

THREE miles at least of the dusty road still lay between Berrien and the hotel. Even now, he knew the guests must be assembled for luncheon in the cool dining room; he would have been particularly grateful for a pair of wings.

It was his first day in Mountainville. How was he to know that, though Mountainville's mornings are always refreshingly cool, its midday hours are as insufferably hot? And how was he to know that Mountainville's roads are of a strangely elastic kind that double in length the moment one turns about for home?

Now, as it chanced, at this spot there was a little lane which led from the highway up over the brow of the hill through a deliciously green wood, and after the endless stretch of dusty road it was so invitingly cool to Berrien's eyes. Besides, he knew that somewhere to the eastward was another highway which also led back to the village; the lane must lead to that; and, as it could be no longer or hotter or dustier than the road he was on, he might as well go that way. He would try it.

And that was how the trouble began. For 10 minutes' walk up the lane brought the young man abruptly into a wide clearing, in the center of which stood a handsome gray stone villa, with well kept lawns and shady walks and cozy summer houses all around it. Obviously he had entered one of the neighborhood's fine estates through its rear entrance, and the only thing to do was to retrace his steps.

Not 20 yards from where he stood, however, a young girl and a boy were knocking a ball about a tennis court. And even as Berrien's glance took in the scene the girl espied him and apparently imparted the information to the boy. Both dropped their rackets and ran toward the intruder, who expected to be ordered from the premises without further ado.

"So you are here!" exclaimed the girl, breathlessly. "How did you ever get here so soon?"

If Berrien had been disturbed a moment since by the knowledge of his intrusion the warmth of this welcome was more embarrassing still. Some one was expected, and he was mistaken for him; that was evident. So, with as much coolness as he could muster, he removed his hat and said he feared there was some mistake; that he was sure he was not the person they supposed him to be, and that, with their permission, he would now retire from what he perceived was private property. All of which explanation fell upon deaf ears.

"Oh, we know you are, all right," explained the youth, with perfect conviction. "You are the detective. But since it was only three hours ago that we telephoned to your superintendent, we did not expect you here so soon. You made good time."

So that was it. Mr. George Berrien, known within a small horizon as a novelist and magazine writer, was mistaken by these young people for a member of some detective force. It was an honor his modesty did not permit him to accept. With some show of dignity, as well as of impatience, he declared he was merely a gentleman from New York spending a short vacation in Mountainville. The explanation produced no more impression than the former one had done.

"Of course, of course," said the boy, indignantly; "we understand." And again he seemed perfectly satisfied with his remarkable penetration. And so did the girl.

"I am sure you must be a splendid detective," said she, with some admiration. "You said about being a gentleman from New York just as though it were true. The superintendent said he would send one of his best men, and I see he has kept his word. I do love detective stories; you must tell us some true ones after you have found it."

"Found what?" gasped Berrien.

"Oh, come!" said the boy, impatiently; "are you going to keep that up all afternoon? You carry your little comedy too far. You must know as well as I do that I am Mr. William Witherton, and that this is my sister, Beatrice. There is no earthly use masquerading before us. Keep that trick where it will be of more use to you. What is your name?"

Some contrary fate clearly controlled the situation. Berrien struggled helplessly in its spell for an avenue of escape. If the earth had opened at his feet—but he knew there was no hope for that. He was not one gifted with that agility of thought which is ready for every emergency; his life had not been of the kind to train him thus. He felt like a fly in the coils of a spider's web; each effort to extricate himself but served to enmesh him more hopelessly, till he had not even the presence of mind to take exception to the boy's cool impertinence. Meekly enough he called them his name, and with a forced attempt to be facetious said he hoped that it pleased them.

"Oh, the name is good enough," said Mr. Witherton. "I have heard it before somewhere—I can't remember where. No matter about that. I was going to say, we told the superintendent all about it, and he, of course, told you, so you know as much about the business as we do and had better get right to work."

