

## *A Detective's Story of New York Life*

“You are too young to remember the case of Miss P—,” said the detective as he gave a twist to his moustache and crossed one leg over the other, as if settling himself down for a narrative in which he had a personal interest. “Well, it was one of the most remarkable cases that I ever had anything to do with, and John Young will tell you the same thing. He took a hand in working it up, and if he wasn’t as much astonished as any of us before we got things ‘dead to rights’ you can set me down as a donkey. Now, if you’ve got time I’ll tell you all about.”

The detective was informed that he would be attentively listened to.

“It happened—let me see, it’s now 1870—well, it happened [seventeen] years ago. ‘Old Man’ Matsell was an officer then, and things were not allowed to go begging to be worked up in those days, I can tell you. I remember that I was sitting in the office one cold night all alone. It was raining furiously, and the wind shook the windows as though bent on making short work of the old shanty in Broome street. A good fire was burning in the stove and I felt particularly comfortable; in fact, I was just falling into a doze when the office door opened without anybody knocking. The sharp gust of wind that came rushing in brought me to my senses, and on starting to my feet, half unconsciously, I saw the outline of a female form before me in the dim light, for I had weak eyes then, you know, and couldn’t bear the gas at its full height. I turned the burner hinge at once, and saw that the person who stood before me shivering with the cold, and with water dripping down from the shawl she had drawn over her head, was a girl apparently about seventeen years of age. Her face was a comely one, and as she raised her hand to her eyes to brush away a tear—for she was crying bitterly—I saw the sparkle of a large diamond on the forefinger of the left hand.

“I had to ask her several times what she wanted before she could reply, so violent was her grief.

“At last she exclaimed:—

“‘Have you any record of an accident to a person named Miss P—?’

“I went and looked over the telegraph book and answered, ‘No.’

“‘Heard nothing at all about any such person?’ and the child-like face wore such an expression of hopefulness that I really would have given a month’s salary to have been able to say, ‘Yes,’ in reply.

“‘Nothing whatever,’ I answered.

“‘My God! then it must be so,’ she exclaimed, wringing her hands in anguish, as she paced to and fro in the room.

“I tried to pacify her and finally succeeded in making her sit down. She asked for a glass of water, and on its being given to her dipped her hand into it and then bathed her temples. She then said:

“Listen to me; I’m in a hurry and can’t waste time in words. Miss P— is a friend of mine. She is three years older than I am, though she looks just as young. There’s her picture. Look at it well for you may have to make use of it. She went to the country last week, and today I received a letter from her friends there inquiring of her. They said she had left the city for three days before; they were astonished by a letter from me addressed to her. They reasoned that I ought to be aware of her presence in town.”

“Here the young girl began to sob again as if her heart would break. She controlled her emotion after awhile, however, and went on:

“What could I do? I bethought me of course, of her folks, her own father and mother, who were living at the — Hotel. She knew him by representation, I supposed. He is very wealthy. I went to the hotel. The father had left town on business, and the mother, an invalid, I found in bed. I didn’t tell what I had heard from the country, but managed to find out that she thought her daughter out of town.

“I left the hotel an awful feeling of dread creeping over me. Surely, Mr. J— must know something about my friend, thought I. He is rumored to be her accepted lover. Well, I called on him. I did not startle him into any sudden questions, but he acted rather strangely, I thought. This may have all been imagination. I shut the door of his father’s house leaving all hopes behind, for J— had spoken of Miss P— as being in the country still. I did not tell him what I had heard.

“Now,’ and as the girl pronounced this monosyllable she let her shawl fall from her head, her face grew deadly pale and her fingers twitched nervously. I was startled at the sudden change that came over her.

“Now,’ she said, as her breath came hard and fast, ‘listen. This evening—an hour ago—I met a friend of mine who asked me how Miss P— was. Had I not seen her? Strange, was it not? He had seen her and Mr. J— the day before, arm-in-arm, in West street as he drove by in a hack.’

