

The Yellow Letter

by William Johnston

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SYNOPSIS.

Harding Kent calls on Louise Farrish to propose marriage and finds the house in great excitement over the attempted suicide of her sister Katharine. Kent starts an investigation and finds that Hugh Crandall, suitor for Katharine, who had been forbidden the house by General Farrish, had talked with Katharine over the telephone just before she shot herself.

CHAPTER I.—(Continued.)

The name meant nothing to me and I turned to Louise for explanation. Though there were many callers at the Farrish home, I never had met a Mr. Crandall, nor had I even heard the name mentioned.

"It must have been Hugh Crandall," said Louise. "I was afraid that it was he."

Her remark puzzled me. The only Hugh Crandall I knew anything about was a prosperous young broker whom I never had met personally, though I had seen his name occasionally in connection with exchange and club affairs.

"Do you mean Hugh Crandall, the broker?" I asked.

Louise nodded, and leaning against my shoulder, told me of a chapter of the family history with which I was wholly unfamiliar. This man, it seemed, had met her sister two years before on a steamer on which they were returning from Europe. After that he had been a frequent visitor at the Farrish home. Katharine was very fond of him, and he had been in high favor both with the general and Louise. Though no formal announcement of an engagement had been made, Crandall was looked on by every one as Miss Farrish's most favored suitor. About three months ago, just prior to the time when I first met Louise, his visits to the house had suddenly ceased.

"I'm sure," Louise explained, "that Katharine cared for him very much. She and father had a bitter quarrel about him, though why, I never could understand, for father had always seemed to like him. There was something strange about the way his visits ended. Father came home one day at noon looking worried. He called Katharine into the library and shut the door. I could hear Katharine pleading with him and once or twice I heard both their voices raised as if in anger. When my sister came out her eyes were red as if she had been weeping. She went at once to her room and did not come down to dinner. When Mr. Crandall called that night she came down to see him, but he stayed only about ten minutes. He demanded an interview with father, and father refused to see him. He left the house in heat and never has been here since. For several days Katharine seemed much depressed but she volunteered no confidences and I hesitated to ask her any questions. She seemed after a while wholly to have recovered her spirits, and I was convinced that she had made up her mind to let Mr. Crandall go out of her life."

"What effect did this have on the relations between your father and sister?" I asked, seeking in vain for a motive that would have caused Katharine to attempt her life.

"None whatever that I could see. Through it all, except for that one afternoon, Katharine's attitude toward father has been most lovable. If anything, it seemed to me that she was tenderer toward him afterward than before."

"Do you suppose she has been meeting Crandall surreptitiously?"

Louise quickly and indignantly drew herself away from me.

"You don't know Katharine as I do," she said, reprovingly, "or you never would have said that. She is the soul of honor. If she was going to see Hugh she would have done so openly."

"But he telephoned her today," I persisted.

"That's so," admitted Louise. "And I think he must have done so day before yesterday, too. Some one called her, and she went out just as she did today. Generally we tell each other where we are going, and I thought it peculiar at the time that she said nothing to me."

In deep perplexity we both sat, silently pondering the mystery of Katharine's action. What could have made her do it? Was it, I wondered, because her father had learned something discreditable about her suitor and had forbidden him the house? Had Crandall been trying to persuade her to continue to see him despite her father's wishes? Was the conflict in her heart between love and duty too much for her? Louise turned to me and laid her hand gently on my arm.

"Harding," she said, "there is some deep mystery behind all this that has been creeping like a black shadow across the lives of both Katharine and my father. In some way Hugh Crandall is concerned in it. I know it. I feel it. It is something more than merely the refusal of my father to permit her to marry Crandall. I have watched them both and I know. I have seen this mysterious specter hovering over my father, gradually crushing the very

soul out of him. I have seen Katharine's life, too, blighted by its constant presence. Whether Katharine lives or whether she dies, I must find out what it is. I must, before it kills my father, too. You'll help me, won't you?"

There have been strange wooings and strange betrothals in love's history, but never before has any man been brought to a fuller realization of the depth of a woman's affection for him or her confidence and trust in him than I was at this moment when Louise put this question to me. My arms went about her and my lips met hers in one long kiss that was a pledge—a pledge that henceforth my life, my heart, my mind, my powers, my everything were hers. All my abilities would be devoted to clearing this mystery that was stealing the joy from her years, when they should be the pleasantest. But this was no time for love dalliance. The mystery must be solved. Suicides generally left letters.

