Ketchum, who walked in his sleep; though it seemed to be taking an unfair advantage of a man to convict him of thefts committed while in a state of somnambulism. Or Mr. Harkness might have done it; Mr. Harkness smoked cigarettes in bed and burnt holes in the sheets and pillow cases. Then there were Messrs. Williamson, Doyle, and Bentley. Mr. Williamson sniffled when eating soup, Mr. Doyle bit his nails, and Mr. Bentley laughed to excess and said "Sure thing" to every remark addressed to him. All these were reprehensible habits, but not exactly criminal, and I did not like to suspect anybody unless it were Mr. Baker.

But whoever the thief, mine was the hand that must bring him to justice; and these unexpected complications only strengthened my determination to undertake in earnest a case begun in the spirit of private theatricals. And as to appear at the interview in my own character was manifestly impossible, the first thing to do was to pretend that I was somebody else,— a scheme upon which I entered with a zeal that would have furnished an instructive object lesson to philanthropists on the lookout for the increase of crime. In the play in which I had last appeared I had worn a costume whose very simplicity had served as such a perfect disguise that my own mother had failed to recognize me, and I resolved to adopt it again. I went down town and bought a black wig, a pair of eyeglasses and a ready-made, tight-fitting black cloth dress with a stiff white collar. There was a row of rooming houses on Chestnut Street between the car tracks and the viaduct. I paid a week's rent on a small room at No. 98 and turned it into a temporary dressing room, whence I emerged at a quarter before three, arrayed in the toggery in which I intended to call on Mrs. Rennecker.

Mrs. Rennecker's eyes were blue, and not unattractive by nature, but of a strained contraction that might have resulted

from nearsightedness or some nervous shock. They rested on me, as we sat in her cool parlor, only fleetingly, then wandered from one object to another as though always peevishly looking for something lost in early life. At any rate they evidently fathomed nothing of the secrets concealed by my stylish black hair and eye-glasses. Then she began in her drawing voice: —

“What is your name, please, and where are you stopping?”

“Ada Mosby. My address is 98 Chestnut Street.”

It was the first lie I had told — exclusive of social fibs — for a good many months, and I was amazed at my glibness. Evidently my new rôle was exactly suited to my abilities.

“It is needless to waste time on preliminary explanations,” said Mrs. Rennecker. “I shall not ask you to violate confidences. I could tell by your letter that you are experienced and capable.”

I think I blushed a little at that. For the sake of my future salvation, I hope I did. But if so, Mrs. Rennecker must have considered the flush an evidence of becoming modesty. At any rate her manifestly growing good opinion of me took effect on my vanity instantly, and I began to feel very sorry for Mr. Baker.

“We will — ah — proceed to business at once,” said Mrs. Rennecker in her hesitating, breathy manner. It was one of her foibles to believe that her misfortunes had developed her latent business instincts. “I have, I regret to say, a thief in my house. A woman.”

Then it was one of the servants, after all. I wondered which, and transferred my pity from Mr. Baker to her.

“She has been boarding with me for — ah — six months.” Mrs. Rennecker paused a moment and tried to look impressive. “She calls herself an artist.” Longer pause and greater effort at impressiveness. “Her name is Constance Stewart.”

I fell off a bridge over the Miami River once when a child, and the sensation is something I'm not likely to forget. Still the dizziness of that descent is absolute level-headedness when compared with my feelings at the moment when Mrs. Rennecker pronounced my name. It was as though I had severed all relation with the established system of gravitation, and was whirling through space with the bronze figures of Washington and Napoleon on the mantelpiece attending me as satellites.

Mrs. Rennecker apparently noticed no change in me, however, for when I had recovered myself she was saying:—

“She is the worst kind of a thief. She comes into your home and robs you in such a way that she cannot be denounced until a superabundance of evidence is accumulated. She has been stealing from me little by little for the last six months. She has robbed me of something of inestimable value. She has stolen my son’s heart.”

George Washington and Napoleon Bonaparte began to waver again, but I quickly calmed my emotions, for I could not afford to lose one word then.

“My son, Jasper, is desperately in love with her, and—he is already as good as engaged to another. Of course it is all her fault. In spite of her refined manner, I believe that she is really both designing and unscrupulous. My son Jasper is an eligible husband for any woman, and she knows it. It’s my opinion she came here for the sole purpose of securing so desirable a *parti*.”

For the first time in my life I began to experience the pleasure of seeing myself as others saw me. The realization was so different from the anticipation that it was several moments before I steadied my voice to ask:—

“Will you kindly tell me everything you know about this Miss Stewart?”

“To begin with, she is decidedly good looking, and, as I said, refined in manner.” I felt a little more kindly toward Mrs. Rennecker than at any previous time during my call. “She has soft, light-brown waving hair, which she wears short; a fine, fair complexion and a distinguished presence. You see I admit her attractiveness. She has not much money, I believe, and earns her living by decorating china. Oh, to look at her you would fancy her a gentlewoman. She gave me excellent references, too,—Judge Goble, Ex-Senator Spears, and Rev. Henry Cadmus.”

