

The Scarlet Ribbon

A Detective's Story

by Rett Winwood

It was all a mere dog's life that I led till I came to be a crusty old bachelor of forty odd years. I was always too poor to think of anything but work, work, day after day, and so it happened that I had few ties, and hardly an intimate friend, in all the busy world that was constantly surging turbulently around me.

In the first place, I was only a watchman. When the police system was started, I went into that corps. I can honestly say that I always tried to do my duty, in either situation. My superiors seemed to think so, too, for by-and-by my name was up before them for the new detective force that was to be organized. I was counted "knowing," and had done some pretty sharp things by way of hauling up offenders, during my life, and when the subject was once agitated, I was of course sure of my place, and on the whole, ready enough to accept it.

At this time my mother was the only near relative I had living, and she was the housekeeper at Colonel Lester's, one of the first families, residing on Fifth Avenue. It is about this family, principally, that I have to tell you. The colonel and his wife could both boast of an ancient and honorable lineage, and were as proud, high feeling a couple, as it was ever my lot to meet. They had one son, Maurice, their very opposite in this particular, a whole-souled, noble-hearted fellow, though a trifle wild, perhaps. He could never be brought to sympathize with the exclusive feelings of his parents. Indeed, he was quite too free in his associations. I believe he would nearly as soon have made an intimate of me or one of the servants as any one in his own peculiar sphere. He seemed to utterly ignore caste, and was careless of appearances.

After I came to be detective, there seemed a little better chance for running about, but I kept steadily at work, early and late. I found enough to keep me busy, hands and brain. There was always some sink of iniquity to be cleaned out, or some case of mystery and crime to be cleared up. All this was bringing me in a little money, and some fame, for I met with wonderful success in my efforts. Perhaps it was owing to this close work, mental and physical, that I put upon every case that came under my notice. However, I believe constant toil and steady perseverance had as much as anything to do with it

I must say, nevertheless, that I now visited my mother much oftener than I had before found it possible. In this way I learned considerable of the private history of Colonel Lester's family. My mother was very strongly attached to them, and when I went to see her, one day, I found her in unusually good humor.

"I must tell you, Tom," she burst out, eagerly, after a few inquiries into my own affairs, "that Maurice is about to be married! It was all settled upon yesterday. I have been afraid, all along, that he would refuse to act reasonably, but it seems he has not quite taken leave of his senses, as yet. Miss Verne is such a sweet creature, too; I don't see how any one could be indifferent to her."

I looked just as I felt, probably, very much dumfounded, for mother went on, hastily: "O, I had forgotten that you did not know all about it. Mrs. Lester made Miss Verne's acquaintance while Maurice was in Europe. Quite an attachment sprang up between them; indeed, they have been almost like mother and daughter, ever since. Miss Verne is an heiress, and of good family, and it has long been Mrs. Lester's cherished plan to have Maurice marry her. She was away when he first returned, but when she did come back he utterly refused to see her, for a long time. When they did meet, it was by the merest chance, but he was smitten with her at once, and now is ready enough to make her his wife. She is here, at the present time, and will remain for several weeks, probably."

"What was Maurice's objection, in the first place?" I inquired.

"Merely prejudice, nothing more. He has a detestation of all made matches, and was convinced he could never be happy with Miss Verne, and for that reason declined to cultivate her acquaintance. Now, he is glad enough to take back all he had said. She is a rare creature, though, and I wish you might see her. She is wonderfully agreeable to me, and so I have told her all about you, Tom."

She said this last, looking at me with maternal pride, as if she considered me a person of much importance, and one of whom everybody must be glad to hear something. We talked a little longer, and then I went away. In crossing the hall I passed a lady coming down the stairs. She was a small, slight body, very fair, with a faint flush of gold shimmering in her hair. Her motions were soft and quiet, like the fanciful dance of thistle-down over a green meadow, coming and going, and flitting about without noise or bustle. Her eyes were a soft, dove-like blue, looking for all the world like a far glimpse into a clear sky. Her dress suited her face and figure exactly, being of some light, gauzy stuff, of a pale, pure green.

"This is Mr. Frazer, I am sure," she said, coming forward with a sweet smile, and holding out her hand. "I am glad to see you. I have been wishing to make friends with you. Did your mother tell you?"

