

A WISH UNEXPECTEDLY GRATIFIED

P. H. Woodward

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When the bogus-lottery men were driven out of the large cities by the vigor of the postal authorities, they tried for a while to operate from small country towns by collusion with dishonest postmasters. As the delinquencies of the offenders were successively brought to light, their heads rolled into the basket at the foot of the official guillotine. The swindlers, however, succeeded in bribing fresh victims, and for a time cunning and duplicity managed with tolerable success to maintain a foothold against the power of the department.

Among other similar swindles, sealed circulars were at one time scattered broadcast over the more remote states, announcing that on a given date the drawing for a series of magnificent prizes would take place at Livingston Hall, No. 42 Elm Avenue, Wington Junction, Connecticut. Patrons were urged to remit the purchase-money for tickets promptly, as there would be no postponement of the grand event under any circumstances. "Fortune," continued the glittering advertisement, "knocks once at every one's door, and she is now knocking at yours."

As usual, multitudes swallowed the bait, but some, instead of sending the greenbacks to Highfalutin & Co., forwarded the circulars to the department. Thereupon special agent Sharretts was instructed to visit Wington Junction, with the view of learning whether the postmaster was properly discharging his duties. Taking an early opportunity to perform the mission, he alighted at the station one morning, and proceeded to survey the town, which consisted of four or five houses scattered along the highway for a distance of half a mile. "Livingston Hall" and "Elm Avenue" were nowhere visible. It was apparent that "No. 42" on any avenue was a remote contingency not likely to arise in the present generation.

Having previously ascertained that the postmaster was also switch-tender at the junction, and that the cares of the office devolved on his wife, the officer walked up to a keen-looking man in front of the little round switch-house, whose energies were devoted exclusively at that moment to the mastication of a huge quid of tobacco, and who, after a prolonged scrutiny of the stranger, answered his salutation in an attenuated drawl, "Meornin', sir."

"Will you be kind enough to tell me, sir, where Mr. Morris, the postmaster, can be found?" asked the agent.

"Wall, I guess my name's Morris. What kin I do fur yeou?"

"Mr. Morris, I should like a few minutes' private conversation on business of great importance, which can be so managed as to turn out advantageously to us both. I do not wish to be overheard or interrupted. In these times even blank walls have ears, you know."

The last suggestion seemed to serve as a passport to the confidence of the postmaster. Leading the way into the switch-house, he remarked, "Come in hear. Neow, what is it?"

"The fact is, Mr. Morris, some friends of mine propose to go into a little speculation, which will involve a large correspondence; and for reasons that I need not specify to a man like you, they do not wish to have every ragtag, bobtail post-office clerk poring over their letters, and asking impertinent questions at the delivery-window. If they can find a shrewd, square man, who knows how to keep his mouth shut, and who can't be fooled, that for a

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handsome consideration will put the letters away in a safe place till called for, they are willing to make an arrangement that will be profitable all around. You have been recommended as just the person. I am told that you generally know which side your bread is buttered, and have called to see if we can't arrange to pull together."

"Nuff said," ejaculated Morris, with a sly wink. "I know what yeou want, but my wife is the one to fix things. I don't have nuthin' to dew with the letters. Sue 'tends to everything. The folks as we'se a-workin' for said we must be plaguey keerful about the deetecters. I'll bet nun on 'em can't play it on my wife tho'. If they dew, they'll have to git up arly in the mornin'."

With that he thrust his head out of the window, and yelled: "Sue, Sue!"

As the sound died away, a tall, raw-boned female, from whose cheeks the bloom of youth had faded a number of years before, emerged from the side door of a two-story cottage, about eighty rods distant, and walked briskly to the switch-house, where she was introduced to the stranger as "my wife."

After a little preliminary skirmishing, she invited the agent to go over to the cottage. Having been duly ushered into the "best room," he embellished for her benefit the story already told to the husband.

"I think I kin 'commodate yeou," she broke forth, "but yeou'll have to pay putty well for't. Laws me, I'm told—and I've ways o' heerin' 'bout these things—that the deetecters are jest as likely as not to come a-swoopin' deown enny minnit. Yeou know, if they feound it out, we'd be smash'd."

Her terms were ten dollars a week. Highfalutin & Co. paid six, but she understood the business a great deal better now than when she made the bargain with them. The agent thought the price rather high, but finally consented to contract at that figure.

