

A Bit of a Mystery

by Johnson B. Turner

A woman past sixty, but hale vigorous, called on Varnoe one day on a singular errand. She was the owner of a number of small tenements in Bedford street, and always went in person to collect the rent, being too miserly to pay an agent to attend to it. (As Varnoe did not give her name in his printed sketches, I shall call her Mrs. Sordid, as the most appropriate name for a person of her avaricious disposition.)

The detective was at his rooms when she called, and she at once stated her business.

“There is a bit of mystery at my residence which needs looking into,” said she, her little black eyes twinkling like those of a rat, which animal she so closely resembled.

The gentleman requested her to explain the matter, but she seemed to be undecided in what manner to proceed after having uttered the first sentence; finally she said:

“Well, sir, sometimes I have a sum of money about the house which comes too late for banking, and I usually put it in a place where no burglar or sneak-thief would dream of looking for it. Yet next day it is sure to be missing, and that is the last of it. This has occurred four or five times within two months, and I am at a loss to even conjecture what becomes of it or how the thief could possibly have found its hiding place.”

“How many servants have you in the house” asked the detective.

“But two; a man servant and a maid-of-all-work.”

“Do you suspect either?”

“Well, no, I can’t say that I do. I have had them in my employ these twelve years, or more, and never had any occasion to complain of either. Mary Dunbar is a well-conducted woman, and attends to her duties, and James Long is an industrious, tidy and sober man. If they were otherwise I would not have retained them in my service for so long a period.”

“In what part of the house did you conceal the money?”

“In my bedchamber.”

“And you sleep alone?”

“Yes.”

“Have you bolts on your door[?]”

“Yes; above and below, besides the lock.”

“Is there but one door to the room?”

“But one.”

“How many windows?”

“Two.”

“Is this room on the second or third floor?”

“On the second—in the back-building.”

“Do you usually secure the windows during the night?”

“Yes, by day and night.”

“And after you were robbed, did you find the door and windows as you had left them on retiring?”

“Exactly as I had left them.”

“And these mysterious thefts always take place during the night?”

“So I presume, for on the following morning the money would be gone.”

“I’d advise you to change the place of concealment,” suggested Varnoe.

“Didn’t I try that plan,” cried she, in a high key. “I placed the money in my stockings, half in each, and kept them on my feet. But next morning the money was gone, and the stockings were on my feet.”

Varnoe gave the woman a keen glance; he was very much inclined to doubt her last statement; it appeared too strange for belief; he thought she must be either a fraud or a lunatic. But she bore his scrutiny without the least show of embarrassment. She must have noticed the incredulous expression of his face, so she remarked:

“This appears like witchcraft to you, does it not?”

“It almost passes my belief,” responded he, thoughtfully. “It is truly ‘A Bit of a Mystery.’”

“I should say so,” rejoined she, “but will you, for a [consideration,] undertake to ferret out the pilferer?”

“I cannot see any show of success,” observed he; “but I will, nevertheless undertake it.”

“Then come to my house [tonight,] and I’ll manage to smuggle you in without the knowledge of any in the house. You will be required to keep watch all night, and take your rest during the day.”

Then followed the question of pay for the services required. She offered him twenty-five [percent] of all that had been stolen, if he recovered that for her, and twenty [percent] of all he found on the person of the thief he had caught him.

The detective agreed to this and that night was secretly admitted during the absence of the servants, and conducted to a small room adjoining her own.

The servants had retired, and everything was quiet in the house, when the watcher heard Mrs. Sordid’s chamber door open. He at once opened his own and awaited to see what followed. A stream of light came into his room, and the next moment the old lady tapped softly at his door. In a whisper he asked what she wanted.

“I only wanted to tell you that my man servant, James, says he is sure that he has heard the soft tread of some person pass his door once or twice every night, but supposing it was me, he paid no particular attention to it at the time. But I told him that if he ever heard it again to ascertain whether it was me before he permitted the matter to rest on that belief or supposition. Therefore, be sure, Mr. Varnoe, if you hear any movement in the house during the night to be the watch.”

“Rest assured on that point, madam,” responded he. “Should anyone but yourself roam about the house I shall keep my eye on the prowler.”

Thus assured, madam slipped into her room again, and shortly after he heard her get into her bed, and then deep silence reigned.

At about midnight, however, this silence was broken ever so slightly. Again he heard the old lady’s door open, and presently she came out, lamp in hand. She put the key in the lock on the outside, closed the door gently and locked it; then she passed his door without even looking at it and walked toward the stairway. He looked after her until she descended the stairs, then he turned his attention to the door of her chamber. “For,” thought he, “if she is in the habit of leaving her room at nights, the thief will probably seize that moment to enter by means of a skeleton key, and accomplish his object before she returns. Yes, that must be the manner in which she loses her money.[”]

All this seemed probable enough, and could undoubtedly have been done before she thought of secreting the money in her stockings and keeping them on her feet on retiring; and surely she would not remove either money or stockings during the temporary absence from her chamber.

