

A Mystery and its Solution
by Amy Randolph

“It isn’t the value of the thing that I think so much about,” said Miss Ada Sinclair, deliberately taking off her spectacles and placing them in their black morocco case; “but it’s the feeling that I cannot fully trust those around me.”

Here was an awkward silence. Charles Sinclair, the old lady’s nephew, went on flourishing his own name with innumerable up-and-down strokes with his aunt’s big gold pen, looking annoyed the while. Did Aunt Ada mean to insinuate that she suspected *him* of stealing her old-fashioned garnet clasps? Sylvia Heart, the old lady’s pretty little “companion,” blushed painfully as she bent over her fine stitching, and wished that Miss Sinclair would not say such disagreeable things.

“For I’ve looked everywhere,” went on Miss Ada, “and I’m just as positive as if I was on my Bible oath, that I laid them on the dressing bureau when I came in from church. And that isn’t the only thing I’ve missed lately either; my anchor breastpin is gone, and my Irish point lace collar.”

“Hallo!” quoth Charley; “matters begin to look serious now. Have we a band of burglars among us, Aunt Ada? Sylvia, are you certain you’re not in league with a lot of discreditable fellows with black masks over their faces?”

“Charles, how *can* you talk so!” cried poor little Sylvia in distressed accents.

“Indeed, Charles, it is not a subject for jesting,” said Miss Sinclair, drawing herself up. “Things cannot disappear without hands, and Hannah has lived with me full five-and-twenty years, come next Christmas. And as for John the gardener, I would trust him with untold gold.”

“It might have been the cat,” suggested Charles with imperturbable gravity.

“The cat, indeed! The cat carry off my garnet clasps, and— But I see you are laughing at me, Charles,” she added, beginning to be seriously offended. “Yes, laugh away. I dare say it’s the fashion nowadays to make fun of your elders; but I *did* think, Charles—”

“Aunty, dear, now don’t take up a fellow so short,” said Charles Sinclair, putting his arm coaxingly round the old lady’s trim little waist; “you knew that I didn’t mean anything. Don’t fret; we’ll institute a search, and we’ll have the garnet what-you-call-‘ems and the Irish point lace found, if they’re above ground anywhere.”

And Aunt Ada suffered herself to be led out of the room in a somewhat mollified frame of mind.

Sylvia Heart went on with her sewing in the quiet solitude of the sunshiny *boudoir*, where the great Persian cat so foully aspersed by Charles Sinclair lay purring on the square

cushion of embroidered velvet, and the parrot in its gilded cage croaked hoarsely to itself among the half-blossomed honeysuckles at the open window. But although Sylvia's deft fingers wrought the pearly small stitches, one by one, with mechanical dexterity, her heart was heavy and full of misgivings within her.

Sylvia Heart was a pretty, loveable young creature, with fresh cheeks tinted like the oleander blossoms of Louisiana, wistful hazel brown eyes, and luxuriant brown hair, soft as the finest silk, and inclined to curl itself into wavy rings, whenever there was a *soupcou* of rain in the atmosphere. She was an orphan, quite friendless but for the kindly care of Aunt Ada Sinclair, who had adopted her a year or so previously; and to sum up matters, she was barely seventeen!

As she sat there with drooping head and eyes luminous with unshed tears, Charles Sinclair came back into his aunt's sitting room.

"Sylvia! Why, little lassie, what are you crying about?"

"I—I can't help it, Charles," sobbed Sylvia, dashing the bright spray away from her long eyelashes; "but I know that Miss Sinclair suspects *me* of taking the things she has missed of late!"

"Suspects *you*!"

"Yes, me; nor is it strange that she should. I am a poor, friendless, forlorn little creature, of whose antecedents she knows comparatively nothing; and although I would cut off my right-hand before I would do aught to displease her, still she cannot be expected to know that."

"But Sylvia—"

"Wait an instant, Charles, and hear me out. I am going away."

"No, Sylvia, you must not do that!"

"It is the only alternative remaining to me now. I can earn my bread very comfortably with my needle, and I ought not to remain here, now that I am suspected of stealing!"

"Sylvia, you shall not go; you shall remain here as my wife. We have often spoken of it, and when the possibility of such a thing has been hinted to Aunt Ada she has not been displeased."

"That was before the shadow of this dark suspicion fell upon me. I should be wronging you beyond recompense, Charles, if I became your wife now."

"Then I'll be wronged; for, by all the powers of heaven and earth, Sylvia, you *shall* be my wife!"

“It is impossible, Charles!”

And sanguine though he was, Charles Sinclair read, in the quiet determination of her voice, his doom. In vain were his remonstrances. Sylvia was as firm as she was gentle, and he was at length compelled to let the matter rest, for the present at least.

“You may go, Sylvia, if you *will*,” he said at length, in a tone of some pique, “but my faithful love will follow and watch over you, wherever your footsteps may turn.”

She smiled faintly. “Hush! Your aunt is coming back.”

Aunt Ada was in a state of high perturbation then next day, when Sylvia came into her room to comb out and arrange her false curls, ere she assumed her “best cap” for the day.

“This is very strange, Sylvia; in fact, it grows more and more strange,” she exclaimed excitedly. “My gold beads are gone this morning!”

“But it is impossible, Miss Sinclair,” argued the companion. “I untied them from your neck myself, the last thing before you went to bed, and no one has entered your apartment since, except—”

“Except yourself, Sylvia Heart,” the old lady said, speaking slowly and impressively. “My dear, my dear, what inference can I draw from this?”

Sylvia stood pale and trembling in the presence of her accuser, with hands folded and hanging down, and eyes full of wild appeal.

“Miss Ada, oh, my best, my kindest friend, do not put your horrible suspicions into words! Do not say that you think me a—a thief!”

