

## *A Woman of Mystery*

Remarkable Story of New York's Great Female Detective

The Daughter of a United States Senator as a Ferreter of Crime

[From the New York Mercury]

People moving in the best society of this city have been puzzled during the present and the previous three or four winters about a mysterious lady who had appeared at most of the select soirees, parties and gatherings which have taken place. She has been the cynosure of all eyes at both public and private establishments in which the bon-ton have been guests. In the Fifth Avenue, Twenty-Third Street or Thirty-Fourth Street mansions she has been the envy of the ladies and the admiration of the gentlemen equally as at the balls and concerts at the Academy or at Irving Hall. She dresses handsomely, in the richest apparel, without ostentatious display, and yet diamonds and precious stones glisten from her ear-drops and upon her fingers. She is tall, slim, with well-developed bust, tapering waist, and a queenly head appropriately adorned with luxuriant tresses, set upon well-rounded and sloping shoulders. She is most graceful and agile in her movements, perfectly at ease in society, indicating that she has been accustomed to the companionship of the cultured, opulent and refined. When she smiles she displays two rows of pearly teeth, and those who are intimate with her declare she is a most remarkable conversationalist. She is a brunette, and her rapid speech, frequent gesticulation and sibilant utterance would indicate foreign birth. She speaks

ENGLISH, FRENCH, GERMAN AND SPANISH EQUALLY

well, and conjectures as to her nationality are numerous and indeterminate. It has been gravely asserted that she is the daughter of an expatriated foreign nobleman, that she is of royal blood and is studying American society and manners. This has been contradicted, and others allege that she is the daughter of a wealthy American, educated abroad, and possessing foreign airs and native graces. She has dignity and hauteur indicating self-possession and an established standing in society, and she possesses a personal magnetism which all those brought into intimate association with her have declared irresistible. This has induced many men and women to give her that unreserved confidence which has led to consequences they never conceived possible. This remarkable woman is simply an actress on the stage of life, performing her part in the interest of justice. She is, in short, a detective; a female spy in the employ of the Police Commission of this city; hired to discover culprits whom the Central Office detectives are unable to detect; and many a man whom she has bewitched has poured unwittingly into her ear secrets connected with his business operations, or a story of some irregular proceedings, which have led to the detection and arrest of some of the most accomplished and shrewdest swindlers who have operated in the metropolis. She is and has been for several years the most successful and efficient detective in America.

These facts, however, were unknown to the writer until a few days ago. At least the occupation of the lady was a mystery to him. He knew that the Police Commission had in its employ an expert female detective, and when he started out to obtain an audience with her, he was unaware

that she was identical with the mysterious lady who has puzzled society people. When he saw her he recognized her as the

### HANDSOME LADY OF FASHIONABLE DRAWING-ROOMS

and salons. In the numerous select circles in which she has moved she has been known by different names when following her calling in different cities or in separate coteries. We shall call her by one of her most familiar names, Mrs. Lucille Benton—the shrewdest detective of all those whose ambition has led them to aspire to that title, while forgetful of their sex and their lack of endurance. While other women have succumbed to the wearing watchfulness, the long, wearisome journeys, the tension of nerve, this woman has not grown old, or weak, or lost her wonderful power of self-control, her matchless vitality, her incredible endurance.

So silent is she as to her work, so unostentatious, so nonchalant in her caution, that her most intimate friends are ignorant of her profession, knowing her only as a lady of rare accomplishments, of great wealth, and fond of traveling, yet in all things circumspect as Mrs. Grundy could demand. Her most envious lady friend can pick no flaw in her womanly armor. Of relatives she has none, and out of her bereavements, the terrible wrongs she has endured, and the blighting influence of an unhappy alliance has grown her remarkable heroism, her undaunted courage.

A very delicate and extremely difficult task was that of learning where the lady resided. To obtain an audience was still more difficult, for those to whom her service have become invaluable are quite as cautious about her introduction to the public as the lady herself, and the way was abruptly barred several times by very decided snubs.

