

A Double Mystery

The Strange Things a Guest at a Chicago Hotel Heard and Saw

Mysterious Occupants of a Room for Transients and Their Dark Secret

Astonishing Developments at the Palmer House—Detectives Outwitted

There have been for many months vague references to a strange story that an occupant of one of the rooms at the Palmer House might tell if she would. As a matter of fact this story was told to a representative of THE INTER OCEAN, and is given below. Its bearings on a mystery that has been frequently before the public, and which is still unsolved, furnishes a good reason for giving it entire:

“I am not a nervous person but there was always in my mind a slight feeling of anxiety about *that* door. I had often before at hotels had doors communicating with my room—doors simply locked or bolted, and they had never worried me. But from the first evening of my arrival at the Palmer House that particular door was on my mind.

“I have a few superstitions—we all have. There are two or three that have outlived my childish days that no effort of will can entirely suppress. They crop out at odd times and places and cause a nervous chilliness that leaves me in a fever of unrest and anxiety. There are premonitions that I can never wholly disregard, premonitions that I sometimes trample beneath the feet of unbelief, but they have their hour of vengeance: sooner or later they come back in such shape that reason is forced to admit that ‘shadow presupposes substance.’

“So day and night the worry of that door stayed with me. It was a badly fitting door—the shrinkage had not been properly considered. There were uneven spaces, where the light came through when my room was in darkness. I could tell if the two gas jets were burning; even the flicker of the firelight quivered, and flashed, and faded over my carpet. If my carpet had been more commonplace in design it would not have mattered, but its weird, fantastic shapes of palms and pagodas, its brown-red lights made the glimmer uncanny. All this got so much the better of me that I asked for an armoire, and had it placed against the door—an armoire large enough to conceal the fact of any door. The thing I failed to do was to have those chinks stuffed and wadded until sound was excluded. As it was, I could hear every movement in the adjoining room. The faintest footfall seemed to find an answering echoes in the boards beneath my carpet; fortunately, as I then thought, it was occupied only by transient guests, so that daily the noises changed character. I was most at ease—could sleep most tranquilly—when the deep breathing, or heavy snore, of some tired traveler came in regular waves to lull a sixth sense that seemed to have come to me in the watches of those long nights.

“Days whirled away in work that would not wait on the idle imaginings of fancy. The unseen

door, though never forgotten, had passed into the habitudes of life—an annoyance that I preferred to the trouble of changing rooms, as I had at first intended. I have been so long a wanderer that I have learned to fit myself into the grooves of custom.

“Suffering one evening with neuralgia, I took a teaspoonful of a mixture prescribed by Dr. A., and thankful that I had no neighbor in No. —, composed myself to wait for sleep. I do not know if I slept—possibly, for the mixture had mastered pain. Suddenly I was fully roused to consciousness by the opening of the outer door of No. —, and the putting down of heavy luggage. There was a tramping of feet, a mingling of direction and answer, a shutting of the door into the hall, and a low, sullen, sounding murmur of disjointed words. Some one tried the door behind the *armoire*. I was now accustomed to that and to the grating sound of the rusty lock, as the door shook and rattled in the easing. The only words that framed themselves distinctly were—first in a woman’s voice—sharp and piercing, with a sort of repressed pain in the ring, ‘Do move that trunk further from the bed.’ A husky bass voice growled in return.

“‘You’re d—d particular; it won’t hurt you.’

“The woman moaned. There was a deeper, coarser oath. The talking hushed. Half an hour later a heavy, [strenuous] breathing told that the man slept. Then the woman’s long, painful sighs were stilled; only at intervals quick gasps and smothered cries came like the chorus of a Walpurgis night.

“At daylight the effect of the opiate and the confusing sounds in the hotel, as the busy day commenced, overpowered the noises in No. —; and I slept long and heavily.

“When I awakened all was quiet in the adjoining room; but another sense was to feel the door of communication. There came through it a faint but deadly odor of chemicals. I dressed quickly, threw up my windows, and through one of them stepped into the conservatory, that crowns the flat roof of the central row that unites the quadrangle of the hotel.