"No, miss; I don't believe she knew," I managed to stammer out, confusedly.

"Perhaps not. On the whole, I hardly think I told her. I was not sure, you know, that her son was the Mr. Frazer whom I wished to see. But I recognize you now."

I could do no more than look the surprise which I was too thoroughly confused to speak.

"I see plainly that I must make some explanation," she resumed, after a pause, a rare smile breaking once again over her face. "You once did a great service for my father. It was in Fulton Street, more than a year ago. You saved him from being robbed, and perhaps murdered. Don't you remember it?"

I did, but had never thought that the Mr. Verne whom I had saved was her father. He was one of our merchant princes. I was out on my usual beat, one night, when I had observed Mr. Verne

pass, and two men had seemed to be carelessly following him. Something in their appearance having excited my suspicions, I had watched them. All at once they had sprung forward and dragged him into a dark alley. Of course I sprung my rattle and ran to his rescue—as it happened, just in the nick of time. I had only done my duty, but Mr. Verne seemed very grateful, and insisted on rewarding me in some way.

Of course I was too proud-spirited, despite my poverty, to receive anything, but I have always thought that he may have had something to do with my promotion, as I am sure he had influence with my superiors. Nevertheless, I like to attribute my rise entirely to my own [desserts], and I may be right, after all.

However, this does not matter with my story. Indeed, I had quite forgotten the circumstance, until Miss Verne now recalled it to my mind. I mean the circumstance of the attempted robbery, of course.

“My father has often spoken of you,” said Miss Verne, pleasantly. “He pointed you out to me on the street, one day. We wished to have spoken with you, but you were gone too soon. Now my father is in Europe, but he will be glad to know that I have met you. I hope you will come here often while I am in the house. Furthermore, I shall be rejoiced to do you a service whenever I can. Good-by.”

She held out her hand kindly. It seemed like a snowflake resting on my big, brown palm. I kissed it reverently, and then went silently out, but from that moment I would willingly have gone through fire, water or pestilence, at the bidding of that delicate girl. There seemed to have come a new glory into my dull, aimless life—a halo that brightened it wonderfully.

From that day all my spare time—little enough, in all conscience—was spent at Colonel Lester’s. To be sure I seldom saw Miss Verne for more than a moment, but it was happiness enough to be near her, under the same roof. Not that I was learning to cherish any wild, foolish passion for her, as I might have done for one occupying something like my own position in life. I cannot hope to analyze the emotions I felt towards her. She seemed high above me, and I realized the distance that separated us. I had no desire to lessen it. I think my regard for her must have been very much of the nature of a pious Catholic’s devotion to his patron saint. The same feeling, only intensified.

She seemed strangely happy in those first days. I have often heard my mother speak of it since. She went floating softly and quietly about the house, a rich carmine creeping into her cheeks, and a new lustre into her eyes. Maurice, too, seemed very gay and self-content. He was evidently proud of his beautiful betrothed, and glad for the happiness that was one day to be his.

Thus matters went on for months. Miss Verne was to remain with the Lesters until her father returned from Europe, and then she and Maurice were to be married. At one time the day for the wedding was even fixed upon, but circumstances happening to detain Mr. Verne longer from home, it was postponed.

By-and-by there came a change. I believe I was one of the first to notice it. Miss Verne moved

about more silently than ever, and gradually all the fresh, pure color faded from her cheek. She was just as kind and pleasant as ever, only I think it sometimes cost her an effort, now. She was certainly changed, though I could not conceive the cause. At last I spoke with my mother about it.

“Then you, too, have noticed it,” she said, with something like a sigh. “Poor Lilian! I am very much afraid she has cause enough to be sad. I would not speak of it to you before, because I thought it might only be my notion, after all.”

“What is it? Why don’t you tell me?” I interrupted, impatiently.

“Well, Maurice is not quite so devoted as he used to be. A coldness—all on his side— seems to have sprung up between him and Miss Verne. I honestly believe that the new seamstress is at the bottom of it all!”

I was surprised. I had heard of this seamstress, Miss Sayles, but had never met her. She had been engaged by Mrs. Lester to make up a quantity of linen against the coming marriage of her son.

