A Psychical Prank

John Kendrick Bangs

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I

Willis had met Miss Hollister but once, and that, for a certain purpose, was sufficient. He was smitten. She represented in every way his ideal, although until he had met her his ideal had been something radically different. She was not at all Junoesque, and the maiden of his dreams had been decidedly so. She had auburn hair, which hitherto Willis had detested. Indeed, if the same hirsute wealth had adorned some other woman's head, Willis would have called it red. This shows how completely he was smitten. She changed his point of view entirely. She shattered his old ideal and set herself up in its stead, and she did most of it with a smile.

There was something, however, about Miss Hollister's eyes that contributed to the smiling of Willis's heart. They were great round lustrous orbs, and deep. So deep were they and so penetrating that Willis's affections were away beyond their own depth the moment Miss Hollister's eyes looked into his, and at the same time he had a dim and slightly uncomfortable notion that she could read every thought his mind held within its folds—or rather, that she could see how utterly devoid of thought that mind was upon this ecstatic occasion, for Willis's brain was set all agog by the sensations of the moment.

"By Jove!" he said to himself afterwards—for Willis, wise man that he could be on occasions, was his own confidant, to the exclusion of all others—"by Jove! I believe she can peer into my very soul; and if she can, my hopes are blasted, for she must be able to see that a soul like mine is no more worthy to become the affinity of one like hers than a mountain rill can hope to rival the Amazon."

Nevertheless, Willis did hope.

"Something may turn up, and perhaps—perhaps I can devise some scheme by means of which my imperfections can be hidden from her. Maybe I can put stained glass over the windows of my soul, and keep her from looking through them at my shortcomings. Smoked glasses, perhaps— and why not? If smoked glasses can be used by mortals gazing at the sun, why may they not be used by me when gazing into those scarcely less glorious orbs of hers?"

Alas for Willis! The fates were against him. A far−off tribe of fates were in league to blast his chances of success forever, and this was how it happened:

Willis had occasion one afternoon to come up town early. At the corner of Broadway and Astor Place he entered a Madison Avenue car, paid his fare, and sat down in one of the corner seats at the rear end of the car. His mind was, as usual, intent upon the glorious Miss Hollister.

Surely no one who had once met her could do otherwise than think of her constantly, he reflected and the reflection made him a bit jealous. What business had others to think of her? Impertinent, grovelling mortals! No man was good enough to do that—no, not even himself. But he could change. He could at least try to be worthy of thinking about her, and he knew of no other man who could. He'd like to catch any one else doing so little as mentioning her name!

"Impertinent, grovelling mortals!" he repeated.

And then the car stopped at Seventeenth Street, and who should step on board but Miss Hollister herself!."The idea!" thought Willis. "By Jove there she is—on a horse−car, too! How atrocious! One might as well expect to see Minerva driving in a grocer's wagon as Miss Hollister in a horse−car.

Miserable, untactful world to compel Minerva to ride in a horse−cart, or rather Miss Hollister to ride in a grocer's car! Absurdest of absurdities!"

Here he raised his hat, for Miss Hollister had bowed sweetly to him as she passed on to the far end of the car, where she stood haning on to a strap.

"I wonder why she doesn't sit down?" thought Willis; for as he looked about the car he observed that with the exception of the one he occupied all the seats were vacant. In fact, the only persons on board were Miss Hollister, the driver, the conductor, and himself.

"I think I'll go speak to her," he thought. And then he thought again: "No, I'd better not. She saw me when she entered, and if she had wished to speak to me she would have sat clown here beside me, or opposite me perhaps. I shall show myself worthy of her by not thrusting my presence upon her. But I wonder why she stands? She looks tired enough."

Here Miss Hollister indulged in a very singular performance. She bowed her head slightly at some one,

apparently on the sidewalk, Willis thought, murmured something, the purport of which Willis could not catch, and sat down in the middle of the seat on the other side of the car, looking very much annoyed—in fact, almost unamiable.

Willis was more mystified than ever; but his mystification was as nothing compared to his anxiety when, on reaching Forty−second Street, Miss Hollister rose, and sweeping by him without a sign of recognition, left the car.

"Cut, by thunder!" ejaculated Willis, in consternation. "And why, I wonder? Most incomprehensible affair. Can she be a woman of whims—with eyes like those? Never.

Impossible. And yet what else can be the matter?"

Try as he might, Willis could not solve the problem. It was utterly past solution as far as he was concerned.

"I'll find out, and I'll find out like a brave man," he said, after racking his brains for an hour or two in a vain endeavor to get at the cause of Miss Hollister's cut. "I'll call upon her to−night and ask her."

He was true to his first purpose, but not to his second. He called, but he did not ask her, for Miss Hollister did not give him the chance to do so. Upon receiving his card she sent down word that she was out. Two days later, meeting him face to face upon the street, she gazed coldly at him, and cut him once more. Six months later her engagement to a Boston man was announced, and in the autumn following Miss Hollister of New York became Mrs. Barrows of Boston. There were cards, but Willis did not receive one of them. The cut was indeed complete and final. But why? That had now become one of the great problems of Willis's life. What had he done to be so badly treated?

II

A year passed by, and Willis recovered from the dreadful blow to his hopes, but he often puzzled over Miss Hollister's singular behavior towards him. He had placed the matter before several of his friends, and, with the exception of one of them, none was more capable of solving his problem than he. This one had heard from his wife, a school friend and intimate acquaintance of Miss Hollister, now Mrs. Barrows, that Willis's ideal had once expressed herself to the effect that she had admired Willis very much until she had discovered that he was not always as courteous as he should be.

