

Foiled by a Woman

THE following telegram was sent to the mayor, in October, 1856:

“YORK, Pa., Oct. 19.—Send Mr. Varnoe to Myer’s hotel as quickly as possible. An important case for him.

DUNKIRK.”

The detective took the next train and reached York in the afternoon. Calling at Myer’s hotel he registered his name, upon which the landlord directed him to a certain address, where a young lady received him and held a private interview with him of about two hours’ duration. We will acquaint the reader with all that transpired at that interview.

After being seated the lady at once plunged into the subject that led to their meeting.

“Mr. Varnoe, I have summoned you here on a bare suspicion of a fraud being attempted; yet that suspicion is of such a strong character that I’m sure you will admit that I am justified in sending for you to investigate it. My name is Mary Mosher, and my father keeps the Farmers’ hotel. Two weeks ago two young men stopped at our house with the intention of remaining in town until the end of the month. One was called [Jocelyn] Kimball, and appeared to be a gentleman by birth and education, and possessed of considerable wealth. The [other’s] name was George Hanold, who appeared to be a sort of servant and companion to Kimball, for they appeared to be on very intimate terms.

“They were about the same height, rather tall and slender; both had dark eyes, and no beard whatever. But while Mr. Kimball had dark brown hair, closely cut, Hanold had red hair, of a curly nature. Both were of lively disposition, and appeared to be in the best of spirits. Yesterday they went away together, to gather chestnuts in a neighboring wood, and two hours afterward one came back in great haste, with the intelligence that the other had fallen off a tree and was terribly injured. The unfortunate man was the companion of Jocelyn Kimball.

“A physician accompanied the gentleman to the spot where the accident occurred, and found the unfortunate man dead; he having broken his neck in the fall—a height of some thirty feet. An indented mark on the ground bore evidence where he had struck the earth head foremost.

“An inquest was held on the body and a verdict rendered according to the facts elicited. A boy saw the man fall, from a distance, and ran to the spot, where he found his companion stooping over him, and apparently feeling his head, as it appeared to the boy.

“The man looked startled when the boy came up, and at once sent him to town for a doctor, although he followed him ten or fifteen minutes after, leaving the unfortunate man alone on the ground.

“I suppose you think, Mr. Varnoe,” observed she, “that there is nothing in all this requiring your services.”

“You have more to tell?” queried he.

“I have,” responded she, gravely. “What follows may only be my imagination; but I think you must admit that it required a rigid investigation. Mr. Kimball drank only wine or porter, while his companion indulged in ardent spirits only. Now, however, since his companion is no more, he appears to have acquired an appetite for brandy alone—utterly eschewing wine and malt liquors! Mr. Kimball never indulged in profanity before, but now he makes use of it very frequently. He was a man of mild temper before this accident occurred, whereas he now appears to be of a very irascible temper. Can you follow the direction of my suspicion?”

“I can,” replied the detective. “You mean to intimate that George Hanold has usurped the name and position of his dead master!”

“I do!” was her emphatic response.

“Many of his acts point to that conclusion,” observed the gentleman, with a smile, “but you lose sight of the inconsistency of your suspicions.”

“Inconsistency?” echoed she, with a look of surprise.

“Oh! I had forgotten to mention that Hanold’s red hair consisted of a wig.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the detective, with awakened interest, “that quite does away with the inconsistency. But how came you to a knowledge of this fact?”

“I’ll tell you,” replied she, with great earnestness. “At home, I always attend to the chamber work of our guests’ [rooms,] and when thus engaged, I always wear soft slippers, so as to avoid annoying any one in an adjoining room, who might be sick or enjoying a doze. Well, sir, one day, while attending to my duties I came along a passage leading to their room and found their door open. I supposed, from this fact, that they had left the room, and I was on the point of entering when I heard Mr. Kimball say: “Well, Hanold, you have given me a surprise; I must confess I never would have suspected that you wore a wig, and for the reasons mentioned. And since we look like twins when you have it off, let me see if I look like you with a wig on my head.”

