

Disappeared

Yes, I can tell you the story of my dear old friend Bayle; no one better. Some of my friends here may have heard it before, but it will bear hearing again. I can't say I'm proud to say it, because it's too sad an ending, as far as he was concerned, poor fellow, though I myself had a lucky escape.

James Bayle was a very peculiar man. I don't think anyone understood him except myself. He was certainly more open with me than with any of his other friends or acquaintances. It was three years ago, in November, when he came up to London to stay with me, in this very house. He used to go out on long walks by himself every day, and I knew his object, for he had confided to me that he was going to marry a young girl somewhat below him in station, and he was looking for a house in London, as he intended to work hard on two or three journals, to the staff of which he had long been attached.

The sort of house that he looked for, was, as you may believe, not a very dear one. He naturally wished for a very quiet situation; and as he was a man who had always lived in the country, and was very fond of flowers, he said he would put up with any inconvenience as long as he could have a piece of ground to himself. He told me the sort of a house he required, and I told him the direction in which he would most probably find one. It was one Wednesday, I remember, four days after he had been with us, that he went out rather earlier than usual. We never expected him to return very early; but when the dinner bell rang, and we found he had not come in, we felt a little uneasy. He was a very shy man, as you know, and very particular; the last thing he would be likely to do was to be purposely late for dinner, without giving any warning—We waited twenty minutes, and then sat down without him. He never came back at all that night, nor the next day, nor the day after that; in fact, as you all know, he never came back at all.

We went to the police office at once; and I was very much amused at the theories set up by the excellent detectives to account for his disappearance. I told them I believed it very likely that he had been looking for a house, or if not, that he had gone to the British Museum; but they got it into their heads that he had been decoyed into the slums of St. Giles or Westminster, or had committed suicide; and nothing would dissuade them at first from these two ingenious theories.

They asked me if he was not a man of studious, solitary habits, rather eccentric.

I answered: "Yes, certainly."

"Then depend upon it," said the sergeant, "he's in the Regent's Canal or the Thames."

This reasoning was so unanswerable that I did not attempt to answer it, but I determined to test my own theory first.

Hitherto we had been able to find nobody who had seen him. He knew very few people in London, and he was not the sort of man to attract attention. I began my endeavors to trace his movements in rather a novel manner.

I started every morning from my own house at the same hour as he had done. I stood for about five minutes in the street, and then I set out in whatever direction chance suggested to me. For eight days I walked about fifteen miles a day, looking everywhere for any house to let which would have been likely to attract Bayle's attention, but I did not get any clue. I found several which he had been to, but not on the day upon which he disappeared. On the ninth day I started at the same hour; this day I selected a district which I knew to contain one or two houses such as he required. I walked on in the same unpremeditated manner, turning down any street as chance led me. I was very much dispirited, so much so that I had forgotten I was hungry, when I found myself in a very quiet part of one of the western suburbs. I was just going to try and find some place where I could lunch, which promised to be no easy matter, as there seemed to be no shops or public houses near, when my eye caught a very crazy-looking board which was peering over the dingy corner of a dead wall straight in front of me. I walked up to it and read: "This eligible villa to be let, unfurnished, with one acre of ground, stabling, etc. Terms very moderate. Inquire within."

I could only see the top of the house, which seemed very low, and some little way from the road. The front looked on to Duddon's Grove; on one side was a Dissenting chapel, standing in a small piece of ground; on the other, a very quiet, lonely lane; there was a door, evidently leading to the stable-yard; it was bolted and there was no bell. I tried to make the people hear, and failing, I returned to the front entrance, which I had not seen before, and after some little trouble, I found the bell and rang it. Five minutes elapsed before [anyone] answered the summons, and then a man opened the door, and asked me what I wanted[.] He was a cunning, dirty-looking fellow, with very peculiar eyebrows, growing in patches, as if he had the mange. He looked as if he had been drinking, but he did not speak quick, nor was his gait or hand unsteady but the bloodshot eyes and blotchy face made me feel sure that he was not a man I should care to leave in charge of a house. One other peculiarity I noticed then, and that was the great length of his arms, which gave him the appearance of a great ape.

He led the way down a damp gravel walk, overgrown with weeds, through what had been a little garden. On the right hand side I noticed a large patch of very rank grass round a broken sundial. I remarked to the man that the soil seemed pretty rich there.

"Yes," he answered with a kind of hoarse chuckle, "the grass do grow very thick and sweet just there; and it ought to, considering wha'ts underneath."

"Why," I inquired, "what is underneath there?"

"Clay, of course," he answered, with another chuckle, and by this time I found myself at the front door of the house.