"Courteous? Not as courteous as I should be?" retorted Willis. "When have I ever been anything else? Why, my dear Bronson," he added, "you know what my attitude towards womankind—as well as mankind—has always been. If there is a creature in the world whose politeness is his weakness. I am that creature. I'm the most courteous man living. When I play poker in my own rooms I lose money, because I've made it a rule never to beat my guests in cards or anything else."

"That isn't politeness," said Bronson. "That's idiocy."

"It proves my point," retorted Willis. "I'm polite to the verge of insanity. Not as courteous as I should be! Great Scott! What did I ever do or say to give her that idea?"

"I don't know," Bronson replied. "Better ask her. Maybe you overdid your politeness.

Overdone courtesy is often worse than boorishness. You may have been so polite on some occasion that you made Miss Hollister think you considered her an inferior person. You know what the poet insinuated. Sorosis holds no fury like a woman condescended to by a man."

"I've half a mind to write to Mrs. Barrows and ask her what I did," said Willis.

"That would be lovely," said Bronson. "Barrows would be pleased."

"True. I never thought of that," replied Willis.

"You are not a thoughtful thinker," said Bronson, dryly. "If I were you I'd hide my time, and some day you may get an explanation. Stranger things have happened; and my wife tells me that the Barrowses are to spend the coming winter in New York. You'll meet them out somewhere, no doubt."

"No; I shall decline to go where they are. No woman shall cut me a second time—not even Mrs. Barrows," said Willis, firmly.

"Good! Stand by your colors," said Bronson, with an amused smile.

A week or two later Willis received an invitation from Mr. and Mrs. Bronson to dine with them informally. "I have some very clever friends I want you to meet," she wrote. "So be sure to come.

Willis went. The clever friends were Mr. and Mrs. Barrows; and, to the surprise of Willis, he was received most effusively by the quondam Miss Hollister.

"Why, Mr. Willis," she said, extending her hand to him. "How delightful to see you again!"

"Thank you," said Willis, in some confusion. "I—er—I am sure it is a very pleasant surprise for me. I—er——had no idea—"

"Nor I," returned Mrs. Barrows. "And really I should have been a little embarrassed, I think, had I known you were to be here. I—ha! ha!—it's so very absurd that I almost hesitate to speak of it—but I feel I must. I've treated you very badly."

"Indeed!" said Willis, with a smile. "How, pray?"

"Well, it wasn't my fault really," returned Mrs. Barrows; "but do you remember, a little over a year ago, my riding up−town on a horse−car—a Madison Avenue car—with you?"

"H'm!" said Willis, with an affectation of reflection. "Let me see; ah—yes—I think I do. We were the only ones on board, I believe, and—ah—"

Here Mrs. Barrows laughed outright. "You thought we were the only ones on board, but—we weren't. The car was crowded," she said.

"Then I don't remember it," said Willis.

"The only time I ever rode on a horse−car with you to my knowledge was—"

"I know; this was the occasion," interrupted Mrs. Barrows. "You sat in a corner at the rear end of the car when I entered, and I was very much put out with you because it remained for a stranger, whom I had often seen and to

whom I had, for reasons unknown even to myself, taken a deep aversion, to offer me his seat, and, what is more, compel me to take it."

"I don't understand," said Willis. "We were alone on the car."

"To your eyes we were, although at the time I did not know it. To my eyes when I boarded it the car was occupied by enough people to fill all the seats. You returned my bow as I entered, but did not offer me your seat. The stranger did, and while I tried to decline it, I was unable to do so. He was a man of about my own age, and he had a most remarkable pair of eyes. There was no resisting them. His offer was a command; and as I rode along and thought of your sitting motionless at the end of the car, compelling me to stand, and being indirectly responsible for my acceptance of courtesies from a total and disagreeable stranger, I became so very indignant with you that I passed you without recognition as soon as I could summon up courage to leave. I could not understand why you, who had seemed to me to be the soul of politeness, should upon this occasion have failed to do not what I should exact from any man, but what I had reason to expect of you."

"But, Mrs. Barrows," remonstrated Willis, "why should I give up a seat to a lady when there were twenty other seats unoccupied on the same car?"

"There is no reason in the world why you should," replied Mrs. Barrows. "But it was not until last winter that I discovered the trick that had been put upon us."

"Ah?" said Willis. "Trick?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Barrows. "It was a trick. The car was, empty to your eyes, but crowded to mine with the astral bodies of the members of the Boston Theosophical Society."

"Wha−a−at?" roared Willis.

"It is just as I have said," replied Mrs. Barrows, with a silvery laugh. "They are all great friends of my husband's, and one night last winter he dined them at our house, and who do you suppose walked in first?"

"Madame Blavatsky's ghost?" suggested Willis, with a grin.

"Not quite," returned Mrs. Barrows. "But the horrible stranger of the horse−car; and, do you know, he recalled the whole thing to my mind, assuring me that he and the others had projected their astral bodies over to New York for a week, and had a magnificent time unperceived by all save myself, who was unconsciously psychic, and so able to perceive them in their invisible forms."

"It was a mean trick on me, Mrs. Barrows," said Willis, ruefully, as soon as he had recovered sufficiently from his surprise to speak.

"Oh no," she replied, with a repetition of her charming laugh, which rearoused in Willis's breast all the regrets of a lost cause. They didn't intend it especially for you, anyhow."

"Well," said Willis, "I think they did. They were friends of your husband's, and they wanted to ruin me."

"Ruin you? And why should the friends of Mr. Barrows have wished to do that?" asked Mrs.

Barrows, in astonishment.

"Because," began Willis, slowly and softly—"because they probably knew that from the moment I met you, I— But that is a story with a disagreeable climax, Mrs. Barrows, so I shall not tell it. How do you like Boston?"