Perhaps—Hand in hand, Louise and I went into Katharine's apartments, where the room's disorder still told of the tragedy so recently enacted there. In one corner stood a little open desk. Its contents bore evidence of a recent careful sorting that hinted very plainly of premeditation, but there was no note or letter there. I looked next on the mantelpiece, hoping to find among the photographs and cottons favors that littered it some clue which might solve the mystery, but there was nothing there, either.

My eye fell to the grate below, where a fire burned cheerily. Here again was evidence of premeditation in the ashes of burned letters and the charred corner of a photograph. A blackened bit of paper that had fallen through the grate before it burned caught my glance and I stooped to pick it up. It was just a scrap of yellow, torn from a folded letter, with its edges burned to fragility. Carefully Louise and I unfolded it, for it seemed the only thing in all the room that might yield some explanation. As we pored over the meaningless fragments of sentences, an exclamation of horror came from the doorway. Looking up we saw the tall form of General Farrish tottering on the sill.

Clad in a dressing-jacket, his white hair in wild disorder, he pointed with accusing finger at the yellow scrap of paper in my hand. Never in mortal face have I seen such terror as I saw in his. His eyes, dilated, seemed bulging from their sockets. His countenance was white as chalk. His jaw had dropped in the paralysis of terror. From his throat came horrible mumbings, as he tried to speak and could not.

Louise and I sprang to his side, but with almost maniacal strength he shook us off and, with finger still pointing to the yellow scrap I had let fall to the floor, he managed to gasp:

"That yellow letter. Where did—"

Before he could finish the sentence he fell stricken to the floor, his voice choking, his eyes glazing, paralyzed by some hidden terror—we knew not what.

CHAPTER II.

Our First Clue.

Louise and I sat at dinner together. Isn't it strange in this world of ours how the commonplace follows on the terrible, how the usual and the unusual intermingle, how the clock ticks on when the whole universe seems to be tumbling about our heads! In one of the rooms up-stairs lay Katharine, still unconscious, with a doctor and a nurse constantly at her side. The bullet had been removed, and while it had penetrated the brain some slight distance, Doctor Wilcox said there was just a chance—the barest chance—that she might recover. It might, however, be hours, he explained, before she regained consciousness—if she ever did.

In another of the rooms lay General Farrish, more dead than alive. Paralysis had deadened his limbs and tied his tongue. Only his eyes seemed alert. Most of the time since the stroke had felled him he had been slumbering heavily.

While the bustle of caring for the two stricken ones lasted there was little time for thought, and I was glad for the activity that kept Louise's mind distracted. Just at the moment when it seemed that everything had been done and there was nothing left but the anxious waiting—waiting for the worst—the butler had tiptoed in to summon us to dinner. Bravely, at first, Louise and I made pretense of eating, each trying to encourage the other, but the unforgettable events of the afternoon, the missing faces at the table and the sorrow that filled us both made food impossible. Drawing our chairs together, we discussed in whispers the baffling mystery of Katharine's attempted suicide and her father's strange terror.

On the table before us lay the scrap of yellow paper, the sight of which had so agitated General Farrish. As soon as he had been carried into his

own rooms I had hastened to rescue it from the floor. I felt that, insignificant as it appeared, it must have some important connection with the events of the afternoon. Yet as Louise and I puzzled over it, there seemed nothing sinister in the fragments of sentences that the flames had left all but indecipherable.

The paper, of a peculiarly yellowish tint, was hardly more than two square inches, the torn corner of a folded letter. On it we could make out these words:

ba
used se
a sister t
seemed ine
and disgrace
by accident
make good

As we studied the bit of type-writing, word by word, we tried to trace in it some hidden meaning, some sinister warning, something or anything that would connect it with poor Katharine's mental distress and her father's poignant terror. That the letter of which this was a part had been in Katharine's possession was evident from the place where I had picked up the fragment. It was equally certain that it had been her purpose to destroy it. On the other hand, General Farrish, too, must have known of the existence of this letter, else why did he show such terror at the mere sight of a scrap of it? It must have been part of some document that had made a vivid impression on his mind. More than likely, we felt, whatever the letter was, it had played some part in the quarrel between Katharine and her father the afternoon before she dismissed Hugh Crandall.

