

The Undefined Crime; Defined

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The train left a trail of billowing smoke as it wound through the low hills and the rhythmic chug, chug, chug of the engine had put several of its passengers to sleep. Many of them had made this trip on previous occasions and had little interest in the unfolding scenery. This, however was all new to one of the two ladies who was enthralled with it all and especially with the train itself. Belle Fenton had always been fascinated with the power and romance of the steam engine and with the adventure of being transported to far away places, in this case in reality rather than through the magic of books. She was a librarian, or a rather, a recently unemployed librarian, who was, thanks to her good friend Jennie, taking the first train trip in her life, more than 25 miles from her home.

Jennie was saying, "You will love my parents and the farm and I am sure that it will take your mind away from the past couple years at the school. I am so glad I was able to convince you to come with me on my summer visit with my parents." Belle had heard all the stories, multiple times of "the farm", its beauty, the horses, the lake and the quaint town not far away. She was also quite prepared, and even had some eager anticipation, of the primitive aspects ... no electricity or running water ... although she had some apprehension of the inconveniences of the lack of indoor plumbing.

They arrived at the town of Crescent Lake, which is situated on the South end of, what else, Crescent Lake. As they alighted from the rail coach with their luggage and the kind assistance of the conductor, they were eagerly greeted by Jennie's father who first hugged his daughter with obvious joy and then turned to Belle saying, "You must be Miss Fenton. We are so glad to have you visit this summer. Come ... the buggy is right over here ... you need to get to the house and get all that filthy train soot off you." They were, in fact, quite in need of some soap and water for as romantic as train travel may be to some, it was indeed quite dirty.

Mr. Royce apologized for not having one of those automobile "contraptions" but pointed out that he had no need of one and that the horse was much easier to maintain. He didn't stop talking during the fifteen minute ride to the farm but Belle enjoyed the short trip as much as the train ride. Mr. Royce had just informed Belle that the house was just up the road and to the right, pointing to the house and other structures which had come into view. Belle saw that the turn in the road had also revealed another house. At the same time, Jennie exclaimed, "Oh dad, What happened to the Wilkins place?"

Obviously, there had been a fire. The pile of rubble to one side had been the barn and the roof of the house was partially covered with a tarpaulin of some sort. "Oh, the barn burnt down yesterday and the roof of the house caught fire too. But that's not the worse of it Ma will tell you all about it when you get settled in. She tells it better than I do." Jennie exclaimed, "how terrible!" Then, "Daddy, is that Mr. Wilkins over there in the family plot?" Glancing over to the small fenced area where the woods joined the road, he replied, "Sure looks like him and he's diggin ... wonder what he's up to?"

"Ma" was waiting on the front porch and came down to greet them. Introductions were made with hugs all around and then Belle was escorted to the guest room, as it was explained, the former room of Jennie's older brother, Steve, who as did Jennie, "went off to the city" and in a whisper, "too good for farm life." There was a basin, a pitcher of water and a dish with a bar of soap to "clean up a bit". Belle was invited to change from her "traveling" clothes and rest a bit if she wished, then come down stairs. Dinner would be in about an hour.

After she washed and unpacked her suitcase, Belle put on a comfortable dress and immediately went down to join the family where she found Jennie already in conversation with her parents. She was telling her mom what they all had seen as they passed the Wilkins place. Her mother, with an anguished look on her face remarked that it gets stranger and stranger all the time. "Its a crime what is going on over there ... where will it end?" was her comment.

Well, that was the topic of conversation all evening and Belle asked question after question. First of course she and Jennie were told of the previous day's fire and the missing child. When Belle asked about the child, the story of its birth and how it was kept in the house all these years was related. The tale unfolded in bits and pieces largely from the recollections of Mrs. Royce, some interjections of Mr. Royce and a little from Jennie. As an aid to the reader, I will put it all in order as it unfolded in time rather than the random order of accounts which Belle heard.