But how the money could be abstracted from her stockings without awakening her would, in itself, be singular; but how the thief gained an entrance after she had retired and secured both

door and windows, and left them thus secured after committing the theft seemed so utterly impossible that Varnoe was at a loss what to make of it.

However the old lady returned from her nocturnal errand, and re-entered her room in so quiet a manner that it was not surprising that the servants were not disturbed by her movements.

The watcher heard her lock and bolt the door and directly after retire, and silence reigned once more, and it was not interrupted by any event during the night.

Varnoe was quite positive that no one had entered her chamber during her brief absence, and naturally presumed that her report in the morning would be of a favorable character. What was his surprise, therefore, when she informed him that the usual [program] had been performed! The money had been taken out of her stockings!

She announced this in an angry tone, and with her flashing eyes fixed on those of her hearer, as though she held him accountable for the loss. The perplexed detective could not only stare at the irate female in stupefaction. “Was she quite sure that the money had been concealed as she stated, and that it had been taken away?” asked he.

“Do you think that I do not know what I am about?” demanded she, angrily, then turned questioner herself by asking, “and are you sure you have not *dozed* on your post?”

The detective positively assured her that he had been wide awake every minute during his watch; and urged this as a proof that he was a faithful guardian of the night. “I saw you leave and enter the room, hence I must have been awake.”

“Well, yes, at that moment, doubtless[,]” admitted she; “but are you quite positive that you have been as wakeful during the *whole* night?” and she eyed him most skeptically.

Varnoe thought her too unreasonable, and became impatient; he thought her whimsical, and hinted as much. This led to an angry controversy, and for a period threatened a rupture between employer and employee. She accused him of laxity of duty, and he expressed doubts of her remembering where she placed her money; that if she really concealed it in her bedchamber, there it must be still, for no one, save herself, had entered the door during the past night.

In the midst of their angry dispute a sudden thought struck him. It was just barely probable that the thief, whoever it might be, might have gained access to her room before she retired, and concealed himself until she was asleep—he, perhaps, deepening that sleep by means of [chloroform]—then taking the money, he would return to his hiding place and wait until the old woman left her room, when he would also slip out at the first opportunity that offered.

He mentioned this to Mrs. Sordid, and she at once saw that such a thing could be done, but was not quite as certain where the thief could hide himself in the interim. The detective suggested the wardrobe—a capacious one—or under the bed; but she assured him that it was absurd to suppose that any female would retire before she was positively certain that a “nasty man” was not snugly

[ensconced] under bed. As for the wardrobe, a man could well conceal himself therein; but the chances of being detected were too many to be available.

“Now, Mr. Varnoe,” said she, after deliberate consideration, “let us dissect this matter fully, then after mutual suggestions, endeavor to devise means to prevent recurrence of these mysterious thefts. I am positive that I was robbed of twenty-two dollars last night, and you are just as positive that no one entered my room during the night. You are bound to believe me, and I must not doubt you. Very well. Now [tonight] I shall try this nocturnal scamp once more. I shall place the money in a spot where no one would, with the wildest stretch or imagination, suppose any person would possibly hide any valuables. Even you shall not know where I’ll place it. Then if I find it missing in the morning, I shall certainly believe in witchcraft”

The detective heartily commended her proposed plan, and they separated for the day, he promising to return at nine that evening, which he did, secretly as on the previous occasion.

Somewhere dining midnight he again heard her door open, and saw her issue from the room with a lighted lamp in her hand. He thought it strange that this should occur twice in two consecutive nights, and greatly wondered at her nocturnal propensities; but from motives of delicacy as before, he forebore mentioning it in the morning when she electrified him with the fact that the money had been taken from her back hair, during her sleep, and in the morning when she awoke, she found her night-cap on her head just as she had adjusted and tied it the night before; her hair was done up also in the style she usually observed in that process, yet in the face of all this, the money was gone. “Now, even if a thief could have had access to the room,” added she in conclusion, “how in heaven’s name could he know where I placed the money, for mentioned it to no one, and did up my hair in the dark!”

Varnoe could not doubt that she spoke the truth and he was sorely perplexed. He assured her that he never came across anything that puzzled him so completely in all his professional career.

They discussed the matter thoroughly—dissected it inch by inch, but could arrive at no conclusion.

“No one entered your room during your temporary absence during the night?” said he, “besides you locked the door after you?” added he.

“Mr. Varnoe,” asked she, in surprise, “do you allude to last night, or night before?”

“Both,” replied he. “You must be aware that you left your room the first night I was here.”

“Yes,” she admitted, “when I spoke to you about what James had been telling me.”

“But, madam,” persisted he, “you left your room a second time and passed down stairs with a lighted lamp, remaining absent about ten minutes; do you not recollect?”

