

## *The Mysterious Advertisement*

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I was on my way home last autumn from a tour which I had been making in Normandy, and arrived by a late train at Dieppe, intending to cross over to England next morning, weather permitting. The clock struck one before I got to bed, and, being tired with my journey, I soon fell asleep. Between two and three in the morning I was disturbed. The night was pitch dark, but there was a faint light reflected into my room from a lamp in the courtyard of the hotel, and the outline of my window was printed on the ceiling of the room like a huge, distorted skylight. It was blowing hard outside but I only heard the distant murmur of the wind, my side of the house being well sheltered. Yet I fancied that I must have been disturbed in my sleep by its roaring.

Before I had had time for much reflection my attention was attracted by a strange moaning sound which seemed to be close to me; then a sharp cry rent the air, followed by loud exclamations of pain or terror, and then a series of most distressing sobs and groans fell upon my ear. The sounds were so near me that they seemed to be in my room, and, indeed, close to the head of my bed. I could even fancy that I felt the air vibrate, and I thrust out my hands in the darkness to feel whether any living object were near me from which such terrible sounds could emanate. After a short time the groans and exclamations ceased, or nearly so, and I then called out, first in French, and afterwards in English: "Who is there—what is the matter?" But I could obtain no answer, and presently the alarming sounds began again and were louder and more harrowing than before.

I had some matches in the room, but they were not within reach as I lay—or rather sat up—in my bed, and I did not like the idea of leaving it, but I presently mustered courage and stepped on tiptoe towards the table, feeling anxiously before me till I reached it. I found my matches, struck at least half a dozen, which would just flash up and go out, and, growing more and more nervous every moment, at length succeeded in procuring a light. As the match burned up, illuminating the whole chamber, it enabled me to see distinctly that there was nothing unusual to be seen—nothing, at all events, that could account in any way for the mysterious and painful sounds which had alarmed me.

I lighted my candle, and, after a careful survey of the apartment, observed that in the wall by my bedside was a door communicating with another room. I came to the conclusion that there must be a bed on the other side of this door, touching it, perhaps, as mine did, and it was occupied by some one who was in great pain, arising, it might be, from a sudden attack of illness. The groans and cries for help, which continued to break forth while I was thus considering, left me no alternative but to try and afford relief, so I at once tapped at the door and asked if anyone were ill. Knock as I would, however, I could get no reply. So I partly dressed myself and went forth in search of a night porter, or some one who might be waking in the hotel, to whom I might communicate my anxiety.

On the staircase I met a tall, thin figure clad all in white, in point of fact a cook, candle in hand, and yawning fearfully, mounting slowly toward his bedroom. I had some difficulty in making him understand what it was that I wanted, he was so very sleepy. At length he seemed to apprehend a little of my meaning, and with a gesture and a "Tenez, mn'sieur," turned away suddenly and left me. After about ten minutes he returned, bringing with him another sleepy

person, probably a waiter who had just risen from his bed, to whom I repeated my story: he also said: "Tenez, m'sieur," and retired. In course of time he returned with a third, who said and did likewise. Finally about a dozen of the strangest, most fantastic, weird-looking objects you could imagine "found themselves" grouped around me in the corridor listening to my account of what had happened in or near my bedroom. The proprietor of the hotel, stout as a feather bed, wrapped in a flowered dressing-gown, the waiters in their drawers and slippers, a housemaid or two, a cook or two, in fact, nearly the entire establishment, in every possible variety of undress, were present and expressed, by all sorts of strange ejaculations and remarks, their opinion of my story. At length I led the way to the bed-chamber where I pictured to myself the subject of my solicitude lying upon his bed, or perhaps upon the floor, dying, if not already dead. The door was locked, but the landlord, by some process known to himself, opened it quite easily. There was a bed, as I had conjectured, near the door which communicated with my room, and on the pillow I could see from the distance a gray head and a pale face lying perfectly still and quiet. The whole party entered the room in single file, forming a procession which reached from the door to the bedside: while I, beginning to feel uneasy on my own account at having raised and introduced into another man's room such a spectral array as this, kept in the background, or, to be plain with you, in the corridor, reconnoitering over the shoulders of the rest. The old gentleman, for such he evidently was, though I was not near enough to see his features, remained for some time unconscious of the intrusion, till the landlord, finding that he could not rouse him with his voice, laid his hand upon him and shook him. He then woke up with a start and a sob, and appeared for a minute or two to be in great terror; he spoke English, and began to protest that he could explain everything, and that he was the victim of circumstances, with other such expressions; and it was a long time before the landlord could satisfy him (for he was rather deaf) that no other motive had brought him to his room but a fear that he was ill.