“My nerves were so excited by the night’s watching that the opiate, instead of soothing, had over-stimulated and excited every sense. The warm air of the conservatory was stifling. The waving palms and spotted cactus gave a sinister effect to the gray lights that came through the dark panes of stained glass. Suddenly, behind the mammoth lilies in the fountain, I saw a woman half hidden by the leaves. Through an opening in the foliage a pair of beady black eyes watched me. The quick, restless glance; the low, narrow forehead; the flattened head and its sinuous pose; the yellow reflection of a dead gold chain around the throat; the half-opened scarlet lips, through which shone a gleam of white teeth; the brown of the stuff dress, with little specks of orange shot through the wool—all was so serpent-like that, involuntarily, with a half-suppressed cry, I fled into the camellia room. The door leading out of that into the hall beyond was locked, so I was forced to wait or return to my room. I remembered, too, that my window was open, and that, having come through it, I had left my door bolted. Just then the woman came down the middle walk, turning from right to left, with a quiet nervous movement that intensified the idea that

already possessed me. I shivered as I used in the old days when, in swamps and wood-paths an ominous dry rattle had sounded in the thickets of palmetto or scrub pine. Rapidly crossing behind the camellias I ran through the west door, down the nearest walk, and scrambled through my window, hastily closing it, and fastening the inside shutters. I put on my wraps determined to go out and walk off what I now characterized to myself as stupid and childish nervousness. I looked up quickly as I passed the door of No. —, and then fairly flew down the hall as I saw through the partly opened door the woman of the conservatory. My sixth sense was trustworthy; this was the neighbor I had known in those vague fears that presaged the coming of something evil. All day I stayed away from the hotel, walking listlessly past the shops, or lounging in studios and cozy sanctums of fellow workers; all the day trying to forget, to bury my worry—the last phrase best expresses it, for it seemed like an unquiet ghost that walked the earth, waiting only an order to be swallowed up with the past. In the evening the pitiless inevitable forced me back to complete the daily task that waited. I went directly to my room; all was quiet in No. —. I lit the gas, and resolutely absorbed myself in my writing. The imperious power of labor, of habit, helped me. At midnight I had written the last page of the allotted stint. Worn out, I undressed and put out the lights. Just then I heard the entrance of my neighbors in No. —. They made little noise; there was a moment's discussion as to leaving a window open: the woman insisted it should be so left in a tearful, beseeching way, and the man grumblingly consented. An hour perhaps had passed; then, knowing they were sleeping, I slept.

“In the morning I was wakened by voices in No. —. There was a visitor there, a voice that seemed strangely familiar, with its cynical, mocking sound. Though trying to speak in undertones they were talking quickly, excitedly; and occasionally a sentence would detach itself and come to me clearly—broken words that shadowed forth a mystery—sentences that told of a crime. My newly-found magnetic sixth sense intensified the others, and gradually these broken words, these disconnected phrases tied themselves together in a perfect whole, and the story put itself into my consciousness; a real and horrible drama in which I was forced to take a role. There was one gain; the actual horror had killed the intangible fear. The mystery unveiled my courage returned; I was ready to follow the path of duty and action that I saw opened. I was dressed and in the street a few minutes after the talking ceased and the men were gone. Again, as I passed down the hall, the woman's eyes peered out of the half-open door, but now knowing her fears I no longer feared her. It was impossible for her to stay shut in there alone in that room.

“I had not hesitated an instant as to what to do; the danger of delay was the only danger to be feared. I thought first of consulting the proprietor of the hotel, but he was talking busily with two gentlemen, in the entrance hall, and I could not wait. Outside the door a man, handsomely dressed in a Canadian travelling costume, stood talking to a hackman. The outline of this man's face and figure brought back recollection—a resemblance. A rapid glance, as I passed, and he turned his full face, fixed the resemblance, and I recognized a person I had known years before; a man who had gone down from the plane of gentle-people to that of an adventurer, and now, worse, for I knew it was his voice I had that morning heard with the others in No. —.

“Ten minutes later I was in the private room of the great Detective Sphinx. In the ante-room the

subordinates had questioned me. I only answered, 'Personal and private business with the chief.' He was standing in the open door of his room, or I might have been forced to wait longer. Evidently he was master of his *metier*; he could read faces; read in mine that this was no waiting matter. He motioned me to enter.