At last all barriers were passed, and the *Mercury* reporter was admitted within the doors of an elegant brown-stone mansion, in the aristocratic neighborhood of Fifth Avenue and Thirty-Fourth Street. An obsequious servant disappeared with the card bearing the name of the intruder and that of the officer introducing him. There was ample time in which to note the artistic blending of colors and tasteful disposition of costly furniture before the door opened again and the servant announced his mistress with much formality. Then, folding his arms, the latter waited near the door as the slender, graceful figure of a lady, in almost regal attire, stood before the reporter. The servant's eyes were prepared to measure every word uttered by the audacious stranger, who, it may be confessed, was slightly fearful that all his time and labor would amount to simple failure, so perfectly noncommittal was the lady whom he called to interrogate. But, upon being positively assured that nothing would be said to reveal her identity, the lady gave the reporter the following particulars concerning her personal history, which reads like a romance, but which was afterward verified by one of the highest officials at headquarters:

### THE SAD STORY OF AN ADVENTUROUS LIFE.

“I was an only child. My father was one of the wealthiest and most influential men of his time. My mother dying, I was constantly with him, and delighted in his studies and his friendship. At sixteen I was proficient as a linguist, acquainted with standard literature, an observant traveler and a fair musician. My father was in Washington in a high position, and I was thrown into the

gayest society. On my seventeenth birthday I was married to a handsome, talented, wealthy Southerner, whom I loved devotedly. I had been warned in vain that my marriage would not be a happy one. I loved him blindly, and when, after a few brief months I found that he was a gambler and a roué—a man of malicious temper and unmeasurable jealousy—I was too proud to confide in my father, and bore my troubles alone. A year after my marriage I became the mother of two lovely babes, who inherited from their father the fearful legacy of a dissipated life too often given to the innocent offspring, and after a few months they were mercifully removed from earth, leaving me desolate, for my husband almost hated me, and struck me many a cruel blow when under the influence of drink. Less than two years of my wretched married life had passed when my husband disappeared. Had he been murdered, or was he the victim of madness? Had some new face lured him away, or had he fled from the consequence of undiscovered crime? I knew not, and weeks passed away with no clue to his whereabouts. With a trembling at my heart I sought out his boon companions in their

### HAUNTS OF VICE,

And was jeered at when I pleaded with them to tell me where he was. I was his wife, and I loved him in spite of all my sufferings. I determined to find him, or to know where he had fled; and, confiding in my life-long servant Zeb—who always watched over me with the love of a mother, friend and servant combined—I prepared to seek my husband. Dressing myself in a suit of male attire, and assuming the character of a young man of wealth seeing the world, I left my home, ostensibly to recruit my health, but really to find out the secret hiding-places of wrecked and degraded criminals and their newly-trapped victims. The gayest gambling halls, and the lowest theaters and most degraded shows, the billiard saloon, the foul groggery, the gilded halls where virtue is laughed at, and misery is painted to resemble happiness—I visited them all! At times pained almost beyond endurance; again indignant almost beyond control; careful not to give offense, endowed with wonderful intuition, I escaped harm, and amid many strange tales babbled over their wine-cups, at last I heard the name which I longed, yet dreaded, to hear. I was playing a game of cards. Zeb touched my shoulder slightly; and as played on we both listened intently. A woman's name with ribald words was mentioned, and the low brutal laugh announced that my husband was the victim of revenge. He had been lured away by a siren voice, and had been robbed of all the means within his reach, and had been cast out of the gay mansion a besotted beggar. Helpless and lying in the streets, he had been crushed by a passing wagon and was the inmate of a hospital.

“‘They say he has a dashing wife, rich and handsome,’ observed one.

“‘Guess she would be proud of the old bloat now,’ returned the companion.

“‘She is the only daughter of the Senator.’

“‘No!’

“‘Fact!’

“Think I’ll sober up and go and find her out as soon as Billy dies. Tell her the news and marry her myself.’