“Why should you suspect her?” I inquired.

“Because it is evident that Maurice has taken a sudden liking to her. I am sure I don’t know how it will end. I hardly think either the colonel or his wife has any suspicion of the truth. Miss Verne must have seen it all, though, and that is what troubles her.”

“What sort of a creature is this Miss Sayles?”

“A nice, quiet body enough. I am sure you would like her. I don’t believe she is the least to be blamed for anything that has happened. She seems like a very pretty, respectable young woman. She is so modest and pious, too! Indeed, we are all very much taken with her. I don’t wonder at Maurice’s infatuation.”

I did not reply. I was thinking over what had just been said, and trying to make up my mind what was best to be done under the circumstances, for I was anxious to see Miss Verne well and happy again, as soon as might be. There soon came a low tap upon the door. My mother opened it.

“Mrs. Lester sent me,” began a low, softly-modulated voice. “She said you would measure off the towels that are to be hemmed. I am ready for them now.”

This was all that was said, but the voice seemed strangely familiar. I could have sworn that I had heard it before, and under circumstances that awoke unpleasant feelings in my mind. And yet I was utterly unable to determine when or where.

Being somewhat curious, I moved my seat, so as to be in range of the doorway. My mother had come in for the towels, which were lying in a bundle on the table, so there was nothing to hinder me from having a good view of the person standing in the passage outside. She was a young woman, not looking to be much over twenty. She was of medium size, and was clad in a neatly-fitting gown of plain gingham. She was looking the perfect picture of modest decorum—her hair

combed smoothly over her brow, her eyes cast down, and her hands carelessly clasped over a snowy apron.

Suddenly she raised her eyes for a quick, furtive glance into my face. I was watching her keenly, and saw that she started and turned pale. My calling had made me observing and suspicious, and though in a moment more she was looking as calm and serene as at first, yet I was satisfied that she had seen me at some previous time, and now recognized me with feelings either of dread or fear. Nevertheless, her face looked entirely strange to me, only those keen, sharp eyes and her voice seeming in the least familiar.

After she had given her the bundle, my mother closed the door, and came towards me.

“That was Miss Sayles, Tom. I’m glad you have seen her. What do you think of her?”

“She *appears* like a modest, respectable girl,” I said, evasively. “I hope she is, I am sure,”

“O, she is a perfect jewel. I wish she had come in, and sat a few moments. But she seemed in such a hurry that I never thought to invite her.”

After that, I could no longer enjoy my visit with mother. My mind was too busy in solving the mystery of what was familiar in the girl’s appearance. I got up and went out, soon. The nursery, where Miss Sayles did her sewing, was at the head the stairs, and next to my mother’s room. The door was ajar, and I heard the subdued murmur of voices as I passed it. Something made me pause, just then. It was Miss Sayles who was speaking. I could not be mistaken in those peculiar tones.

“You *must* go, Maurice,” I heard her say, earnestly. “We are liable to be interrupted at any moment. All would be discovered, if any one should come and find you here.”

“What do I care,” he burst forth, impetuously. “We love each other, Fannie, and it must be discovered sooner or later. Lilian ought to know at once, that I no longer wish the preparations for this marriage to go on. But for my mother’s wishes, I should not have been ensnared into it in the first place.”

“It would be unwise, to confess the truth just yet. By-and-by we can do it with greater safety, though I am afraid your parents will refuse ever to recognize me as your wife. I think Miss Verne already suspects our attachment. If so, she will soon, of her own accord, release you from your engagement. It is best for us that she should be the one to break the engagement.”

Maurice was silent, though not from astonishment at the duplicity which her words hinted at, for he was too deeply infatuated for that. There was a short pause, which Miss Sayles broke by saying abruptly:

“There was a gentleman in Mrs. Frazer’s room when I called at the door, just now. Can you imagine what he was there for?”

“It was her son Tom, very likely. He comes quite often of late. He is a member of the police, I believe.”

“O,” with a sigh of relief. “I concluded from his appearance that he was a detective, something of that sort.”