She shuddered as the words crossed her lips.

“Sylvia, my child,” pleaded the old lady, “you are young, and have a lifetime to amend your ways in. Don’t add deception to your other sins, but confess to this freely and at once. I will forgive you, and will try again!”

“I am as ignorant as yourself of where these things can possibly have vanished to, Miss Sinclair!” said Sylvia tremulously. The old lady’s heart, momentarily softened, became again like adamant, almost in the instant.

“Very well, Sylvia,” she answered coldly; “but of course you must know, under these circumstances, that—”

“That we must part, Madam,” interposed Sylvia in a scarcely audible voice. “I am quite aware of that. I will go tomorrow!”

And she quitted the room to hide the outburst of wild, passionate tears that would not be repressed.

“Ma’am,” cried honest Hannah, “I don’t believe she ever touched the things, pretty, innocent little creature that she is!”

“Then, Hannah, who has taken them? They could not walk away from here without hands.”

“No, Ma’am.”

“*You* haven’t taken them?”

“No, Ma’am, of course I haven’t!”

“Nor John.”

“John, indeed! No, that he haven’t.”

“And it would be absurd to suspect my nephew of making away with garnet clasps, old lace, or a string of gold beads.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Then who else can possibly be concerned? Sylvia is young, poor thing, and she has a girl’s natural fondness, no doubt, for pretty things to have and to wear, and perhaps temptation has been too much for her. I am sorry, for I was beginning to get very much attached to the poor girl; but—”

She paused, checking herself abruptly, for Charles Sinclair had entered the room, and old Hannah went back to her kitchen, puzzled it is true, but quite certain nevertheless of Sylvia Heart’s innocence.

“It sartinly is the strangest things in the world, Miss Sylvia,” she said that evening, when Sylvia had occasion to enter her domains. “And more than that, it ain’t the first strange thing that’s happened in this ere house,” she added mysteriously.

“What do you mean, Hannah?”

“I mean, Miss Sylvy,” said the woman in a whisper, “that this house is haunted.”

“What nonsense, Hannah!”

“Miss, I’ve seed it with my own eyes—all in white, floatin’ like a shadow through the hall, when I’ve been up with my bad tooth. And I’ve been on the very pint o’ runnin’ to

missus's room and tellin' her, but I remembered how nervous she was, and I held my tongue."

"You did a very wise thing, Hannah. Of course it could be nothing but your own imagination."

"No, 'twa'n't, Miss Sylvie; 'twas a real ghost, if ever ghost walked on this poor sinful earth o' ourn. But maybe it'll appear to you one o' these nights, and then you'll believe in it."

"Hardly, Hannah, for I am going away tomorrow."

"Going away, Miss Sylvie!"

But without waiting to hear Hannah's outburst of deprecation, Sylvia withdrew. Her heart was already full, and she felt that even the one additional drop of this kind old woman's sympathy would be more than she could bear.

It was late that evening when she returned from engaging her place for the morrow in the little stage coach that conveyed passengers to the railroad depot a few miles distant—not so late, however, but that Charles Sinclair was waiting for her, half concealed from the mellow midsummer's moonlight by the tall hedge of acacias.

"Charles!"

"I couldn't help it, Sylvia—I couldn't indeed. It will be my last chance to see you, if you persist in your resolution."

"But it is so late—nearly midnight, and—Oh, mercy! Charles, what is that?"

The blood seemed to curdle in her veins, and she clung closer to her companion's protecting arm, as a tall, white-robed form flitted past them with a rushing sound.

"The ghost! the ghost!" she shrieked.

"Hush!" Charles Sinclair placed his hand hurriedly over her lips. "For your life, Sylvia, silence!"

He bent eagerly forward, watching the strange apparition. It went straight to a mossy stone wall which divided the orchard from a field of silvery nodding wheat, stopped, and seemed to search beneath the stones. Charles sprang towards it.

"I thought we should get at the root of this mystery by and by," he muttered.

"Charles!" shrieked Sylvia, striving to detain him, "it is a ghost!"

“No, it is not, Sylvia; it is Aunt Ada, walking in her sleep!”

And as he confronted the tall spectral form, Sylvia saw that he was right. The ghost, as she fancied it, stared vaguely at her a moment; then consciousness seemed to return, and Miss Ada Sinclair cried out in terror:

“Merciful Heaven! where am I?”

Sylvia and her nephew soothed her, and explained matters to the best of their ability, while she stood trembling before them.

“Walking in my sleep!” gasped the affrighted old lady; “why, I might have been killed without ever knowing it! And where did I go?”

“Directly to yonder old stone wall,” said Charles. “Let us look there, aunty. I’ve a suspicion or two.”

He displaced a stone where the somnambulist had groped blindly. The gleam of something golden flashed in the moonlight.

“My goodness gracious!” exclaimed Miss Ada; “my garnet clasps, and the gold beads, and the old point lace! And, dear me! why, what am I holding this neck-ribbon so tightly for?”

“Aha! Aunt Ada,” exclaimed Charles, “the thief is discovered at last! Old Hannah’s ghost has not haunted the house so long for nothing! You have been robbing yourself all the time.”

“So I have,” cried the old lady in genuine compunction. “Sylvia, my love, come here and give me a kiss. I’ll never doubt you again; and if you and Charley don’t get married right away, I’ll know the reason why.”

And heedless of her very peculiar costume, she hugged and kissed Sylvia until that young lady could hardly breathe.

“Bless me!” cried she suddenly, “why, I’m all in my night-gown! I shall catch my death of cold.”

Away went the old lady, and Charles and Sylvia finished their chat by moonlight in a most satisfactory fashion.

Aunt Ada slept with her door locked thereafter, under the care of Hannah; and that was the end of all ghostly visitations and mysterious disappearances.

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