It all began years ago when Willie Wilkins and Emily Lenning were in school. They were, as people said, "two of a kind", both a little "slow" and both very shy. They were attracted to each other and, well, she became pregnant. There was a quick wedding and Emily moved in to the Wilkins place. The baby was stillborn and nothing more was said about things at the time but the Lenning family was terribly upset about the entire situation and moved back to New York State where they had come from. No one heard from them since. Willie was good with his hands and became the town handyman, doing odd jobs and since most folks felt sorry for him, they hired him to fix a screen door, repair a roof or build shelves and such, whenever they could. His work was always more than satisfactory.

The Wilkins family had lived on the place for generations and that is why there was a family plot near the road. There were twelve graves there and when both Willie's

parents died of the fever within a year of the marriage, they were also buried there. Willie and Emily had a vegetable garden and had some fruit trees. That, and fish from the lake, plus Willie's little jobs kept them fed and solvent. Emily kept mostly to herself and the two were never known to go to church and certainly didn't socialize with anyone. Everyone kind of felt sorry for the couple but they seemed to be getting along all right so they let them be. But, after a time, Emily was pregnant again.

After her time progressed a few months, Willie put her on the train to the city. The stationmaster asked about it and was told that she had an aunt and uncle with whom she would stay and a hospital nearby. They thought that it would be better to have the baby in a hospital rather than rely on a midwife again, which of course made all the sense in the world.

Eb, the stationmaster, had related what happened when she returned. He had thought it very strange. Emily stepped down from the train with the baby completely covered in a small light blanket even though the day was warm. The conductor, after helping her down, reached back for her suitcase and placed it on the platform. By then Willie was there and gave Emily a kiss but did not even attempt to look at the baby. They went right to the buggy and were soon on the road out of town. That was five years ago.

Since then no one has seen the child up close. A few neighbors had gone to the Wilkins place bringing small gifts but were always told, "The child is asleep" and while the gifts were politely accepted, the visitor was gently turned away. Others who heard of this "affront" just didn't bother to go. There were times when Emily was seen about the place, at first with the child in her arms and latter being pulled about in a red wagon (is there any other color?) or in winter, on a sled, But even several years later when it should be walking it was never seen outside. Of course every one talked. Was the child deformed? Was it an idiot? ... or both? The question was never answered but always asked.

Willie was often asked how the child and Emily were doing and it was always the same, "Oh, they're fine." and nothing more. The other strange thing was that Willie always referred to it as "Emily's Child". He never said "Our child" and there was never the mention of a name or any reference to gender. Of course during five years of this, the buzz, when people gathered for church or anything else for that matter, just grew louder. "It is a crime how they treat that child!" was often heard. "Will they keep it locked up forever?"

All this was related during dinner and afterward they went out to the comfortable chairs on the lawn which slopped down to the lake. It was there that the story continued.

Mr. Royce first saw dark smoke coming from the Wilkin's barn. He first called to Ma, as he always referred to her, and by the time she reached the porch there were licks of flame emitting from between the boards. She immediately began sounding the dinner bell hanging on the porch, meant to call the workers in from the fields when this had been a working farm. As John Royce ran to his neighbors place, Willie was desperately trying to get his horse from the barn and had just succeeded as John arrived. It was at dusk on a cloudy day and by this time someone in town had seen the smoke and flames. The town fire bell had sounded and help would be on the way. The women had gotten buckets and soon Willie, John, Ma and Emily were doing their best to get some water from the lake onto the blaze with little or no effect.

By the time the volunteer firemen arrived, the barn was beyond saving and embers had ignited the roof of the house. The almost new and untried fire truck was driven between the house and the lake where the big hose was unreeled with the end thrown into the water. The firemen manned the other hose and the pumper revved up until a steady stream quenched the flames that had started eating away at the roof. The house and most of the roof had been saved. While this was happening, others arrived and two men rushed into the house. Some time later, the men emerged reporting that there was some water damage up stairs but little else. But they were perplexed. They found no child, just a child's room, some clothing and a few toys.

While a tarp was obtained from a neighbor and secured over the damaged section of roof, the fire chief asked Emily where she had put the child. Her startling response was, "I have no child." Emily, obviously distressed, was sobbing. She sat down on the grass simply repeating, time after time, "I have no child." Willie came to her with tears streaming down his cheeks, threw his arms around her and held her as the firemen cleaned up and neighbors continued to gather. Someone suggested that a search be made of the house, small outbuildings and the nearby woods. This was quietly done but nothing was found amiss, certainly no trace of the missing child. But it was already quite dark and the woods had not been well searched at all.