I heard Maurice getting up as if to come out, and so beat a hasty retreat down the stairs. But I had heard quite enough to satisfy me of the relation existing between Miss Verne’s betrothed husband and Fanny Sayles. I suppose the senses of detectives as regards delicacy and propriety must get terribly blunted sometimes, for I never thought of its being dishonorable for me to play at eaves-dropping. Nor would I acknowledge even now, that I did wrong in listening on this particular occasion.

I went home slowly, with my head bent down. That is a habit I have when trying to clear up any mystery in my own mind. I am apt to jump at conclusions, and this is the one I arrived at after having seen Miss Sayles. I was convinced that I had met her at some previous time, and that, too, in my character as detective. I was sure she had recognized me as an old acquaintance, from her altered manner on seeing me, and I inferred that she had known me as a detective, from the tenor of her last remark to Maurice.

I run over in my mind all the young women with whom I had come in contact in the discharge of my office, but could recall no one resembling Miss Sayles. This seemed queer, as my experience as detective had, as yet, been very brief. But the oddest of all was that I could not rid myself of the idea that when I had met her it had been as a criminal! Even her modest face and pious airs could not cause me to think otherwise.

Well, I was not particularly busy just then, and that night after I had gone to bed I again thought the matter all over. For Miss Verne’s sake I was anxious to find out the true character of Miss Sayles, and get her away from Colonel Lester. However, my reflections for that night were of little benefit. I could not find the clue I was after.

According to my view, prospects were very much brighter for us, the next morning. I was up at our quarters about nine o’clock, when one of Lester’s servants brought me down a note from my mother. This is something like the way in which it was worded.

“Miss Verne was robbed of her jewels last night. Come down, Tom, without delay. Ask your captain to entrust the business of finding out the thief, to you. It is the colonel’s request. Make haste.”

I showed this letter to the captain, and he told me to “go ahead.” I was off in a very few minutes, thinking to myself on the way, that I should have very little difficulty in tracing out the offender, for I was well enough convinced in my own mind who had done the deed.

When I reached the house, I learned that Miss Verne had lost a valuable set of jewelry, including

diamond ear-rings, pin, and sleeve-buttons, and that Colonel Lester had missed a set of silver spoons, though nothing else had been molested.

Well, I looked carefully through the house, but could find no broken lock, or shutter off from its hinge. Nor was there a hole bored anywhere, or a window forced. Everything was just as it had been the night before, with the exception of the missing articles. Miss Verne knew that her jewels had been all safe only the day before, for she had taken them out sometime in the afternoon, to dust the cushions. She kept her jewel box in another box much larger, and usually had it stowed away on a shelf in her closet, as there was no room for it on her dressing bureau or table. Besides, she really considered this the safer place. One of the diamonds in her sleeve-buttons had become loosened, and she had gone for them the first thing in the morning, thinking to send them directly to a jeweller's to be newly set, and had thus discovered her loss.

The closet from whence the diamonds had been taken opened directly at the head of Miss Verne's bed, and the thief must have passed through the room, and taken the keys from under her pillow. Miss Verne declared, however, that she had not been disturbed, but had slept unusually well. That could readily be accounted for, though, for there was still a faint smell of chloroform in the room. She had been under its influence without suspecting it. Colonel Lester looked horrified when told of it.

"The guilty party is some one very well acquainted with the premises, evidently," I said. "Miss Verne's apartment was entered by a false key, for she assures me that she locked the door on retiring."

"I don't see how that could have been," returned the colonel. "I would vouch for the honesty of any one of the servants. They have been in my employ for years."

"Is there no one else who has the run of the premises?" I inquired, trying to draw him out.

"Miss Sayles, the seamstress. But she couldn't have had anything to do with it. She never stops here over night. She is a very nice, quiet sort of a body, and so modest and pious, too! O, I should never suspect her!"

From Miss Verne's room we kept on to the garret. It was not like most attics, partitioned off into multitudinous rooms, but one great square place filled with all sorts of old trumpery and cast-off furniture, where the great beams and black rafters made the only walls.

I went up the ladder leading to the scuttle. I had seen a woman's track—small as any fine lady's—in the dust at the foot of the ladder. The impression was very faint, and yet I could trace it without difficulty. I said nothing, but going up, pushed open the trapdoor carefully.

