

Davis' Short Stories Vol. 2

by

Richard Harding Davis

Web-Books.Com

Davis' Short Stories Vol. 2

The Lost House	3
The Make-Believe Man	43
The Man Who Could Not Lose	67
The Messengers	96
My Buried Treasure	106

The Lost House

I

It was a dull day at the chancellery. His Excellency the American Ambassador was absent in Scotland, unveiling a bust to Bobby Burns, paid for by the numerous lovers of that poet in Pittsburg; the First Secretary was absent at Aldershot, observing a sham battle; the Military Attache was absent at the Crystal Palace, watching a foot-ball match; the Naval Attache was absent at the Duke of Deptford's, shooting pheasants; and at the Embassy, the Second Secretary, having lunched leisurely at the Artz, was now alone, but prepared with his life to protect American interests. Accordingly, on the condition that the story should not be traced back to him, he had just confided a State secret to his young friend, Austin Ford, the London correspondent of the New York REPUBLIC.

"I will cable it," Ford reassured him, "as coming from a Hungarian diplomat, temporarily residing in Bloomsbury, while en route to his post in Patagonia. In that shape, not even your astute chief will suspect its real source. And further from the truth than that I refuse to go."

"What I dropped in to ask," he continued, "is whether the English are going to send over a polo team next summer to try to bring back the cup?"

"I've several other items of interest," suggested the Secretary.

"The week-end parties to which you have been invited," Ford objected, "can wait. Tell me first what chance there is for an international polo match."

"Polo," sententiously began the Second Secretary, who himself was a crackerjack at the game, "is a proposition of ponies! Men can be trained for polo. But polo ponies must be born. Without good ponies----"

James, the page who guarded the outer walls, of the chancellery, appeared in the doorway.

"Please, Sir, a person," he announced, with a note for the Ambassador says it's important."

"Tell him to leave it, said the Secretary. "Polo ponies----"

"Yes, Sir," interrupted the page. "But 'e won't leave it, not unless he keeps the 'arf-crown."

"For Heaven's sake!" protested the Second Secretary, "then let him keep the half-crown. When I say polo ponies, I don't mean----"

James, although alarmed at his own temerity, refused to accept the dismissal. "But, please, Sir," he begged; "I think the 'arf-crown is for the Ambassador."

The astonished diplomat gazed with open eyes.

"You think--WHAT!" he exclaimed.

James, upon the defensive, explained breathlessly.

"Because, Sir," he stammered, "it was INSIDE the note when it was thrown out of the window."

Ford had been sprawling in a soft leather chair in front of the open fire. With the privilege of an old school-fellow and college classmate, he had been jabbing the soft coal with his walking-stick, causing it to burst into tiny flames. His cigarette drooped from his lips, his hat was cocked over one eye; he was a picture of indifference, merging upon boredom. But at the words of the boy his attitude both of mind and body underwent an instant change. It was as though he were an actor, and the words "thrown from the window " were his cue. It was as though he were a dozing fox-terrier, and the voice of his master had whispered in his ear: Sick'em!"

For a moment, with benign reproach, the Second Secretary regarded the unhappy page, and then addressed him with laborious sarcasm.

"James," he said, "people do not communicate with ambassadors in notes wrapped around half-crowns and hurled from windows. That is the way one corresponds with an organ-grinder." Ford sprang to his feet.

"And meanwhile," he exclaimed angrily, "the man will get away."

Without seeking permission, he ran past James, and through the empty outer offices. In two minutes he returned, herding before him an individual, seedy and soiled. In appearance the man suggested that in life his place was to support a sandwich-board. Ford reluctantly relinquished his hold upon a folded paper which he laid in front of the Secretary.

"This man," he explained, "picked that out of the gutter in Sowell Street, It's not addressed to any one, so you read it!"

"I thought it was for the Ambassador!" said the Secretary.

The soiled person coughed deprecatingly, and pointed a dirty digit at the paper. "On the inside," he suggested. The paper was wrapped around a half-crown and folded in at each end. The diplomat opened it hesitatingly, but having read what was written, laughed.

"There's nothing in THAT," he exclaimed. He passed the note to Ford. The reporter fell upon it eagerly.

The note was written in pencil on an unruled piece of white paper. The handwriting was that of a woman. What Ford read was:

"I am a prisoner in the street on which this paper is found. The house faces east. I think I am on the top story. I was brought here three weeks ago. They are trying to kill me. My uncle, Charles Ralph Pearsall, is doing this to get my money. He is at Gerridge's Hotel in Craven Street, Strand. He will tell you I am insane. My name is Dosia Pearsall Dale. My home is at Dalesville, Kentucky, U. S. A. Everybody knows me there, and knows I am not insane. If you would save a life take this at once to the American Embassy, or to Scotland Yard. For God's sake, help me."

