

Was It a Wraith?

It Smelled a Smell of the Sea and Saward With a Letter

By F. A. MITCHELL

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Kate Langdon was a character. Not especially pretty, she had a way with her that first attracted people's attention, then won them. Some said she was very deep, others that she was a simple child of nature. She was certainly reckless. She would flirt with several men at a time without heeding the consequences and when cornered would, if possible, dodge them all by flight, leaving them to settle the matter among themselves.

And so it was that some blamed her. Others defended her, but all were puzzled by her. It was very interesting to see a middle come upon the edge of the vortex, get drawn in, drop out, giving place perhaps to a fellow cad, perhaps to an officer. Whether the girl realized the wrong she was often doing, whether she was unconscious of it or whether she had no appreciation of the tenderness of men's hearts, certain it is that she never seemed either ashamed of her conquests or proud of them. Indeed, she gave every evidence that she regretted them.

A fine field for such girls is either the West Point or Annapolis academy, where young men are trained for the army or navy. Kate Langdon the year of the breaking out of the Spanish American war visited the Naval academy as the guest of her aunt, Mrs. Lyall, the wife of one of the professors. She hadn't been there a week before she had half a dozen cadets "by the ears."

In the class to be graduated the following spring were two young men, Hector Peckham and Leslie Holt. Both met Kate Langdon, and both fell violently in love with her. In the government academy the standard of honor is very high. Neither of the cadets would take the slightest advantage of the other, but neither could find out which was really the favored one. Nor were they ever sure but that one of several other cadets might not after all carry off the prize.

Peckham finally won. Kate gave him her heart and, to the surprise of every one, gave him the whole of it. There were a number of disappointed cadets in consequence of this victory, the most serious of which was Leslie Holt. Kate had given him a great deal of encouragement and for some time after she came to a decision hadn't the heart to break with him. When it finally came out that Peckham had won, Holt went to see her to ask if the news were true. She confessed, and he told her that she had wrecked his life.

Young men have said this before to young women, to marry some other and live happily. Some have remained single, cherishing their idol in their hearts, to meet that idol when past middle age and find it demolished. Holt so long as he lived did not live long never recovered from his situation. The words he used at his last meeting with Kate Langdon made the first change in her. By them her light, gladsome nature received its first sobering.

Meanwhile the Cuban war was coming on, and ships and munitions were being hurriedly put in condition for war. And the cadets, too, were being hurried on in their academic course, to be graduated as soon as hostilities commenced.

The following spring Peckham and Holt were graduated and assigned to a war vessel sailing for Cuba. Peckham and Kate were married before he sailed. The wedding was notable for the number of disappointed young men in attendance. But every man of them swore by the bride and considered the groom the luckiest man that had ever wooed woman.

Kate, having joined the navy matrimonially, felt at home at a naval station, and her aunt, who adored her, invited her to remain with her indefinitely. So Kate stayed where she would be in touch with her husband far more than at home. That was an exciting summer. First came news of the fight in Manila bay, then the entrance of the Spanish Admiral Cervera's fleet into Cuban waters, his attempt to escape and its destruction.

Peckham and Holt went through this last fight, and when it was over the latter officer was ordered to the command of a small supply boat and directed to sail for the Brooklyn navy yard.

"Can I do anything for you at home?" he asked of Peckham.

"Nothing, unless you will take a letter for my wife. You can mail it as soon as you get to Brooklyn."

"With pleasure," replied Holt.

Peckham wrote a short note to his wife and gave it to Holt.

"The trap I'm to command is not very seaworthy," said the latter. "If I meet a big blow I may not get through. But I promise you, Hector, that your wife shall have the letter."

Peckham hoped that his friend would get through safely, and they parted.

One morning young Mrs. Peckham was sitting in her room at Annapolis reading accounts of the naval fight off Cuba—she had read them many times before—when a draft blew open the door and there came into the room a

strong smell of the sea. Standing before the opening was Leslie Holt, pale and exhausted.

"Why, Mr. Holt!" exclaimed Mrs. Peckham.

Without a word he handed her a letter. Thinking it to be from her husband or that it might bring her bad news from him, her attention was momentarily turned from its bearer to the letter. It bore evidence of having been wet. A dampness clung to it and the letters of the superscription had run together. She tore it open and read it. It was simply an announcement that the writer was well and hoped before many weeks to return to her. Having satisfied herself that it boded no harm to the man she loved, she turned to its bearer. He was not there.