"No," said the old gentleman, apparently much relieved, "no; I am not ill; I have slept soundly; there is nothing the matter. I have not complained nor uttered a sound; why have you disturbed me?"

As soon as I heard this I retreated at once to my own room and closed and locked the door. It was a cowardly thing to do, but I confess I dared not face that regiment of excited men and women, who were beginning already to abuse each other, and who, I felt sure, would presently turn upon me with the conviction that I had been playing a silly practical joke upon them.

"Ou est donc ce, monsieur?" I heard them exclaim, and the word "Betise betise," was repeated often in a variety of voices: then there were snarling sounds, as if, like Demosthenes, they had been taking lessons from the dogs in the pronunciation of the letter "r-r-r-r," and mutual recriminations. Somebody was called "a great turkey," and told to "go to bed," which I have no doubt he would be very glad to do. I suspect it was the tall white cook, who had been, next to myself, the chief agent in the disturbance: however, hard words break no bones, and as no one seemed to know who I was from whence I had issued, or to what "numero" I had retired, I did not think it necessary to betray myself, and after a time they all withdrew, still chattering and complaining, to their beds, and I also went to mine.

In the corridor, or it might be just inside my neighbor's room, I am not sure which, I had taken up from the floor an envelope on which my name was written. I did not think much of it at the

moment, supposing I had dropped it from the pocket of my coat, which I had flung hastily over my shoulder when I left my room: but the next morning, when I was dressing, it attracted my attention as it lay upon the table where I had placed it. I took out the enclosure (the envelope had been opened previously), and to my great surprise discovered nothing but a copy of the English alphabet, with the same letters repeated in a different order, or rather disorder, under it. I did not recognize the hand-writing, nor did I remember ever having seen the paper before: but my name was on the envelope plainly enough, so I thought it might possibly belong to some other member of my family, and have come into my possession by mistake. When I descended to the coffee room I asked the waiter whether there was any other person of the name of Dickens in the hotel, and, after he had made inquiry, he answered: "No;" but a gentleman who was sitting near me looked up so quickly and so anxiously at the moment that I was on the point of speaking to him, when he rose up suddenly and left the room. I noticed the same gentleman, a man of about sixty years, perhaps, with a sad, depressed look and manner, reading the *Times* newspaper in the afternoon, or rather the first page of it, and sighing dismally, as if he were in some great trouble. More than once I should have spoken to him, but every time he caught my eye he seemed confused and anxious to avoid me; and, of course, [I] did not wish to intrude upon him, though I would gladly have cheered him up a little if I could have done so, as he seemed to be quite alone.

The following night I was again disturbed about the same hour as before, but by a different cause. As soon as I was fairly awake I became aware that some one was in my room with a light. The light was indeed so faint, or rather so carefully shaded from sight, that it was almost confined to one spot, like a ray from a dark-lantern. It served, however, to show me the form of a man standing near my dressing-table, upon which I had laid my purse and watch and some other contents of my pockets when I undressed. The figure was busy with these articles, turning them over as if making a selection; and for a few seconds I lay still, watching him, I saw him take something, which from the sound I thought must be a letter, and after examining the address, clasp it eagerly in his hand; and then he turned to leave the room, walking with stealthy steps and carefully shading the light from my eyes with his hand.

I was determined not to be robbed in this manner, and slipping hastily out of bed, contrived to reach the door and intercept his retreat, almost before he knew that he had been observed. In his surprise he dropped the candle and with a sudden gasp or exclamation stood still before me, making no effort to escape, and presently began to sob hysterically. I closed and locked the door, and then, as quickly as I could, lighted my candle. To my great surprise and sorrow, I found that the person I had detected was no other than the sad old gentleman whom I had noticed in the coffee-room reading the *Times*, as I have told you.