When he had read the note, Ford continue to study it. Until he was quite sure his voice would not betray his interest, he did not raise his eyes.

"Why," he asked, "did you say that there's nothing in this?"

"Because," returned the diplomat conclusively, "we got a note like that, or nearly like it, a week ago, and----"

Ford could not restrain a groan. "And you never told me!"

"There wasn't anything to tell," protested the diplomat. "We handed it over to the police, and they reported there was nothing in it. They couldn't find the man at that hotel, and, of course, they couldn't find the house with no more to go on than----"

"And so," exclaimed Ford rudely, "they decided there was no man, and no house!"

"Their theory," continued the Secretary patiently, "is that the girl is confined in one of the numerous private sanatoriums in Sowell Street, that she is insane, that because she's under restraint she IMAGINES the nurses are trying to kill her and that her relatives are after her money. Insane people are always thinking that. It's a very common delusion."

Ford's eyes were shining with a wicked joy. "So," he asked indifferently, "you don't intend to do anything further?"

"What do you want us to do?" cried his friend. "Ring every door-bell in Sowell Street and ask the parlor-maid if they're murdering a lady on the top story?"

"Can I keep the paper?" demanded Ford. "You can keep a copy of it," consented the Secretary. "But if you think you're on the track of a big newspaper sensation, I can tell you now you're not. That's the work of a crazy woman, or it's a hoax. You amateur detectives----"

Ford was already seated at the table, scribbling a copy of the message, and making marginal notes.

"Who brought the FIRST paper?" he interrupted.

"A hansom-cab driver."

"What became of HIM?" snapped the amateur detective.

The Secretary looked inquiringly at James. "He drove away," said James.

"He drove away, did he?" roared Ford. "And that was a week ago! Ye gods! What about Dalesville, Kentucky? Did you cable any one there?"

The dignity of the diplomat was becoming ruffled.

"We did not!" he answered. "If it wasn't true that her uncle was at that hotel, it was probably equally untrue that she had friends in America."

"But," retorted his friend, "you didn't forget to cable the State Department that you all went in your evening clothes to bow to the new King? You didn't neglect to cable that, did you?"

"The State Department," returned the Secretary, with withering reproof, "does not expect us to crawl over the roofs of houses and spy down chimneys to see if by any chance an American citizen is being murdered."

"Well," exclaimed Ford, leaping to his feet and placing his notes in his pocket, "fortunately, my paper expects me to do just that, and if it didn't, I'd do it anyway. And that is exactly what I am going to do now! Don't tell the others in the Embassy, and, for Heaven's sake, don't tell the police. Jimmy, get me a taxi. And you," he commanded, pointing at the one who had brought the note, "are coming with me to Sowell Street, to show me where you picked up that paper."

On the way to Sowell Street Ford stopped at a newspaper agency, and paid for the insertion that afternoon of the same advertisement in three newspapers. It read: "If hansom-cab driver who last week carried note, found in street, to American Embassy will mail his address to X. X. X., care of GLOBE, he will be rewarded."

From the nearest post-office he sent to his paper the following cable: "Query our local correspondent, Dalesville, Kentucky, concerning Dosia Pearsall Dale. Is she of sound mind, is she heiress. Who controls her money, what her business relations with her uncle Charles Ralph Pearsall, what her present address. If any questions, say inquiries come from solicitors of Englishman who wants to marry her. Rush answer."

Sowell Street is a dark, dirty little thoroughfare, running for only one block, parallel to Harley Street. Like it, it is decorated with the brass plates of physicians and the red lamps of surgeons, but, just as the medical men in Harley Street, in keeping with that thoroughfare, are broad, open, and with nothing to conceal, so those of Sowell Street, like their hiding-place, shrink from observation, and their lives are as sombre, secret, and dark as the street itself.

Within two turns of it Ford dismissed the taxicab. Giving the soiled person a half-smoked cigarette, he told him to walk through Sowell Street, and when he reached the place where he had picked up the paper, to drop the cigarette as near that spot as possible. He then was to turn into Weymouth Street and wait until Ford joined him. At a distance of fifty feet Ford followed the man, and saw him, when in the middle of the block, without apparent hesitation, drop the cigarette. The house in front of which it fell was marked, like many others, by the brass plate of a doctor. As Ford passed it he hit the cigarette with his walking-stick, and drove it into an area. When he overtook the man, Ford handed him another cigarette. "To make sure," he said, "drop this in the place you found the paper. For a moment the man hesitated.

