

**DISAPPEARED FROM
HER HOME.**

A Novel,

IN ONE VOLUME.

BY

MRS. FRED. E. PIRKIS.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER I.

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER III.

CHAPTER IV.

CHAPTER V.

CHAPTER VI.

CHAPTER VII.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHAPTER IX.

CHAPTER X.

CHAPTER XI.

CHAPTER XII.

CHAPTER XIII.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHAPTER XV.

DEDICATED,

WITH ALL LOVE AND ESTEEM,
TO MY BROTHER,
GEORGE IGNATIUS PIRKIS.

DISAPPEARED FROM HER HOME.

CHAPTER I.

“£200 REWARD. Disappeared from her home, Amy, only daughter of Stephen Warden, Esq., of the High Elms, Harleyford. Age, 17; height, 5ft. Dark hair and eyes, oval face, small nose, mouth, and chin; remarkably small hands and feet; dressed in dark blue silk walking costume, broad brimmed felt hat, with light-blue ostrich feather. Jewellery worn—a gold butterfly brooch, and butterfly earrings; on the third finger of left hand, an antique ruby ring—one large stone, surrounded with eight small diamonds, set in a garter with buckle; motto on garter, ‘*Sans espoir je meurs.*’ The young lady was last seen on the morning of the 14th of August, leaving the park lands, and entering the high road leading to Dunwich. Information to be given to Inspector Smythe, Dunwich Police Station, who will pay the above reward on the young lady’s restoration to her family, or portions of the amount according to the value of the information received.”

The above handbill appeared one bright summer’s morning on the walls of Dunwich Police Station, and on all the principal buildings of that busy manufacturing town.

Hard-working men of business found time, in the midst of their buying and selling, to stop and read, and wonder how it was possible that any young lady, well looked after, as Miss Warden undoubtedly was, well-known, too, in the neighbourhood, and surrounded by relations, friends, and servants, could thus disappear from their very midst, at noon-day, and leave no trace of any sort.

Harleyford was situated about five miles from Dunwich, and Mr. Warden's house about three from the local railway station. A well-traversed high road led from his estate to the market town—Dunwich. This the young lady had been seen to enter about ten o'clock on the morning of the 14th of August, by some country people, with whom she exchanged greetings. From that moment nothing more had been seen nor heard of her, and it was, as the country people expressed it in their broad Leicestershire dialect, "as though the earth had opened, and swallowed her up," so completely had all traces of her been lost.

Well-to-do tradesmen and thriving farmers, passing by, read the handbill with a sort of shudder. Here was a young lady taking her usual morning walk on a bright summer's day; she wishes her neighbours a gay good morning with a nod and a smile, goes on her way, and lo! nothing more is seen or heard of her. After this, who was safe? And with a sigh and a shiver, and a thought of their own young daughters at home, they went their way to ponder over the strange occurrence.

The county people by scores left their cards on Mr. and Mrs. Warden; heard how they had waited breakfast for their daughter, then luncheon, then dinner—how they had sent their men far and near to scour the country—how every river had been dragged, every infirmary and hospital searched, every railway official questioned and cross-questioned as to whether the young lady had been seen entering either station—how the parents had racked their brains to discover any possible or impossible pretext which could drive their daughter from her home—how that now, well-nigh broken-hearted, after a fortnight of wearying suspense, they had folded their hands and prayed for any news, even the worst that might come.

“It is beyond mystery,” said old Lady Nugent to her young lady companion, driving along the very same high road which had seen the last of poor Amy, and looking right and left in the hedges, as though she expected to find some traces of her there; “If the girl had had any love troubles, one could understand it better; for the young, foolish things at seventeen are often driven to some desperate folly by a man’s wicked eyes. But every one knows she could have made the best match in the county if she had liked. There’s young Lord Hardcastle, who absolutely worships her—fastidious and fault-finding as he is; and as for Frank Varley, the rector’s son, with his £10,000 a year, he is positively mad after her.”

“Yes, my lady,” responded the companion, “and it is well known that neither Mr. nor Mrs. Warden cared in the least whom she chose. Ah! she was always a coquette, even in the schoolroom. Those young, bright things with so much money, and so many chances generally choose badly after all, and run away with some groom, or footman. Depend upon it, my lady”—

“Don’t be an idiot, Matthews,” interrupts the dowager, “talk about things you understand. It has been ascertained beyond doubt that no one but Miss Warden is missing, far or near. Besides, the young lady, however playful and vivacious she might be with her equals in station, was too well-born and well-bred to permit the slightest familiarity from an inferior. She would not have suffered such a thing any more than I should myself,” with a withering glance at Matthews. “Tell George,” she added, pulling violently at the check-string, “to drive past the police station. I want to see what they have put in the handbills.”

