

The Disguised Servant

ONE day in May, 1865, the detective received the following note:

“DEAR SIR: Could you make in convenient to call at No. 346 South—— St., any time after 8 P. M., today? If not, I shall call at your office tomorrow afternoon at 2. Respectfully,
“MARGARET VALLEE.”

The note was penned in a neat feminine hand, but the name of the writer was entirely unknown to the detective. He called at the number mentioned in the note, and was met at the door by a woman of apparently forty years of age.

“Is your mistress in?” he asked of the servant.

“No, sir; she had gone out with her husband, Mr. Darnley,” replied the woman, eagerly regarding his features while she spoke.

“Darnley!” said he. “is the lady of the house named Darnley?”

“Yes, sir. Whom did you wish to see, sir[?]”

“A lady named Margaret Vallee.”

“That is my name,” rejoined she, smiling, “and you are——”

“Varnoe,” said he, finishing the sentence for her.

“Walk in, please. I’ve been expecting you, but not having the pleasure of an acquaintance with you, I was not aware it was you, sir.”

She conducted him to the parlor, and after a brief pause, said:

“My master and mistress have gone to the opera, and we are alone in the house. I have something to tell you which, if naught comes of it, you must give me your word of honor as a gentleman, to keep a secret for life. Will you promise this when I assure you that there is nothing criminal in the matter?”

“On that condition, I promise, madam,” said he, promptly.

“Do not address me by that title, please,” rejoined she. “I am a miss, and I am disguised to conceal my age. See?” added she, taking a wig from her head and removing her glasses, when she presented the appearance of a young lady of about twenty-three.

“Now, listen to what I have to say,” said she, and the detective became all attention[.]

“One short year ago,” began she, “I was a resident of Liverpool, England, and had a home with a loved brother, and as we were twins as well as orphans we were all in all to each other.

“He formed the acquaintance of a young lady of high connections, and soon became warmly attached to her. Her name was Aurelia Duchene, of French extraction, and a beautiful brunette.

“They were married, and as my brother stipulated that I should remain with him, I became an inmate of the little family in their new home. My brother, as well as myself, was independent, but held a position in a bank notwithstanding. He was not a gay man, hence he preferred an active to an idle life.

“Whether Aurelia loved my brother or not I will not say; but there were periods when I doubted her affection for her husband. She had winning ways, like those of a child, and they were the charm that held my brother captive to his bride.

“Before they were wedded six months he startled me one day by telling me he had made his will!

“‘A man just married, and not yet twenty-five, making his will!’ exclaimed I. ‘Why, what put such a ridiculous idea into your head?’”

“‘It was Aurelia who put it there,’ laughingly answered he.

“‘Aurelia, your wife, suggesting such a thing?’ cried I, a vague horror taking possession of my soul. ‘Pray, what can be her motive?’ asked I gravely—not to say indignantly.

“‘Well, she used more sensible logic in arguing the point,’ rejoined he, a trifle discomposed at my serious tone and air. ‘She allowed (quoting Scripture) that ‘In the midst of life we are in death,’ and as a fellow has to make his will some time or other, I concluded to make mine and be done with it.’

“‘I hope you have not neglected your wife in the distribution of your legacies?’ remarked I, in a tone of irony.

“‘Why, of course not,’ rejoined he earnestly. He thought I made the remark in all sincerity, so much can a man be blinded by the honeymoon.

“‘Shortly after this my brother changed in health and spirits,’ continued Miss Vallee. ‘He did not complain, and possibly did not feel indisposed; but I, who regarded him as my other self, saw that he grew weaker as the days sped along. I spoke to him about it, and he laughed at what he was pleased to call my foolish fancies.

“‘Several more months went by, and he resigned his position at the bank, being no longer capable of attending to his duties. Then I had a long talk with his wife. Perhaps, thought I, she has been impressed the same as myself.

“‘But how I had been deceived! She laughed right in my face when I spoke of my brother’s

illness. 'He is not ill, my dear Margaret,' said she, derisively; 'the fact is, he has overworked himself at that nasty bank, and has finally yielded to my persuasion to quit it. And because he did so you must have him ill. Pshaw! nonsense, child!'