"I might as well tell you," Ford continued, "that I knocked that last cigarette so far from where you dropped it that you won't be able to use it as a guide. So, if you don't really know where you found the paper, you'll save my time by saying so." Instead of being confused by the test, the man was amused by it. He laughed appreciatively admitted. "You've caught me out fair, governor," "I Want the 'arf-crown, and I dropped the cigarette as near the place as I could. But I can't do it again. It was this way," he explained. "I wasn't taking notice of the houses. I was walking along looking into the gutter for stumps. I see this paper wrapped about something round. 'It's a copper,' I thinks, 'jucked out of a winder to a organ-grinder.' I snatches it, and runs. I didn't take no time to look at the houses. But it wasn't so far from where I showed you; about the middle house in the street and on the left 'and side."

Ford had never considered the man as a serious element in the problem. He believed him to know as little of the matter as he professed to know. But it was essential he should keep that little to himself.

"No one will pay you for talking," Ford pointed out, "and I'll pay you to keep quiet. So, if you say nothing concerning that note, at the end of two weeks, I'll leave two pounds for you with James, at the Embassy."

The man, who believed Ford to be an agent of the police, was only too happy to escape on such easy terms. After Ford had given him a pound on account, they parted.

From Wimpole Street the amateur detective went to the nearest public telephone and called up Gerridge's Hotel. He considered his first step should be to discover if Mr. Pearsall was at that hotel, or had ever stopped there. When the 'phone was answered, he requested that a message be delivered to Mr. Pearsall.

"Please tell him," he asked, "that the clothes he ordered are ready to try on."

He was informed that no one by that name was at the hotel. In a voice of concern Ford begged to know when Mr. Pearsall had gone away, and had he left any address.

He was with you three weeks ago," Ford insisted. "He's an American gentleman, and there was a lady with him. She ordered a riding-habit of us: the same time he was measured for his clothes."

After a short delay, the voice from the hotel replied that no one of the name of Pearsall had been at the hotel that winter.

In apparent great disgust Ford rang off, and took a taxicab to his rooms in Jermyn Street. There he packed a suit-case and drove to Gerridge's. It was a quiet, respectable, "old-established" house in Craven Street, a thoroughfare almost entirely given over to small family hotels much frequented by Americans.

After he had registered and had left his bag in his room, Ford returned to the office, and in an assured manner asked that a card on which he had written "Henry W. Page, Dalesville, Kentucky," should be taken to Mr. Pearsall.

In a tone of obvious annoyance the proprietor returned the card, saying that there was no one of that name in the hotel, and added that no such person had ever stopped there. Ford expressed the liveliest distress.

"He TOLD me I'd find him here," he protested., "he and his niece." With the garrulousness of the American abroad, he confided his troubles to the entire staff of the hotel. "We're from the same town," he explained. "That's why I must see him. He's the only man in London I know, and I've spent all my money. He said he'd give me some he owes me, as soon as I reached London. If I can't get it, I'll have to go home by Wednesday's steamer. And, complained bitterly, "I haven't seen the nor the Tower, nor Westminster Abbey."

In a moment, Ford's anxiety to meet Mr. Pearsall was apparently lost in a wave of self-pity. In his disappointment he appealing, pathetic figure.

Real detectives and rival newspaper men, even while they admitted Ford obtained facts that were denied them, claimed that they were given him from charity. Where they bullied, browbeat, and administered a third degree, Ford was embarrassed, deprecatory, an earnest, ingenuous, wide-eyed child. What he called his "working" smile begged of you not to be cross with him. His simplicity was apparently so hopeless, his confidence in whomever he addressed so complete, that often even the man he was pursuing felt for him a pitying contempt. Now as he stood uncertainly in the hall of the hotel, his helplessness moved the proud lady clerk to shake her cylinders of false hair sympathetically, the German waiters to regard his predicament with respect; even the

proprietor, Mr. Gerridge himself, was ill at ease. Ford returned to his room, on the second floor of the hotel, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

In connecting Pearsall with Gerridge's, both the police and himself had failed. Of this there were three possible explanations: that the girl who wrote the letter was in error, that the letter was a hoax, that the proprietor of the hotel, for some reason, was protecting Pearsall, and had deceived both Ford and Scotland Yard. On the other hand, without knowing why the girl believed Pearsall would be found at Gerridge's, it was reasonable to assume that in so thinking she had been purposely misled. The question was, should he or not dismiss Gerridge's as a possible clue, and at once devote himself to finding the house in Sowell Street? He decided for the moment at least, to leave Gerridge's out of his calculations, but, as an excuse for returning there, to still retain his room. He at once started toward Sowell Street, and in order to find out if any one from the hotel were following him, he set forth on foot. As soon as he made sure he was not spied upon, he covered the remainder of the distance in a cab.