"But I tell you," began Berrien, trying one last forlorn protest. "I don't blame you," interrupted the girl. "You must not mind him, he is young. I know that you wish to do the work in your own way and without any orders from Will or advice from me. Tell us what you want us to do to help you and we will do it. And the two tormentors watched their victim expectantly, which only made

the latter more uncomfortable. The girl came to the scene again. "The superintendent said we were to tell you all about it, more fully than we told him over the telephone," said she, regarding with some doubt the puzzled look before her. "I suppose that is what you want now. Well, it was simply this. Last night we went to the dance at the country club and I wore it there, you know. When we got home I was too tired to return it to the safe, so I just left it on my bureau till this morning. It was there when I awoke, but I was a little late for breakfast—"

"You always are," said the brother, cheerfully. "I did not have time to put it away then, it slipped it down the stairs. The drawers and went down stairs. That is the whole story. And now, who do you suppose took it?"

The unwilling audience heaved a sigh of relief. All through the brief recital he had been ready to take to his heels; it was a fine thing indeed to stand here and listen to a story not intended for his ears! But it was not so bad, then, after all. There had merely been something stolen, and there was no particular harm in his knowing it. He felt a trifle less than contemptible. But as to who had taken it—whatsoever "it" the missing article might be—he could, of course, offer not the slightest explanation. If they had told him what they had, but they had studiously refrained from doing that; and all he knew was that it was something that a young woman could wear to a dance and that would fit into a bureau drawer, which was not sufficient information to warrant a professional opinion. Berrien suspected that he was looking more foolish than ever, and since he had not the slightest idea what a genuine sleuth would say or do under the circumstances he gathered his wits for one more attempt to break through the web. It was not to be. Miss Beatrice drew him deeper into the meshes.

"How stupid of me!" she said. "Of course the next thing you want to do is to question the servants and examine the room; that is the way they always do in the stories. You detectives are so clever!"

And solemnly she led the way across the lawn and into the house. Into the cool library they went, the girl and her captives and the unheeding younger brother, and immediately the inquisition began.

"House keeper, maids, stablemen, gardeners, fiddlers, all of which were asked what they knew—which was nothing. But they colorated and left no ground for suspicion against any of their number. To Berrien, still superlatively uncomfortable, but beginning to feel a growing interest in the case, it was not long before the girl and the boy had no more to say here. With more hope he followed his guides up the stairs.

The girl opened a door and the three passed into the chamber. It was large and airy and tastefully furnished and decorated. Two French windows opened on the roof of the veranda, and midway between them stood the bureau from which "it" had been taken not four hours ago. But the girl was not there. Where was she here? Berrien glanced shamefully around the room and walked to the window. And then spontaneously there came into his mind an idea—a real detective idea, worthy of any of the famous ones of mystery and fiction. An active man might climb to that veranda roof by the help of one of the supporting pillars, and once there, what was to prevent him from making a dash for the roof and the low window and taking whatever he wanted. This could easily have been done while the family was at breakfast. Another and more careful glance around the room, and behold! there were clear marks of a heavy boot on the dusty tin. Berrien's triumph was complete.

"What do you think now?" asked Miss Beatrice.

"I think that the thief climbed to the roof and hid in the room through the window. Note the foot marks in evidence; they were made by some one."

"They certainly were," said the boy, serenely. "By the tinmith yesterday morning I saw a man with a hammer on him if I were you. And he grinned provokingly at Berrien's complete discomfiture.

"You cannot think of anything else?" asked the girl, eagerly, but without forget. It was evident that the last article was exceedingly dear to her and that she was exceedingly anxious to recover it.

But Berrien could think of nothing else. And his abortive triumph being over, he was once again only a man on escape. He would go straight back to the hotel; he would pack his effects; he would board the first train that left the Mountainville depot, without bothering to question whether it was found. He had been a good deal of time over and led the way down the stairs and out across the lawn.

"I knew you would say that," said Miss Beatrice. "That is the way they do it. You say you are a detective, and you know what to do. And I do hope you will get it back; it was the last thing poor papa gave me. I am sure you will."

"You must," remarked the young gentleman, "remember that I will add a hundred dollars to the reward. Meanwhile take this." And he thrust into Berrien's outraged but helpless hand a new five dollar bill.

"It is luncheon time, too," added Miss Beatrice, thoughtfully. "Go around to the back of the house and tell Mrs. Briggs to give you something to eat. And be sure to advise us just as soon as you have any news."