“Zeb’s hands trembled as he placed them upon my shoulders to assure me of his sympathy. My game was finished. I paid my losses, and, refusing to play further, turned away to my hotel. Admittance to the hospital could not be gained then, for it was midnight. I threw myself upon my bed and

#### WEPT AS I HAD NEVER BEFORE

in all my life. A fitful slumber followed the weeping, and in the morning I donned the woman’s garb hidden in my trunk, veiled my face, and passing out of the door I was soon joined by Zeb, when we hurried away to the Charity Hospital, then as now one of the best in St. Louis.

“The matron insisted that it was unwise to admit me, as the poor man was delirious, and in great danger, but I implored her for admission. When I looked at the bloated face, brutalized by vicious indulgence, I knew it was myself for whom she feared the result rather than her patient. I turned away and wept on her kindly breast. Then, gathering courage again, I turned to him, and called his name. He listened. Incoherent pleadings for pardon followed; and after a little time he recognized Zeb, and then his wife. How he begged me to forgive him all the wrong he had done, but he did not ask, nor would he permit a caress from either of us, saying all the time how unfit he was to be with us. All day I sat by him, and at nightfall he died. Then Zeb and I returned to the desolated home from which I had been absent so long. We buried the dead without other eyes than ours seeing how terribly he had changed, but my troubles were not ended. A few weeks after his internment a woman closely veiled called on me, and asserted herself to be his lawful wife. For a sum of money she said she would destroy all evidence of her marriage. In case I refused she would publish to the world my sad position. I was at first

#### DUMB WITH DESPAIR,

and then I remembered his dying words to the sister bending over him: “This is my wife, my true and lawful wife; before God no other can claim the name.” The words sounded strange to me then, but it was no doubt one of the keen intuitions of the dying that I would be annoyed by such a claim. The revenge of some malicious person had not been fully sated. Remembering his words, I put the woman off for one month, until I could realize by the sale of some property the money she asked. I gave her then a small sum for immediate use, and noting her address, dismissed her. Zeb coincided with me. She was not the wife of his dead master. To whom could I entrust the solution of the problem? I resolved to know for myself before I sought aid of any one else. In disguise I visited the house where the miserable creature lived. The kindly old lady in white hair and gold glasses, with bent shoulders and weak voice, searching for some recently removed pensioners on her bounty, appeared to the selfish hoyden an easy victim, and she told her tale of woe very pathetically while the dear old lady shed some tears on her fine lace handkerchief. Quite off her guard with the childish creature, who repeated her questions and apparently forgot the answers as soon as uttered, the pretended wife admitted that she had never been married to any one, but had suffered at the hands of a miscreant lover. So intent was she on obtaining a gratuity from the old woman that she did not see the door turn slowly on its hinges

and the determined face of the stalwart colored man, as he listened intently to her words. The admission having been made, Zeb spoke out, at a nod from his mistress:

“Then all that mighty nice yarn of yours was a lie, eh? I knew it was.”

“The woman screamed, but at once hushed her cries in a terrible convulsion, as she saw all her schemes fade; for her old lady, pushing back bonnet and wig, and removing her glasses, proved to be the intended victim of a well concocted plot. Zeb threw some water into the woman’s face, and she soon recovered, when,

#### KNEELING AT MY FEET,

she begged that I would allow her to go away in peace. I promised never to molest her if she would sign a retraction of her words. She most willingly acceded to my proposal, and never again annoyed me, although there were vague whispers set afloat by her previous to her calling on me. I had performed my self-imposed detective duty with success, and having learned during my journey in secret for my husband much of the cowardice of criminals and the double character of men and women, I found myself fascinated with the idea of ferreting out the guilty and rescuing the innocent. I have never worn male attire except that one time, nor have I ever since then mingled with the same class of men. Our

#### WORST CRIMINALS ARE IN HIGH LIFE,

and I have no need to step down into the depths to seek for evil doers. I have always been wealthy, and that fact, together with my accomplishments and my birth, gives me the entree to the best society. I have received large rewards for some of my work, and have added many rare jewels to my casket. I cannot always wear them, as they would be recognized. One of the Police Commissioners who knew something of my early history and what they esteemed my ability to obtain secrets and knowledge which no man could get sought for me, and as a consequence I have been engaged in some of the most important cases that have come up for detection, and have been uniformly successful. I now love the work, and enter into it with my whole heart and soul. It supplies a love of adventure and excitement and keeps me infatuated with the work.”

