

Detective Connor's Valentine

A Simple Story of Life in the New York Slums

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THE February air was very chill and a frosty wind blew from the northwest.

"Kind of snappy outside, Cap," was the comment of the desk sergeant, as the captain of the Sixth Precinct swung his big hulk through the street door.

"Snappy, eh," snorted the captain. "Devilish cold, if I know anything about it. Where's Connor?"

"Not here yet, sir," replied the sergeant, dropping all familiarity and realizing by the atmosphere that something had gone wrong with the captain.

The captain, grunting and growling, went to his own room, and had just removed his big, fur-collared coat when Detective Bill Connor entered the outer door.

Big Bill was a trifle late, to be sure, and he hurried to the desk as fast as his fat legs would let him. He should have been on duty half an hour before, but Bill was still reminded of his Christmas eve adventure by the ache in his back, and he was not over strong on his legs. He smiled at the sergeant.

"Captain inside, waitin' for ye," whispered the sergeant with a nod toward the inner room.

"What have you to say for yourself, Connor?" growled the captain as Big Bill entered the private office.

"Couldn't help it, Colonel," answered Bill apologetically. He knew it would conciliate his chief to call him colonel, as there was a military record somewhere back in the captain's history and he was ever proud of a soldierly title. This was one of life's little vanities he called his own.

The captain sputtered some words which Connor could not grasp, and then turned abruptly to the papers on his desk.

"Report here will interest you," said the captain sharply. "Now listen! The body of a woman was picked up in the East River this morning."

Connor gave a start of surprise, but knew better than to interrupt.

"Apparently had been dead a few hours," went on the captain, dropping his words like the chant of a hymn. "Youngish woman—body emaciated—dressed in suit of coarse underwear—cheap flannel petticoat—red wrapper."

Big Bill started again and mumbled a word of exclamation.

"Well!" exclaimed the captain, "what's the matter with you—know her?"

"Go on, Colonel," replied Bill; "I'll tell you what I've got to say afterward."

"Red wrapper—" repeated the captain, turning again to his report, "no stockings—one black shoe—one brown shoe—body at the morgue, awaitin' identification. Take it up, Connor, and see if you can place her right."

The captain placed the slip on the file and glanced at Bill, who made no show of departure. "Oh, yes, you said you had something to say. What was it, Connor?"

"I only wanted to tell you, Colonel," stammered Big Bill, as he swallowed something hard in his throat, "before I started out, why I was late this morning, and it has some relation to this case, I guess."

The subdued voice of Connor and his manner of speech attracted the captain's interest. He had started a protest to hearing Bill's excuse, but he seemed to think the better of it. "Well, go on, but be quick about it," he remarked shortly.

Detective Connor raised his hand, gave his collar a twist, cleared the husk from his throat, and began in his homely, matter-of-fact way:

"As I was trotting home last night, Colonel, just a little distance from Duffy's place around the corner, I noticed a woman with a bundle in her arms followin' of me. Well, an' you know, Colonel, I'm no sort of man for the female sex, and I get along pretty well without 'em, and I must say, I didn't like the looks of the female with the bundle. So after a bit, feeling sure she had her eyes on me, I stops rather short like. She comes along timid and shy, but I soon saw she was kind of determined, and when she got close to me, I see she had a baby in her arms, just as I had guessed it. The kid was so wrapped up, so I could'n't see its face."

Bill wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Well, when she got close up, she stops, and speaks to me.

"'Mister!' says she—and her voice was sort of out of breath as if she's been a running—'would you please do me a favor?'

"She had a kind of pretty face, mostly eyes, and her voice sounded sort of nice and soft like.

"'Well,' I sez, sez I, 'I don't like refusing to do anything I can for the ladies, and what might be your asking me to do for you?'

"And then she sez, 'Would you be kind enough, mister, to take this bundle to John O'Donovan's in the next block at a hundred and nine Bleecker?'

"'It's a baby,' I sez, sort of amused like."

