

Davis' Short Stories Vol. 1

by

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The Amateur

I

It was February off the Banks, and so thick was the weather that, on the upper decks, one could have driven a sleigh. Inside the smoking-room Austin Ford, as securely sheltered from the blizzard as though he had been sitting in front of a wood fire at his club, ordered hot gin for himself and the ship's doctor. The ship's doctor had gone below on another "hurry call" from the widow. At the first luncheon on board the widow had sat on the right of Doctor Sparrow, with Austin Ford facing her. But since then, except to the doctor, she had been invisible. So, at frequent intervals, the ill health of the widow had deprived Ford of the society of the doctor. That it deprived him, also, of the society of the widow did not concern him. HER life had not been spent upon ocean liners; she could not remember when state-rooms were named after the States of the Union. She could not tell him of shipwrecks and salvage, of smugglers and of the modern pirates who found their victims in the smoking-room.

Ford was on his way to England to act as the London correspondent of the New York Republic. For three years on that most sensational of the New York dailies he had been the star man, the chief muckraker, the chief sleuth. His interest was in crime. Not in crimes committed in passion or inspired by drink, but in such offences against law and society as are perpetrated with nice intelligence. The murderer, the burglar, the strong-arm men who, in side streets, waylay respectable citizens did not appeal to him. The man he studied, pursued, and exposed was the cashier who evolved a new method of covering up his peculations, the dishonest president of an insurance company, the confidence man who used no concealed weapon other than his wit. Toward the criminals he pursued young Ford felt no personal animosity. He harassed them as he would have shot a hawk killing chickens. Not because he disliked the hawk, but because the battle was unequal, and because he felt sorry for the chickens.

Had you called Austin Ford an amateur detective he would have been greatly annoyed. He argued that his position was similar to that of the dramatic critic. The dramatic critic warned the public against bad plays; Ford warned it against bad men. Having done that, he left it to the public to determine whether the bad man should thrive or perish.

When the managing editor told him of his appointment to London, Ford had protested that his work lay in New York; that of London and the English, except as a tourist and sight-seer, he knew nothing.

"That's just why we are sending you," explained the managing editor. "Our readers are ignorant. To make them read about London you've got to tell them about themselves in London. They like to know who's been presented at court, about the American girls who have married dukes; and which ones opened a bazaar, and which one opened a hat shop, and which is getting a divorce. Don't send us anything concerning suffragettes and

Dreadnaughts. Just send us stuff about Americans. If you take your meals in the Carlton grill-room and drink at the Cecil you can pick up more good stories than we can print. You will find lots of your friends over there. Some of those girls who married dukes," he suggested, "know you, don't they?"

"Not since they married dukes," said Ford.

"Well, anyway, all your other friends will be there," continued the managing editor encouragingly. "Now that they have shut up the tracks here all the con men have gone to London. They say an American can't take a drink at the Salisbury without his fellow-countrymen having a fight as to which one will sell him a gold brick."

Ford's eyes lightened in pleasurable anticipation.

"Look them over," urged the managing editor, "and send us a special. Call it 'The American Invasion.' Don't you see a story in it?"

"It will be the first one I send you," said Ford. The ship's doctor returned from his visit below decks and sank into the leather cushion close to Ford's elbow. For a few moments the older man sipped doubtfully at his gin and water, and, as though perplexed, rubbed his hand over his bald and shining head. "I told her to talk to you," he said fretfully.

"Her? Who?" inquired Ford. "Oh, the widow?"

"You were right about that," said Doctor Sparrow; "she is not a widow."

The reporter smiled complacently.

"Do you know why I thought not?" he demanded. "Because all the time she was at luncheon she kept turning over her wedding-ring as though she was not used to it. It was a new ring, too. I told you then she was not a widow."

"Do you always notice things like that?" asked the doctor.