#### HUNTING DOWN A MURDERER

Having completed the synopsis of her own life, the lady, glancing at her jeweled watch, remarked: “If you desire it, I will give you the history of one of my first cases. It occurred nineteen years ago: Mrs. Williston, a young and very beautiful lady, a bride of six months, and one of the belles of fashion, giving the gayest reception of that winter in her elegant home on Madison Avenue, died suddenly and mysteriously.

“Her husband was very wealthy, and this marriage was one of the grandest celebrated at Grace Church. She was the orphaned daughter of a New York merchant, and inherited a large fortune. No home in all the city gave greater promise and continued happiness than theirs. After a brief wedding tour they were envied and complimented, and many were the good wishes bestowed for the continuance of their happiness.

“But suddenly gloom shrouded their home. Her husband, returning from his club about eleven o’clock one evening in the winter of the year 1860, was shocked to find his wife dead, lying in her evening dress on the bed in her sleeping-room. He rang the bell and summoned the household. Physicians were called, but it was of no avail. Life was quite extinct, and had been for some hours. In his statement before the Coroner Mr. Williston said: “I returned at 11 o’clock, having only been absent for some four hours. I left my wife at the dining-room door. She was in good health and spirits, and requested me to return early. When I entered the room the gas was turned low, and I thought she was asleep upon the bed. I passed into the dressing-room quietly, not to disturb her, but was struck by the perfect order of the room. No indications of her having disrobed were there, and I then turned up the gas. In the chamber, my wife was lying on the bed at full-length, but in her evening dress. Her face looked strangely to me, and I listened in fear. She didn’t seem to be breathing. I called her name. She didn’t answer. I stooped to kiss her, and found her lips were cold. Then I summoned help.” The coroner’s jury failed to find any sufficient grounds to call it murder, nor yet did they deem it suicide. A singularly abnormal condition of the heart determined the verdict of death by heart disease. Yet vague rumors were constantly creeping about that there was some mystery connected with the death of the woman. No

#### OPEN CHARGE OF MURDER

was preferred against any one, much less against her husband. Both had been members of Grace Church, both belonged to the most select circles of society. But a keen-eyed officer, who had viewed the corpse, was satisfied in his own mind that there were marks of slender fingers on the white throat, and the mark of close, firm pressure on the finely-cut features. The nails of her delicate fingers held beneath them the impression of extra-vascular blood, and he argued to himself, ‘she struggled for her life.’ But the physicians had asserted that no marks of foul play were discernable, and she was buried. The officer, however, did not forget his impressions.

“At that time the detective force held on its pay-roll some of the best names ever written there, among them the eminently wise and shrewd officer John A. Kennedy. To him the officer communicated his thoughts, and was quietly detained to work up the case alone. He became the friend and advisor of the bereaved husband, but his coolest scrutiny gave him no clue to the truth. Through some channel he had heard of me, and I was summoned from Washington by a mysterious letter, which piqued my curiosity. With all my caution on the alert I answered the summons, and arrived at the Astor House one evening, where my correspondent met me with the nonchalance of an old friend and ushered me into a private parlor, lighted and warmed for my reception. Another gentleman was seated in the parlor, to whom my correspondent introduced me by what I afterwards learned was a fictitious name. I inquired:

“What is it you wish me to do?”

“To listen to a story, and give me your opinion of it,” rejoined the officer. Then quietly, and without omitting the most minute incident, he related to me the story of the death of the lady.

“I listened intently. ‘What do you think of it?’

“I hesitated. ‘Answer frankly,’ he said; ‘we are a confidential party, and your opinions shall be held sacred.’