"How often do your family come here — any of them?" I inquired, after a little investigation.

"Never, that is, very seldom. Once in a month, perhaps. Not oftener. There is nothing to bring them here.

“Nevertheless the trapdoor has been opened within a day or two. Everything indicates it. Besides, I found the fastenings all loose. It certainly has been used as a means for ingress to the house. Probably the thief was let in through it by some accomplice.”

I was preparing to descend, when a tiny scrap of scarlet ribbon caught my eye, clinging to a nail in the door, where it seemed to have been caught and violently torn away from a larger piece. It was the merest fragment, but I put it carefully away in my vest pocket, saying nothing. I was positive that I had found a clue.

Getting down, I closely examined the track on the floor, but could make nothing further of it. My next step was to ask that all the members of the household might be called together. Maurice, who had followed us up, ran down to give the order, and the colonel and myself descended more leisurely.

“You are convinced of Miss Sayles’s innocence,” I said, to him. “I shall not call it in question, but I must ask if you know at what hour she left here last night?”

“O yes. We were at supper. It must have been seven or after. We heard her close the front door as she went out. I remember this particularly, because Mrs. Lester remarked at the time that she had meant to see Miss Sayles before she returned home.”

“Was any one in the hall at the time?”

“I think not. The family were all at the table, and the servants below.”

Here was better evidence than I had hoped to gain. There was no one around to observe her movements; and what was easier than for Miss Sayles to slam the door as if she had gone out, and then creep away to hide herself until the coast was clear for the accomplishment of her object? She had probably used the trapdoor either as a means of escape, or to let in an accomplice.

After considerable coaxing and threatening the servants were all gathered in the drawing room. Miss Sayles had come down from the nursery where she was sewing, as I insisted on her presence. She came in, pleasant and cheerful, her lashes drooping modestly over her cheeks. She was certainly a lovely creature to look at, but I never thought of her beauty. Really, I don’t believe that I saw much at the time, aside from the bunch of scarlet ribbon that looped up her hair, and was knotted at the top of her head. No one present except her wore scarlet.

While Colonel Lester and myself were questioning the servants, I had an opportunity to observe their feet. Here there seemed to be further evidence. None of the domestics could have made the print I had seen in the dust up stairs. Miss Verne and Fannie Sayles were the only two in the house who would have made so small a track. To cap the whole, in passing Fannie I discovered that there was a corner gone from one end of the ribbon she wore. And that corner I was convinced was at that moment lying snugly tucked away in my pocket!

However, I said nothing. In going away, I only told the colonel that I thought I had found a clue, and should follow it up the best I was able. Maurice offered his services so persistently that I said to him in an aside:

“Come over to our office at half-past seven, and you shall go with me. I may not be there when you arrive. In that case get one of the men to thoroughly disguise you, and you shall have a part in the adventure if there is to be one.”

He promised, and I went away. I had gone but a few rods from the house, however, before Miss Verne stepped out from one of the side streets and confronted me. It was evident she had been waiting there for me.

“I must entreat, Mr. Frazer,” she began, in a low, hurried tone, her face anxious and pale, “that you will go no further in this matter. The jewels were mine, and I will give up all hopes of having them again, to save trouble. Make the colonel believe you are doing everything possible to find out the guilty party, while you really let the whole subject drop. I know it seems very wrong, but perhaps I may some day tell you my reasons for asking this. Only please grant my request. Tell me that you will, Mr. Frazer?”

She had gone on so rapidly that I could not say a word. Now she paused, breathless and white. “I am sorry for you from the depths of my heart,” I answered, “and rest assured of this, I shall do everything for your best good. I will try to follow your wishes so far as possible.”

A few more words of hurried entreaty, and then Miss Verne darted away as if afraid of being seen. But I understood perfectly the cause of her request. It all came for her true love for Maurice. She was anxious to spare him all possible suffering. With a woman’s true instinct she had felt that Miss Sayles must be the thief, but had probably considered it a first offence in which the temptation had finally become too strong to be resisted. She had thought, very likely, that Maurice loved Miss Sayles too well to give her up in any event, and on that account wished to keep the identity of the thief forever a secret from him. I could hardly sympathize with her in this idea, however. To tell the truth, I had my doubts if Maurice’s regard for Fannie was really so very intense as it was thought to be.