Mr. Royce told Willie he would take his horse to his barn and Ma, with some trepidation, invited the couple to spend the night at the Royce place. As the offer was made, the couple looked up at Ma and John and were both smiling through their tears. The offer was gratefully declined and Ma was grateful that it had been. She knew a crime had been committed here but could only imagine what it had been ... And imagine she did. How could they be smiling?

Well, that was the story to this point and by now the mosquitoes had driven the four back into the house. Ma suggested that Mr. go to town in the morning and tell the sheriff about what Willie was seen doing in the grave plot and about those smiles, those mysterious smiles! Belle asked if she could go along with him. She wanted to know more and also said she would make a phone call to someone she thought may be able to obtain some "missing" information.

So it was that the next day found Mr. Royse, Jennie and Belle in the office of the sheriff on the first floor of the county building. Jennie related the scene in the Wilkins family plot and added the witnessing of those strange smiles. The sheriff thanked them and agreed that further investigation was in order. He wished to talk to others before doing anything and the couple in question weren't apt to go anywhere so he had time to gather as much facts as possible before visiting them. Belle asked if there was a telephone she could use to call the city and was directed to one in the deputies' office.

Belle knew that Constable Wagner had an eye for her since that horrible episode in the library of the college (but that's another story) and she could rely on him to make some inquiries. The long distance connection was made with no more than the usual delay and she was soon relating as much of the story as needed and the request was made for assistance. As she anticipated, the constable was eager to help and said he would contact her when he had some information. Their task completed, the trio returned to the house and the girl's vacation was resumed.

Belle soon got accustomed to the lack of amenities, all of them, and became lost in the adventures of the countryside. There were boat rides and she was even introduced to fishing. She also enjoyed swimming in the pristine waters of the lake. Most of all, once she overcame the fear, she enjoyed the horseback riding. It was on one such ride, this one was to be a long one along the road leading further from town that Billy, the stationmaster's son, came puffing up on his bicycle just as the girls were leaving the farm. "Are you Miss Fenton?" he inquired as he fought to catch his breath. When getting an affirmative reply he dug a piece of blue paper from his pocket and reaching it up to her announced, "Telegram for you." It was as informative as it was brief. "News" stop "Call". Stop and signed "Wagner". That was enough and Belle. Addressing Jennie said, "Can we ride to town instead of to the countryside? I must telephone the constable." Jennie nodded yes and Belle remembered the messenger. "Please wait here for your tip. I must go back to the house for my purse." When the lad told her, very reluctantly but all the same generously, to forget about it, she said that she may need change for the telephone anyway and insisted he wait. He needed no more persuasion and presently Belle returned presenting him with a shiny quarter. He was most grateful especially since his usual gratuity was most often a dime.

The boy was soon way ahead of them as they rode to town. Jennie suggested that they go to the Sheriff's office as she was sure he would allow them to use his telephone and besides they may learn more of his investigation. And so it was that it was from her telephone conversation with Constable Wagner that Belle received some very interesting and informative news after which, she asked the sheriff to talk privately with her. When they emerged from the private office the sheriff was saying that this put entire different light on things but there were still some questions to be resolved. He said he and his deputy would be out the next day and maybe he could ask the girls and Mr. and Mrs. Royce go with him to visit Emily and Willie.

Jennie was a little, or more than a little, miffed that Belle was keeping secrets from her ... her best friend. Belle explained that she had learned just part of the story and that there were still questions open and unanswered. After all, she still may be wrong about this whole thing and she didn't want to plant unfounded ideas around. That didn't really satisfy Jennie but she knew her friend well enough to know that further plea's would be fruitless. When they arrived back home, Jennie related all she knew including her displeasure with her friend. They all went to bed that night to spend a sleepless night with all sorts of scenarios racing through their minds, all that is, except Belle who slept like the proverbial baby.

