

The Professor

MY DEAR VANE: A line in haste. If you possibly manage it, come down here by 4 o'clock train. My mother's diamond been stolen. Don't bring a detective; we'll try it ourselves first. Telegraph if you can come. Yours in haste, H. CARGILL.

My friend Harold was waiting for me when I reached the little station about 7 o'clock in the evening, and on the drive home I learned a few more particulars. The robbery had taken place, as far as could be judged, either during the night before last or on the preceding day. The house and the effects of the servants had been searched without avail, and Harold had only waited my arrival before taking further steps. We talked the matter over at great length, both on our way home and after dinner. That one of the servants was guilty seemed to me quite evident, but I could convince neither of the others on this point.

Mrs. Cargill left us soon to our wine, and I continued my endeavors without avail to prove to Harold that strict measures should at once be taken with all the servants. He contended that a thorough search had already been made.

"My dear fellow," I said at length, "you should have allowed me to use my discretion in the matter, and I would have brought you down a French detective or two."

"And what would your detectives have done? Made up a nice story, implicating one or all of the servants, and probably the gardener as an out-door agent, but not found the diamond. Now where is the use of investigations unless we recover the diamond?"

A happy thought struck me as he spoke. "If your object, Harold, is entirely the recovery of the diamond and not the punishment of the thief, I have a suggestion to make, and it may be, after all, that if we discover the stone first we may learn more afterward. Let us have down this great mesmerist and thought-reader, who is making such a small commotion just now. We'll tax him (if he'll come) to conduct us to the stone. It is probably still in the house; the robbery was discovered so very quickly that even with an outside agency in the person of the gardener, whom I grant you I don't like, it is unlikely this stone can have got so far as the village yet."

On this suggestion (made half in jest, half in earnest) we eventually decided to act. The robbery had been discovered the morning before, and the servants had since then been pretty closely watched so that, after a further talk which, it is needless to say, went over and over the same ground at least a score of times, each of us attempting to prove to himself and to the other that detective work was what Providence had severally meant us for, we came to the determination that we would ask the great thought-reader, Professor Landley, to come to our assistance.

The greatest secrecy, of course, was necessary. Not even Mrs. Cargill should know at first who our visitor really was, for our only hope of success lay in the chance that if one of the servants was the thief the stone might be still hidden in the house, or perhaps buried in the

ground outside, till it could with greater safety be removed when the matter had had time to be partly forgotten.

I went to town early next morning and called at once upon the learned professor. He was “out,” but was to be in again very soon. I strolled about the neighborhood some time so as not to miss him, having a shrewd suspicion that he had not yet made his appearance at breakfast. Sure enough, I found him at a little before noon eating in a languid manner the remains of a fowl that had done duty before and drinking small beer. Knowing a little of professional men, however, I recognized the exigencies of the case, and, after the usual civilities, explained the reason of my call. He was a tall man, rather thin, with weak eyes, but sufficiently gentlemanly to pass muster, both in dress and manner. Rather to my surprise he readily agreed to accompany me and postpone for a few days the private engagements which he had on hand at the time: but in the course of our journey down (for we returned that night) the reason of his compliance came out. He wished to include the robbery in his advertisements, and all that I could say to the contrary would not convince him that my friend would scarcely care for his name to be mixed up in the matter. After considerable discussion we thought it best to inform Mrs. Cargill later in the evening who and what our visitor really was.

The professor explained to us that, as Mrs. Cargill knew the diamond and had worn it so long, she was the one who, with her hand in his, could best communicate to him where to lead her. “If,” said he, “the day is, clear and bright, I shall lead you tomorrow to the spot, Mrs. Cargill, provided you have sufficient strength of mind to keep your ideas fixed entirely upon the stone. You must keep it vividly before your mind’s eye, and I shall lead you to it, if it is in the house or grounds.”

Nothing had occurred in the household since my departure in the morning, and the robber (whoever he was) must now, we judged, be beginning to feel somewhat easier in mind; so in case of his deeming it necessary to alter the probable hiding place of the stone, we determined upon immediate action, deciding to commence next morning at daybreak, before the world would be properly awake. The professor did not much appreciate the idea of such an early start, but we succeeded in overcoming his scruples, and it was arranged before we parted for bed that we should all meet in the dining room at 3 o’clock next morning.