You may ask why, with such evidences of guilt as had been discovered, I did not cause Fannie to be arrested at once. The truth is this. She had no idea how strongly circumstances were against her, and on this account I thought it best to first get some trace of the jewels, as otherwise we might never find them, even though she was arrested. Despite Miss Verne’s entreaties, I really thought it would be much better for both her and Maurice to push the matter to extremes. It might save Maurice from some indiscretions.

Well, I will tell you just how I acted. Before seven o’clock that night, I was in the street near the colonel’s carefully disguised. I watched there until Miss Sayles came out, and then followed her. She led me quite a chase, going in at last at what I knew to be a not very respectable house down by the North River. Having trapped her thus, I hurried back to our quarters for Maurice. He was waiting for me, as thoroughly changed in external appearance as myself.

I never gave him a hint of the identity of the person we were after. We went up to the house by the North River, and waited there. Somehow, I felt sure that Fannie would make some effort to dispose of her illgotten wealth that night. Events proved the truth of this suspicion. By-and-by the front door opened, and a woman came quickly out, glancing furtively up and down the street. We were in the shadow of the opposite doorway, so that she did not observe us. She was dressed in plain black, and looked for all the world like one who had recently been reduced from affluent circumstances. She appeared to be about forty years of age. I had no idea that this woman could be Fannie, until in turning her head, one end of the scarlet ribbon peeped out from the back of her bonnet! She had neglected to lay off the ribbon, thinking, perhaps, it would not be observed under her bonnet.

“A very clever disguise,” I chuckled, to myself, watching her tripping down the street. Maurice and I followed very leisurely, only keeping her in sight. We did not wish to attract her attention. By-and-by, after a long walk, she went in at one of the second-rate jewellers. Maurice and I hurried on, peering in at the window. She had given the diamond pin to the jeweller for his inspection.

“I should never think of disposing of it did not my present circumstances compel me to the sacrifice,” I heard her say.

He took the pin into another room—to test the jewels perhaps—but soon returned, and gave it back to her, refusing to purchase. Then she tried to barter with him, but he remained resolute. I think he was afraid of getting into some trouble.

She turned to come out, and I whispered for Maurice to be ready. We confronted her in the doorway, and I seized hold of one of her arms, saying:

“You are my prisoner, Miss Fannie Sayles.”

She drew back with a muttered exclamation, and quick as thought drew a pistol from under her cloak and fired. The ball just missed us, passing through Maurice’s hat. Then she tried to break past us, but we seized her on either side, so there was no chance for escape.

Maurice had caught the meaning of my words, and now I could see that he was shaking like a leaf. He seemed intuitively to understand how matters stood. And yet he would ask no questions, or betray himself further, though I believe he was suffering intensely. Miss Fannie failed to penetrate his disguise, never once mistrusting but that he was a common policeman.

As for Fannie, herself, she raved and tore at a great rate on her way to the station. I have only a word more to say of her. The jewels and silver spoons were recovered uninjured. And now I will tell why Miss Sayles’s eyes and voice had seemed familiar. She was an old offender, known under the name of “Wild Nell.” She was nearly thirty-five, but paints and cosmetics had effected such a change that I had quite failed to recognize her. She had accepted the situation at Colonel Lester’s, wishing to learn the bearing of the house before robbing it. It may be, also, that she had some thoughts of marrying Maurice—I cannot say as to that. *N’importe*.

After all that had happened, I think Maurice Lester was a different, and a thoroughly penitent man. He begged Lilian's forgiveness for all he had caused her to suffer, and then went back to Europe for a year. But before he went he confessed to his mother that his heart had been true to its choice through it all. Only a temporary infatuation had drawn him toward "Miss Sayles," as he always persisted in calling her, and he was already beginning to tire of her. But for his mother's anxiety to see him married to Lilian, he might never have been untrue to her, or have thought of loving Miss Sayles.

Well, he came back at the end of the year, a wiser and a better man. He and Lilian were married shortly afterwards, and when I say that they made a noble couple in every sense of the term, I have said enough to satisfy one of their perfect happiness. They had been tried and purified.

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