"I left her presence with a heavy heart, and a sad foreboding. My darling brother would not admit that he was ill, and his wife laughed at my fears. What could I do to make them see that which haunted my waking thoughts and my dreams at night.

"In this, my grievous dilemma, an old college chum of my brother came to see him by invitation. They had not seen each other for several years, and when my brother languidly rose to receive his friend, Mr. Charles Pettit, that gentleman started in surprise, and exclaimed:

"'Good heaven! Eugene, what is the matter with you?'

"'What do you see the matter?' asked my brother, with a languid smile that pierced my heart to witness.

"'Why you are but the ghost of your former self,' rejoined his friend.

"'Nonsense,' said my brother, a faint color rising in his pale cheeks. 'I presume you imagined, now that I am a Benedict, to see me grown fat and weighing sixteen stone at least.'

"'No,' was the thoughtful response, as the other gazed from Eugene to me, as if mentally contrasting us, 'but I must say that married life does not appear to agree with you. Does it now, Miss Vallee?' said he, appealing to me.

"'So it seems to me also,' said I, scarcely knowing what to say.

"'He looks ill, does he not?' urged Mr. Pettit.

"'That is my belief, but he does not believe so,' answered I, glancing at my brother, with my heart aching for him.

"'Then you have no doctor attending you?' asked Mr. Pettit, in deep surprise, addressing my brother.

"'I do not think it necessary,' responded Eugene.

"'Not necessary,' echoed the other. 'Are you then bent on suicide so soon after your wedding?'

"'Do not talk nonsense,' said Eugene visibly annoyed. 'Tell me about yourself and let poor me alone for the present.'

"'Poor me, indeed!' returned his friend, in a low tone as he turned to me, then immediately turned again to my brother and said:

“Where is Mrs. Vallee?”

“She is visiting some friends in the country,’ replied my brother. ‘She will return in a day or two.’

“In that cast I shall not see her,’ returned Mr. Pettit, ‘for I can remain but a day.’

“I had an hour alone with my brother’s friend,” continued Margaret Vallee, “and I freely expressed my fears in regard to my brother, and he urged me to have a physician called in, if only to examine into this case. After Mr. Pettit had gone away I told Eugene what he had said, and finally gained his permission to send for Dr. Reynolds.

“This doctor was one of the most skillful in the profession, and I had hopes that under his care my brother would soon be restored to his wonted health.

“But alas! After a most thorough examination, Dr. Reynolds shook his head and acknowledged that he was completely puzzled what to make of the case. He gave him a prescription, saying he would consult several of his friends of the profession and would call with them on the following day.

“That night Dr. Reynolds was prostrated by a paralytic stroke. The next day he died, and with him died my last hope, for on the return of Mrs. Vallee she persuaded her husband to go to Italy and see what that climate could do to restore the color to his cheeks.

“A week from thence they started for the sunny land of Italy; I was to keep house until their return. What followed is soon told,” continued Margaret “and, as I have been somewhat prolix in my story, I will sum up the remainder briefly.

“Three weeks after their departure, I received intelligence that my beloved brother had died when within sight of the shores of Italy, and his disconsolate widow was on her return to England with his corpse in an air-tight metallic casket.

“I will not dwell upon my grief and subsequent severe illness, but when I was sufficiently recovered to comprehend my surroundings, I was informed that my brother’s will had been read, and that all he possessed had been left ‘his dear wife, Aurelia,’ save the house whose roof now sheltered me; this and this only, was all that he had left to his only sister.

“Mrs. Vallee had converted all into cash, and, leaving me to the care of a few intimate friends, left the city and country and came to this country, whither I followed her as soon as I was well enough to bear a sea voyage.

“My object in coming here was to watch her every movement,” said the spirited lady. “I strongly suspected that she encompassed the death of her husband, for he only began to fall in health after he had made his will. What I wished to learn was whether she would marry again, and if so, whether her second husband would share the fate of the first, after he had made a will in her favor.