“The girl pulled the shawl over her head and stood up; ‘now,’ she exclaimed, ‘have I good cause for stealing away from home all unattended to tell you this. There’s my card,’ and the hand from which the five-stone diamond ring sparkled in the gas light held out the delicate pasteboard. In her agitation she dropped it on the floor, and as I stooped to pick it up the door opened and the girl was gone.”

“Did you follow her?” I ventured to ask the officer.

“Have patience and we will hear the rest,” he replied.

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“The dead body of a woman was found floating in the North river one morning about three months after the visit,” continued the detective, as he lit a fresh cigar. “It had evidently been in the water for a long time, although it was, as the doctors said, ‘in a good state of preservation.’ I

read in the newspaper of the finding of the body. It gave a full description of it, and many of us went down to see it, for we were led to believe that it was the body of Miss P—, from the description given.”

“Then you had heard nothing all this time of the lady?”

“Absolutely nothing, and yet we had worked at the case day and night—stimulated, between you and me, by a large reward offered by the father.

“Well, we went down to the dock, and became satisfied that the body was that of Miss P—.

“The young lady who called at the office that rainy night three months before, went with us, afterwards. She recognized her friend in an instant, as did the poor mother. The body had no marks of violence about it, and the gold ear-rings were still in the ears, and a diamond ring on one of the fingers.

“I noticed that it was a five-stone one, and that the gold setting, which was peculiar, was exactly like that of the diamond ring that I had noticed on the finger of the dead woman’s friend the night she came to the office. I called the young lady’s attention to this.

““She said as she burst into tears, ‘we both had our rings set at the same time, and we had them set alike.’

“The mother, hoping against hope, said that her daughter had a peculiar mole mark behind the left ear. If the body had not that mark it was not that of the daughter.

“Investigation showed the mole mark where the mother had indicated.

“Then came the coroner’s inquest, and young J— was suspected of having foully dealt with Miss P—, and he was committed, for his explanation did not satisfy the jury.

“Six weeks rolled by, the young J—’s trial was to take place the following week. I was seated in the office, and it being a fine night, all the windows were open. A carriage drove up to the door and a young lady alighted, and in a second was at the doorstep. I heard my name mentioned and recognized the voice of the girl who had called on me nearly five months before. She rushed into the room out of breath.

““What is it?’ I asked.

“She sank into a seat and was unable to articulate a word for several minutes.

““She—she—she is not dead!’ she gasped, as she seized hold of my hand and gave way to her feelings in a fit of weeping.

““She! Who? What?’ I asked, half afraid that the girl was going out of her mind.

“Miss P—,” she cried, “she home and well. That was not her dead body. God be thanked.”

“If I’d been ordered to do police duty in the Fifth precinct I couldn’t have been more dumbfounded.”

“But what in the deuce did she mean?” I impatiently asked, as the officer buttoned his coat preparatory to going out.

“Mean? Just this. The whole thing came out. Miss P— took it into her head to go to Europe with a party of friends from London who had been in New England for a few months. She never would tell why she went without letting anybody know it, but she probably thought it a good joke, and her London friends kept it up. On reaching the city from the country she met young J— quite accidentally, and managed to throw him off the scent.”

“It looks rather strange,” I remarked to the detective, “almost an improbable story.”

“Well, the case is still on the coroner’s records; but such a case of mistaken identity I never heard tell of before; the mole mark on the dead body being identical with the mark described by the mother, and that diamond ring the same as the one worn by Miss P—’s friend! I swear it puzzles me even now when I think of the case’

“What became of the parties?”

“Miss P— is now residing at No. — Fifth avenue. She is Mrs. —.”

“What?”

“The same. Yet who would think that she had ever been the innocent cause of such a mystery?”

“And the young lady friend of hers—the one with the diamond ring?”

“She has been sleeping the sleep that knows no waking for seven years past.” And as the detective uttered these words in a sort of solemn way he rose and went out in the street.

*Fayetteville [TN] Observer*, February 24, 1870  
*Wilmington [NC] Journal*, October 6, 1871