Then, as if troubled by an after-thought, he said, "Madam, how do I know but some of these 'deetecters' may come around, and, seeing my letters, get me into difficulty?"

"Why, laws a' mercy," said she, "don't be skeer'd. Yeou jest leave that to me. The minnit them air letters gits here, I hides 'em in that bewro-draw'r," pointing to an article of furniture in the corner.

"Is it a safe place?" queried the agent.

"Yas, it is," answered the woman. "Got it half full neow. Carry the key in my pocket."

She gave a grin, intended for a knowing smile, in admiration of her own cleverness.

"I believe the hiding-place is tolerably secure," replied the officer, with the air of one who desired to be convinced, but had not yet reached the point of full assurance.

"You seem to be very particl'r and diffikilt to satisfy," continued Mrs. Morris; "but, if yeou don't believe it, jest come and see for you'sef."

She led the way to the bureau, opened the drawer, and, raising a plaid cotton handkerchief, displayed the contraband letters by the score. All were directed to the lottery firm, and were turned over to the knave from time to time as it suited his convenience to call for them. As no such firm did business at Wington Junction, it was the duty of the postmaster to forward to the department, as fictitious and undeliverable, all letters bearing the address of the swindlers. In similar cases neglect to obey the regulation was treated as sufficient ground for instant removal.

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More fully pleased with the result of the examination than the woman surmised, the officer resumed: "I see you are very particular about your methods of doing business, and do not mean to be caught napping. The arrangement we are about to enter into is a very important one, and, as you are not postmaster, your husband will have to be present to witness and ratify the bargain."

"Bless yeour soul," replied she, "it's all right. I 'tend to all the biznis. My husband doesn't bother hissef about it in the least."

"Madam," answered the officer, "pardon me. I had my training in a large city, and am accustomed to pay minute attention to every detail. Your husband is the principal in this case, and must ratify the agreement to make it binding. Of course you will derive all the benefit, but his presence is essential as a matter of form."

Apparently satisfied, she called for "John," who replied promptly to the summons.

"Mr. Morris," said the officer, "your wife has agreed to keep my letters for me—"

"Yaas," broke in the postmaster. "I know'd she would. Yeou'll find she'll dew it right, tew. Nobody can't come enny tricks on her—can they, Sue? I wish one o' 'em durn'd deetecters would come around, jest tew see heow she'd pull the wool over 'im. I wudn't ax enny better fun;" and he indulged in a fit of loud cachinnation at the absurdity of supposing that anyone could match in sharpness his own beloved Sue.

"The letters will come to that address," said the agent, pulling out his commission from the postmaster-general, and exhibiting it to the pair.

Taking in the purport of it at a glance, Morris jumped several inches into the air, slapped his sides, and exclaimed, "A deetecter, arter all; sold, by jingo!"

"We're bust'd then," chimed in Sue, with a melancholy grin.

It was even so. The letters for Highfalutin & Co. went to Washington, and Morris went out of the post-office; but the fact that Sue was overmatched hurt him more than the loss of the place.

June 8, 1872, a law was approved making it a penal offense to use the mails for the purpose of defrauding others, whether residing within or outside of the United States. The postmaster-general was also authorized to forbid the payment of postal money orders to persons engaged in fraudulent lotteries, gift enterprises, and other schemes for swindling the public, and to instruct postmasters to return to the writers, with the word "fraudulent" written or stamped on the outside, all registered letters directed to such persons or firms. Prior to the enactment of this law, the most wholesale and barefaced operations were conducted by professional cheats, mainly through the facilities afforded by the mails, with almost absolute impunity. Letters addressed to bogus firms were indeed forwarded from the offices of delivery to the department as "fictitious" and "undeliverable," and many colluding postmasters were decapitated. Such petty measures of warfare served merely to annoy the vampires and to whet their diabolical ingenuity for the contrivance of new devices. Since the law of 1872 went into effect, however, the scoundrels have been compelled to travel a thorny road. Scores of arrests have been made, and in many cases the criminals have been sentenced to the penitentiary.

It would exceed our limits even to enumerate the devices which have been tried by different swindlers with greater or less success. Gift enterprises of various kinds are the most common and notorious, constituting a distinct branch of the business; but the pretenses on which human credulity is invited to part with actual cash for imaginary benefits are innumerable. A few specimens are given as illustrations.