“Greatly interested, I peeped into the room while Mr. Kimball put on the wig, and was perfectly astonished to see how strangely it resembled Hanold. Only it appeared to me that the wig fit him too loosely, and a moment later he remarked: “The wig is rather too large for me, otherwise I would readily be taken for you.”

“When he removed the wig, and returned it to its owner, I looked at the two men, and to my amazement beheld, as twins, two Jocelyn Kimballs! Twins could not possibly look more alike! They had not observed me, and I crept away safely and resumed my occupation at the further end of the passage.

“The physician when examining the dead man’s head, also remarked that the wig he had on was too large for his head. The companion of Mr. Kimball changed clothes with the dead man, after sending the boy away after the doctor. Can you see it?” asked he eagerly.

“After what you have told me with reference to the incident in their room, I can readily believe such a thing was possible,” remarked the detective, with a serious air, “and the change of temper, habits and disposition in the present Mr. Kimball, would naturally cause one to arrive at such a conclusion. Knowing what you know, I shall take the matter in hand, if that is your desire, and give it a thorough investigation. I shall stop at your father’s hotel under the name of Mr. Otto Kunkaly, and profess to be acquainted with you. Let us therefore agree to this point—where we became acquainted—providing your father should ask me.”

“Say we met at Lancaster last winter, at a party,” said she.

“Very good,” was his rejoinder, and they parted to meet again at her father’s hotel.

Next day, in the early forenoon, “Mr. Kunklay” entered the Farmers’ Hotel, and registered his name. At dinner he saw the host’s daughter, but she did not recognize him, although she appeared to be anxiously awaiting his arrival. Varnoe wore a complete disguise.

After dinner he saw her alone, and made himself known. She regarded him with amazement! Had he not mentioned his assumed name, and the object of his coming there, she would not have believed that he was Mr. Varnoe.

She introduced him to her father and mother, stating where they had met, then had a long conversation with him in the private parlor. She informed him that Mr. Kimball (as we shall call him for the present), when asked whether he had apprised Mr. Hanold’s friends of his death, replied:

“No; for the very good reason that I know nothing at all about them. I picked him up in Philadelphia, during my stay there, but never heard him allude to any of his relatives. I think he has none, so I have concluded to give him a decent burial in one of your cemeteries.”

He thereupon purchased a lot in the cemetery, and ordered the sexton to prepare the grave. The funeral was to take place on the following day.

Miss Mosher handed Varnoe a letter, sealed and directed to Mrs. Agatha Kimball, New Orleans, La.

“This letter,” said she, “was handed to me on the day of the terrible accident. The real Mr. Kimball asked me to mail it for him. I had quite forgotten to do so, and the sad affair, occurring so soon after, quite drove it from my mind until my suspicions were aroused, then I concluded to retain it and give it to you, hoping you could discover something to aid you by perusing it.”

“My dear lady,” responded the detective, in a grave tone, “not for the world would I break the seal of that letter; you must mail it. I shall send a telegram to the same address. I am glad you have the address, for I was about to ask if you knew where Mr. Kimball’s friends resided.”

“He told me his home was in New Orleans,” rejoined the lady. “He also informed me that he had been traveling through the Northern and Eastern States for the past eight months, and had not been home during all that period.”

Varnoe at once sent a dispatch to Mrs. Kimball requesting her immediate presence. He then took a look at the dead body, and noticed that the wig was not on the head of the corpse. He turned to Miss Mosher for an explanation, and she replied:

“I removed it surreptitiously before the body passed into the undertaker’s hands. It may become of use in the investigation that is to take place.”

“That was discreet, Miss Mosher,” replied the detective. “You have many qualities that are requisite to make a good detective.”

“Thank you for the compliment,” replied she, with a blush and a smile.

Varnoe received Mrs. Kimball at the station, and on the way to the hotel made her acquainted with all that had transpired during the past two or three days. The presumed death of her son he broke to her gently, tenderly soothing her grief, adding that there was a bare possibility that it was the companion (Hanold), instead of her son, who lay in his shroud.

“Oh, I could not be mistaken in my son!” said she, the tears flowing afresh. “Living or dead my heart will tell me which is my boy!”

By the advice of the detective she was to try the test. They separated some distance from the hotel, and she was to come alone and register an assumed name. The detective would manage it that she and the young man should see each other as if accidentally; and not by design.