“I engaged myself to her under the name of Mary Morris, and wear this disguise so that she may not suspect me. What I require of you, Mr. Varnoe, is to endeavor to become acquainted with Mr. Darnley, and when intimate with him, to ascertain if he has made a will, and, if possible, try to learn the substance of it. In the meantime, I shall make it my business to watch both husband and wife. Him, to see when the first symptoms of falling health appear, and her, to try and find out the means she employs to produce such a result.

“Can you and will you do what I ask of you?” asked she appealingly. “I have ample means to pay you for your services. Only do this for me, I implore you. If the lady is really innocent of any criminal act, I would have it made manifest, for I would not do her an injustice, much as I censure her for leaving me during my illness, and coming to this country without apprising me of her intentions.”

“Miss Vallee,” responded the detective, “I shall undertake the task you would assign me. It is my duty to accept everything that comes in the line of my profession, and as this borders on the mysterious, it will have a peculiar charm for me in my endeavors to penetrate and unravel it.”

“Then you accept the task?” she asked.

“I do.”

“Thank you, sir. Whenever you address me in future, either in person or by note, do not forget that I am Miss Mary Morris.”

“I shall not forget.”

“And let me know occasionally how you are progressing,” she continued.

“I shall see you or write to you whenever I have anything of importance to communicate,” he replied, and shortly after left the house.

He was deeply impressed with what the young lady had told him, and heartily sympathized with her. He did not know Mr. Darnley either personally or by reputation, but would endeavor that day to learn what he could about the gentleman, and before nightfall had a promise of an introduction to him on the following day.

He was informed that Theodore Darnley was a junior partner in a wholesale cloth establishment, and was quite wealthy. He had lately married a rich widow—a Mrs. Vallee.

The introduction took place next day, and the detective found Mr. Darnley a pleasant, social young man of about twenty-eight, full of vitality and the picture of health. After a few weeks’ acquaintance Varnoe remarked about the young merchant’s fine health and observed:

“I presume that a man of your physique never even dreams of making his will.”

The young man gave a perceptible start at these words, and while he gazed curiously at the detective, remarked:

“What a singular coincidence, Mr. Varnoe! for only last night my wife spoke about the same thing, only she appeared to think the reverse of what you do. She said it was never too early to settle up our worldly affairs, that life was full of snares and accidents, and one could never tell when grim death would appear; hence it was advisable always to have our house in order.”

“She made hers, she told me,” pursued the young man, with a smile, “and gave me a copy of it to read. The affectionate creature has in it left everything to me.”

“Thereby proving her unselfish love for you,” observed Varnoe; but he added, mentally: “The shrewd Miss Margaret Vallee is not wrong in her surmise, for the madame is evidently bent upon the same purpose again.”

He saw into her motive. In making her own will in favor of her husband, she shrewdly supposed that his would be no less generous in its tenor.

The detective took dinner with the Darnleys one day, and was introduced to the lady. He confessed to himself that she appeared as guileless as a child, as Miss Vallee had remarked, and her face appeared to him the reverse of what he had expected to see in a woman whom he regarded as a wicked creature.

“She must be an admirable actress, if guilty,” thought he, and may tax our ingenuity to the utmost, if we would prove her what her sister-in-law suspects.”

A month went by, and Varnoe, who managed to see Mr. Darnley every day, thought the gentleman did not look as well formerly, and made a remark to that effect one day.

“Oh, I’m all right enough,” responded he, “though the fact is, several of my acquaintances have of late remarked that I did not have my usual color.”

“Perhaps you have made your will and it has had a bad effect on you,” remarked Varnoe, in a facetious manner.

“I did have my will drawn up, sure enough,” rejoined Darnley, laughing “but I do not [think] it has affected me any, as I have not given it a moment’s thought since. I did it simply because Mrs. Darnley seemed to consider it my duty to do so.”

Varnoe wrote a note to Miss Margaret, requesting her to call at his office at any hour during the day.

They met, and the young lady stated that the “vampire” Aurelia, was at work again. “I have not yet discovered in what manner she operates,” remarked Margaret, with a puzzled air, “but I can see by his appearance the deadly work has begun. He will meet the fate my brother did, unless we separate him from this accursed vampire.”

“I think we can arrange that if it become necessary,” rejoined Varnoe. “I have a plan that I think will put him on his guard.”