Mrs. Cargill was down before me, and Harold shortly after. Of course, we were all before the time, and to wait in dumb silence (even with the prospect of a most interesting experiment) for twenty minutes in the cold dawn was anything but lively. At length the professor appeared, looking, we were glad to see, equal to his business. We had left the front door ajar in case of need, as it was our impression (so thorough a search having already been made inside) that the object of our quest must be without the house. It was rather eerie work for us all, except the professor, who was equal to the occasion and seemed to scent the battle, so to speak, in the shape of some far-off diamond which he had never seen.

At 3:12, then, Mrs. Cargill took the professor’s hand, he having been previously blindfolded—“Not,” he said, “that such a thing was necessary, but it calmed his power of thought to some extent.” Harold and I retired a few steps, and the silence for several minutes was deathlike. At last the professor made a step, another, and then to us onlookers it seemed as if certainty had

replaced doubt. He went straight to the door, Mrs. Cargill following (and we too, discreetly), down the avenue to the first turning, and then bang against the fence in a most disturbing manner. This little incident seemed to have upset his train of thought, and it was some minutes before he seemed to grasp the situation.

It was a fortunate thing that the morning was fine, though the grass looked abominably wet. I inwardly shuddered at the idea that, had there been a gate, we should have felt obliged to open it, and take to the grass; and catching Harold's eye, we both felt somewhat guilty, as though we might be shirking something. But the "something" was not to be shirked. The professor calmly commenced to climb the paling, which, as his one hand was occupied, and as he was an exceedingly ungainly man, obviously never born for feats of agility, seemed rather an extraordinary proceeding. Over he would go, however, and over Mrs. Cargill must go with him; when a man is in a trance he is very unreasonable; how Mrs. Cargill stood it I cannot tell, save that she herself was, perhaps, a little affected.

We were helping them quietly over when the professor got into a most unaccountable hurry and, had we not both devoted our attention to Mrs. Cargill, she and her leader must have fallen and the train of thought been probably broken. We had been asked to maintain a discreet silence, but I could almost have sworn I caught a smothered exclamation from Harold as Mrs. Cargill's foot was brought smartly around upon the side of his head, owing to the professor's unreasonable haste.

Once over the paling the scent seemed to have grown weaker. Of course there was no hesitation in the avenue, and a very evident absence of such feeling when palings had to be surmounted; but once on the dew grass things might be taken more easily. I went back to the palings to join Harold, and we left the pair to themselves till they got fairly across the field. Then the professor seemed to recognize the proximity of another paling, and we had to run to be in time to help them over. We were getting more used to it now, and Mrs. Cargill was bearing up wonderfully. We handed them over without any mishap, save that the professor's foot got twisted in the fence, and his boot (one of those elastic-sided monstrosities and very old) came off in the struggle to extricate him.

It was by this time thoroughly light; we must have been out for nearly half an hour and as yet had done nothing but climb palings and get our feet very wet. Still, it certainly seemed that there might be some method in this madness, and so on we went, more slowly now, owing to the brushwood, which happily was not very thick. Suddenly the professor stopped, in so decided a manner that I could not but think it possible that we were near the object of our search. He was at the moment just opposite a thick laurel bush. I looked hastily at Harold, who appeared as confident as myself that we must have come to something to cause such a decided and prolonged stop. A few minutes of silence and suspense passed like hours: then, a step forward, and the professor commenced to stoop slowly downward, when we heard a rustling among the laurel leaves, and a fox slunk out from the other side of the bush and made off through the wood. This distracted my attention for a moment, and when I looked round the professor had resumed his usual stiff-backed attitude. We waited for full five minutes. What had gone wrong? Where was the professor's promise? Was there nothing in the bush after all?