We ran over all the words we could think of that begin "ba," trying to fit one to the phrases following—back, bar, ban, bank, bankruptcy, basin, barrel, barren, battle—there were too many of them. We gave it up and passed on to the next phrase, "used se—" It proved equally puzzling. We could make nothing out of it, but the third line at least was definite enough for discussion.

"A sister—" said Louise. "That makes it certain that this letter did not apply in any way to father, for he never had a sister. He was an only child."

I was not so positive as she that the letter did not apply to the general. The thought came to me that perhaps even in the proud Farrish family there might have been some girl child of unblemished birth whose existence had been kept secret from Louise. Perhaps some knowledge of this sort had come to Katharine and the letter referred to it. I refrained from suggesting such a theory, for I felt it would be the height of cruelty even to hint such a thing to Louise at a time when the father was helpless to explain. Yet the following phrase, "seemed inevitable," might well fit into some

in some way Crandall was involved. My theory would not account for his connection with the case and I at once abandoned it, listening intently to one Louise advanced.

"There must have been some connection between his having telephoned her and what she did this afternoon. Before she shot herself she burned this letter, or most of it. Father must have known about the letter, so I am certain that it concerned Crandall."

"Has Crandall a sister?"

"I do not know," said Louise. "I know nothing about his family. It seems strange, too, when for months and months we saw so much of him. I do not recollect his ever having mentioned any of his relatives."

My brain recorded a victory for woman's intuition over man's logic. Her theory seemed infinitely better than mine. After all it was absurd to suspect a skeleton in the life of a man like General Farrish, who had been constantly under public scrutiny for many years. It was much more probable that the letter referred to some incident in the life of Crandall, something so discreditable that the general had been forced to forbid Katharine having anything to do with him. This theory would account for the quarrel between father and daughter, for Crandall's reticence about his family, for Katharine's distress, and naturally the sight of the letter that had caused all the trouble would upset the general. I began to see a plan for action.

"Louise, dear—" How quickly adversity strips off conventionality and puts us where our hearts would have us! "Louise, dear," I said, "it will probably be days before either your father or Katharine will be able to give us any assistance, yet the knowledge that everything has been cleared up, that the specter has been driven away, undoubtedly would hasten the recovery of both. So I feel that we must go ahead."

"Oh, Harding," she breathed. Her hand stole out and sought mine. "What a comfort you are to me! What would I have done this afternoon without you! You're right, dear, we must solve this awful mystery at once. We must." "The first thing for me to do," I went on, "is to find Hugh Crandall. He can probably tell us all about this letter. Even if he can't he can say why he telephoned Katharine and where she went this afternoon. When we have learned this much we shall at least have made a good start. The next thing will be to trace the letter. If Crandall does not know about it, we will try to learn from whom it came."

"That's impossible," objected Louise. "Haven't we looked everywhere in Katharine's room for the envelope in which it came. I am positive that she burned it. Without the envelope you can never discover where it was mailed or to whom it was addressed."

"I'm not so sure about that. The post office has wonderful ways of

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Part of Nansen's equipment for his trip across Greenland consisted of two sleeping-bags made of undressed skins. On the first night of the journey Nansen and his two Norwegian companions got into one of the bags, pulled the mouth tight across their necks, and so slept in the snow with only their heads out.

Before retiring to rest, Nansen saw the three Laplanders he had engaged for the expedition cozily tucked into the other sleeping-bag. When he awoke in the morning, almost numb with cold, he observed that the bag in which he had tied up the Laplanders was empty, and that they were nowhere in sight. He was afraid they had deserted him, and scrambling out of the bag he went in search of them. He found the three men fast asleep behind a hillock of snow that they had scraped together as a protection against the wind.

"Ah, master," they said, when asked to explain this extraordinary conduct, "we couldn't sleep in that thing. It was too hot, so we got out and have had a comfortable night here."

RCT NEW.



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Frank—No.

Daisy—Strange; I never saw it before.

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