The Ear in the Wall

By

Arthur B. Reeve

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1. The Vanisher

"Hello, Jameson, is Kennedy in?"

I glanced up from the evening papers to encounter the square- jawed, alert face of District Attorney Carton in the doorway of our apartment.

"How do you do, Judge?" I exclaimed. "No, but I expect him any second now. Won't you sit down?"

The District Attorney dropped, rather wearily I thought, into a chair and looked at his watch.

I had made Carton's acquaintance some years before as a cub reporter on the Star while he was a judge of an inferior court. Our acquaintance had grown through several political campaigns in which I had had assignments that brought me into contact with him. More recently some special writing had led me across his trail again in telling the story of his clean-up of graft in the city. At present his weariness was easily accounted for. He was in the midst of the fight of his life for re-election against the so- called "System," headed by Boss Dorgan, in which he had gone far in exposing evils that ranged all the way from vice and the drug traffic to bald election frauds.

"I expect a Mrs. Blackwell here in a few minutes," he remarked, glancing again at his watch. His eye caught the headline of the news story I had been reading and he added quickly, "What do the boys on the Star think of that Blackwell case, anyhow?"

It was, I may say, a case deeply shrouded in mystery--the disappearance without warning of a beautiful young girl, Betty Blackwell, barely eighteen. Her family, the police, and now the District Attorney had sought to solve it in vain. Some had thought it a kidnaping, others a suicide, and others had even hinted at murder. All sorts of theories had been advanced without in the least changing the original dominant note of mystery. Photographs of the young woman had been published broadcast, I knew, without eliciting a word in reply. Young men whom she had known and girls with whom she had been intimate had been questioned without so much as a clue being obtained. Reports that she had been seen had come in from all over the country, as they always do in such cases. All had been investigated and had turned out to be based on nothing more than imagination. The mystery remained unsolved.

"Well," I replied, "of course there's a lot of talk now in the papers about aphasia and amnesia and all that stuff. But, you know, we reporters are a sceptical lot. We have to be shown. I can't say we put much faith in THAT."

"But what is your explanation? You fellows always have an opinion. Sometimes I think the newspapermen are our best detectives."

"I can't say that we have any opinion in this case--yet," I returned frankly. "When a girl just simply disappears on Fifth Avenue and there isn't even the hint of a clue as to any place she went or how, well--oh, there's Kennedy now. Put it up to him."

"We were just talking of that Betty Blackwell disappearance case," resumed Carton, when the greetings were over. "What do you think of it?"

"Think of it?" repeated Kennedy promptly with a keen glance at the District Attorney; "why, Judge, I think of it the same as you evidently do. If you didn't think it was a case that was in some way connected with your vice and graft investigation, you wouldn't be here. And if I didn't feel that it promised surprising results, aside from the interest I always have naturally in solving such mysteries, I wouldn't be ready to take up the offer which you came here to make."

"You're a wizard, Kennedy," laughed Carton, though it was easily seen that he was both pleased and relieved to think that he had enlisted Craig's services so easily.

"Not much of a wizard. In the first place, I know the fight you're making. Also, I know that you wouldn't go to the police in the present state of armed truce between your office and Headquarters. You want someone outside. Well, I'm more than willing to be that person. The whole thing, in its larger aspects, interests me. Betty Blackwell in particular, arouses my sympathies. That's all."

"Exactly, Kennedy. This fight I'm in is going to be the fight of my life. Just now, in addition to everything else, people are looking to me to find Betty Blackwell. Her mother was in to see me today; there isn't much that she could add to what has already been said. Betty was a most attractive girl. The family is an excellent one, but in reduced circumstances. She had been used to a great deal as a child, but now, since the death of her father, she has had to go to work--and you know what that means to a girl like that."

Carton laid down a new photograph which the newspapers had not printed yet. Betty Blackwell was slender, petite, chic. Her dark hair was carefully groomed, and there was an air with which she wore her clothes and carried herself, even in a portrait, which showed that she was no ordinary girl.

Her soft brown eyes had that magnetic look which is dangerous to their owner if she does not know how to control it, eyes that arrested one's gaze, invited notice. Even the lens must have felt the spell. It had caught, also, the soft richness of the skin of her oval face and full throat and neck. Indeed one could not help remarking that she was really the girl to grace a fortune. Only a turn of the hand of that fickle goddess had prevented her from doing so.