He slowly relaxed Mrs. Cargill's hand: "It is no use, gentlemen; I can do nothing more just now!" But why? What was the reason? Why stop himself just as discovery appeared certain? The professor could understand it no more than we. "I came here," he said, "guided by Mrs. Cargill's thought. I don't know where I am. I had the diamond or the clew to it, five minutes ago; now it is lost. Whether Mrs. Cargill had ceased to assist me or not I cannot tell. But I know I can do nothing more just now."

It seemed best, if we wished to preserve any secrecy in the matter, to make our way home as quick as we could. I gave the professor his boot, and Mrs. Cargill (who was something exhausted) my arm; and we returned, gloomily, almost as we had come, that is to say, by the shortest and most direct way. We were all too disgusted with the professor to be able to discuss the matter amicably with him at the moment, so we parted quietly and like guilty creatures in the hall to court the sleep which we all began to feel would be beneficial.

His explanations later in the day made the matter no clearer. He was certain that he had been on the track (and it certainly had looked like it), but the reason for the sudden stop he could not tell. Still, in the end, he managed to talk us over, and Mrs. Cargill was induced to go through the experiment again; but this time we were to start where we had left off. One thing alone the professor would swear to: the diamond could not be in the house, else he would never have gone outside. Also he informed us that his foot, notwithstanding his thick stocking, was considerably the worse for wear.

The hour at length came again. Harold and I had decided to dispense with sleep. Mrs. Cargill and the professor turned up very punctually within a few seconds of one another.

The morning was clear and frosty. We walked to the laurel bush, where, having blindfolded the professor as before. Mrs. Cargill took his hand. He soon started off, taking no notice of the laurel bush, but away through the wood. We must have been walking for several minutes, and at a pretty quick pace, when, like an evil omen, a fox (probably the one we had seen on the previous night) sprang out of a clump of underwood and vanished among the trees.

It was the same story over again. Our leader's pace slackened, then he stopped. Could it be that a fox was, as it were, a nonconducting agent? I put the question to the professor; nay, I further hinted that, perhaps, when in a mesmeric state the sense of smell might be so heightened that he had been following like a foxhound, for two nights in succession, this evil denizen of the woods. He put the suggestion aside with scorn, but the more I thought the more I felt there might be something in it, and Harold so far agreed with me as to question the learned professor next day as to whether he had ever been fond of hunting.

We had gone home as before nonplussed; we had retired to our rooms, slumbered late and met for fresh discussion, all to no purpose. Mrs. Cargill wished to give up the attempt and call in the detectives. Harold and I were inclined somewhat ignominiously to agree. But we had forgotten the professor; his blood was up; our taunts on the subject of fox hunting had aggravated him more than we had fancied. Prove himself right he would; his honor, he insisted, was at stake; he must be successful in the end. He appealed to Mrs. Cargill to stand by him, and the long and the

short of it was that she agreed to make a third and last trial, the professor on his side promising that it should be the very last.

It rained hard all the evening, and at daybreak when we met it was so damp, dreary and misty that we all felt relieved when the professor asked us to leave matters alone for a day and give his last attempt every possible chance.

All this time things in the household had been going on quietly enough, and it seemed as though the servants had quite made up their minds that no further search was intended. The only fresh circumstance that came to light was that the gardener's kennel, formerly occupied by a tame fox for which he had a great affection, was observed to be empty. The man affirmed that the animal had slipped its collar the day before. We could only question him casually on the subject, but it seemed likely that the animal, whose scent had proved too strong for the professor, was the one which the gardener affirmed only to have escaped on the previous day. The animal, he said, was bound to come back for its meals sooner or later, but we did not altogether agree with him on that point.

Daybreak next morning saw us again assembled in the dining room, and we left the house to recommence business in the wood where we had last stopped. It was a fine, clear morning, and gave promise of a glorious day. The professor was on his mettle. He had said to us: "I will succeed to-morrow"; and to succeed he evidently intended.