I perceived immediately that my watch and purse, with one or two rings, were lying on the table undisturbed; it was evident, therefore, that this was no common thief.

"What have you taken?" I asked; "what motive had you in coming to my room?"

I felt very sorry for the poor man, he seemed in such distress, and I suppose something in my look or tone of voice made him aware of it.

"I will tell you," he said, "if you will only be silent and promise not to betray me. I am the most

unfortunate of men; but I will tell you everything and then throw myself upon your mercy. I am entirely in your power, but if you believe my story you will be sorry for me. I am quite innocent of any wrong in this matter—as innocent as yourself—and I might say, even more so!”

“How can that be?” I asked.

“See,” said he, “this is the only thing I have robbed you of, and this is mine, not yours!” and he showed me the envelope with my name upon it.

“Then why did you not claim it?” I asked; “you saw it in my hand yesterday. Why did you not ask for it?”

“I dared not, and I am going to tell you why.”

“How came my name upon it?”

“It is my name, not yours or rather mine as well as yours.”

“But the waiter told me your name was Pierce, not Dickens.”

“Pierce is the name I go by here. Let me sit down; I will explain everything.”

He seated himself by my bedside, wrapped in a traveling rug which I lent him, for he was shivering, as much from nervousness, perhaps, as from the cold, and told me his story in a few words.

He was a banker’s clerk, high up, of long standing, and very much respected in his house. He had—or, I may say, has—a son grown up and a daughter. The former had been idle and unsteady until about a year ago; he had held one or two situations and lost them from misconduct. At length he seemed determined to reform, and as he had never been suspected of anything worse than unpunctuality and inattention to business, his father consented, upon his earnest promise of good conduct, to apply for a situation for him in the bank and under his own immediate supervision. For a time the young man went on well, but he grew weary of the confinement and often talked of emigrating, a proposal to which, as he was his only son, the father would not listen to for a moment.

At length one day the son disappeared, and a letter arrived by post next morning from Liverpool, saying that he was on the point of sailing for New York, begging forgiveness for the secrecy and suddenness of his departure, which he could only justify on the plea that he knew it would be useless to ask his father’s consent. The letter was full of good resolutions and affectionate promises, but before they could reply to it he had sailed.

Here I would have comforted the old man with the prospect of seeing his son at home again after a time, and probably in prosperous circumstances, but he interrupted me.

“You have heard nothing yet,” he said, and then proceeded to tell me, with faltering words and

burning tears, that a day or two after the departure of his son it was found that a sum of money, amounting to several hundred pounds, which had been intrusted to him in the course of his duties, was missing. It ought to have been paid to the account of one Sydney Smith at a certain bank, but had never been delivered there—in a word, his son was a defaulter. The father, too, was implicated; indeed, the onus rested upon him, for it was he who had intrusted the young man with the money and had sent him on his errand, and no one else in the bank knew that he had done so. Therefore he could only justify himself by accusing his son, and even then he had no proof to offer, and could not be sure that he would be exonerated. The poor old man, as soon as he learned what had happened, seemed to have lost his better judgment. He took immediate steps to raise money by the help of his friends, to replace that which was lost, but felt that until this was done he could not face his principals nor his fellow clerks, and he seems to have thought that by absenting himself on some fictitious plea the inquiry might be deferred and exposure avoided. In a fit of nervousness and alarm (such as I plead guilty to myself when I ran away from the Frenchmen) he took train and came at once to Dieppe; at the same time he assumed another name, and for greater security would not even allow his daughter to write to him, but contrived a plan of communication by means of advertisements in the *Times*, in which the letters were to be so transposed as to be incomprehensible (as they imagined) to any one who was not acquainted with the key. That key he had lost; he saw it in my hands, but dared not ask for it. It had been placed in an envelope for him by his daughter, who had thoughtlessly, but very naturally, written his real name upon it. He feared that if he should ask for it, it would be the means of his betrayal. He did not know me, of course, or I hope he would have had a better opinion of me. The *Times* of the previous day had a few lines in the second column which he was sure were meant for him, but he could not decipher them. The poor man's anxiety again got the better of his discretion, and he adopted the means which I have described to recover possession of the all-important document, of which, as he truly remarked, I had robbed him, rather than he me.