"Not on purpose," said the amateur detective; "I can't help it. I see ten things where other people see only one; just as some men run ten times as fast as other men. We have tried it out often at the office; put all sorts of junk under a newspaper, lifted the newspaper for five seconds, and then each man wrote down what he had seen. Out of twenty things I would remember seventeen. The next best guess would be about nine. Once I saw a man lift his coat collar to hide his face. It was in the Grand Central Station. I stopped him, and told him he was wanted. Turned out he WAS wanted. It was Goldberg, making his getaway to Canada."

"It is a gift," said the doctor.

"No, it's a nuisance," laughed the reporter. "I see so many things I don't want to see. I see that people are wearing clothes that are not made for them. I see when women are lying to me. I can see when men are on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and whether it is drink or debt or morphine--"

The doctor snorted triumphantly.

"You did not see that the widow was on the verge of a breakdown!"

"No," returned the reporter. "Is she? I'm sorry."

"If you're sorry," urged the doctor eagerly, "you'll help her. She is going to London alone to find her husband. He has disappeared. She thinks that he has been murdered, or that he is lying ill in some hospital. I told her if any one could help her to find him you could. I had to say something. She's very ill."

"To find her husband in London?" repeated Ford. "London is a large town."

"She has photographs of him and she knows where he spends his time," pleaded the doctor. "He is a company promoter. It should be easy for you."

"Maybe he doesn't want her to find him," said Ford. "Then it wouldn't be so easy for me."

The old doctor sighed heavily. "I know," he murmured. "I thought of that, too. And she is so very pretty."

"That was another thing I noticed," said Ford.

The doctor gave no heed.

"She must stop worrying," he exclaimed, "or she will have a mental collapse. I have tried sedatives, but they don't touch her. I want to give her courage. She is frightened. She's left a baby boy at home, and she's fearful that something will happen to him, and she's frightened at being at sea, frightened at being alone in London; it's pitiful." The old man shook his head. "Pitiful! Will you talk to her now?" he asked.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Ford. "She doesn't want to tell the story of her life to strange young men."

"But it was she suggested it," cried the doctor. "She asked me if you were Austin Ford, the great detective."

Ford snorted scornfully. "She did not!" he protested. His tone was that of a man who hopes to be contradicted.

"But she did," insisted the doctor, "and I told her your specialty was tracing persons. Her face lightened at once; it gave her hope. She will listen to you. Speak very gently and kindly and confidently. Say you are sure you can find him."

"Where is the lady now?" asked Ford.

Doctor Sparrow scrambled eagerly to his feet. "She cannot leave her cabin," he answered.

The widow, as Ford and Doctor Sparrow still thought of her, was lying on the sofa that ran the length of the state-room, parallel with the lower berth. She was fully dressed, except that instead of her bodice she wore a kimono that left her throat and arms bare. She had been sleeping, and when their entrance awoke her, her blue eyes regarded them uncomprehendingly. Ford, hidden from her by the doctor, observed that not only was she very pretty, but that she was absurdly young, and that the drowsy smile she turned upon the old man before she noted the presence of Ford was as innocent as that of a baby. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes brilliant, her yellow curls had become loosened and were spread upon the pillow. When she saw Ford she caught the kimono so closely around her throat that she choked. Had the doctor not pushed her down she would have stood.

"I thought," she stammered, "he was an OLD man."

The doctor, misunderstanding, hastened to reassure her. "Mr. Ford is old in experience," he said soothingly. "He has had remarkable success. Why, he found a criminal once just because the man wore a collar. And he found Walsh, the burglar, and Phillips, the forger, and a gang of counterfeiters--"

Mrs. Ashton turned upon him, her eyes wide with wonder. "But MY husband," she protested, "is not a criminal!"

"My dear lady!" the doctor cried. "I did not mean that, of course not. I meant, if Mr. Ford can find men who don't wish to be found, how easy for him to find a man who--" He turned helplessly to Ford. "You tell her," he begged.

