

The Disappearing Eye-By Fergus Hume

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(Continued from yesterday)

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.
Mrs. Caldershaw, former servant in the Monk family, is found dead, a hatpin piercing her heart and her glass eye missing. The eye is supposed to contain a clue to the hiding place of a treasure worth 50,000 pounds, bequeathed by Gabriel Monk to his niece, Gertrude. Cyrus Vance, a London playwright, falls in love with Miss Monk's photograph. He found Mrs. Caldershaw's body, and at the time his motor car was taken by a woman wearing a white cloak. He finds the cloak in a field where his car had been deserted. It bears the initials "G. M." He conceals it. Joseph Striver, Mrs. Caldershaw's nephew and heir, a gardener at the Monks, avows his love for Miss Monk. Vance meets Gertrude and they become friends. He meets her father, a dapper, selfish little man, who lives mainly in London. Vance discovers a glass eye on a table in the Monk drawing room. A short time later it has disappeared again. Miss Destiny accuses her niece of having killed Mrs. Caldershaw and stolen the glass eye.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Gertrude's Defense.

As may be guessed I passed a very perturbed four and twenty hours until my arranged interview with Miss Monk. Miss Destiny had not seen the glass eye in the drawing room, and so far could prove nothing against her niece. I believe that so far she was speaking the truth, as if she had seen the eye she would have been only too pleased to adduce its presence as a proof of Gertrude's guilt. But as things were, what she knew was damning enough. She could swear to the girl's presence at Mootley on the evening of the murder and to the ownership of the white cloak worn by the lady who had stolen my motor car. Fortunately, from sheer shame, since Miss Monk was her niece, Miss Destiny promised to hold her tongue.

In the face of what the old woman

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had said and what I already knew. It seemed certain that Gertrude was guilty. Miss Destiny could even declare that her niece had possessed certain blue glass-headed hatpins, with one of which the crime had been committed. Then, again, Gertrude wished to get the money, which, after all, was rightfully her own. It seemed probable—on the face of it—that while waiting with Anne Caldershaw for Miss Destiny's arrival she had tried to learn what the ex-housekeeper knew as to the whereabouts of the money. Anne may have told that the secret was locked up in her glass eye, and then—well, I shuddered to think of what took place. Nine people out of ten would have pronounced Gertrude guilty, with the greatest promptitude; but I happened to be the tenth, and I hesitated to give an opinion. But then I was in love, and my decision was biased.

But I really could not believe that so lovely a girl was guilty. Besides her demeanor was not that of a brazen criminal, and she had seemed really puzzled by my over-attentive gaze. Tossing and turning on my bed, I tried to see some ray of light, but all was utter darkness. The evidence was dead against Gertrude Monk, and her fate was in the hands of her vindictive aunt. Miss Destiny might hold her tongue for the time being, but it would come very little to get it wagging. And being a miser, she might try to blackmail her niece. My brain ached with trying to get at the truth. To Inspector Dredge it would have been readily apparent; but in the face of stern facts I refused to believe the aid to be guilty.

Then there was Giles. During the night I thought a good deal of Giles, when I had met that very evening when I returned to the Robin Redbreast. He was remaining there for the night, and informed me that he had come over to Burwain that day in order to see Striver about the lease of the corner shop.

"You see, Mr. Vance," said Giles, shortly before I retired to bed, and while we were in the bar, "my wife wants to have a shop of her own, so I thought I would get Mr. Striver to make over the lease of Mrs. Caldershaw's shop to me. My wife is set on having it, and I think Mr. Striver will agree to the terms I propose."

"You have seen him, then?"

"Yes, sir, I went to his house today, and found he was at The Lodge working in the garden. I sought him out there, and we had a talk just before Miss Destiny came to bother him. I went away then, and afterward you came."

"Oh! my mind ran swiftly over the events of the day; then you were in the grounds of The Lodge before I arrived?"

"Yes, Mr. Vance," said Giles, readily enough. "Mr. Striver wasn't in the garden at the time, as he had gone round to the back of the house. I walked up to the front door and asked for him. The servant sent a message and we were talking over our deal when the little old lady arrived. She spoiled the business for the time being, but I saw Mr. Striver this evening, and we have arranged about the matter. My wife will have the shop."