"'Yes!' she sez, 'it's a baby.' And she hurries the words out. 'They sent me with it from the Home over in Spring street. I was to leave it at O'Donovan's,

but my husband caught me and wouldn't let me bring it earlier. I jest got away from him, seein' he's pretty far gone in liquor, and I'm afraid he'll beat me if I'm gone away long. He's a good man when he don't drink.'

"I began to explain, Colonel, as how we'd take care of him if he beat her, when she went right on again.

"'Please take the baby, mister, down to O'Donovan's for me. They'll be awfully angry at the Home, and the O'Donovans will be mad, and my husband will be mad, and oh, what shall I do!'

"Well, before I knew what was happening, and quick as a snap of your finger, she laid the baby in my arms—and turned on her heel and ran down Bleecker street jest like a streak.

There I was with the bundle of baby in my arms, and she gone like a flash of lightning. It beat any flim-flam game I ever saw. Well, I knew where the O'Donovans lived, all right, as I pass the house every night on the way home. They've got an outside bell, with a shiny brass plate and their name on it. I remembered that about six months ago there was some white crepe tied to the bell, and I heard they had lost their kid. Naturally, I s'posed they were adopting another baby from the Home, and this woman was asked to bring it over.

"So I went along carrying the bundle, which had an old shawl on the outside, and when I got to O'Donovan's I gave a pull on the bell, and had made up my mind to ask for the missus, when the door opened and a youngish, big, six-footed man stood there. I sez, 'Is Mrs. O'Donovan to home?' 'She is,' he sez.

"'I brought her a valentine,' I sez, I don't know jest what made me say those words, cause I'd forgot it was the fourteenth, but I jest blurted it out like that, for I thought, and then I sez, too, 'I'm kind of late, but better late than never.'

"'Come in,' he sez, 'and I'll call Mrs. O'Donovan.'

"In about a minute out comes a young woman, who might have been

mighty pretty if she hadn't looked so cross like. She sort of stared at me with her big eyes, and me standin' there like a fool, holding the baby, which was getting kind of heavy by this time.

"I don't want any valentine," she sez.

"Maybe you'll want this one, Missus O'Donovan," I sez. "Can't we go in by the fire?"

"Come in," sez she, tired-like and heaving a little sigh. "What have you got?"

"Well," I sez, lifting up the bundle which kept slipping down, "I've brought your new baby!"

"Before my words got cold, Colonel, I wished a thousand times I hadn't said it, for that little woman threw up her hands, and let out one scream after another.

"Take it away! take it away, oh, John, John!"

"Well, the tall feller put his arm around her, soothing like, and led her out into another room. I set down in a chair then with the baby in my lap, and presently he came back into the room.

"Mebbe it's smotherin'," sez he.

"Mebbe it is," said I.

"Mebbe we might undo it," sez he.

"Then you get busy," sez I; "this is the first time I ever had one in my arms and I can't get head or tail to it"

"He seemed to be willing, and begun to undo the fastenings, and when it got uncovered, and the kid felt the warm from the fire, and saw the blaze shining, I'll be darned, if it didn't jest look up and smile, and do you know, Colonel, I never knew babies could smile like that."

The captain was sitting quietly, listening intently to Connor's narrative, his teeth closed on an unlighted cigar.

"Well," continued Connor, "this O'Donovan wanted to take up the baby in his arms, and, of course, I let him, for I wasn't going to hold on to it forever.

"What's this?" he sez all of a sudden, and pulls out a letter from somewhere in the baby's clothes, which, by

the way, were kind of cheap and ragged.

"You read it," sez he, and I could see plain enough he didn't want to lay that kid down long enough to do it himself.

"I opened the letter and read it to him, and here it is, Colonel; you can read it yourself."

Detective Connor fumbled in his coat pocket and drew out a letter which he opened and laid on the captain's desk. The captain took up the letter, leaned back in his chair, and, gripping his cigar more tightly between his teeth, read the following:

"This is to be the end of it all—the baby and this letter. I can get no work because I've got a baby, and no one seems to want a woman to work who has a baby with her, and my poor baby is a cripple. Mebbe you think I am wicked to leave my baby and drown myself in the river, which I am going to do tonight. But I am not hard and cruel and I do care, but I ain't so hard as God and the Charities.