I had picked up one of the evening papers and was looking at the newspaper half-tone which more than failed to do justice to her. Just then my eye happened on an item which I had been about to discuss with Carton when Kennedy entered.

"As a scientist, does the amnesia theory appeal to you, Craig?" I asked. "Now, here is an explanation by one of the special writers, headed, 'Personalities Lost Through Amnesia.' Listen."

The article was brief:

Mysterious disappearances, such as that of Betty Blackwell, have alarmed the public and baffled the police before this-- disappearances that have in their suddenness, apparent lack of purpose, and inexplicability much in common with her case. Leaving out of account the class of disappearances for their own convenience--embezzlers, blackmailers, and so forth--there is still a large number of recorded cases where the subjects have dropped out of sight without apparent cause or reason and have left behind them untarnished reputations and solvent back accounts. Of these, a small percentage are found to have met with violence; others have been victims of suicidal mania, and sooner or later a clue has come to light which has established the fact. The dead are often easier to find than the living.

Of the remaining small proportion, there are on record, however, a number of carefully authenticated cases where the subject has been the victim of a sudden and complete loss of memory.

This dislocation of memory is a variety of aphasia known as amnesia, and when the memory is recurrently lost and restored, we have alternating personality. The Society for Psychical Research and many eminent psychologists, among them the late William James, Dr. Weir Mitchell, Dr. Hodgson of Boston, and Dr. A. E. Osborn of San Francisco, have reported many cases of alternating personality.

Studious efforts are being made to understand and to explain the strange type of mental phenomena exhibited in these cases, but as yet no one has given a clear and comprehensive explanation of them. Such cases are by no means always connected with disappearances, and exhaustive studies have been made of types of alternating personality that have from first to last been carefully watched by scientists of the first rank.

The variety known as the ambulatory type, where the patient suddenly loses all knowledge of his own identity and of the past and takes himself off, leaving no trace or clue, is the variety which the present case of Miss Blackwell seems to suggest.

There followed a number of most interesting cases and an elaborate argument by the writer to show that Betty Blackwell was a victim of this psychological aberration, that she was, in other words, "a vanisher."

I laid down the paper with a questioning look at Kennedy.

"As a scientist," he replied deliberately, "the theory, of course, does appeal to me, especially in the ingenious way in which that writer applied it. However, as a detective"--he shook his head slowly--"I must deal with facts--not speculations. It leaves much to be explained, to say the least,"

Just then the door buzzer sounded and Carton himself sprang to answer it.

"That's Mrs. Blackwell now--her mother. I told her that I was going to take the case to you, Kennedy, and took the liberty of asking her to come up here to meet you. Good-afternoon, Mrs. Blackwell. Let me introduce Professor Kennedy and Mr. Jameson, of whom I spoke to you."

She bowed and murmured a tremulous greeting. Kennedy placed a chair for her and she thanked him.

Mrs. Blackwell was a slender little woman in black, well past middle age. Her face and dress spoke of years of economy, even of privation, but her manner was plainly that of a woman of gentle breeding and former luxury. She was precisely of the type of decayed gentlewoman that one meets often in the city, especially at some of the middle-class boarding-houses.

Deeply as the disappearance of her daughter had affected her, Mrs. Blackwell was facing it bravely. That was her nature. One could imagine that only when Betty was actually found would this plucky little woman collapse. Instinctively, one felt that she claimed his assistance in the unequal fight she was waging against the complexities of modern life for which she had been so ill prepared.

"I do hope you will be able to find my daughter," she began, controlling her voice with an effort. "Mr. Carton has been so kind, more than kind, I am sure, in getting your aid. The police seem to be able to do nothing. They make out reports, put me off, tell me they are making progress--but they don't find Betty."

There was a tragic pathos in the way she said it.

"Betty was such a good girl, too," she went on, her emotions rising. "Oh, I was so proud of her when she got her position down in Wall Street, with the broker, Mr. Langhorne."

"Tell Mr. Kennedy just what you told me of her disappearance," put in Carton.

Again Mrs. Blackwell controlled her feelings. "I don't know much about it," she faltered, "but last Saturday, when she left the office early, she said she was going to do some shopping on Fifth Avenue. I know she went there, did shop a bit, then walked on the Avenue several blocks. But after that there is no trace of her."