I smiled at the thought of what those staid, respectable old gentlemen would say, could they but know of my present predicament.

“But there’s something wrong with her,” said Mrs. Rennecker, sinking her voice to a subterranean whisper and drawing her chair still nearer mine. “I’ve been gifted with an almost supernatural

power of divining human nature, and I am positive that that woman has done something at some time that she — well, that she would not like the world to know about. What I want you to do is to become intimately acquainted with her and find out what it is. The end justifies the means. My son is a particularly high-minded young man, and if I could only go to him and say, 'Miss Stewart is unworthy of your love,' and prove it to him, his affection would turn to hate.'

"Pardon me," I said, "but does she know of your son's love?"

"Know it?" said Mrs. Rennecker. "Naturally, when that is what she has been working for all the time. But my son has never spoken to her on the subject. He is very reserved. In fact, the understanding between himself and his cousin Margaret was brought about by her mother and myself. If it had been left to him, I verily believe it would have been put off forever."

I remembered what a heavy, uninteresting girl his "cousin Margaret" was, and thought the supposition quite likely.

"I should have never known of his love for Miss Stewart," Mrs. Rennecker proceeded, "if I had not found him one day standing over her photograph, looking at it with an expression that a man's face never wears unless the object looked upon is his dearly beloved. I could not forbear questioning him. 'Do you love her, Jasper?' I said. He did not try to deceive me. 'Better than all the world,' he answered. 'And how long have you cared so much for her?' I asked. 'Ever since she came here,' said he. Then I asked him if he had told her about it. 'No,' said he, 'and I shall not—at least, not now. I want to make myself good enough for her, first.' If I had had any doubt before of his affection for her, it would have been dispelled by that. As a general thing, a man thinks he is a little better than anything else in the world. When you hear one of them talk as Jasper did you may know his is a serious case. It hurt me to hear him. I argued with him and tried to make him understand that he is her superior in every way. Indeed, Miss Mosby, I am very proud of my son. He is a great student; he is the soul of honor; he has not much money now, but when he is twenty-seven he will come into quite a fortune left him by his grandfather; we are an excellent family, and he has social position, too, even

if I have lost money, and am obliged to open my home to paying guests. I am very fond of his cousin Margaret, and his marriage with her has been the dearest of all the hopes centered in him.

"He listened patiently when I told him all this, but in conclusion he said: 'O mother, you do not understand. You are entirely mistaken in Miss Stewart. There is a refining grace about her that makes me seem like a mere clod beside her. There is much that I must acquire before I will dare to speak to her of my love.' You can see by that how sensitive and highly strung he is. Ah, Miss Mosby, there are few men like my son. We have talked on the subject often since, and it is always the same story. He does not want her to suspect his love, fearing she will refuse him and go away. Refuse him, indeed! When she perfectly understands the situation, and is simply waiting for him to speak. But you couldn't make him believe that. You see it is an unfortunate attachment of which he can never be cured except by positive proof of her unworthiness. You must be the doctor. The medicine may be bitter, but he must take it."

"But," I said, "why do you not let your son's happiness stand paramount to your own wishes and strive to bring about this marriage instead of thwarting it?"

I never saw Mrs. Rennecker's eyes quite so large as at that moment.

"Because," she retorted, "I don't like her. In spite of her attractiveness my intuition tells me that she is not good enough for him. And besides, I wish him to marry his cousin. Yet I dare not ask Miss Stewart to leave this house, for that would make Jasper desperate and bring things to a crisis. Are you ready to stay here now? I want you to meet her to-night. Come upstairs. I will show you the room you are to occupy. It is next to hers."

I went with her into the hall bedroom that opened off my own pretty apartment.

"This is the only room I have vacant," apologized Mrs. Rennecker. "It is not very large, but perhaps you can make it answer. I wish you to be close to Miss Stewart."

My door was ajar, and Mrs. Rennecker stepped inside. A number of half-decorated pieces of china were scattered about the

room as I had left them upon going out, and a morning gown was thrown over the back of a chair.

"Just see how careless she is," Mrs. Rennecker remarked. "That speaks volumes against her. Here's her picture," she added, taking my photograph from the mantel. "There's a look about her eyes that I never fancied."

Then she showed me my collection of European views, my album of pressed flowers, and my folio of water colors. When she went to my closet and took down my new silk dress with the remark, "This is her best dress; it doesn't fit her very well, either," I could have throttled her with genuine good-will.