And, as the old lady drives through the crowd of stragglers gathered about the station-house doors, two others, with white, anxious faces, are standing there, reading the printed lines. Tall, fair, muscular Frank Varley, the rector's scapegrace son, the best rider, runner, and rower in the county—the first in all mischief—in all breakneck adventures—and yet more sought after at balls and garden parties, than the richest lord, or the most eligible unmarried baronet—his mother's darling and pride, and a constant source of anxiety and apprehension to his father.

As he reads, his brow darkens. "By heaven!" he mutters through his set teeth, "there has been foul play somewhere. She held my hand for a moment only, at the ball the night before, under the large oleander tree, and called me her own Frank; and then, coquette as she is, the next minute she told me she meant her own *brother* Frank—I had been so good to her. Shall we all sit still with folded hands, and let a girl like that be stolen from our very midst? A thousand times, no!" And then aloud, with a full-drawn breath, "By heaven! no corner of the earth shall hide her from me; by land and by sea, by night and by day, I will search the whole world through, till I find her, living or dead."

"You are right," exclaims a voice at his elbow, and Lord Hardcastle's dark pale face, with thin, clear-cut features, looks over his shoulder. ("Kid-gloved Hardcastle" he was sometimes called by his sporting and boating friends, on account of his super-refinement and dainty fastidiousness.) "You are right; there has been some foul play here—some deed of iniquity which must be brought to light. We, who have been rivals hitherto, may well join hands now." He extends his thin white hand, which Varley grasps in a strong, firm hold. "I repeat your own words; 'no corner of the earth shall hide her from me; by land and by sea, by night and by

day, I will search the whole world through till I find her, living or dead.””

CHAPTER II.

WHILE the townspeople and country folks read and wondered at the printed handbills, the father and mother of the missing girl wandered about their now desolate home, listless, aimless, well-nigh broken-hearted. The first sharp pang, it is true, was past, and the sorrow had settled down to a dull leaden weight on heart and brain. The servants walked about the house slowly and silently, speaking in subdued voices. Day and night lay old Presto, Amy's favourite deerhound, at the house door, waiting and listening, and never seeming to eat nor sleep. Her maid carefully each day fed her birds and watered her flowers, and every one in the household vied with each other in endeavouring to carry out every known wish or fancy the young lady had ever had (and it must be confessed they were not a few) as they would endeavour to carry out the wishes of some dear one dead. On every side, in every room, were traces of the lost darling. Here, the open piano with a roll of new music; there, the uncovered harp. In the little morning room piece after piece of unfinished needlework, and here in a little "studio," as Amy was pleased to call it, numberless pencil sketches, an oil landscape commenced, a water-colour three-parts done, and a crayon head, "all but" finished. A whole tableful of china-painting accessories, and commenced cups, saucers, and plates; and there, in a corner, a cabinet of fret-work tools, with brackets, card trays, and picture frames enough to stock a small shop.

From all this it may be seen that the young lady's tastes and pursuits were numerous and varied—change, to her, the one great necessity of life. A too great indulgence from her earliest infancy

had developed in her character an impatience of restraint, an impetuosity and wilfulness which, unless it had been counterbalanced, as in her case it was, by an unusually loving, playful, tender disposition, would have rendered her imperious and domineering. As it was, every one in the household, from her father downwards, adored her and bowed to her sway. "I must not be kept waiting an instant" was a remark which might be heard every hour of the day from Miss Amy's lips. And kept waiting she never was, for the simple reason that it was an impossibility to keep her in any posture of tranquillity for five minutes at a time. Every thought or idea that entered into her brain must be executed there and then and, scarcely completed, must be thrown on one side to make way for another.

"Were you ever thus in your very young days, Stephen?" Mrs. Warden would sometimes enquire of her husband. And the husband would smile and shake his head, and declare he had never been half so fascinating as his wilful, loving, teasing little daughter, "the music and sunshine of his life," as he was wont to call her.