I thought a good deal about this conversation when in bed. Giles had been alone in the grounds of The Lodge and had it up to the house to seek for Striver. Might he not have placed the eye on the table, since he could easily do so when the middle French window was open? But then I had absolutely no reason to suspect Giles, as the glass eye was, I be meaningless to him. But stop! Would it be meaningless? Certainly Mrs. Giles had denied that she knew about Mrs. Caldershaw's glass eye, but then she had admitted that the ex-housekeeper had said she would never die in her bed. In one way or another Mrs. Giles may have learned the secret of the hidden money, and thus Giles might have killed Mrs. Caldershaw to obtain the glass eye which was the clue. But after reflection I dismissed the story as utterly ridiculous. Giles could not have gained possession of the hatpin belonging to Gertrude Monk; and certainly, having the eye, would not come over to Burwain to leave it in the drawing room of The Lodge. Giles, on the face of it, was utterly innocent. Yet it was strange that he should have been in the grounds of the acubean house nearly at the time I had seen the glass eye. And that had disappeared. If Giles had not placed it there he might have taken it.

"No! no! no! no!" I muttered in drowsy tones. "It's absurd. Giles has nothing to do with the matter. He merely came over to arrange about the shop. He did not place the glass eye there; nor did Striver. If Striver had possessed the eye he would

have gained possession of the money. Besides, he was not at Mootley until the funeral took place. Mr. Monk! He's innocent enough, as he was in London when the crime was committed. Moreover, if he possessed the eye he also would be in possession of the fortune. Gertrude is the only person to whom suspicion points. I shall insist upon a full explanation tomorrow. I alone can save her if she is guilty." And then I fell into a troubled sleep, reproaching myself for daring to doubt my divinity.

Giles departed next morning before I arose, and I did not see him again. Haunted still by undefined suspicions, I regretted his departure, and determined later to look him up at Mootley. Of course the mere idea of thinking that the respectable, sturdy green-grocer was guilty seemed ridiculous, but in my anxiety to save Gertrude from danger I was willing to sacrifice anyone and everything. To such a state does love bring the most just of mankind.

By the midday post I received an impetuous letter from Cannington, who informed me that he had snatched the word is his own—a couple of weeks' leave. For the present he was staying with his aunt, Lady Denham, because Mabel wished it. But proposed, when I came up, to take rooms at a hotel, where he would, as he put it, be less tied by the leg. Then he went on to say that I had remained long enough at Burwain, and that if I did not come to him he would come to me, like Malcolm and the proverbial mountain. Bearing in mind Mr. Monk's aspirations for a titled son-in-law, this was the last thing I desired, so I arranged promptly in my own mind to accept his invitation. Besides, after my interview with Gertrude, in which I hoped to come to an understanding, there would be no need for me to remain at Burwain. Her story might send me farther afield in search of new clues.

Reading between the lines of Cannington's letter, I saw that he was devoured with curiosity concerning Miss Monk. He knew that I had fallen in love with the portrait, and as he had always regarded me as a particularly staid, sedate personage, he naturally doubted if I would carry on so fantastic a romance. However, he evidently had his suspicions, since I chose to linger in a dull country village, and therefore was desperately anxious to see the lady who could thus move my elderly heart. As Cannington was a most pertinacious mortal, I wrote by the next post that I would be in London next week and would have much to tell him about the case. And as a matter of fact I did wish to have some safe person with whom to discuss matters. I could always rely on Cannington to hold his tongue, even if his advice did not prove to be particularly good. At all events the boy could always be relied upon to keep silent, which was more than I could say for many people I know. So to Cannington I resolved to confide the full tale of my discoveries and, in the interests of my wooing, I ended my letter with a repetition of the fact that I was coming to see him. Had I not emphasized this the boy might have appeared the next day to make inquiries.

After posting the letter I consulted with Mrs. Giffin about afternoon tea, and that able old creature bustled about to some purpose. She arranged flowers in my sitting room, stoked the fire, dusted the furniture unnecessarily and spread a truly gorgeous tea for my visitor. I protested that neither one of us could eat so many cakes and buns and jam and bread as loaded the table. Mrs. Giffin—who had some idea of my state of mind—admitted with a beaming smile that love did not spoil the appetite. But she objected to the presence of my second portman-trunk in the sitting room.

"It do spile the looks of things," said Mrs. Giffin, "why not put it in the bedroom, Master Cyrus?"