About mid morning the sheriff and his deputy drove up looking very official in their best uniforms. Ma ask, "Ready to make some arrests?". The reply surprised her. "Probably not, but lets get on over there." "But hasn't there been a crime?" asked Mrs. Royce. Again ... "Probably not." Since all could not fit into the car, they walked the short distance and as they did, noticed that both Willie and Emily were at the family plot. As they approached, Willie was pounding a wooden marker in the ground and his wife waited with some flowers. This was truly an astounding, yet perplexing sight. But then everything about this situation was perplexing.

The two were again smiling but now the tears were gone. The sheriff greeted them with a warm "good morning" and asked if they could ask a few questions, "just to satisfy unfounded rumors." Ma could contain herself no more and blurted out, "But ... hasn't there been some sort of crime?" Belle put her hand on Ma's arm and quietly said, Yes, but it may be one entirely different than you think." Addressing the smiling couple, the Sharif asked, "Was there ever a child?" Emily and Willie replied in unison, "No."

Ma, Mr. Royse and Jennie exclaimed in unison, "But we all saw ... " Belle cut them short asking, "Did anyone ever see an actual child?" Not waiting for a reply, she answered her own question. "No, all anyone saw was a bundle that could have been a child." She then explained what Constable Wagner had discovered when he contacted the hospital in which Emily was confined for her delivery and then when he found the aunt and uncle. This baby was, as was her first, still born, quite premature. Poor Emily was so distraught as to be almost uncontrollable. She blamed herself for failing the poor soul of her child by not being able to carry it to term and give it life. She kept pleading for the nurses to give her baby to her and out of desperation they gave her a doll to which she clung, repeatedly saying she was sorry. They could not convince her to give up the doll and so as she was discharged a nurse gave her a receiving blanket in which the doll could be wrapped, just like a real live baby. She kept the doll in the blanket until well enough to travel and her aunt and uncle put her on the train with it. In the mean time they sent a letter to her husband which explained everything and let him know when she would be arriving at Crescent Lake.

They all turned to the couple who nodded their affirmation to the story, Ma then asked, this time with sensitivity, "But what happened the night of the fire?" It was Emily who responded. "I knew all the time that there was no child but could not bring myself to really believe it. I think I wanted somehow for it to be alive for if it was not, I had failed it. But when that man came out of our house and said that there was no child, the words suddenly brought me to reality. Nobody had spoken those words before, at least not since the hospital and I guess I needed someone to say them." Willie interjected, "I did not know how to say them." He continued, "But when my darling kept repeating that there was no child I knew she had been released from her guilt ... we had both been released and we could now be happy. There was only one thing left to be done."

Belle said, "And that brings us to this grave." Willie nodded, and said, "It is a box with the blanket, clothes and toys." and stepping aside revealed the words he had inscribed on the marker: "Here lies forever, Our guilt and sadness"

Ma, with tears in her eyes, softly and slowly said, "And I now see there has indeed been a grievous crime here and the crime is the way we, as neighbors, have treated you." Willie replied, that he and Emily had talked about it most of the day after the fire and through the night and that they hold no grudge. He blamed himself for not asking for help. Emily placed the flowers on the grave and said, "Let all guilt be buried forever ... mine is buried here." With that, they turned from the grave and the burial plot, Ma insisting that they all go back to the house for some lemonade. It was, as had been said someplace else, "The beginning of a beautiful friendship".

The word spread like wildfire and all that happened along with what hadn't happened was told all through the county. Several days later neighbors from all around descended on the Wilkins' place in cars, trucks and wagons bringing lumber, nails and roofing materials. Within a week the roof of the house had been restored and the barn rebuilt, larger and better than the old one. Ma, Jenny, Emily and Belle all served refreshments and lunch for the workers and their wives brought the food from their homes. Willie and Emily were assured that all this was nothing more than the community owed to them for the way they were shunned and maligned the past years, and yes, before that. The pastor along with a large group from the local church invited them to Sunday service and when they came, there was a sincere and public apology with a multitude of private apologies both before and after the service.

Postscript:

It was found that Emily had a real talent, hidden all this time. She had a gift of being able to sew as well as crafting beautiful designs. She soon had many families commissioning her to make party dresses, wedding gowns and her most loved creations, Christening gowns, for which she always refused payment. Ma often was heard to say, "Its a crime we didn't get to know them sooner." Yes indeed, ... Its a crime!