The detective did not acquaint Margaret with the nature of his plan, but wrote the following note to Darnley:

“MR. THEODORE DARNLEY:—Of late I have notice that your health is apparently not so robust as it has been, and this fact gives rise to a suspicion once before entertained against Mrs. Vallee, now your wife. Her former husband failed in health after they had been [married] six months, and gradually sank into his grave. After his death it was discovered that he had left all his property to his beloved wife, Aurelia. Have you, too, been persuaded to make a will to that effect? If so, then I would have you watch your wife closely. A word to the wise, etc.

ONE WHO KNOWS.”

Three days after sending this note the detective was visited by Theodore Darnley, who, after being assured that they were quite alone, made this startling statement, after mentioning that he had received the warning note:

“I had noticed something peculiar in her manner at different times,” said he, “and this anonymous note had given me the key to it. I watched her the past two nights, and have made a startling discovery.

“Last night, when she thought I was away from home, I concealed myself in a closet in her private apartment. She came in after she had prepared herself for retiring, and opened an ebony cabinet directly opposite the closet, and I could see all her movements through a tiny hole I had made in the door of the closet.

“She took a casket from the cabinet and opened it by a concealed spring, then took out of it a vial with a glass stopple. Holding it before the gas jet I could see that it contained a colorless liquid, then she poured a few drops in a goblet I always used when taking a glass of wine before retiring. She had taken it from the stand where it was usually kept in our sleeping apartment, and after she had thus tampered with it, she restored it to its accustomed place.

“As soon as she left the room I hastily escaped from my place of concealment and also left the room, managing to make it appear that I had just come home when I met her in our bed-chamber.

“Before partaking of my glass of wine, I managed to send her from the room on a trifling errand to her own private apartment, and during her brief absence slipped the goblet in my coat pocket, and replaced it by another of the same pattern and size. That ‘tampered’ article is now in the hands of a chemist for analysis, and the vial contains pure water, while I have its contents in another vial which I carry about my person.

“I have given her two doses of the accursed stuff already,” said he, a fiercer light springing into his eyes. “If it is harmless so much the better for her, but if it is what I suspect, she shall feel its effects as I think I have done. I shall take my wine as before, and in her presence if she so wishes, but I am determined that she shall swallow the whole of that poison if she lives long

enough to do so.”

The detective was horrified, and endeavored to make him forego his terrible revenge, but the resolute man laughed scornfully as he said:

“Had I not made the discovery she would have killed me by inches, and no one would have been the wiser. No, Mr. Varnoe, do not try to dissuade me. I am actuated by a noble motive—to save my own life and to avenge her first victim.”

Varnoe would say no more. Morally, the man was justified in retaliating as he did, but after Darnley had left him, he decided that it would not be justifiable on his part to allow this enraged man to take the law in his own hands in such a summary manner, and he resolved to prevent him from carrying out his purpose.

But what was his astonishment the next day when taking [up] the morning paper, he saw the announcement that Mrs. Aurelia Darnley, wife of Theodore Darnley, Esq., had suddenly died after partaking of a glass of wine. The outraged husband must have given her sufficient in the last glass of wine to have closed her guilty career.

He confided to the detective, after his recreant wife was under the sod, that the chemist had analyzed the few drops of the liquid in the goblet. They had, of course, dried but that did not matter. He attained his object and discovered that subtle poison known to a few as *agua Toffana*, a poison supposed to have been used by the Borgias.—It left no traces of its deadly work, and defied detection when once admitted into the system.

With the consent of Varnoe, Margaret Vallee acknowledged herself as having given the information causing the sending of the anonymous note, and then related to Mr. Darnley how her brother had been served by the iniquitous creature.

When attired as befitted her age, Miss Vallee was a remarkably handsome young woman, and in due course of time Darnley proposed for her hand and was accepted, and after a suitable period had passed they were united, and the doubly orphaned girl had found a mate who made her lonely life so happy that she never regretted having acted as “THE DISGUISED SERVANT.”

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This story was one of a number of stories, likely written by different authors, all featuring Mr. Varnoe, the detective.