

A Strange Disappearance

by

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1. A Novel Case

"Talking of sudden disappearances the one you mention of Hannah in that Leavenworth case of ours, is not the only remarkable one which has come under my direct notice. Indeed, I know of another that in some respects, at least, surpasses that in points of interest, and if you will promise not to inquire into the real names of the parties concerned, as the affair is a secret, I will relate you my experience regarding it."

The speaker was Q, the rising young detective, universally acknowledged by us of the force as the most astute man for mysterious and unprecedented cases, then in the bureau, always and of course excepting Mr. Gryce; and such a statement from him could not but arouse our deepest curiosity. Drawing up, then, to the stove around which we were sitting in lazy enjoyment of one of those off-hours so dear to a detective's heart, we gave with alacrity the required promise; and settling himself back with the satisfied air of a man who has a good story to tell that does not entirely lack certain points redounding to his own credit, he began:

I was one Sunday morning loitering at the ----- Precinct Station, when the door opened and a respectable-looking middle-aged woman came in, whose agitated air at once attracted my attention. Going up to her, I asked her what she wanted. "A detective," she replied, glancing cautiously about on the faces of the various men scattered through the room. "I don't wish anything said about it, but a girl disappeared from our house last night, and"--she stopped here, her emotion seeming to choke her--"and I want some one to look her up," she went on at last with the most intense emphasis.

"A girl? what kind of a girl; and what house do you mean when you say our house?"

She looked at me keenly before replying. "You are a young man," said she; "isn't there some one here more responsible than yourself that I can talk to?"

I shrugged my shoulders and beckoned to Mr. Gryce who was just then passing. She at once seemed to put confidence in him. Drawing him aside, she whispered a few low eager words which I could not hear. He listened nonchalantly for a moment but suddenly made a move which I knew indicated strong and surprised interest, though from his face--but you know what Gryce's face is. I was about to walk off, convinced he had got hold of something he would prefer to manage himself, when the Superintendent came in.

"Where is Gryce?" asked he; "tell him I want him."

Mr. Gryce heard him and hastened forward. As he passed me, he whispered, "Take a man and go with this woman; look into matters and send me word if you want me; I will be here for two hours."

I did not need a second permission. Beckoning to Harris, I reapproached the woman. "Where do you come from," said I, "I am to go back with you and investigate the affair it seems."

"Did he say so?" she asked, pointing to Mr. Gryce who now stood with his back to us busily talking with the Superintendent.

I nodded, and she at once moved towards the door. "I come from No. ---- Second Avenue: Mr. Blake's house," she whispered, uttering a name so well known, I at once understood Mr. Gryce's movement of sudden interest "A girl--one who sewed for us--disappeared last night in a way to alarm us very much. She was taken from her room--" "Yes," she cried vehemently, seeing my look of sarcastic incredulity, "taken from her room; she never went of her own accord; and she must be found if I spend every dollar of the pittance I have laid up in the bank against my old age."

Her manner was so intense, her tone so marked and her words so vehement, I at once and naturally asked if the girl was a relative of hers that she felt her abduction so keenly.

"No," she replied, "not a relative, but," she went on, looking every way but in my face, "a very dear friend--a--a--protegee, I think they call it, of mine; I--I--She must be found," she again reiterated.

We were by this time in the street.

"Nothing must be said about it," she now whispered, catching me by the arm. "I told him so," nodding back to the building from which we had just issued, "and he promised secrecy. It can be done without folks knowing anything about it, can't it?"

"What?" I asked.

"Finding the girl."

"Well," said I, "we can tell you better about that when we know a few more of the facts. What is the girl's name and what makes you think she didn't go out of the house-door of her own accord?"

"Why, why, everything. She wasn't the person to do it; then the looks of her room, and--They all got out of the window," she cried suddenly, "and went away by the side gate into ----- Street."

"They? Who do you mean by they?"

"Why, whoever they were who carried her off."

I could not suppress the "bah!" that rose to my lips. Mr. Gryce might have been able to, but I am not Gryce.

"You don't believe," said she, "that she was carried off?"

"Well, no," said I, "not in the sense you mean."

She gave another nod back to the police station now a block or so distant. "He didn't seem to doubt it at all."

I laughed. "Did you tell him you thought she had been taken off in this way?"

"Yes, and he said, 'Very likely.' And well he might, for I heard the men talking in her room, and--"

"You heard men talking in her room--when?"

"O, it must have been as late as half-past twelve. I had been asleep and the noise they made whispering, woke me."

"Wait," I said, "tell me where her room is, hers and yours."

"Hers is the third story back, mine the front one on the same floor."