“‘It may be,’ I replied, cautiously, ‘that she was murdered by her husband.’ The gentlemen both turned pale, and the one who had remained silent put out his hand toward me, in a deprecating manner, exclaiming in a startled voice, ‘O, no, no, no, no; don’t say that.’

“I looked at the officer for an explanation, but he continued, ‘Give me a reason for your opinions.’

“‘You say they were newly married and very affectionate?’

“‘Yes.’

“‘In that case the wife, unless seriously ill, would have been waiting for her husband and have hastened to greet him on his return, especially as she had urged him to return early. Not meeting him, the husband would have taken alarm at once and

#### RUSHED NOISILY INTO THEIR ROOM

to see why he was deprived of her welcoming caresses. He would not have hesitated to arouse her if she had fallen asleep, and, the gas being turned low, would not have concealed the robed figure on the outside of the bed. His movements had a studied precision about them which show guilt.”

“The horror depicted on the stranger’s face was so striking that I inquired: ‘Is this the husband?’”

“‘Yes, madam.’”

“I carefully studied the face. It was worn with anxiety, but through the lines of care I thought I traced the marks of a haunting fear, and veiled in his black eyes was a world of passion, which might easily be roused. I was left alone for the night, and my new-made friend called for me on the following morning, with the request from Mr. Williston that I would ferret out the matter, if convinced that it was a case of murder. I visited the desolate house. Nothing had been removed from the death-chamber except the lifeless body, and during the eight months of mourning the dust had gathered on everything in the once carefully tended rooms. I looked over each article in the apartment cautiously and slowly; at the wardrobe I lingered, examining every garment, and at last found a clew. My heart almost ceased its beating as I drew it from its long hiding and carefully placed it in my portmonnaie—a trifle—but on it hung a human life. The true thread of the mystery was in my hands.

“Mr. Williston had been failing rapidly in health, and just at that time was ordered by his physician, Dr. Willard Parker, to hasten away to the South, and prevent, if possible, the threatened decline. My case was not in a shape to give into the hands of the proper officers, and on the day of his departure for New Orleans I shook his hands, and said to him: ‘I must give up

the search. No human being but the guilty one will ever know who was the murderer, yet murdered she certainly was. You must forgive me for suspecting you.'

"'Certainly, I will forgive you,' he replied. 'As you have never betrayed your suspicions, they can not harm me, although they gave me much pain.' He then

#### PASSED OUT OF MY SIGHT

to complete his preparations for his journey. But the same steamer on which he sailed had also as a passenger a venerable, white-haired old lady, who was a martyr to neuralgia, and anxious to test the advantages of a Southern climate. She was a professional nurse, and bore with her certificates from several eminent physicians of New York, by which she hoped to obtain employment in New Orleans. A good sailor, she found her services in demand, as the sick gentleman was not only very ill, but very exacting, and it was difficult for the boys to please him. After reaching New Orleans, Mr. Williston grew worse rapidly, and sent for his friend, the old lady to whom he had become attached during the trip. Little by little his confidence was gained; and at last an opportunity offered when a description of his wife could be asked for. It was readily given, with the most genuine tone of regret at her untimely death. The nurse drew from her pocket a sealed envelope, and, deftly opening it, held up a shining, curling tress of gold-bright hair. There were only a few threads, but quite enough to determine its color, and show that it was naturally curly. Every glimmering thread still held the root, proving the force and abruptness with which it had been torn from the head it once adorned. Mr. Williston rose to a sitting posture, and leaning toward her exclaimed:

"'Who, in the fiend's name, are you?'

"'Your old friend, Mrs. Benton, of Washington.'

"'Where did you find that?'

"'On your coat, tangled about a button, which was partly covered by the folding of the collar. It was your dinner coat—and instead of leaving your wife at the dining-room door, you accompanied her up to your room, there murdered her, and, changing your coat, left the house; every hair has the root in perfection, and none were displaced when I found it.' He sank back on his pillow, and I thought he would die in his agony.

"'Then you are her murderer, by your own confession?'

"'No, no!' he whispered, 'I loved her better than life.'

"'Yet I believe you guilty. I have weighed carefully every circumstance, sifted every particle of evidence, and every step has only served to convince me of your guilt.'