And now all was changed! The music was hushed, the sunlight had died out. Would the shadows ever be lifted from the home again? Would the quick, light step ever be heard again, and the sweet, young, ringing voice, exclaiming in its old familiar tones, "I must not be kept waiting an instant?"

So the father and mother asked themselves, as, standing side by side in their dining room verandah, they looked across the bright August landscape to where the groom was leading out Amy's pony for its morning canter.

Mr. Warden, at this time, was about forty-five years of age, looking considerably younger. A well-featured, muscular man, with energy, determination, and many other good qualities plainly written on his face. A more complete contrast to him than his wife could not well be imagined. She was very tiny, very fair, very gentle, with amiability, want of will, and weakness of character marked in every line and feature. Her one god was her husband, her one thought how to please him, and her every opinion and wish was simply an echo of his.

“A doll, my dear, nothing more,” was old Lady Nugent’s summing up, after her first introduction to Mrs. Warden, some twelve years previously. Mr. Warden had come among them a perfect stranger, buying one of the largest estates in the county which happened to be for sale. He had resided, so he had said, nearly all his life in the south of France, but his family and connections were well known in the Midland Counties as wealthy and nobly connected. Of his wife, however, nothing was known, nor could be discovered, so she was set down, and perhaps justly, as having been an English governess in some French family, and as such, most probably, Mr. Warden had first known her.

“What men can see in dolls to induce them to marry them, I cannot see,” pursued the dowager, “they simply need a glass case, some good clothes, and their work in life is done.” Nevertheless, in spite of Lady Nugent’s comments, Mrs. Warden had been well received in Harleyford for her husband’s sake, and now, in the time of her sorrow, nothing could exceed the kindness and sympathy extended to her on all sides. Carriage after carriage sweeps along their drive, letter after letter is brought to the house, some containing wild and improbable suggestions, others opening here and there a door of hope, all full of warm and earnest sympathy, and offers of help.

“What can any of them do that has not already been done?” says Mr. Warden, handing to his wife a joint letter from Frank Varley and Lord Hardcastle, relating their solemn vow, and placing their services at Mr. Warden’s disposal.

“They are noble young fellows, and worthy of a true-hearted girl’s love. But what can they do? God help us all and teach us how to act for the best, for my brains are nearly worn out with thinking and supposing.”

“The gentleman from London, sir, Mr. Hill, wishes to see you,” says the butler at his elbow, having entered the room with a quiet, solemn tread, as though serving at a funeral feast.

“Ah, the detective,” says Mr. Warden, thankful to have the pressure of thought lifted for an instant; “show him into the library; I will see him at once.”

Mr. Hill, a slight, gentleman-like man, with the eye of an eagle, and the nose of a deerhound, seats himself at the library table, and spreads his memoranda before him.

“I bring you my latest report, Mr. Warden, and I grieve to say it amounts to very little. The only additional information I have obtained, and that, I fear, is scarcely reliable, is from the postman, John Martin. He tells me that on the morning of the 14th he met your daughter in the park lands, and, at her request, handed to her her morning’s letters. I questioned him as to how he recollected it was on that day, and he at once admitted he could not be positive, as it was the young lady’s custom, whenever she met him, thus to ask for and receive her letters. I questioned him as to the general appearance of her letters, whether directed in masculine or feminine hand-writing—(I beg your pardon, sir, such questions

must be asked)—and his reply is, he never recollects bringing Miss Warden any but letters in ladies' writing. You must take the evidence for what it is worth; I fear it counts for very little, but, such as it is, I have entered it in my case book."

"I scarcely see whither your questions tend," remarks Mr. Warden, somewhat stiffly. "Miss Warden, I am convinced, had no correspondents with whom I am unacquainted. She has been brought up at home, under careful supervision, and has never visited anywhere without Mrs. Warden or myself. If you are inferring some unknown attachment existed, such a supposition is entirely without foundation. I have every reason to believe that my daughter's affections have been given, and with my approval, to a very dear young friend and neighbour."

"All this I know, sir. Indeed, I think there is very little you or any one else can tell me on this matter. There is not a man or woman in the place whom I have not sounded to their very depths, questioned and cross-questioned in every imaginable way. I have here, in my pocket, a map of my own sketching, containing every field and river, every shady nook and hollow within thirty miles round. I have also a directory with the names, ages, occupation, and household of every human being within the same area. Very little, indeed, remains now to be done."