"Who are you?" I now inquired. "What position do you occupy in Mr. Blake's house?"

"I am the housekeeper."

Mr. Blake was a bachelor.

"And you were wakened last night by hearing whispering which seemed to come from this girl's room."

"Yes, I at first thought it was the folks next door,--we often hear them when they are unusually noisy,--but soon I became assured it came from her room; and more astonished than I could say,--She is a good girl," she broke in, suddenly looking at me with hotly indignant eyes, "a--a--as good a girl as this whole city can show; don't you dare, any of you, to hint at anything else o--"

"Come, come," I said soothingly, a little ashamed of my too communicative face, "I haven't said anything, we will take it for granted she is as good as gold, go on." The woman wiped her forehead with a hand that trembled like a leaf. "Where was I?" said she. "O, I heard voices and was surprised and got up and went to her door. The noise I made unlocking my own must have startled her, for all was perfectly quiet when I got there. I waited a moment, then I turned the knob and called her: she did not reply and I called again. Then she came to the door, but did not unlock it. 'What is it?' she asked. 'O,' said I, 'I thought I heard talking here and I was frightened,' 'It must have been next door,' said she. I begged pardon and went back to my room. There was no more noise, but when in the morning we broke into her room and found her gone, the window open and signs of distress and struggle around, I knew I had not been mistaken; that there were men with her when I went to her door, and that they had carried her off--"

This time I could not restrain myself.

"Did they drop her out of the window?" I inquired.

"O," said she, "we are building an extension, and there is a ladder running up to the third floor, and it was by means of that they took her."

"Indeed! she seems at least to have been a willing victim," I remarked.

The woman clutched my arm with a grip like iron. "Don't you believe it," gasped she, stopping me in the street where we were. "I tell you if what I say is true, and these burglars or whatever they were, did carry her off, it was an agony to her, an awful, awful thing that will kill her if it has not done so already. You don't know what you are talking about, you never saw her--"

"Was she pretty," I asked, hurrying the woman along, for more than one passer-by had turned their heads to look at us. The question seemed in some way to give her a shock.

"Ah, I don't know," she muttered; "some might not think so, I always did; it depended upon the way you looked at her."

For the first time I felt a thrill of anticipation shoot through my veins. Why, I could not say. Her tone was peculiar, and she spoke in a sort of brooding way as though she were weighing something in her own mind; but then her manner had been peculiar throughout. Whatever it was that aroused my suspicion, I determined henceforth to keep a very sharp eye upon her ladyship. Levelling a straight glance at her face, I asked her how it was that she came to be the one to inform the authorities of the girl's disappearance.

"Doesn't Mr. Blake know anything about it?"

The faintest shadow of a change came into her manner. "Yes," said she, "I told him at breakfast time; but Mr. Blake doesn't take much interest in his servants; he leaves all such matters to me."

"Then he does not know you have come for the police?"

"No, sir, and O, if you would be so good as to keep it from him. It is not necessary he should know. I shall let you in the back way. Mr. Blake is a man who never meddles with anything, and--"

"What did Mr. Blake say this morning when you told him that this girl--By the way, what is her name?"

"Emily."

"That this girl, Emily, had disappeared during the night?"

"Not much of anything, sir. He was sitting at the breakfast table reading his paper, he merely looked up, frowned a little in an absent-minded way, and told me I must manage the servants' affairs without troubling him."

"And you let it drop?"

"Yes sir; Mr. Blake is not a man to speak twice to."

I could easily believe that from what I had seen of him in public, for though by no means a harsh looking man, he had a reserved air which if maintained in private must have made him very difficult of approach.

We were now within a half block or so of the old-fashioned mansion regarded by this scion of New York's aristocracy as one of the most desirable residences in the city; so motioning to the man who had accompanied me to take his stand in a doorway near by and watch for the signal I would give him in case I wanted Mr. Gryce, I turned to the woman, who was now all in a flutter, and asked her how she proposed to get me into the house without the knowledge of Mr. Blake.

"O sir, all you have got to do is to follow me right up the back stairs; he won't notice, or if he does will not ask any questions."

And having by this time reached the basement door, she took out a key from her pocket and inserting it in the lock, at once admitted us into the dwelling.