It was a singular little place. The windows of what was probably the dining-room opened into a rickety, moldy veranda, which terminated at the porch. This porch projected some little way from the house, and at once struck me as space very ill-utilized, since there was no room above.— Two urns, that looked as if they were afflicted with gangrene, surmounted the front door; the lattice-work that had once been put up for the creepers was nearly all rotted away. One

or two chimneys were quite ready to drop, and the whole place looked as if it was built of moldy cheese.

“Not in very good repair, this house,” I observed to my hideous guide.

“Oh, quite good enough. Only wants a little touching up here and there.”

I can’t tell you when it was that the peculiar feeling which had taken possession of me ever since I looked at this uninviting property, pronounced itself so strongly as to become a distinct sense of horror. But it was so now, and as I looked up at the puckered face of this ape-like man, I saw something that almost made me utter a cry of dread. But I restrained myself. I should not have been such a fool any other time, but I had now been walking about for seven hours, and my breakfast had consisted of one cup of tea.

We entered the house, and in the passage we found a woman waiting for us. “My wife,” said the man, “she will go through the rooms with you,” and then he disappeared through the house into the back yard.

The woman took me into the rooms on the ground-floor. I observed nothing particular about them, except that they were very gloomy. There were no rooms on the basement, except cellars. The kitchen, scullery, etc., were on the ground-floor. I say that there was a yard, with stables and wash house in it; I went into the stable, and found that it was a little more than a shed; the wooden back abutted on some waste ground, enclosed by a low wall of tane which I have mentioned before. Altogether, I never saw such a lonely house so near the busy part of the west end of London. I asked the woman how far it was to Piccadilly, and she told me only fifteen minutes walk. She turned out to be quite right, for I had wandered round and round so much in that day’s expedition that I was much nearer the civilized region of Belgravia than I thought.

The peculiar feeling which I have mentioned was still strong on me. I was perfectly sure that, somehow or other, I had lighted on the real clue to my dear friend’s fate. I dare say you will laugh at me, a practical old money-getting [foge], when I tell you that I felt, as I ascended the staircase of this house, that James Bayle was close beside me.

As I said, there were only two stories to the house; but it was a straggling sort of building. The woman took me through a sitting-room, which she called a drawing-room, but which in its present state was much more like a lumber-room with nothing in it, and through this, across a passage to a much smaller room, which she and her husband used as their dwelling-room. There were two children of very unprepossessing appearance—a boy and girl. They were fighting for something when we entered, and we had hardly got inside the room before I saw that the boy had wrested from his sister a small pencil case.

“What have you got there, my little man?” I said. “Let me look.” He showed it with pride. There was no mistaking it. It was a somewhat peculiar one, made of ebony and silver, and I recognized it at once as having belonged to James Bayle.

I suppose my face must have betrayed my agitation, for the woman looked at me closely and then remarked:

“It’s a pretty little thing as little Johnny picked up the other day when he was out; If I could find who it belongs to, I should be very glad.”

“Oh, it’s not worth much,” I said; “it is well it has fallen into such honest hands.”

We now went up three steps, and into a larger room.

“This is the best room,” she said; “there is another one next it, in which rubbish can be stored.”

I saw nothing in the room worth noticing, and followed my conductress into the next one. These rooms had all doors opening into the passage. I thought I heard the handle of the door move as we came in. There was a peculiar smell here, a very sickly smell.

I began to feel uncomfortable, and was at a loss how to act. There was no reason to disbelieve the woman’s statement about the pencil-case; and yet I felt sure that it was untrue. I went to the window in order to gain time. I heard the passage door open, and when I turned around, the man was standing there.

“I hope the gentleman likes the house,” he said. “It’s a little damp, but it is very cheerful in the Summer, and so quiet.”

“I suppose there is not much more to see. It’s rather a gloomy place.”

“Well, you see, it’s a dark sort of day, but with a little trouble it might be made a beautiful villa.” The man moved the door leading to the bed-room as if he was going through. When he said this he turned around from the door; he had one of his long arms in the pocket of his coat, which was open. I noticed that many of the waistcoat buttons were torn off.

I stood reflecting a moment calculating the chance I should have in a struggle with him.

They seemed in his favor.

“I think I may as well be going if you will give me the address of the landlord, I will write to him.”

“Here’s two more nice sleeping rooms on this floor,” said the woman, and she opened a door at the further end of the room, which I had not seen. I followed her down two steps, into a fair-sized room. The sickly smell grew stronger here. There was a stain in the middle of the floor, which looked as if it had been lately washed.