Berrien agreed to fulfill the latter obligation, but declined the thoughtful "report" as well as the "bonus." He walked away in the direction of the lane which had led him into all this trouble, when the boy stopped him.

"By the way, I recall now where I have heard your name," he said, "and that is in the paper. You are General Townsend's nephew. He's a reporter or story writer or some old thing. I suppose you are not he?" he added, facetiously.

"That is who I am," replied Berrien, gravely. And they all laughed at the prospect of an idea.

"Oh, just imagine!" cried Beatrice. "Dear, dignified General Townsend! And she and her brother laughed some more. "But I never knew detectives were so jolly," she said. "I am sure you would get it back, and you are very nice for a detective."

Berrien resumed his journey in a strange frame of mind. He made no attempt to conceal a disconcerting fact, that he had acted a dishonorable if not a fraudulent part. And being burdened with a sensitive nature, he could not fail to regard himself with a certain contempt. But he still retained some little of that interest which he felt for things mysterious, and he was not to be regarded as a person who had drawn him so neatly into the net, though this was by no means clear in his mind. So, as he trudged along, he told himself that he need not say such a particular thing as that he was such a particular person as Mountainville or all. Where else were such blue skies, such green hills, such merry brooks? He noted even that the dust of the road was not disagreeable.

He had thought of a horse, ago, and couldn't he get back in the dingy city digging short stories out of his over-

worked imagination soon enough anyway? Well, there was a hurry away! Besides, there was another aspect. Why could not he do this work as well as a professional sleuth? There was Poe, who was only a literary man like himself. What Poe could do why not Berrien? Why not, indeed? He asked himself as he walked into the corridor of the hotel. And so, since a man who battles with his conscience always comes forth victorious, our friend's trunk remained unpacked that day.

The morning unfolded the next morning. Berrien had thought over the case during the afternoon and evening; he had dreamed about it through the night. All of which mental energy produced no result, much to the young man's surprise. But he was not entirely discouraged. Possibly he had not examined the premises with sufficient care, or had not listened closely enough to Miss Witherton's story. For instance, it would help considerably if he could learn precisely what it was he was expected to find. His data were not complete, he believed.

This was a logical excuse. So immediately after breakfast he set off down the dusty road which led to the seductive lane and the gray stone villa at the end of it.

Miss Beatrice and the insufferable brother were again on the tennis court. The morning was bright and hot, and the girl's hair and her cheeks were flushed from the exercise, and Berrien could not be sorry that he had won that argument with his conscience. She dropped her racket and sat down on the grass, and the boy sat beside her. Berrien sat himself on her feet.

"Have you any news?" was of course the first question.

"No-o, not yet. In fact, it is a puzzling case, a very puzzling case, indeed, Miss Witherton."

"Really? Well, I have a clue," rejoined the girl with meek enthusiasm. "I told you I could help you. It is just this. Will had one of his friends here, and he left yesterday morning immediately after breakfast. You must note that he remained in front of the house for some minutes while Will went around looking for a lady in a carriage. Now, why could he not have climbed up to my room and down again, as you suggested yesterday, before Will got back?"

"Why not?" echoed the detective, and added as an afterthought, "Have you reason to believe that this lady would have any particular use for it?"

"Why, no. What use could he himself have for it? But he could sell it, couldn't he?" demanded the girl, regarding the detective suspiciously. "Why do you ask such foolish questions?"

Berrien accepted the reproach meekly, as he was compelled to do, only venturing to ask who this suspect might be. And immediately he heard the name he had been waiting for. It was not at all cool, supposed he would. It was growing black in the lane, but he regarded to the way of his feet. There was an indescribable exhilaration in his heart which left him little care for real things. Once, however, he was sure he saw a shadowy form in front of him down the lane; but it was only a shadow, and he did not care. But out on the main road, where the gloom was not as yet so deep, he saw it was a man who marched ahead of him, and the slovenly gentleman at that. So the slovenly gentleman had been up the lane. Immediately Berrien's mind returned to its everyday balance.