Mary Mosher offered to effect this meeting. Mrs. Kimball sat in the ladies sitting room, and the young girl requested “Mr. Kimball” to get her a certain book from that room.

He eagerly obeyed, and entered the apartment hastily, and probably not thinking it had an occupant. He halted, when his eyes fell upon the lady, who started perceptibly, when she saw the strong resemblance to her son; yet the mother’s heart was true to its instincts. After the first glance it whispered, “This is not your son!”

“Excuse me, madam,” said he, addressing her as he would any strange lady, “I was requested to get a book for a young lady, and was not aware of any one being here.”

“You are excusable, sir,” returned the lady, bestowing upon him a glance of contempt for the part he was playing, compelling her also to play a part for the time, and keeping her away from her dead son.

Varnoe was concealed in a position where he could watch the features of the young man, and noticed that not the slightest sign of recognition was visible in his face when he beheld Mrs. Kimball.

After the young man had left the room, Varnoe entered and approached the lady. Before he could say a word she rose to her feet, and appealingly holding out her hands cried:

“O, sir! now that I have seen the living imposter, take me where I may behold my dead son!”

The detective tenderly placed her hand within his arm, and with bared head led her into the presence of the dead. Some half dozen persons were seated in the darkened apartment. Miss Mosher and the imposter (as we shall henceforth call him) were seated near a window.

When Mrs. Kimball and her escort entered, Miss Mosher reached out her arm and opened the shutters, admitting sufficient light to enable the bereft mother to see her dead son’s features.

The moment she beheld the beloved face, she fell upon her knees beside the coffin, and pressing her lips to those of the dead, she cried in anguished tones:

“Oh, Jocelyn, my son, my son! Is it thus we meet again?”

Further utterance was checked by her vehement weeping, and for a period naught else was heard save the wailing of the widow, bereft of her only son.

At her anguished words, and at the sight of the face in the coffin, the impostor started to his feet, white as the face of the dead man whose name he assumed, and trembling in vague alarm. Then bending his head he whispered to the girl at his side: “Miss Mosher, who is this lady who calls him in the coffin her son?”

“It is Mrs. Kimball,” replied she without looking up.

“Damnation! I was not prepared for this!” muttered he, in a low tone; but it reached the attentive ear of the detective, nevertheless, who placed his mouth to the impostor’s ear and whispered:

“No, George Hanold, I suppose not; nor for what will follow!”

“Sir! What do you mean?” demanded the young man in a fierce whisper.

“Step outside this sacred room and I’ll inform you,” quietly replied the detective, opening the door and leaving the room.

After a moment’s hesitation, Hanold followed, and the detective and he met in the yard of the hotel, when the impostor demanded an explanation. This was given in the following words:

“George Hanold, the wisest course for you to follow is to confess your attempted imposition. The mother of the dead son has pronounced against your claims by not recognizing you as her son, Jocelyn Kimball, when you and she met in the ladies’ sitting room a few minutes since; neither did you recognize the lady, whom you probably never saw before in all your life! Come, what say you?” and the cool headed detective looked him square in the face.

“See here, my fine fellow,” exclaimed Hanold, dropping all his assumed refinement, “you had better be a little careful how you ‘chin’ to one, or you’ll get your ma’s monkey into a condemned hobble. Do you know, you scarecrow?” This was accompanied by the exhibition of a clenched fist in close proximity to Varnoe’s olfactory organ.

A smile of mingled scorn and pity rested for a moment on the lips of the detective, which gave place to a frown when the man made the movement as if to strike.

“Look you, George Hanold,” observed Varnoe, in cold tones, keeping a wary eye on the fellow, “if you are wise you will drop this thing at once.”

“Curse you for a meddling fool!” cried the other furiously, “I’ll drop you first,” and he lunged out savagely.

The detective warded off the intended blow, then seized Hanold’s two wrists, pinioned him against the wall, and thus addressed him:

“See here, my pugnacious bantam, unless you abandon all pretensions to the dead man’s name, you are my prisoner. Do you understand? I am Varnoe, the detective, sent here to look into this matter. I have sufficient proof to condemn you and send you to the penitentiary for attempted fraud; but Mrs. Kimball desires me to persuade you to let the matter drop and go your way. Should you refuse this I am to take you into custody at once. Decide quickly!”