"Well, madame, what is it?" Sharp and clear came the question; it was in the voice of a man who would waste neither time nor words. Briefly I told my story. From the first sentence he seemed to comprehend, to catch the conclusion, even nodding acceptance of my rapidly stated deductions. He never interrupted me; but the light in the gray eyes, the nervous quiver of the thin nostrils, told his own excitement. He had caught the fever of my eagerness, and being a man of action, was ready to plan the action.

"Are you willing to stay in your room for some little time longer without in any way changing your ordinary way of living; as it will make the capture of all a certainty?"

"I do not know. I am not sure. The tensions of nerve force for the last day has been something terrible!"

"Yes, I know—but still I see you have wonderful self-command, wonderful control over a fear that must have been intense. I do not know another woman, who would, under the circumstances, have reasoned so calmly, have so rapidly, and wisely discerned just what to do."

"It was very simple; I did the only thing I thought possible."

"But, madame, your sex so rarely do just what is possible, they nearly always try the improbable, if not the impossible, first."

Seeing a shade of annoyance at his critical generalization, he added "It is hard for them to decide without taking counsel of their fears, fortunately you had the courage to reason and then to act independently of counselors."

"Well, it is not an abstract question of me; it is only what I can do. Do you mean me to stay constantly in my room?"

"Not too constantly to seem natural, but leave it as rarely as possible. Tonight you will find the servants changed on your floor. If you meet W. again, be careful he does not see you have recognized him. I would arrest him at once, but possibly he has a confederate in the force with him. Until we have the gang under surveillance it will not do to make a false move. The very fact that they have a man in the detective service makes great care and caution needful. It proves they are adroit and daring. We have been so constantly baffled, so led astray by false information, that for some time I have known we had no ordinary thieves to deal with. They are men of desperate courage and resolution, intelligent and wary. Thus far we have been completely at fault in every move. Now I think we will have them." There was already a ring of triumph in his voice. A few

short questions were asked, a few short, clear directions given me, and I left him. In the ante-room, as I passed out, stood W., his cap off, his head uncovered. Doubt of his identity was no longer possible. He looked at me curiously, but I saw the chief watching through the partly open door, and so felt secure. When I reached the hotel I found the woman of No. — walking restlessly up and down the corridor leading to the conservatory, and at every arrival of the elevator watching each comer, yet never losing sight of the door of her room. Until late in the afternoon she still walked and waited. About 5 in the afternoon I again heard the voices in No. — ; unconstrained, easy voices, talking of ordinary things. To my sixth sense this change of tone and manner seemed unnatural. I grew anxious, excited as night came on. I rang to order water, fire, all possible excuses were tried. Still the same servants answered, still the easy flow of talk went on in No. —. There was an occasional sibilant sound in the woman's voice that brought back my fears of the preceding day. It grew intolerable; so, as directed, I wrote to Mr. Sphinx, saying, 'I think they suspect me. Come to the conservatory window. I must see you.'

"It was now 7 o'clock. Again I rang. This time a new waiter, the detective, was on watch. Aloud, I asked for ice-water; in an undertone, saying quickly:

"Take this note. Send it instantly.'

"Yes, madame,' in the same undertone.

"I went into the hall and tried the conservatory door. It was locked, as I had anticipated. I was safe that way from the occupants of No. —. I then opened the window leading to the conservatory, as silently as possible, and waited there. Suddenly, above me, I heard a noise, and then some one swung from the window sill and dropped lightly to the floor. The detective was evidently a fine gymnast. He moved into the shade, and then said, softly, 'Come out here.'

"For an instant I hesitated. The voices still came in regular waves of sound from No. —. So, thinking, 'Mr. Sphinx is right; they will not hear there,' I stepped through the window, and was caught, pinioned, gagged, and carried into my room before I could utter a cry. The voices were hushed in No. —. My door was opened by my captor, and the man and woman came in, locking the door after them. The woman brought a small strong cord, which was rapidly wound around me by the man who came with her, tying me securely in an easy chair. My captor was masked and silent, so I guessed it was W. Once when I turned to escape the cutting of the cord, he loosened and rearranged it, bringing some soft articles of clothing to prevent the hurt; he placed a pillow under my head, and my feet upon a low chair. Although securely fastened, I was not uncomfortable, only the gag was painful. The man who was tying me growled his directions to the woman, who spoke only once, saying:

"Why don't you strangle her and done with it? It would be easier and safer.'