Ford sat down on a steamer trunk that protruded from beneath the berth, and, turning to the widow, gave her the full benefit of his working smile. It was confiding, helpless, appealing. It showed a trustfulness in the person to whom it was addressed that caused that individual to believe Ford needed protection from a wicked world.

"Doctor Sparrow tells me," began Ford timidly, "you have lost your husband's address; that you will let me try to find him. If I can help in any way I should be glad."

The young girl regarded him, apparently, with disappointment. It was as though Doctor Sparrow had led her to expect a man full of years and authority, a man upon whom she could lean; not a youth whose smile seemed to beg one not to scold him. She gave Ford three photographs, bound together with a string.

"When Doctor Sparrow told me you could help me I got out these," she said.

Ford jotted down a mental note to the effect that she "got them out." That is, she did not keep them where she could always look at them. That she was not used to look at them was evident by the fact that they were bound together.

The first photograph showed three men standing in an open place and leaning on a railing. One of them was smiling toward the photographer. He was a good-looking young man of about thirty years of age, well fed, well dressed, and apparently well satisfied with the world and himself. Ford's own smile had disappeared. His eyes were alert and interested.

"The one with the Panama hat pulled down over his eyes is your husband?" he asked.

"Yes," assented the widow. Her tone showed slight surprise.

"This was taken about a year ago?" inquired Ford. "Must have been," he answered himself; "they haven't raced at the Bay since then. This was taken in front of the club stand--probably for the Telegraph?" He lifted his eyes inquiringly.

Rising on her elbow the young wife bent forward toward the photograph. "Does it say that there," she asked doubtfully. "How did you guess that?"

In his role as chorus the ship's doctor exclaimed with enthusiasm: "Didn't I tell you? He's wonderful."

Ford cut him off impatiently. "You never saw a rail as high as that except around a racetrack," he muttered. "And the badge in his buttonhole and the angle of the stand all show--"

He interrupted himself to address the widow. "This is an owner's badge. What was the name of his stable?"

"I don't know," she answered. She regarded the young man with sudden uneasiness. "They only owned one horse, but I believe that gave them the privilege of--"

"I see," exclaimed Ford. "Your husband is a bookmaker. But in London he is a promoter of companies."

"So my friend tells me," said Mrs. Ashton. "She's just got back from London. Her husband told her that Harry, my husband, was always at the American bar in the Cecil or at the Salisbury or the Savoy." The girl shook her head. "But a woman can't go looking for a man there," she protested. "That's, why I thought you--"

"That'll be all right," Ford assured her hurriedly. "It's a coincidence, but it happens that my own work takes me to these hotels, and if your husband is there I will find him." He returned the photographs.

"Hadn't you better keep one?" she asked.

"I won't forget him," said the reporter. "Besides"--he turned his eyes toward the doctor and, as though thinking aloud, said--"he may have grown a beard."

There was a pause.

The eyes of the woman grew troubled. Her lips pressed together as though in a sudden access of pain.

"And he may," Ford continued, "have changed his name."

As though fearful, if she spoke, the tears would fall, the girl nodded her head stiffly.

Having learned what he wanted to know Ford applied to the wound a soothing ointment of promises and encouragement.

"He's as good as found," he protested. "You will see him in a day, two days after you land."

The girl's eyes opened happily. She clasped her hands together and raised them.

"You will try?" she begged. "You will find him for me"--she corrected herself eagerly--"for me and the baby?"

The loose sleeves of the kimono fell back to her shoulders showing the white arms; the eyes raised to Ford were glistening with tears.

"Of course I will find him," growled the reporter.

He freed himself from the appeal in the eyes of the young mother and left the cabin. The doctor followed. He was bubbling over with enthusiasm.

"That was fine!" he cried. "You said just the right thing. There will be no collapse now."

His satisfaction was swept away in a burst of disgust.

"The blackguard!" he protested. "To desert a wife as young as that and as pretty as that."

"So I have been thinking," said the reporter. "I guess, he added gravely, "what is going to happen is that before I find her husband I will have got to know him pretty well."