He was acting on the supposition that the letter was no practical joke, but a genuine cry for help. Sowell Street was a scene set for such an adventure. It was narrow, mean-looking, the stucco house-fronts, soot-stained, cracked, and uncared-for, the steps broken and unwashed. As he entered it a cold rain was falling, and a yellow fog that rolled between the houses added to its dreariness. It was now late in the afternoon, and so overcast the sky that in many rooms the gas was lit and the curtains drawn.

The girl, apparently from observing the daily progress of the sun, had written she was on the west side of the street and, she believed, in an upper story. The man who picked up the note had said he had found it opposite the houses in the middle of the block. Accordingly, Ford proceeded on the supposition that the entire east side of the street, the lower stories of the west side, and the houses at each end were eliminated. The three houses in the centre of the row were outwardly alike. They were of four stories. Each was the residence of a physician, and in each, in the upper stories, the blinds were drawn. From the front there was nothing to be learned, and in the hope that the rear might furnish some clue, Ford hastened to Wimpole Street, in which the houses to the east backed upon those to the west in Sowell Street. These houses were given over to furnished lodgings, and under the pretext of renting chambers, it was easy for Ford to enter them, and from the apartments in the rear to obtain several hasty glimpses of the backs of the three houses in Sowell Street. But neither from this view-point did he gather any fact of interest. In one of the three houses in Sowell Street iron bars were fastened across the windows of the fourth floor, but in private sanatoriums this was neither unusual nor suspicious. The bars might cover the windows of a nursery to prevent children from falling out, or the room of some timid householder with a lively fear of burglars.

In a quarter of an hour Ford was again back in Sowell Street no wiser than when he had entered it. From the outside, at least, the three houses under suspicion gave no sign. In the problem before him there was one point that Ford found difficult to explain. It was the only one that caused him to question if the letter was genuine. What puzzled him was this: Why, if the girl were free to throw two notes from the window, did she not throw

them out by the dozen? If she were able to reach a window, opening on the street, why did she not call for help? Why did she not, by hurling out every small article the room contained, by screams, by breaking the window-panes, attract a crowd, and, through it, the police? That she had not done so seemed to show that only at rare intervals was she free from restraint, or at liberty to enter the front room that opened on the street. Would it be equally difficult, Ford asked himself, for one in the street to communicate with her? What signal could he give that would draw an answering signal from the girl?

Standing at the corner, hidden by the pillars of a portico, the water dripping from his rain-coat, Ford gazed long and anxiously at the blank windows of the three houses. Like blind eyes staring into his, they told no tales, betrayed no secret. Around him the commonplace life of the neighborhood proceeded undisturbed. Somewhere concealed in the single row of houses a girl was imprisoned, her life threatened; perhaps even at that moment she was facing her death. While, on either side, shut from her by the thickness only of a brick wall, people were talking, reading, making tea, preparing the evening meal, or, in the street below, hurrying by, intent on trivial errands. Hansom cabs, prowling in search of a fare, passed through the street where a woman was being robbed of a fortune, the drivers occupied only with thoughts of a possible shilling; a housemaid with a jug in her hand and a shawl over her bare head, hastened to the near-by public-house; the postman made his rounds, and delivered comic postal-cards; a policeman, shedding water from his shining cape, halted, gazed severely at the sky, and, unconscious of the crime that was going forward within the sound of his own footsteps, continued stolidly into Wimpole Street.

A hundred plans raced through Ford's brain; he would arouse the street with a false alarm of fire and lead the firemen, with the tale of a smoking chimney, to one of the three houses; he would feign illness, and, taking refuge in one of them, at night would explore the premises; he would impersonate a detective, and insist upon his right to search for stolen property. As he rejected these and a dozen schemes as fantastic, his brain and eyes were still alert for any chance advantage that the street might offer. But the minutes passed into an hour, and no one had entered any of the three houses, no one had left them. In the lower stories, from behind the edges of the blinds, lights appeared, but of the life within there was no sign. Until he hit upon a plan of action, Ford felt there was no longer anything to be gained by remaining in Sowell Street. Already the answer to his cable might have arrived at his rooms; at Gerridge's he might still learn something of Pearsall. He decided to revisit both these places, and, while so engaged, to send from his office one of his assistants to cover the Sowell Street houses. He cast a last, reluctant look at the closed blinds, and moved away. As he did so, two itinerant musicians dragging behind them a small street piano on wheels turned the corner, and, as the rain had now ceased, one of them pulled the oil-cloth covering from the instrument and, seating himself on a camp-stool at the curb, opened the piano. After a discouraged glance at the darkened windows, the other, in a hoarse, strident tenor, to the accompaniment of the piano, began to sing. The voice of the man was raucous, penetrating. It would have reached the recesses of a tomb.

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