So the slovenly gentleman had been up the lane! Now, that was a place where no one would be at that hour of the day who had not particular business there. What reason or night could the slovenly gentleman have for walking there? No honest one, surely. Here at last was something suspicious; here was a suspicious character. And as in all Mountainville and its neighboring country Berrien had found none other there, could he be far wrong in supposing that this one suspicious character was the thief for whom he was supposed to be searching?

A few minutes before he had felt a great kindness toward all the world; it was now all centered in the man who had been seen in the twilight. He felt grateful to him; he was sorry for his churlish behavior of the day before. He hurried his steps and caught up to him; he walked beside him and talked of the pleasant evening and the beautiful country. The dim light of the little roadhouse tinted the darkness; he asked him in to drink.

He was a sullen fellow, this slovenly gentleman. He might have feared that Berrien would empty a vial of poison into his glass, so intensely did he watch his every movement. The young man noted this, but was not to be baffled by such boorishness. He put his hand into his pocket by chance and felt there the crisp new bill which young Mr. Berrien had given him his first day on the case. In an instant he pressed it into the hand of the slovenly gentleman, with the kind suggestion that he expend it for cigars. The man seemed embarrassed and Berrien watched across the room where the slovenly gentleman was to light his own cigar. And lo! when he turned around the man had vanished like a figure in a dream.

Miss Beatrice and the boy were again on the veranda. And Berrien again sat himself at her feet. The girl was dressed in no tennis costume now, and Berrien, whose tastes were not athletic, was seated with her, and he knew instinctively that the change was not in the gown alone; she might romp with the boys in the morning, but he knew she would not be less quick to feel the spell of the summer twilight.

Far away the last sunlight lay on the mountain tops. The tiny string of river grew dull and gray. A light mist spread low down over the lawns and the woods. Crickets and katydids joined in their evening chorus, and the world was solemnly still.

"Have you—have you discovered anything?" asked Beatrice, in a low voice. "No-o," said the man, "I have not. No-o, I am sorry—but does it matter much at a time like this? Look at the light on those mountain tops, and the purple shade below; and the river, and the evening star. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes," said the girl, dreamily. "I have never seen it so beautiful before. It is so beautiful, and I have never grown tired of it; and have always felt the same."

"Of course," said the man. "Who has not?"

But, you, you, a police—I should say a detective, aren't you?" she asked. "She did not finish, and Berrien had nothing to say. The two sat in silence for many minutes. The light faded from the far peaks, and the world grew very gray. A strange and a thousand times, and have always felt the same."

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was doing there, and then would come the grand climax as he had imagined it last night.

So the detective breakfasted in some haste and started off in blithe spirits. There was, it is true, a letter from his uncle, the general, which was suggestive of trouble to come. The old gentleman would arrive in Mountainville that afternoon, and would stop with some friends over Sunday. He would look up his nephew at the hotel as soon after his arrival as possible. The nephew trusted sincerely that he would be through with his present business before that time, and that nothing would ever transpire to make his pompous old relative acquainted with it. But all this he forgot as he cleared his destination.

He walked up the familiar lane, and as he had planned took his station behind a thick clump of bushes, which gave him a view some distance down the lane itself as well as over the lawn and driveway and the front of the broad gray house. He could not have found a better point of observation, and he congratulated himself upon his idea. He settled himself to wait.

It was easy enough and comfortable enough at first; but as the early hours wore away his patience went with them and no slovenly gentleman appeared. Could the fellow disappoint him after he had planned everything so neatly? He could not believe this, though it did dawn upon him that he had made the plans without considering at all those of his adversary.

He amused himself watching the house. He saw Beatrice and the insufferable brother. He saw the girl glance several times in the direction of the lane and wondered what she could be examining in that quarter. The morning tennis was ended and Berrien, looking at his watch, saw that it was late. He had been monotonous by the time. It became well nigh unbearable as the afternoon wore on. But he would stay right there till night if necessary. He was privileged to resign the task and retire to the hotel, but he never he pleased, but he did not please to retreat. As for advancing upon the house and Miss Beatrice, that could not be done till he had something to show. He had found the slovenly gentleman, in fact. So the afternoon went.