"I have use for it here Cuckoo," I answered, and so I had, for in it was snugly folded the celebrated cloak, which I proposed to show Gertrude when the time came for explanations.

At four o'clock all was spie and span, and the room was as comfortable as the afternoon tea was tempting. Miss Monk duly arrived—this time without Puddles as an escort—and looked more beautiful than ever in her plain dress. Poor girl, she nearly always wore the same frock, which showed how very short in cash Mr. Monk kept her. She should have been arrayed in silk attire, and I inwardly swore when establishing her in a deep-seated arm chair by the fire, that some day she should be, at my expense. Meantime I handed her a cup of tea and plied her with bread and butter, much to Mrs. Giffin's satisfaction. That good lady had looked in to see that we were comfortable

"Eat all you can, miss," urged Mrs. Giffin; "you don't look as fat as you ought to be."

Gertrude shuddered. "I don't want to grow fat," said she, laughing. "There's worse things than fat," said Mrs. Giffin solemnly. "Lean people with wrinkles are never so nice as them without. If Miss Destiny had more flesh on her bones she'd be more popular," and after delivering herself of this dictum the landlady departed with a fat chuckle.

Gertrude's face clouded when her aunt was mentioned. I noticed this and commented thereon. "You are not fond of Miss Destiny," I remarked. "I have little reason to be," she replied, with a nervous air. "Aunt Julia—"

"Is that her name?"

"Yes, Julia Destiny—a strange name, isn't it? Well, then, she has always behaved harshly to me. Even when I was a child she never liked me, and since Uncle Gabriel left me this fortune she has scarcely been able to bear the sight of me. Then this morning—"

"What about this morning?" I asked, seeing her hesitation.

"Aunt Julia came to me and said all manner of dreadful things. Even if you had not arranged this afternoon tea, Mr. Vance, I should have come to see you. I need a friend more than ever."

I privately thought—and I was right in thinking so—that Miss Destiny had been making herself disagreeable over the visit to Mootley, and perhaps had added threats. However, I said nothing for the moment, as I wished Gertrude to tell her story in her own way. "Take some cake and another cup of tea," I murmured sympathetically, "then we can talk."

Gertrude handed me her cup. "I can't eat or drink anything more, thank you, Mr. Vance. I want to speak seriously to you. No one can hear us, I hope?"

I glanced at the door and window; both were closed. "No one can hear us," I assented, taking the chair opposite her, "and you can depend upon my being secret about whatever you choose to tell me; you know that."

CHAPTER XXV.

The Missing Fortune.

"Yes," she looked straightly at me, and her royal beauty impressed me anew. "I have studied your character closely, so that I might be certain of making no mistake."

"And you are satisfied?"

"Perfectly." She glanced round again, then leaned back in her chair. "Listen, Mr. Vance, and don't interrupt me more than you can help, as it is difficult for me to tell my story clearly."

"I am all attention," said I leaning forward.

"You know that I told you of the fifty thousand pounds which my Uncle Gabriel left me."

"Yes, the fortune which is missing."

Gertrude nodded. "Uncle Gabriel was a miser, and concealed his riches. My father has inherited the income and the property, but the fifty thousand pounds has been hidden away. When the will was read I learned that such a sum had been left to me, but its whereabouts could not be discovered. I searched through Uncle's papers without result. Then about the end of July I came across an old box in the attic filled with foolscap sheets covered with figures. Also there was some writing in the form of a diary, two or three loose sheets pinned together."

"Have you the diary and the other papers?"

"Yes; you can see them when you come to The Lodge. Meanwhile it is easier for me to tell you the contents, as the writing is extremely crabbed. I learned that Uncle Gabriel had for years used the family income of five hundred per annum in purchasing diamonds."

"Really! He could not buy many valuable stones at such a price."

"You forget that he had the income for forty years or thereabouts and lived like a pauper. He was always saving money and buying diamonds. At times—as the diary said—he went to London and Amsterdam and Paris and traded in stones. He turned over what he had bought, as a matter of fact, and in one way and another managed to accumulate fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels."

"Then the fortune, which is hidden, consists of diamonds?"

"Exactly. In the diary Uncle Gabriel hinted that the jewels were for me, but that he mistrusted my father, and would put them safely away."

"Why did he distrust your father?" I asked, although I had a shrewd suspicion of what the answer would be.