"The man answered: 'Considering how d—d afraid you are of corpses, you are devilishly willing to make one.'

“The masked man raised his hand warningly. The man and woman left the room. My captor locked my door, threw some blankets around me, and went through the window, closing the sash and blinds. There was a scrambling sound against the wall, a quick step in the upper hall, and I was alone.

“Again voices in No. —, but now guarded, low voices. Later the noise of heavy luggage being removed. Then all was silent. They were gone.

“After what seemed ages of suffering, I slept.

“But here is Mr. Sphinx, he will tell you the end of it all.”

“What was it all, Sphinx?” said the reporter.

“What was what?”

“What was the mystery? Who were the thieves?”

“What, has Mrs. — told you?”

“Only part of the drama. She has not explained what it was she discovered; or how they got away.”

“Well, you see W—— had only lately been put on the force. I did not know but he might have confederates after I knew from Mrs. —, who and what he was. So I took two of my best men and put them in place of the bell boys. In the hotel the men are changed so often that this was not considered queer. I myself waited in the private office downstairs. I saw W. meet Mrs. —, and I knew he recognized her. So I thought best to have him watched. Somehow he managed to give my man the slip, and got back to the Palmer House, after seeing his confederates outside. At 5 o'clock two respectably dressed gentlemen arrived at the Palmer House with introductions to the proprietor. They were shown different rooms, and selected two on the fifth floor. They dined at half-past 5 in the restaurant, retired at 6, and at half-past 6 one of them rang for a servant. My newly-placed detective answered. He was captured, tied, and gagged. Immediately the second bell rang; the other detective answered, and was served like his partner. The respectable New Yorkers stripped the sham servants of their hotel uniforms, and leaving them under guard of W., who was apparently directing them, they played bell-boys. They brought to W. Mrs. —'s note to me. He read it, and wrote, in almost the same handwriting, one slightly different. Then, making the cords more secure, they left my captured men in the rooms. It was then Mrs. — was captured. The pretended bell-boys then sent me, by one of the clerks of the elevator, Mrs.—'s note, or rather the forged one. Here it is:

“Mr. Sphinx: All right in No. —; they are expecting the arrival of three confederates on the

Northwestern train. W. is to meet them. No time to waste. *Provide for them*, and then come to the conservatory window. I must communicate with you personally. Mrs. ——.”

“I immediately sent the two detectives I had kept with me to the train, with orders to follow W. I then telegraphed for two more men, and concluded not to wait their arrival, but to see Mrs. —— at once. My own men were, I thought, on watch on the fifth floor, so the baggage in No. — was safe. I had sent a female detective in the afternoon as chambermaid, to examine the trunk when the woman was in the conservatory. She had, as directed, lifted the tray (the trunk was left open apparently, to prevent suspicion), and found under it a zinc plate, or cover soldered securely in tight-fitting grooves. It was a masterly piece of work. I went to the conservatory, by the back stairway, unlocked the door of the camellia room, and entered and locked it after me. Not suspecting an attack, I was instantly overpowered, and strangled into silence.” Here Sphinx showed the reporter an ugly line around his throat. “When I recovered consciousness I was lying behind the palms, in the larger room, tied and gagged.”

“And they escaped? Who were they, and what was in the trunk?”

“They were a new organization of desperate men, of broken fortunes, assisted by an exceedingly intelligent English cracksman and his wife. W. was not the only confederate they had in the detective force. That is why they have so long escaped capture.”

“So long. What have they been doing?”

“Well, this morning a trunk filled with bricks and paper replaced the zinc-lined Saratoga of No. —, in which was securely soldered the body of A. T. STEWART!”

“What! you let that slip between your fingers!”

“Yes, in charge of the respectable New Yorkers, who were suddenly telegraphed to return home on important business. In the hurry of the midnight leaving, they had exchanged baggage with No. ——.”

“But are these men unknown to your force?”

“Personally, yes. The two great New York robberies first brought together the gang.”

“What two robberies?”

“The *Manhattan Bank* and the *millionaire’s corpse*.”

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The Weekly Times-Democrat [New Orleans, LA], September 20, 1879
The Wichita [KS] Weekly Beacon, September 24, 1879