"I went to the Charities—went there twice, to their fine rooms, and their cross typewriter girls. They treated me just like I was dirt out of the gutter. They asked me so many questions, and I was so tired and hungry I couldn't think of half the answers. They told me I must get two preachers to sign the paper, and I must leave my address, and I would be investigated and a report would be made in four days. My God! four days and me and the baby starving! I asked for work; they were sorry, but they didn't have any work there. They would take my name and let me know when they had any. So they sent me away.

"There wasn't anything left but the streets. Maggie was crying and I stole a bottle of milk from a doorstep. But I mustn't steal for the police will catch me and then they'll send me to the work-house. I can't go to prison. My baby will grow up and if she found out her mother had been in jail, or on the streets, she would never forgive me, and would have to be ashamed all the rest of her life. Poor little Maggie! I can't take her into the water with me. I can't hurt

little Maggie. Mebbe God will make up for it somehow. The missionary folks talk that way.

"When they pick me up along the river they will know it's me, because my shoes ain't mates—one's black and one's brown. I'm a good woman and her father was an honest man. It was the drink that killed him. Whoever takes Maggie, try to be good to her. Don't let her be ashamed of her father and mother. Margaret O'Donovan."

"Umph!" grunted the captain, as he finished reading the letter. "O'Donovan—same name. Did they know her?"

"No, Colonel," said Connor. "This poor woman found somehow that a family of the same name lived in Blecker street, but they were no relation."

"And you left the baby there?" queried the captain, taking on a softer, kinder tone.

"Sure I did," said Connor. "When the tall young feller heard me read the letter he sort of cuddled the baby up to him.

"'Crippled, is it,' sez he in a whisper, 'like the one we lost.'

"He stood holding the baby in his arms in front of the fire, and then he puts it up over his shoulder, and goes to patting it gently on the back. Jest then his wife—Em'ly, you know he called her Em'ly—she opens the door and looks in from the other room. She was jest going to say something, but didn't as she caught sight of him holding the kid. Then she jest covered her eyes with her hands and gasped, and then came along in very slowly, her eyes uncovered and both of 'em looking straight at the baby. She seemed drawn right up to the kid in spite of herself.

"When she got real close she saw a crooked little foot sticking out. Then she choked and sobbed.

"'John,' sez she.

"'Em'ly,' sez he, and he laughed sad-like, and turned toward her. He held out the kid to her and she took it in her arms and dropped into a chair, hugging the baby and crying.

"The tall feller was still smiling and he turns to me and sez, 'You see, our

baby we lost was a crippled baby, that's why she takes to it so.'

Connor heaved a big sigh of relief.

"That's the whole story, Colonel, only I was out nearly all night trying to find that poor woman.

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It was a coroner's case to be sure, but they tell the story at Duffy's how Big Bill Connor put on a bold front and claimed that the dead woman was an old friend of his and he would attend to the funeral. And Bill did. He bought a little plot on a sunny slope in Calvary, and he had the mother of little Maggie buried there. More than that, he began quietly to do some real detective work on his own account, and he searched the records at the Board of Health, and on the Island, too, and in a short while he found where little Maggie's father was buried among the pauper dead. And they also tell the story at Duffy's how Big Bill had Dennis O'Donovan moved him from the Potter's Feld to Calvary, and how, later on, a small stone bearing the names of Dennis and Margaret was erected to their memory.

It was at Duffy's one Saturday night that Denny, the barkeeper, told these things to O'Donovan, the big tall man of Blecker street, who is very fond of a very pretty baby known to the neighborhood children as Maggie.

The next Sunday morning O'Donovan was wheeling a baby cart past the Sixth Precinct Police Station House when who should he meet but Detective Connor.

Something tempted O'Donovan to speak to Big Bill about the stories he had been hearing at Duffy's. Was it true he had buried little Maggie's father and mother in Calvary? What had been the cost, and could O'Donovan share at least half of the expense?

"Nothing doing, my boy," said Detective Connor. "It was a mere trifle, and I was born to spend money. I wanted little Maggie there, when she grows up, to know where to find her father and mother. And I don't want my only valentine to be ashamed of her folks."