“You are certainly mistaken,” rejoined she, “I never left my room again when I returned to it

after speaking to you.”

“But I am positive, madam,” reiterated he. “If it was not you it must have been your ghost.”

“Sir,” cried she, “you have been hoodwinked by a clever thief. That person was not myself, of that I am positive, hence it must have been the mysterious thief gotten up to personate me in order to avert suspicion on the part of any secret watcher. And this was repeated last night, you say?”

“It was,” respond he, regarding her curiously.

“Then the way is clear before us. We shall not puzzle our brains about the mode of his entrance to my room—let that pass—but [tonight] when you see me—let that ha! ha! when I repeat this midnight promenade, follow the promenader and ascertain what his object is in thus leaving and returning to an apartment where he or she has no right to trespass.”

“I shall certainly do so,” was his positive rejoinder.

“Can it be one or both of my servants, after all?” murmured she, as if to herself. “I cannot persuade myself to that belief; however, we shall see who it is [tonight.]”

That night the same thing occurred. Mrs. Sordid, or her double, again emerged from her room, and Varnoe had a full view of her face by the light of the lamp she carried, it was the lady herself and none other; this was Varnoe’s mental assertion. He silently followed her and she led him into the cellar kitchen. He seated himself on the [top step] in the shadow, where he could see all her movements, himself unobserved.

There was an old fireplace there which had been out of use for many years. Mrs. Sordid reached her arm up the chimney, and when she withdrew it again she held an old [sugar] box in her hand. This she placed on an inverted empty flour barrel, and then, lifting the lid of the box, she dropped a parcel into it again. Then she returned the box to its hiding place, and prepared to leave the cellar. He at once grasped the situation. Mrs. Sordid was a somnambulist, and hid this money while in that state, but never remembered the act when awake.

He permitted her to pass [upstairs] unmolested, and, when her footsteps had died away, he descended to the cellar and drew forth the box; he placed it under his arm and quietly returned to his room. Here he first locked the door—no need of any further watching now—the drew the slide of his dark lantern and began to examine the contents of the treasure box. He was quite astonished at the amount he found in it. It must have been the accumulation of a considerable period, he thought. He carefully counted the money and made a note of it—it amounted to four thousand three hundred and seventy two dollars.

Returning all back into the box, he divested himself of his coat and boots and turned into bed[.]

He could now afford to abate his vigils. In the morning she came to him with an eager, anxious

expression, but when she looked at the bed her face wore a frown. "You have slept instead of keeping watch," she remarked, pointing to the impression his person had left on the bed.

"Yes, [madam,]" admitted he, smiling at her blank look; but that was after I detected the thief and recovered the plunder."

"Ah! then you have caught him?" cried she, joyfully.

"Yes, and here's the money," rejoined the detective, producing the sugar box. She pounced upon and earnestly began to count the contents, saying:

"I shouldn't wonder if had he had robbed me of hundreds of dollars."

"Nor I," innocently remarked Varnoe, smiling in anticipation of his surprise, when she had counted the contents of the box.

"Good gracious!" at length, exclaimed she, dropping into a seat the picture of wonder and stupefaction. Four thousand three hundred and seventy-two dollars."

"Exactly," responded Varnoe, placing the note book before her: "that is what I made of it."

"And you have the thief in custody?"

"No; there was no thief in the case," answered the detective.

"No thief!" ejaculated she, glaring at him. "No thief, with all this evidence before you!"

"Just so," responded he coolly.

"I do not understand" said she in a bewildered tone. "You recovered the money, hence it is presumable that you must have seen the person place last night's theft in the box, for here are the notes as they were taken from my room, yet you have no one in custody. Pray explain."

He did so to her intense surprise. Had it not been for the evidence before her, and the most incomprehensible manner in which the supposed thefts had been committed she would not have believed it possible.

"But you surely must be convinced now that you were the culprit," remarked he, with an amused smile.

"Well, yes, You should know, of course," rejoined she, still incredulous; "but if you only had awakened me while I was in the act of putting the money in the box."

"I can easily furnish you the desired proof," responded the detective laughing heartily.

“How?” demanded she.

“Keep this money in [your] room [tonight,]” replied he, with a mischievous smile lurking in the corners of his [mouth;] do [it up] in your back hair and put on your night-cap, tie it [in] the fashion you styled your own, and then, when you are about to deposit the whole amount in the bank that “soots” [you,] I’ll step forward and arrest the thief.”

She joined him in the laugh at her expense, but concluded not to make the proposed trial. She would believe his statements without conclusive proof.

But to hear the least agreeable part of this “Bit of Mystery” was the paying of the percentage to the detective. She endeavored to persuade him to accept ten [percent,] since it cost him such little trouble to solve the mystery; but he demanded all, and proved inexorable on that point, and she paid it with a grimace far from pleasant.

Louisiana Capitolian [Baton Rouge, LA], January 3, 1880

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