“You can go out this way, sir; the landlord will re-paper these rooms, and do all necessary repairs, he told us to say, sir. I tries to keep this place as clean as I can, but of course, it looks rather dull.” She had got to the door, and stood still to allow me to pass, and with her hand on the handle. I could not see the man. I was feeling in my pocket for a small coin to give her, when she opened the door half-way, and [curtsied]. I passed on, and before I had time to turn back, the

door was shut on me. The smell I had already perceived was horribly strong here. I turned giddy. I had almost lost my senses, when a blow from behind knocked me down. I had just time to get a glimpse of some chemical apparatus in the corner of what seemed more like a dark closet than a room, when I fell.

I remember nothing of what happened then. The first signs of returning sense was the perception of a pungent odor. Then I felt something run over my head. Then I tried to move. I was covered with straw. I was in the shed of the stable evidently, and the smell of the manure acted beneficially in rousing my brain. I was very weak from loss of blood, but I knew that if I didn't exert myself at once I had little chance of escape. I crawled to the door of the shed; it was locked. If it had been open I did not know how I could have escaped across the yard without being seen. I examined the outside wall of the shed. I found a place where the boards had been mended, about three feet from the ground.

Fortunately I had with me a large pocket-knife, containing, among other things, a saw and a screw-driver. I worked away at the boards as quietly as I could; it was very hard work. My head was very bad all the time, but my arms were not hurt. I started at every noise; sometimes it was a rat running across; sometimes the horse in the stall; but no one came to the door. In about half an hour, as near as I can reckon, I had sawed through three planks, and loosened them sufficiently to make a hole big enough to crawl out. I put the knife in my mouth, and slowly crept on my hands and knees into the open air. It was raining, and the rain refreshed me very much. I could not walk upright very well, so I crawled on till I got to the wall, which was luckily very low. I managed to pull myself to the top, and then reeled and dropped in a heap on the other side. There was a gutter in the lane, and it was full, for it had been raining very hard. I washed my mouth out with the water, which, dirty as it was, was grateful to my parched throat. Keeping by the wall, I staggered along till I came to a lighted street. Here I got help; the police office was close by. I got a couple of policemen; then we got into a cab. They made me stop to have my head dressed; but I could not rest, though the surgeon insisted on my doing so, till I found out what had become of James Bayle.

We got to the house. The police got over the wall and lifted me over. We found the man and the woman sitting in the kitchen. When they saw me, all pale and bandaged, she fainted away and he was paralyzed with terror. He made no resistance. We went [upstairs], and I showed them the place where I was struck.

The little room, or closet, at the door of which I fell, had been fitted up as a laboratory. An old retort, on a spirit lamp, stood in the corner. The window was blocked up; there was no chimney. The strange smell was still very strong, and the poisonous vapor had not yet all dispersed. We searched the rooms, and found some clothes and other articles which I identified as belonging to James Bayle, and which he had had on or about him when he left my house. The man denied all knowledge of Bayle, and swore the things had been given him. But we had no doubt as to his fate.

Both the man and the woman were taken to the police station at once. I had fainted, and they took me home. A policeman was left in charge of the place. The next day, on examining the garden, his attention was directed to the spot where I had noticed how rank the grass was. He got

a spade, and about two feet under the ground he found a body. When the sergeant came, they worked together, and dug out three corpses, two in a very advanced state of decay; the other was still recognizable as the body of James Bayle.

I was very ill for some time. I owed my life to an accident. Almost immediately after I was knocked down a ring at the bell came. They thought I was dead, and, hastily throwing a coat over me, carried me into the shed. They hid my body in the straw. Meantime the bell rung twice. It was the landlord's agent, who had called upon some matter of business. He did not stay long; but almost immediately after he had gone, a friend of this respectable couple came in, bringing with him a most welcome guest in the shape of a bottle of gin. To this happy arrival I owed my escape.

The murderer and his accomplice, as you know, both committed suicide. He had been a chemist, and was by birth an Italian. The two other bodies were never identified, but there is little doubt that they were murdered in the same way.

Springville [NY] Journal, November 18, 1871

Buffalo [NY] Morning Express, December 2, 1871

Mower County Transcript [Austin, MN], December 28, 1871

The Sacramento [CA] Bee, December 30, 1871

Watertown [WI] Republican, January 3, 1872

Chippewa [WI] Herald, January 6, 1872

Clinton [IL] Register, January 9, 1872

Seymour [IN] Weekly Sun, January 10, 1872

The Weekly Republican [Plymouth, IN], January 11, 1872

The True Northerner [Paw Paw, MI], January 12, 1872

Republican Banner [Nashville, TN], January 28, 1872

York [PA] Gazette, January 30, 1872

New National Era [Washington, D.C.], February 8, 1872

New Orleans [LA] Republican, February 4, 1872

The Huntingdon Journal, August 20, 1873