He saw Mr. Will drive off alone in a light carriage. He saw Beatrice receive some girl friends on the veranda; they, too, drove away at last, and the girl, with another glance toward the lane, again went inside. And Berrien saw no more of any of them. The sun was very low now; it was time for dinner; it would soon be dark. The detective began to lose his determination as a man will who is tired and hungry. He was beaten again, as usual; he was always being beaten, he told himself, and the only thing to do was to give it up and go back to the hotel and to New York, where Miss Witherton would never hear of him again.

But what was this? There was a rustling of the underbrush and a man moved through the bushes not ten feet from him. It was the slovenly gentleman, and he was throwing his whole heart and soul into the process of cursing some one. And so like were the words of this exhortation to those of the slovenly gentleman, that he understood in Berrien's own mind that he understood that the man was the slovenly gentleman. He had had a day's experience similar to his own. He too had been waiting behind a bush for some one—an associate in crime, presumably. The hour had come.

He could have treated the gentleman courteously in the morning and even with some civility in the afternoon, but that was over now. He had been kept waiting unreasonably long; he would drag him before Miss Witherton with as little pity as the Caesars led their captives at their chariot wheels down the Appian way. He sprang from his cover and grasped the slovenly one by the back of the neck.

And then there was a surprise for Berrien. The man had impressed him as a remnant, slightly damaged by fire or water. He was quickly disillusioned. With an agile twist the captive wrenched himself free and turned upon his pursuer. And as he saw the thought of a struggle had never entered the latter's head, he was at a loss to decide what to do.

He was strong enough muscularly. But the same lack of training which had placed him at a disadvantage on this very spot the day of his first visit served him the same turn now. If the slovenly gentleman had accorded him

the climactic warning, "on guard!" it step on the veranda and a measured, dignified tramp, and he knew them both. Young Mr. Witherton and General Townsend came into the hall, and both paused in amazement at the threshold of the room.

"In the name of creation what is it all about, George?" demanded the general.

"It's—it's all about a necklace some one stole from Miss Witherton's room, I believe," said Berrien, ruefully. "When I first came here they thought I was the detective come to look for it; now the detective has come, and he thinks I am the thief, and what I think I—I don't know—I don't know."

There was something of hopelessness and of bitterness in his voice. The situation was beyond the pale of the serious. The general glanced from the detective with his leveled revolver to the prisoner with his handcuffs and disreputable appearance. He sank down in a chair and laughed and laughed, as only a dignified man can laugh when he targets to be dignified. And Mr. William brayed uproariously. Beatrice laughed, too, but a trifle nervously. And the only thing for Berrien to do was to join the chorus—without much mirth. The detective alone remained unmoved.

"I hate to interrupt your pleasure," said Berrien with scathing sarcasm, "but when you finish laughing will you be kind enough to tell the fellow I am not a thief?"

"That is just what I failed to tell you and you wouldn't let me. No one stole it. I found it only this afternoon. You see, the detective has been a just a detective. I thought I put it in; I found it by chance in another one. I—I don't see how it happened, I'm sure."

And she unclasped from about her neck a string of pearls with a beautiful diamond pendant and handed it to the detective. He was embarrassed; he was not inclined to lose his reward and his prisoner so easily. But when a reference to his note book had made it plain that this was beyond doubt the article that was detailed to recover, he yielded ungraciously.

The handcuffs came off and the revolver disappeared and the detective himself departed, mumbling something about a funny mistake all around, the first he had ever made. In fact, the general neglected not the opportunity to deliver a brief sermon on the foolishness of playing with edged tools, then he, too, followed by Mr. Will, left the room to pay his respects to Mrs. Witherton, Beatrice and Berrien remained alone.

The girl toyed with the pearls of her necklace. She might have been counting them, but Berrien knew she was not. He noted anxiously a queer little twitch at the corner of her mouth; he thought it represented a just remark. But he was wrong; it was mirth. She dropped into a chair, even as the general had done, and laughed as heartily, but more musically and with less jar to the young man's sensibilities. It was not, he reached down and took the necklace, must be "nice" also in his true character. He could do it, if only the argument were an impersonal one and if only the judge were not possessed of such arbitrary powers.

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