Apparently, young Mrs. Ashton believed everything would come to pass just as Ford promised it would and as he chose to order it; for the next day, with a color not born of fever in her cheeks and courage in her eyes, she joined Ford and the doctor at the luncheon-table. Her attention was concentrated on the younger man. In him she saw the one person who could bring her husband to her.

"She acts," growled the doctor later in the smoking-room, "as though she was afraid you were going to back out of your promise and jump overboard."

"Don't think," he protested violently, "it's you she's interested in. All she sees in you is what you can do for her. Can you see that?"

"Any one as clever at seeing things as I am," returned the reporter, "cannot help but see that."

Later, as Ford was walking on the upper deck, Mrs. Ashton came toward him, beating her way against the wind. Without a trace of coquetry or self-consciousness, and with a sigh of content, she laid her hand on his arm.

"When I don't see you," she exclaimed as simply as a child, "I feel so frightened. When I see you I know all will come right. Do you mind if I walk with you?" she asked. "And do you mind if every now and then I ask you to tell me again it will all come right?"

For the three days following Mrs. Ashton and Ford were constantly together. Or, at least, Mrs. Ashton was constantly with Ford. She told him that when she sat in her cabin the old fears returned to her, and in these moments of panic she searched the ship for him.

The doctor protested that he was growing jealous.

"I'm not so greatly to be envied," suggested Ford. "'Harry' at meals three times a day and on deck all the rest of the day becomes monotonous. On a closer acquaintance with Harry he seems to be a decent sort of a young man; at least he seems to have been at one time very much in love with her."

"Well," sighed the doctor sentimentally, "she is certainly very much in love with Harry."

Ford shook his head non-committingly. "I don't know her story," he said. "Don't want to know it."

The ship was in the channel, on her way to Cherbourg, and running as smoothly as a clock. From the shore friendly lights told them they were nearing their journey's end; that the land was on every side. Seated on a steamer-chair next to his in the semi-darkness of the deck, Mrs. Ashton began to talk nervously and eagerly.

"Now that we are so near," she murmured, "I have got to tell you something. If you did not know I would feel I had not been fair. You might think that when you were doing so much for me I should have been more honest."

She drew a long breath. "It's so hard," she said.

"Wait," commanded Ford. "Is it going to help me to find him?"

"No."

"Then don't tell me."

His tone caused the girl to start. She leaned toward him and peered into his face. His eyes, as he looked back to her, were kind and comprehending.

"You mean," said the amateur detective, "that your husband has deserted you. That if it were not for the baby you would not try to find him. Is that it?"

Mrs. Ashton breathed quickly and turned her face away.

"Yes," she whispered. "That is it."

There was a long pause. When she faced him again the fact that there was no longer a secret between them seemed to give her courage.

"Maybe," she said, "you can understand. Maybe you can tell me what it means. I have thought and thought. I have gone over it and over it until when I go back to it my head aches. I have done nothing else but think, and I can't make it seem better. I can't find any excuse. I have had no one to talk to, no one I could tell. I have thought maybe a man could understand." She raised her eyes appealingly.

"If you can only make it seem less cruel. Don't you see," she cried miserably, "I want to believe; I want to forgive him. I want to think he loves me. Oh! I want so to be able to love him; but how can I? I can't! I can't!"

In the week in which they had been thrown together the girl unconsciously had told Ford much about herself and her husband. What she now told him was but an amplification of what he had guessed.

She had met Ashton a year and a half before, when she had just left school at the convent and had returned to live with her family. Her home was at Far Rockaway. Her father was a cashier in a bank at Long Island City. One night, with a party of friends, she had been taken to a dance at one of the beach hotels, and there met Ashton. At that time he was one of a firm that was making book at the Aqueduct race-track. The girl had met very few men and with them was shy and frightened, but with Ashton she found herself at once at ease. That night he drove her and her friends home in his touring-car and the next day

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