"You have heard nothing, have no idea where she might have gone-- even for a time?" queried Kennedy.

He asked it with a keen look at the face of Mrs. Blackwell. I recalled one case where a girl had disappeared in which Kennedy had always asserted that if the family had been perfectly frank at the start much more might have been accomplished in unravelling the mystery.

There was evident sincerity in Mrs. Blackwell as she replied quickly, "Absolutely none. Another girl from the office was with her part of the time, then left her to take the subway. We don't live far uptown. It wouldn't have taken Betty long to get home, even if she had walked, after that, through a crowded street, too."

"Of course, she may have met a friend, may have gone somewhere with the friend," put in Kennedy, as if trying out the remark to see what effect it might have.

"Where could she go?" asked Mrs. Blackwell in naive surprise, looking at him with a counterpart of the eyes we had seen in the picture. "I hope you don't think that Betty---"

The little widow was on the verge of tears again at the mere hint that her daughter might have had friends that were not all, perhaps, that they should be.

Carton came to the rescue. "Miss Blackwell," he interposed, "was a very attractive girl, very. She had hosts of admirers, as every attractive girl must have. Most of them, all of them, as far as Mrs. Blackwell knows and I have been able to find out, were young men at the office where she worked, or friends of that sort--not the ordinary clerk, but of the rising, younger, self-made generation. Still, they don't seem to have interested her particularly as far as I have been able to discover. She merely liked them. There is absolutely nothing known to point to the fact that she was any different from thousands of girls in that respect. She was vivacious, full of fun and life, a girl any fellow would have been more than proud to take to a dance. She was ambitious, I suppose, but nothing more."

"Betty was not a bad girl," asserted Mrs. Blackwell vehemently. "She was a good girl. I don't believe there was much, in fact anything important, on which she did not make me her confidante. Yes, she was ambitious. So am I. I have always hoped that Betty would bring our family--her younger sister--back to the station where we were before the panic wiped out our fortune and killed my husband. That is all."

"Yes," added Carton, "nothing at all is known that would make one think that she was what young men call a 'good fellow' with them."

Kennedy looked up, but said nothing. I thought I could read the unspoken word on his lips, as he glanced from Carton to Mrs. Blackwell, "known."

She had risen and was facing us.

"Is there no one in all this great city," appealed the distracted little woman with outstretched arms, "who can find my daughter? Is it possible that a girl can disappear in broad daylight in the streets and never be heard of again? Oh, won't you find her? Tell me she is safe--that she is still the little girl I---"

Her voice failed and she was crying softly in her lace handkerchief. It was touching and I saw that Kennedy was deeply moved, although at once to his practical mind the thought must have occurred that nothing was to be gained by further questions of Mrs. Blackwell.

"Believe me, Mrs. Blackwell," he said in a low tone, taking her hand, "I will do all that is in my power to find her."

"Thank you," murmured the mother, overcome.

A moment later, however, she had recovered her composure to some degree and rose to go. There was a flattering look of relief on her face which in itself must have been ample reward to Craig, a retainer worth more to him in a case like this than money.

"I'm going back to my office," remarked Carton. "If I learn anything, I shall let you know."

The District Attorney went out with Mrs. Blackwell. Busy as he was, he had time to turn aside to help this bereaved woman, and I admired him for it.

"Do you think it is one of those cases like some that Carton has uncovered on the East Side and among girls newly arrived in the city?" I asked Craig when the door was shut.

"Can't say," he returned, in an abstracted study.

"It's awful if it is," I pursued. "And if it is, I suppose all that will result from it will be a momentary thrill of the newspaper-readers, and then they will fall back on the old saying that after all it is only a result of human nature that such things happen--they always have happened and always will--that old line of talk."

"That sort of thing is NOT a result of human nature," returned Kennedy earnestly. "It's a System. I mean to say that if it should turn out to be connected with the vice investigations of Carton, and not a case of aphasia, such a disappearance you would find to be due to the persistent, cunning, and unprincipled exploitation of young girls.