"Don't tell me that," exclaims Mr. Warden, excitedly, jumping to his feet, and pacing the room; "don't tell me that your work here is over, and no result for your three weeks' labour. Don't, I implore you, crush me down into utter despair. Have you no hope, ever so slight, to hold out to me—no advice of any sort to give?"

“I have both, Mr. Warden,” replies the detective, calmly; “I need not tell you now how I have worked out my theory, nor how, step by step, I have come to the conclusion that your daughter is not dead. This is the hope I hold out to you.”

“Then, if not dead, worse than death has happened to her,” groans the poor father, covering his face with his hands; “better death, than dishonour.”

For a moment both are silent; then, Mr. Warden, slowly recovering himself, enquires, “And what is the advice you have to give, Mr. Hill? let me have that, at any rate.”

“Simply to watch, and to wait, sir; at present, nothing more can be done. We have exhausted every theory, we have followed out every clue, or pretence of one. If there are accomplices in the matter, my presence here puts them on their guard, and as long as I remain nothing will transpire; when I have left, and things have settled down to their usual course, I feel sure some one will betray him or herself unawares. I repeat, wait and watch; and directly your suspicions are aroused in the slightest degree, communicate with me, and I will advise you to the best of my ability.”

“Wait!” groans Mr. Warden, “wait! ‘let things settle down to their usual course;’ how is it possible for a man to live through such a life of torture and suspense? Is there nothing—absolutely nothing—that can be done before you leave us?”

“Only one thing, and that, with your permission, I will do at once. With the men of your household, I have been on tolerably familiar terms, and know pretty well what they could, or could not do; but about the women I am not so sure. If you will allow me, I will have the whole of your female servants in here in succession, from the

scullery maids, upwards—take their names, ages, occupations, &c., from their own lips. I may, possibly, seem to you, sir, to ask a great many irrelevant questions, but while I am questioning, I am watching and noting, and I will under take to say there will be no one with a guilty conscience who will hide it from my eye.”

Mr. Warden rings the bell, and gives the order to the footman, who conveys it to the housekeeper, who forthwith summons all the maids of the household to be paraded in succession before their master, and the detective.

Mr. Hill requests that the housekeeper will remain in the room the whole time. “I may have occasion,” he explains, “to refer to you from time to time, as to the truth or otherwise of some of the statements made.”

First, the kitchen-maids enter, looking very red, and very much ashamed of themselves. Mr. Hill glances at them, looks them through and through, and contents himself with simply noting down their names, ages, and position in Mr. Warden’s household. The cooks are almost as quickly dismissed, and between the exit of one staff of servants and entrance of another, Mr. Hill’s eyes are occupied in scrutinizing the elderly housekeeper, and in addressing to her various friendly remarks.

The housemaids undergo a much longer examination; one girl turns red, another pale. One answers wide of the mark, and is reprimanded by Mr. Hill; another is detected in a wilful fib by the housekeeper, who forthwith brings her to book. Eventually, however, they are dismissed, and the detective, turning to the housekeeper, enquires where Miss Warden’s maid is.

“I have to apologize for her, sir,” replies the housekeeper, “will you kindly excuse her? The poor girl was taken with a violent sick-headache about an hour ago, and went to lie down in her own room. I believe, however, I can answer any questions for her you may wish to put.”

“About an hour ago,” muses Mr. Hill, “just when the order for the servants’ parade was given out.” Then, aloud to the housekeeper, “Is this young person often troubled with violent headaches, Mrs. Nesbitt?”

“Oh dear no, sir,” replies Mrs. Nesbitt, “I never knew her taken in this way before, but you see we have all of us had such an upset, sir, lately. Dear me! such an upset!” and the old lady glances furtively at her master.

“Exactly, Mrs. Nesbitt, exactly,” said Mr. Hill, sympathetically. “That is just what I am thinking. Will you kindly take a message from me to this young person? Tell her I have merely one or two unimportant questions to put as a matter of form, as to her duties, &c., as Miss Warden’s maid, but I must have the answers from her own lips. If it will suit her better I will go with you to her own room, but in any case I must see her.”

Mrs. Nesbitt at once departs on her errand, and after a delay of some ten minutes, returns with the maid, a round-faced, small-featured girl, somewhat fashionably dressed for her position, and with an assumption of refinement and dignity evidently intended as a copy of her young mistress’s style.

Mr. Hill preserves his careless suavety of manner, regrets, politely, he should have been compelled to disturb her, hopes she will soon

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