He stood for a few minutes, blindfolded as usual, before he took Mrs. Cargill's hand, and then commenced to move forward, but in an opposite direction to that he had been taking when he had lost the clew before. On he went, and on, right through the wood, till the affair began to grow tiresome. He was going well today certainly; he had kept us at it a good long time; but if we were only going to get a few hundred yards every night and perhaps not find the stone after all, we might as well give the matter up entirely. Harold appeared, from the frown upon his face, to have begun to consider matters in this light too, when the professor, who had been going at a fair pace, suddenly stopped, it seemed to me only natural that, as he had gone further than he had ever gone before he should stop. His imbecile mind could stand the strain no longer. After considerable hesitation, however, he turned slowly to the left, bent over some thick brushwood and gradually stretched out his hand. "It's that fox again to a certainty," whispered Harold to me; "the professor's as mad as a March hare." No signs of the fox, though, and the professor was well into the bush; if the diamond was there, surely a sudden flash of thought would assist him; but it was not likely to be there any more than our friend the fox, who would certainly have made off before now.

Ere my ideas were completed the flash of thought did come. A sudden dart downward on the part of the professor was instantaneously succeeded by a frightful yell that rang through the woods. Mrs. Cargill's hand was dropped in a second, and it seemed as though the professor was engaging blindfolded in some awful struggle with a foe whom none of us had yet seen.

It was the fox after all. The professor had tracked him down this time, if not to his den, at last to the trap in which the animal was struggling.

Certes, he was pretty severely punished for his fox hunting propensities! Foxes don't usually attack until driven to the last extremity, and the professor must have forced the animal to the furthest point it could go with the trap on its fore paw ere he made that sudden dive which was so disastrous for him. Had it not been that the learned man's hand was most terribly bitten we should have been struck with the absurdity of the scene. Mrs. Cargill had had a great fright: the professor was in a towering rage, not merely at the injury done to his hand, but that he should after all have again tracked down his fox; so Harold and I were alone in any condition for action. The professor swore that he must kill the fox that had so bitten him, and so great was his wrath and haste that he would scarcely wait till he had stanch'd his wound with a handkerchief.

I took Mrs. Cargill to some little distance, and when I returned the fox was well-nigh demolished by the aid of a stout stick, with which the professor had promptly avenged himself.

He was calmer now, and as we were talking over the little excitement of the moment he gave it as his decided opinion that either Mrs. Cargill must, unknown to herself, have been wearing the diamond all the time, or the fox must have swallowed it. The last idea seemed to have something in it, and he was so impressed with it that the only course to convince him (for we had begun to doubt his sanity) seemed to be to dissect the animal there and then. I left them to inform Mrs. Cargill of our last resolve when a shout of joy from the professor and of surprise from Harold made me hastily turn to rejoin them. Mrs. Cargill, hearing the shout, was with us in a trice.

The diamond had been found! The fox had not swallowed it, but tied tightly round its neck, roughly sewed up in a piece of brown leather, was the missing stone.

The professor was exultant; his wound was forgotten: he had been right, after all. But who was the thief? Some one must have committed the diamond to the fox's care. Was it true that the animal had slipped its collar; or had the culprit freed it for greater safety, in the belief that it would return for its meals? Only the gardener could tell us, and he would probably not miss his fox till the morning.

Excited as we were, we talked it all over in the wood and were considerable later than usual in getting home, where we parted at once silently, retiring to our several chambers to take the rest we had so well earned, after mutual compliments all around.

We had decided that the gardener alone could be the thief, and that we would confront him with the charge in the morning— but we had reckoned without our host! When we assembled for breakfast, the professor with his hand wrapped up in most ungainly fashion, Mrs. Cargill met us with a blank face. A note, which the servant had found in the silver chest some minutes since, explained all. It was a filthy piece of workmanship, but still legible, and the contents, alas! too plainly spoke the truth. It ran as follows:

Missus,—I seen you and the gintlemen too nites waukin about the woods lookin for mi fox. You Kant find him eny more than me so ime off. I hop you may ketch mi fox I kant so me and my pals tuk a few spunes insted. Your obedient sirvent,

ps—thanks for levin the door opin.

The professor was the only one who made a hearty breakfast. He had proved the power of thought reading; it was our fault, not his, that the gardener had been too sharp for us. Now, of course, we had the detectives down; but we never caught Mr. Black. “Tuk a few spunes insted!” I should rather think he had; there was not a piece of plate left in the house.

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