Hanold spoke not a word, but suddenly attempted to trip Varnoe, but that was a thing easier in conception than execution. The detective was all eyes, as it were, and detected the movement at once. To avoid losing his equilibrium he released his hold, and once more the now desperate fellow attempted to fell him with a blow. Varnoe now warmed to his work; he turned the blow aside with his right and let fly the left. No man had yet been able to withstand that terrible blow; and Hanold acknowledged its crushing power by a most ungraceful movement, to wit: turning a backward somersault, and reclining on his back directly afterwards. When he opened his eyes they wore a look of wonder. His wrists were encircled by a pair of polished steel bracelets, and the detective stood leaning against the door-jamb, with a pleasant smile upon his face.

The belligerent fellow was entirely subdued, which he eloquently expressed by saying:

“Well, old fellow, I ‘cave.’ You are a figure above me. I played a high game and was euchered. You held the best hand.”

Then, after a pause, a serious turn took possession of him, and his face wore an alarmed expression as he observed:

“But I hope you won’t charge me with killing Kimball? I’m none of the best of fellows, I own, but by—I had nothing to do with his death—he fell from the tree while I was below.”

“Rest easy on that, my man,” replied Varnoe, with commiseration for the foiled imposter. “No one accuses you of harming him, and had you heeded my advice you would now be at liberty.”

“Well, let up on me,” said he, appealingly, “and I swear I’ll ‘git.’ Come, now, will you?”

“I must at least take you to the lock-up until Mrs. Kimball is more composed, so that I may consult with her. In a day or two I may be able to inform you what her decision is,” rejoined Varnoe.

His prisoner submitted to what he could not well avoid, and was accordingly locked up.

In the examination that followed, Hanold made the subjoined confession:

He had met Kimball in New York, and this is how it happened: He had been to a photographer’s to have a picture taken. While the operator was making preparations for the process, Hanold whiled away the time by looking at the specimens of the photographer’s art. Among them he saw the picture of a man who so closely resembled himself that his own likeness could not look more like him. He resolved to hunt up this man, without any other object than merely to see him and ascertain who he was—thinking it probable that he was a relative. He asked the artist if he knew his name, and where he could be found. The man looked at him, then again at the picture, and, without at once answering the other’s question, asked him if he was not a brother to this man. Hanold, who possessed a somewhat fertile brain for invention, at once hatched up a plausible story and replied:

“Yes, we are twin brothers, but have not seen each other for ten years. So please tell me what name he goes by, and where I can find him?”

The artist believed every word the man uttered, and gave him the name and address of Jocelyn Kimball. Hanold procured an auburn wig to conceal the remarkable resemblance, and made the acquaintance of his counterpart. He soon became quite intimate with him, and won his friendship.

He finally accepted Kimball’s offer to become a traveling companion, at a liberal salary, and accompanied him in his eccentric wanderings for the period of six or seven months, until their companionship terminated in the catastrophe at York.

Up to that period he had never entertained any evil design against his friend and companion: but while he lay dead before him, it suddenly occurred to him that by assuming the dead man’s name and position, he might live the life of a gentleman instead living by his wits, as he had frequently been obliged to do. The result of this venture is already known to the reader.

As Mary Mosher had surmised, he had removed the dead man's clothes, and put his own (including the red wig) on the dead body.

In consideration of the fact that the prisoner had really done no harm, and was merely guilty of attempted fraud, he received at the hands of Mrs. Kimball a very light sentence.

Mary Mosher, being considered mainly instrumental in the exposure of this attempted imposition, was handsomely recompensed by the grateful mother; and Varnoe, for the part he took in the matter, was not forgotten.

The affair created quite a stir in the community for many days, and Mary Mosher became a heroine among those who knew her.

When Varnoe took leave of her, he presented her with an elegant gold watch, with this inscription engraved on the inside of the case:

“To Miss Mary Mosher, from ‘Varnoe,’ as a tribute to her admirable detective qualities.”

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