The girl flushed. "Uncle Gabriel was never just to my father," she

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said, in a low voice. "Oh, I know that papa has his faults, but his heart is in the right place. Papa has no idea of money; he is like a child; so Uncle Gabriel thought if papa secured the diamonds he might squander their value."

"What?" said I significantly, "when they belonged to you?"

She colored again. "I think papa believes that what is mine is his. You see Uncle Gabriel died when I was about sixteen—five years ago—and he thought that if papa could lay hands on the jewels then that they would not come to me. He mistrusted papa."

"And with very good reason," I murmured, too low for Gertrude to hear. Walter Monk, as I truly believed, would act exactly in the way his brother suspected he would.

"What's that you say?"

"Never mind. I understand that the diamonds were concealed so that your father might not be tempted. But surely your uncle intended them to come into your hands sooner or later."

"Yes. The diary said that the jewels were hidden in a certain place."

"What place?" I asked abruptly.

"Ah, that was kept secret. But Uncle Gabriel talked about trusting Anne—"

"Ah!" I said rubbing my hands with satisfaction, "now we are coming to the gist of the matter. Any mention of the eye?"

"No. You see, in the diary—it can hardly be called one—Uncle Gabriel only jotted down scraps of the scheme in his head. To make a long story short, I gathered that he had entrusted the secret of the whereabouts of the diamonds to Anne Caldershaw, as he had known her for years and esteemed her as an honest woman."

"I see; and she was not honest."

"Don't you think so?"

"No. Evidently she intended to tell Striver the secret, since she left him the glass eye in the will. He was to get the money, and then—I dare say—he could ask you to marry him."

"Ridiculous," said Miss Monk, coloring.

"Perhaps. Nevertheless, I believe that such was the scheme of Mrs. Caldershaw, for she intended to enrich her nephew at your expense, hoping that you would marry him, and thus gain the benefit of what

was rightfully your own. The idea of a marriage saved her conscience, as it were."

"The idea is absurd. I would never marry a man like Joseph, although he is handsome and fairly well educated."

"You know that he loves you."

"Yes, I know," she replied, blushing, but in a somewhat cold tone. "Never mind; the thing—as I say—is absurd. But it might be as you say, Mr. Vance, that Anne had such a scheme in her head. However, you understand that I gathered from the so-called diary that she knew of the whereabouts of the jewels."

"Yes, I know that. What did you do?"

"I determined to go over and see Anne Caldershaw."

"And did you?"

"Yes," she looked at me nervously. "You were at Mootley then, when—"

"No," she burst out fiercely. "Not though Aunt Julia swears I was."

"Oh. You did not go to Mootley at all."

"Yes, I did. I arranged to meet Aunt Julia at Anne's house at five o'clock. I got there before that time."

"Then you were at Mootley on the evening of the murder."

"I have never denied it," she said, cresting her head like a snake, and looking haughty, "but I do deny that I was in the house when the crime was committed. I was not the woman who ran away with your motor car, whatever Aunt Julia may say."

"Who was the woman, then?"

"I don't know. I never set eyes on her."

"Ah!" said I thoughtfully, "talking of eyes, was Mrs. Caldershaw's glass

opty in her head when you spoke to her?"

"Yes, it was. And remember please, that I never knew—as it appears from your ingenious theory—that the secret was hidden in that eye. I came at half past four and went into the back room, where I talked with Anne. I related to her what I had discovered, and asked her to tell me where the diamonds were. She said she did not know."

"She did not know," I echoed in utter astonishment.

"So she said. She declared that Uncle Gabriel had given her a cipher, in which he had concealed the whereabouts of the diamonds. Anne could not read it herself, so she had no idea where the jewels were."

"Did you ask her for the cipher?"

"Yes, I did. She refused to give it to me."

"On what grounds?"

Gertrude grew red and looked nervously into the fire. "I may as well be quite frank," she said, with an outburst of candor. "Anne really did wish me to marry her nephew, and said she would give me the cipher if I promised to marry Joseph. I refused, and then—"

"Well, what then?" I asked impatiently, and indignant at the plot between the dead woman and the gardener to force Miss Monk into unwilling matrimony.

"Then I heard a voice in the shop calling for Mrs. Caldershaw. She went away, and shortly afterward returned to ask me to leave at once. There was someone who wished to speak to her, and she did not wish me to meet this person. Therefore she asked me to leave at once."

Continued on Page Nine.

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