2. A Few Points

Mrs. Daniels, for that was her name, took me at once up stairs to the third story back room. As we passed through the halls, I could not but notice how rich, though sombre were the old fashioned walls and heavily frescoed ceilings, so different in style and coloring from what we see now-a-days in our secret penetrations into Fifth Avenue mansions. Many as are the wealthy houses I have been called upon to enter in the line of my profession, I had never crossed the threshold of such an one as this before, and impervious as I am to any foolish sentimentalities, I felt a certain degree of awe at the thought of invading with police investigation, this home of ancient Knicker-bocker respectability. But once in the room of the missing girl, every consideration fled save that of professional pride and curiosity. For almost at first blush, I saw that whether Mrs. Daniels was correct or not in her surmises as to the manner of the girl's disappearance, the fact that she had disappeared was likely to prove an affair of some importance. For, let me state the facts in the order in which I noticed them. The first thing that impressed me was, that whatever Mrs. Daniels called her, this was no sewing girl's room into which I now stepped. Plain as was the furniture in comparison with the elaborate richness of the walls and ceiling, there were still scattered through the room, which was large even for a thirty foot house, articles of sufficient elegance to make the supposition that it was the abode of an ordinary seamstress open to suspicion, if no more.

Mrs. Daniels, seeing my look of surprise, hastened to provide some explanation. "It is the room which has always been devoted to sewing," said she; "and when Emily came, I thought it would be easier to put up a bed here than to send her upstairs. She was a very nice girl and disarranged nothing."

I glanced around on the writing-case lying open on a small table in the centre of the room, on the vase half full of partly withered roses, on the mantel-piece, the Shakespeare, and Macaulay's History lying on the stand at my right, thought my own thoughts, but said nothing.

"You found the door locked this morning?" asked I, after a moment's scrutiny of the room in which three facts had become manifest: first, that the girl had not occupied the bed the night before; second, that there had been some sort of struggle or surprise,--one of the curtains being violently torn as if grasped by an agitated hand, to say nothing of a chair lying upset on the floor with one of its legs broken; third, that the departure, strange as it may seem, had been by the window.

"Yes," returned she; "but there is a passageway leading from my room to hers and it was by that means we entered. There was a chair placed against the door on this side but we easily pushed it away."

I stepped to the window and looked out. Ah, it would not be so very difficult for a man to gain the street from that spot in a dark night, for the roof of the newly-erected extension was almost on a level with the window."

"Well," said she anxiously, "couldn't she have been got out that way?"

"More difficult things have been done," said I; and was about to step out upon the roof when I bethought to inquire of Mrs. Daniels if any of the girl's clothing was missing.

She immediately flew to the closets and thence to bureau drawers which she turned hastily over. "No, nothing is missing but a hat and cloak and--" She paused confusedly.

"And what?" I asked.

"Nothing," returned she, hurriedly closing the bureau drawer; "only some little knick-knacks."

"Knick-knacks!" quoth I. "If she stopped for knick-knacks, she couldn't have gone in any very unwilling frame of mind." And somewhat disgusted, I was about to throw up the whole affair and leave the room. But the indecision in Mrs. Daniels' own face deterred me.

"I don't understand it," murmured she, drawing her hand across her eyes. "I don't understand it. But," she went on with even an increase in her old tone of heart-felt conviction, "no matter whether we understand it or not, the case is serious; I tell you so, and she must be found."

I resolved to know the nature of that must, used as few women in her position would use it even under circumstances to all appearance more aggravated than these.

Why, must?" said I. "If the girl went of her own accord as some things seem to show, why should you, no relative as you acknowledge take the matter so to heart as to insist she shall be followed and brought back?"

She turned away, uneasily taking up and putting down some little matters on the table before her. "Is it not enough that I promise to pay for all expenses which a search will occasion, without my being forced to declare just why I should be willing to do so? Am I bound to tell you I love the girl? that I believe she has been taken away by foul means, and that to her great suffering and distress? that being fond of her and believing this, I am conscientious enough to put every means I possess at the command of those who will recover her?"

I was not satisfied with this but on that very account felt my enthusiasm revive.

"But Mr. Blake? Surely he is the one to take this interest if anybody."

"I have before said," returned she, paling however as she spoke, "that Mr. Blake takes very little interest in his servants."

I cast another glance about the room. "How long have you been in this house?" asked I.

"I was in the service of Mr. Blake's father and he died a year ago."

"Since when you have remained with Mr. Blake himself?"

"Yes sir."

"And this Emily, when did she come here?"

"Oh it must be eleven months or so ago."

"An Irish girl?"

"O no, American. She is not a common person, sir,"

"What do you mean by that? That she was educated, lady-like, pretty, or what?"

"I don't know what to say. She was educated, yes, but not as you would call a lady educated. Yet she knew a great many things the rest of us did'nt. She liked

to read, you see, and--O sir, ask the girls about her, I never know what to say when I am questioned."

I scanned the gray-haired woman still more intently than I had yet done. Was she the weak common-place creature she seemed, or had she really some cause other than appeared for these her numerous breaks and hesitations.