Thinking that what had passed between them before her marriage had led him to go away without even having been thanked, she tossed the letter on a table and ran out into the hall to stop him. Not finding him in the hall, she went out on to the porch. He was not there, nor was he anywhere to be seen, though there was nothing for some distance to obstruct her vision.

"Strange!" she said to herself and returned to her room, a fear coming over her that the affair was in some way connected with a misfortune to her husband. Going to the table, she was about to snatch up the letter when she saw that it was not where she had put it. Looking on the floor for it, she did not find it.

"I'm sure something has happened to Hector," she moaned. "Leslie Holt slipped away on purpose so that he wouldn't have to say anything to me about it. But how pale he looked and how exhausted!"

Thinking a draft might have blown the letter off the table, she looked about until she saw something of a light brownish color in a corner. Sure that it was the letter, which had been discolored, she seized it. What was her surprise to find a seaweed.

There was something so uncanny in all this that she was now thoroughly frightened. Dropping the seaweed, she put both hands to her temples in an effort to regain her equilibrium. Then, rushing out of the room, she ran into her aunt and sank in a swoon.

Ten minutes later Dr. Cogswell, medical officer at the academy, was called to Professor Lyall's quarters. He found Mrs. Peckham lying on a bed in a high state of nervous excitement.

Mrs. Lyall told the doctor, before he saw the patient, the story her niece had told her, and he did not permit the invalid to go over it again. He said that the expectation for a long while that her husband would at any time participate in a naval engagement and the excitement attending the recent fight had been a strain upon her nerves that had produced hallucination. He prescribed a sedative and left directions that she was to be kept quiet.

But Mrs. Peckham did not recover from the strain as soon as was expected. And one morning something occurred to give her a terrible back set. A telegram from Key West appeared in a morning paper stating that a little naval tender, commanded by Leslie Holt, had been wrecked on one of the keys and all on board had been lost.

Mrs. Lyall kept this news from her niece as long as she dared, hoping the invalid would gain strength and there would be less danger in communicating it to her. Finally, fearing that Kate might hear it from others, she told her of young Holt's death.

If anything was needed to complete the conviction that the wraith of the man who had told her she had wrecked his life had visited her, the announcement of his death supplied it. A subsequent letter, however, from Peckham served to lighten the blow. Kate felt that the matter had no reference to her husband; it was between her and Leslie Holt. She considered it a punishment for having trifled with him and brooded and brooded, and all efforts on the part of her friends to convince her that there was nothing in it except a creation of her own brain under a nervous strain were fruitless.

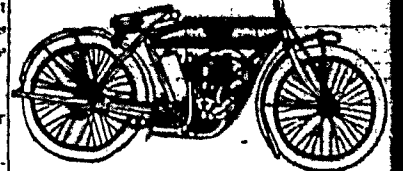
In time Peckham came north, and it was hoped that his presence would lift the cloud that hung over his wife. It helped her, but did not cure her. She went about as before, but how changed! "What a sad sight is Mrs. Peckham," said one of the men with whom she had trifled—one of the older ones, an officer. The matter proves the innocence of her action when so many of us were attentive to her. Wicked people are not remorseful. The tender consciences are usually to be found in innocence. Had she been a heartless, wicked flirt, the fact that she had wrecked a man's life would have pleased her. Instead of this, his telling her that she had wrecked his life wrecked hers. He should not have said such a thing to her, and he would not have said it had he been older and realized the effect it would have on her.

It is a decade since this shock came to Mrs. Peckham, and, although it has somewhat worn away, it has left its effects. She is still beloved, for at heart she is the same innocent woman, though very different from the days of her girlhood. Every one except herself refers the visit of the wraith to a shock coming from overstrained nerves. She would as soon doubt her existence as doubt the reality of the visit. After sufficiently recovering to talk about it she declared that she not only smelled the salt air of the sea, but saw Leslie Holt standing before her—not lifelike, it is true, because he was very pale, and he had the appearance of having been in the water. The only thing to prove her position was the letter she received and the seaweed, but that disappeared during her first shock and never was recovered.



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