By 6 o'clock I was installed in the hall bedroom in the capacity of Ada Mosby, the detective. At 6.30 I went down to dinner. Mrs. Rennecker went into the dining room with me and introduced me as "My friend Miss Mosby, from Pittsburgh." I was motioned to a seat beside Jasper Rennecker and directly opposite my own chair. I had never given more than a passing notice to my landlady's son until that evening. Whenever I had had occasion to think of him at all, I had set him down as a good young man, worthy and serious minded, but endowed with no characteristics that would set the world on fire. But the revelation of the afternoon had made him a figure of considerable importance in my estimation. Whoever the man, a woman is bound to regard him with more than ordinary interest when she learns that he is in love with her. Throughout the meal I glanced up at him whenever I could do so with impunity, and my newly aroused detective instinct perceived many fine points about him hitherto unobserved. His hands, alone, disproved my former impression. Large, firm, strong hands they were, indicative of a force of character that surprised me. I noticed, too, the fine shade of brown of his silky beard, and when he looked full into my face when replying to some inquiry, I thought his dark eyes, all aglow as they were with intelligence, the most expressive I had ever seen. It was strange I had never noticed all that before.

Dinner was half over before my name was mentioned.

"I wonder where Miss Stewart is to-night," said Mr. Baker, at length, as he took the last piece of celery.

"I wonder, too," said Mrs. Rennecker. She looked worried,

and I could see that the probability that I, as Mr. Hyde, was not going to meet myself as Dr. Jekyll was weighing on her heavily.

Twice she sent the servant to my room to see if I had come in, and at each report of my non-arrival the cloud on her face deepened.

"I wouldn't give myself any uneasiness about it, mother," said Jasper, with a laugh. "She is able to take care of herself."

"Yes," assented Mr. Doyle, "she sometimes goes away for two or three days at a stretch without giving notice."

"A regular gadabout," put in Mr. Baker.

All that did not increase my self-possession, and I was heartily glad when the meal was ended. After dinner, not having myself to cultivate, I did the next best thing, and began to get acquainted with Jasper Rennecker. Really he was a wonderfully interesting man when you once came to know him.

I did not try to make any plans for maintaining the double existence into which I had insensibly drifted. Everything had come by chance so far, and I decided to let chance rule all future developments. So absorbed had I become in carrying out my rôle successfully that the whole affair seemed simply a prolonged theatrical performance. Indeed, my conscience was not punctured by a single pang, and I never slept more sweetly than on the first night I spent in Ada Mosby's hall bedroom, while Constance Stewart's beautiful room beside it was unoccupied.

During the following week I became simply a creature of impulse. Wednesday afternoon I went over to Chestnut Street, doffed my detective attire, and in the original character of Miss Stewart went around to 360 Oak Street.

"Where on earth have you been?" asked Mrs. Rennecker. "I wanted to see you so badly last night. I have a friend here from Pittsburgh — a Miss Mosby. I was telling her about you, and she is very anxious to meet you."

I stayed for dinner, then made another trip to Chestnut Street, and returned to Mrs. Rennecker's in the guise of Ada Mosby.

"Well," she said, "you've missed it by going out. Miss Stewart was here this afternoon. She went out just about an hour ago. I'm afraid she won't be back until quite late."

For three days I kept up the strain of this double rôle, appearing first in one character, then in the other; then as Mrs.

Rennecker had become well-nigh frantic with the futility of her endeavors to bring about a meeting between my two selves, I was forced to desist.

"I don't want you to leave this house again for so much as five minutes," she said pettishly. "The minute you step out Miss Stewart steps in. My intuition tells me that she's engaged in scheming of some sort."

Had Mrs. Rennecker been a writer of the Gospels she could not have spoken more truly. After that I stayed closely indoors through the sultry July days, but Miss Stewart did not return.

I had been there ten days. Jasper and I sat on the porch one evening watching the red-lamped bicycles flash past like so many fireflies, and making the most of the gentle breezes that had commenced to blow in from across the lake after sunset. We were alone and we were silent. At last Jasper cleared his throat, and I knew he was going to say something personal. He always hemmed a little before beginning on personalities.

"If you keep this thing up much longer," he said, "you'll drive mother crazy."

"Keep up what thing?" I said.

"This detective business."

He laughed, and before I had fairly understood the situation he had taken my hand.

"You could fool mother," he said, "but not me. She doesn't love you as I do. I was behind the portière at your first interview, and knew you were Constance Stewart the minute I heard you speak."

"You did?" I gasped. "And what did you think?"

But what he thought, and what he said, and what I said belong in another chapter with which my detective instinct has nothing to do whatever. That evening Ada Mosby stepped out of the house, and sent the following telegram:—

Have seen Miss Stewart, and learning of her engagement to your son, have thrown up the case. Shall not return. ADA MOSBY.

Out of consideration for Mrs. Rennecker's feelings, neither her son nor her daughter-in-law have divulged to her the inner history of that telegram and the episode that led up to it.

As for Margaret, she had been engaged to Baker all the time.