"Where did you get this girl?" I inquired. "Where did she live before coming here?"

"I cannot say, I never asked her to talk about herself. She came to me for work and I liked her and took her without recommendation."

"And she has served you well?"

"Excellently."

"Been out much? Had any visitors?"

She shook her head. "Never went out and never had any visitors."

I own I was nonplussed, "Well," said I, "no more of this at present. I must first find out if she left this house alone or in company with others." And without further parley I stepped out upon the roof of the extension.

As I did so I debated with myself whether the case warranted me or not in sending for Mr. Gryce. As yet there was nothing to show that the girl had come to any harm. A mere elopement with or without a lover to help her, was not such a serious matter that the whole police force need be stirred up on the subject; and if the woman had money, as she said, ready to give the man who should discover the whereabouts of this girl, why need that money be divided up any more than was necessary. Yet Gryce was not one to be dallied with. He had said, send for him if the affair seemed to call for his judgment, and somehow the affair did promise to be a trifle complicated. I was yet undetermined when I reached the edge of the roof.

It was a dizzy descent, but once made, escape from the yard beneath would be easy. A man could take that road without difficulty; but a woman! Baffled at the idea I turned thoughtfully back, when I beheld something on the roof before me that caused me to pause and ask myself if this was going to turn out to be a tragedy after all. It was a drop of congealed blood. Further on towards the window was another, and yes, further still, another and another. I even found one upon the very window ledge itself. Bounding into the room, I searched the carpet for further traces. It was the worst one in the world to find anything upon of the nature of which I was seeking, being a confused pattern of mingled drab and red, and in my difficulty I had to stoop very low.

"What are you looking for?" cried Mrs. Daniels.

I pointed to the drop on the window sill. "Do you see that?" I asked.

She uttered an exclamation and bent nearer. "Blood!" cried she, and stood staring, with rapidly paling cheeks and trembling form. "They have killed her and he will never--"

As she did not finish I looked up.

"Do you think it was her blood?" she whispered in a horrified tone.

"There is every reason to believe so," rejoined I, pointing to a spot where I had at last discovered not only one crimson drop but many, scattered over the scarcely redder roses under my feet.

"Ah, it is worse than I thought," murmured she. "What are you going to do? What can we do?"

"I am going to send for another detective," returned I; and stepping to the window I telegraphed at once to the man Harris to go for Mr. Gryce.

"The one we saw at the Station?"

I bowed assent.

Her face lost something of its drawn expression. "O I am glad; He will do something."

Subduing my indignation at this back thrust, I employed my time in taking note of such details as had escaped my previous attention. They were not many. The open writing-desk--in which, however I found no letters or written documents of any kind, only a few sheets of paper, with pen, ink, etc.; the brush and hairpins scattered on the bureau as though the girl had been interrupted while arranging her hair (if she had been interrupted); and the absence of any great pile of work such as one would expect to see in a room set apart for sewing, were all I could discover. Not much to help us, in case this was to prove an affair of importance as I began to suspect.

With Mr. Gryce's arrival, however, things soon assumed a better shape. He came to the basement door, was ushered in by your humble servant, had the whole matter as far as I had investigated it, at his finger-ends in a moment, and was up-stairs and in that room before I, who am called the quickest man in the force as you all know, could have time to determine just what difference his presence would make to me in a pecuniary way in event of Mrs. Daniels' promises amounting to anything. He did not remain there long, but when he came down I saw that his interest was in no wise lessened.

"What kind of a looking girl was this?" he asked, hurrying up to Mrs. Daniels who had withdrawn into a recess in the lower hall while all this was going on.

"Describe her to me, hair, eyes, complexion, etc.; you know."

"I--I--don't know as I can," she stammered reluctantly, turning very red in the face. "I am a poor one for noticing. I will call one of the girls, I--" She was gone before we realized she had not finished her sentence.

"Humph!" broke from Mr. Gryce's lips as he thoughtfully took down a vase that stood on a bracket near by and looked into it.

I did not venture a word.

When Mrs. Daniels came back she had with her a trim-looking girl of prepossessing appearance.

"This is Fanny," said she; "she knows Emily well, being in the habit of waiting on her at table; she will tell you what you want to hear. I have explained to her," she went on, nodding towards Mr. Gryce with a composure such as she had not before displayed; "that you are looking for your niece who ran away from home some time ago to go into some sort of service."

"Certainly, ma'am," quoth that gentleman, bowing with mock admiration to the gas-fixture. Then carelessly shifting his glance to the cleaning-cloth which Fanny held rather conspicuously in her hand, he repeated the question he had already put to Mrs. Daniels.

The girl, tossing her head just a trifle, at once replied:

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