"No, Walter, it is not that women are weak or that men are inherently vicious. That doesn't account for a case like this. Then, too, some mawkish people to-day are fond of putting the whole evil on low wages as a cause. It isn't that--alone. It isn't even lack of education or of moral training. Human nature is not so bad in the mass as some good people think. No, don't you, as a reporter, see it? It is big business, in its way, that Carton is fighting--big business in the commercialized ruin of girls, such, perhaps, as Betty

Blackwell--a vicious system that enmeshes even those who are its tools. I'm glad if I can have a chance to help smash it.

"Now, I'll tell you what I want you to do, just so that we can start this thing with a clear understanding of what it amounts to. I want you to look up just what the situation is. I know there is an army of 'vanishers' in New York. I want to know something about them in the mass. Can't you dig up something from your Star connections?"

Kennedy had some matters concerning other cases to clear up before he felt free to devote his whole time to this. As there was nothing we could do immediately, I spent some time getting at the facts he wanted. Indeed, it did not take me long to discover that the disappearance of Betty Blackwell, in spite of the prominence it had been given, was by no means an isolated case. I found that the Star alone had chronicled scores of such disappearances during the past few months, cases of girls who had simply been swallowed up in the big city. They were the daughters of neither the rich nor of the poor, most of them, but girls rather in ordinary circumstances.

Even the police records showed upward of a thousand missing young girls, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty-one years and I knew that the police lists scarcely approximated the total number of missing persons in the great city, especially in those cases where a hesitancy on the part of parents and relatives often concealed the loss from public records.

I came away with the impression that there were literally hundreds of cases every bit as baffling as that of Betty Blackwell, of young girls who had left absolutely no trace behind, who had made no preparations for departure and of whom few had been heard from since they disappeared. Many from homes of refinement and even high financial standing had disappeared, leaving no clues behind. It was not alone the daughters of the poor that were affected--it was all society.

Many reasons, I found, had been assigned for the disappearances. I knew that there must be many causes at work, that no one cause could be responsible for all or perhaps a majority of the cases. There were suicides and murders and elopements, family troubles, poverty, desire for freedom and adventure; innumerable complex causes, even down to kidnapping.

The question was, however, which of these causes had been in operation in the case of Betty Blackwell? Where had she gone? Where had this whole army of vanishers disappeared? Were these disappearances merely accidents--or was there an epidemic of amnesia? I could bring myself to no such conclusions, but was forced to answer my own queries in lieu of an answer from Kennedy, by propounding another. Was there an organized band?

And, after I had tried to reason it all out, I still found myself back at the original question, as I rejoined Kennedy at the laboratory, "Where had they all--where had Betty Blackwell gone?"

2. The Black Book

I had scarcely finished pouring out my suspicions to Kennedy when the telephone rang.

It was Carton on the wire, in a state of unsuppressed excitement. Kennedy answered the call himself, but the conversation was brief and, to me, unenlightening, until he hung up the receiver.

"Dorgan--the Boss," he exclaimed, "has just found a detectaphone in his private dining-room at Gastron's."

At once I saw the importance of the news and for the moment it obscured even the case of Betty Blackwell.

Dorgan was the political boss of the city at that time, apparently entrenched, with an organization that seemed impregnable. I knew him as a big, bullnecked fellow, taciturn to the point of surliness, owing his influence to his ability to "deliver the goods" in the shape of graft of all sorts, the archenemy of Carton, a type of politician who now is rapidly passing.

"Carton wants to see us immediately at his office," added Craig, jamming his hat on his head. "Come on."

Without waiting for further comment or answer from me, Kennedy, caught by the infectious excitement of Carton's message, dashed from our apartment and a few minutes later we were whirling downtown on the subway.

"You know, I suppose," he whispered rather hoarsely above the rumble and roar of the train, but so as not to be overheard, "that Dorgan always has kept a suite of rooms at Gastron's, on Fifth Avenue, for dinners and conferences."

I nodded. Some of the things that must have gone on in the secret suite in the fashionable restaurant I knew would make interesting reading, if the walls had ears.

"Apparently he must have found out about the eavesdropping in time and nipped it," pursued Kennedy.

"What do you mean?" I asked, for I had not been able to gather much from the one-sided conversation over the telephone, and the lightning change from the case of Betty Blackwell to this had left me somewhat bewildered. "What has he done?"

"Smashed the transmitter of the machine," replied Kennedy tersely. "Cut the wires."

"Where did it lead?" I asked. "How do you know?"