I need not tell you that I exonerated him at once from all blame, and promised that, whatever happened, I would keep his secret. I should have gone on to offer my assistance in arranging matters for him at home, but he interrupted me.

“O, if I could but see the *Times*,” he said. “I will go down to the coffee room and fetch it; I cannot wait till morning to read the message.”

He did so (I would have gone with him but that I feared to meet the cook again upon the stairs), and returned clasping the paper in his trembling hands.

“There is your key” I said; “take it, and may it bring you good news.”

“O, help me! he exclaimed; “you know all about it; I have no secrets now from you; help me to make it out, the letters all seem to swim before my eyes.”

The advertisement did indeed look formidable; here it is:

“Zmmh slkg Dteerlk yg fmdl rmdl msbv t dvgetel fmdl rmdl te msfl. Tzslg.”

“Now for the key,” I said. “But what is this? the envelope is empty.”

“It must have fallen upon the floor,” said my poor friend, and he stooped down and groped about for it with trembling fingers.

But no, it had not fallen to the floor; search as we would we could not find it. By what chance it had been mislaid, or where it was gone to, I have never discovered to this day. I scarcely know which of the two was more distressed, poor Mr. Dickens (the other Dickens) or myself. After turning over all my papers to no purpose, we sat down and looked at each other in despair. Then suddenly I remembered that by patience and perseverance nearly all puzzles of this description might be interpreted, and I resolved to try what I could make of it. I took up the paper and read the letters backwards and forwards for some time without approaching any nearer to their meaning. At length an idea struck me. I had read how the first clue to the interpretation of the cuneiform inscriptions of Assyria had been obtained by observing the recurrence of certain letters and words and names; such as “Xerxes, king of kings, son of Darius, king of kings,” etc. It was indeed *magna componere parvis*; but the hint was practical. The last word in this secret message was most probably the name or signature of the sender; it began with a capital and consisted of five letters.

“What is your daughter’s name?” I asked.

“Agnes,” he replied, without raising his head.

I was sure of it now, and wrote down the disguised letters with the real ones under them, thus:—

T. z. s. l. g  
A g n e s

I then observed that the third word in the riddle also began with a capital. His son’s name he told me was Matthew, and this word had seven letters, of which the third and fourth were identical, so I wrote down:

D. t. c. c. r. l. k  
M a t t h e w

With the clew thus obtained I went on, without saying anything to my friend, to the other words of the puzzle, and wrote down the first line thus—

ZmnhslkgDtcrlk ygfmdl rmdl  
news Matthew s me h me.

It was easy to guess that the last three words were “is come home,” and this gave me double o for the first. “Good news,” I cried out in ecstasy. “Matthew is come home.”

I could scarcely persuade Mr. Dickens that I was not deceiving him; he was too much agitated to trace the process by which I had arrived at this result, but sat down by me and watched while I deciphered the rest, which with this enlarged clew was quickly done. If you will take the trouble

to look it over you will easily be able to make it out. I was able to tell my dear friend, for such he is now, that the money was found; there had been a mistake about it which was now set right. You will not expect me to describe his emotion, nor to tell you how, after his first transports of delight and gratitude, he read the welcome message again and again, and blessed me for the assistance I had rendered. It was painful to see him sobbing and gasping; for he had some kind of asthmatic affection, which would account in part for the distressing sounds to which he had given utterance on the previous night, when he was so troubled in his dreams. But he grew calm at last, and went to his bedroom for the short remainder of the night.

We crossed over to Newhaven together next morning, caring little for a stormy passage; and the following day I had a letter from my friend in London, telling me all about it. The ship in which his son had sailed had put back in consequence of heavy gales. Matthew had returned home while she was refitting, and had then heard for the first time of the supposed embezzlement. It proved, on inquiry, that he had carried the check to the wrong bank, and it had been entered there to the credit of a stranger, another Sydney Smith—there are so many of them. Of course it was soon set right, and Matthew Dickens, instead of going abroad, settled down at his old desk, and is going on now contented and well. —*Leisure Hour*.

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