"'He sent for his physician and demanded the truth as to his health.

"'You will recover,' answered the doctor, 'if you are careful.'



“After his departure my patient, looking into my eyes with a fierce expression, said:

“I defy you and I hate you! Leave me, and never show your face to me again.’

“I will leave you, but ’tis to give you over to justice.’

“I turned to leave the room.

“Nurse,’ he called, ‘come back,’ and then he implored: ‘Don’t destroy me; you don’t know anything against me; you could prove nothing but devoted love.’

“Ah, yes, but I could prove that you lied to the Coroner, and that would involve you so that eventually the truth would come out.’

“Nurse,’ he asked calmly, ‘do you think that I will recover?’

“I cannot tell.’

“Will you persist in giving me into the hands of the law if I recover?’

“I certainly shall; it is my duty.’

“Then sit down and write what I dictate, but you will never see me in court. I shall die now, and that soon.’

“I hastened to comply with his wishes, and, lying there, he repeated as I wrote.

“I loved my wife dearly as any man could, and did not intend to murder her, but she had had a schoolboy lover, to whose memory she clung with a persistent fondness which roused the demon of jealousy. I did not want her to think of anyone but myself. At dinner that day she had unfortunately again angered me about the beardless boy, who had that day called upon her. We passed up the stairs together without the servants noticing us, and, on entering our room, she expostulated with me. She was half sitting on the edge of the bed. I sprang to her side, clutched her throat, and, forcing her back on the bed, uttered angry words that have never since left my ears. She attempted to scream, and I drew the heavy pillow over her face only for a moment, but that moment of terror sufficed to develop the latent heart trouble, and I looked into the dead face of my wife. I endeavored to bring her to, but

#### SHE WAS DEAD BEYOND RECALL.

I put on my street coat, and in a maze of terror hastened into the street unobserved by any one in the house. My first impulse was to fly, but a second thought showed me the futility of the attempt. Vainly striving to still the tumult of my heart, I walked the streets until fatigued. Then I returned to the house, partially disrobed, arranged the silent figure on the bed, and summoned aid. I did lose consciousness for a time—and God knows my grief has been genuine. I have

suffered beyond human endurance, and but for my gray-haired father and my sisters I should have given myself up to the law.’

“He ceased speaking, and wept as only men weep, while I shed many tears also. After he became more calm he signed the paper, and I witnessed the signature, as did also the clerk of the hotel, who little thought of the terrible portent of that slip of paper.

“I then telegraphed to Superintendent Kennedy to send me an officer, as I was on the eve of a discovery of importance. The officer came with all possible speed, duly authorized to act in any case. My patient was failing so rapidly that no steps were taken for his arrest, and at midnight following the arrival of the officer Mr. Williston died. We two witnessed his death, which was very affecting indeed, as he continually implored ‘Dora to forgive him.’ As soon as arrangements could be made his remains were forwarded in the care of the officer to his friends in New York. There were no wrongly accused victims of circumstantial evidence to be vindicated, and the confession was sealed up and put away until the time should elapse during which it was probable any accusations might be made. The time has already passed.”

The curious reader of this true narrative may, if he chooses, find in the *Herald* of March 26, 1861, the following notice:

#### DEATH NOTICE.

“Died, in New Orleans, March 19, Charles Williston, aged twenty-nine. His many friends will regret to learn of the sad end of a prosperous and promising life, but the mysterious and sudden death of his lovely wife so preyed upon his health as to produce a rapid decline. His remains will be brought home for interment.”

Frequently when the public cry out about the important cases being dropped by the police, it is because of some similar result of the search, and it is best and wisest to bear the reproach of the uninformed, a higher power having wrested from them the privilege and the right to bring to justice the guilty.

Mrs. Benton spoke of many other cases of more recent date, in which she had aided the police in their efforts to find out criminals, but preferred to keep the manner of procedure a secret. She is still aiding the police in their work.

*St. Louis [MO] Globe-Democrat*, January 26, 1879