Under the Rose

Passages from the Case-Book of Inspector FINNEY VALENTINE, Investigator Extraordinary

THE DEUCE OF DIAMONDS

By FREDERIC REDDALE

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A GENTLE-FACED, white-haired old lady followed an immaculately engraved card, on which was inscribed "Mrs. Harvey Benson," into Finney Valentine's sanctum in the Flat-iron building.

"I am entirely at your service, Mrs.—er—Benson," said the great investigator, always courtly and considerate toward the uneasy sex "How may I serve you?" For our student of men, women and manners realized that to put a caller at his or her ease was the surest way to ensure a complete and unembarrassed unburdening of the mind—in other and more colloquial words, to find out "what ailed them."

"We—I—am in great trouble," said Mrs. Benson, all a-flutter with the experience, unusual with one of New York's elect, of consulting a "common detective." Indeed, the fact that she—Mrs. Harvey Benson—had been forced to thus demean herself, was enough to account for her agitation.

"Just think of me as your doctor or your dentist," said Valentine. "I am—or I hope to be—merely your adviser—for I assume that you need or want my advice. And I may add that whatever you say to me, Mrs. Benson, goes no further." These observations the great detective used simply to set the dear old lady at her ease.

"W-e-l-l, Mr. Valentine," said the dear old lady aforesaid, somewhat reassured by his words, "I can assure you that it took me some time to make up my mind to consult you. And—er—I thought it would be more difficult."

"Our profession," said Valentine, sententiously, "is to help people in distress—especially those who feel that they cannot use the ordinary channels. Am I right in supposing that you, my dear lady, are in that position?"

Mrs. Benson beamed on Finney Valentine at these words, and fairly "snuggled down," to use a familiar phrase, as though he were one of the family, like a tame pussy cat.

"Let me tell you all about it," she said, "since you are so kind. I feel that I can talk to you like—oh, like my own son or my dear husband, now dead and gone."

Finney Valentine bowed—what man would not?—at this almost childlike evidence of confidence. Meantime Mrs. Harvey Benson gathered herself together for her narrative. She was going to try to be logical—a very rare accomplishment for her sex and age.

"Two years ago, Mr. Valentine," she began, "my dear son Martin left home to seek his fortune in the west. The good Lord knows there was no need—his father had left plenty—but Martin was possessed with the idea that he must prove himself able to stand on his own feet—that was the way he put it.

"W-e-l-l, he left me, and for two or three months he wrote me regularly—now from the coast, then from Montana, then from Alaska, and finally from a place somewhere in Minnesota. After that—well, there was nothing after that! Martin seems to have disappeared! You may guess how I worried—he was all I had left! Here a tiny square of cambric came into requisition. Valentine waited patiently.

"W-e-l-l,"—the peculiarly drawled interjection was characteristic, it seemed—"after the last one from Warimoo, in Minnesota, Martin's letters stopped. That was nearly two years ago.

"One day last March I had been driven downtown doing some shopping. After leaving Beeman's I had taken my place in the coupe—telling Parkes—he's our coachman, you know—'home,' when this same Parkes—he's been with us for years—came to the door of the coupe, saying:

"'Here he is, Mrs. Benson—I've caught him, begging your pardon!' And without a word of apology or of permission on my part he opened the door and half pushed a man into the coupe! 'Get in, Mr. Martin, sir,' he said, slammed the door, jumped on the box, and drove off uptown.

"At first glimpse, Mr. Valentine, I thought the man was my dear boy, Martin. If it wasn't my son himself it was his perfect double—height, build, features, hair, eyes, coloring—only he looked as if he had been very ill or suffering. But he didn't seem to know me, although he was pleased and good-mannered. He smiled in the very way I knew he ought to smile, but—well, I was flustered that I could only sit and gasp. Sure enough, it was my own boy, Martin, and yet—

"W-e-l-l, Mr. Valentine, we got home, and all the servants seemed to recognize him as their young master. He had been away, you will remember, more than two years, wandering all over creation; he was browner, broader, bigger, somehow, and yet the image of my boy. What could I do but take him to my heart? Still, he sort of held me at arms' length, with a curious look in his eyes, half doubting, half suspicious. When it came to sending him to his room he seemed all at sea—didn't know his way about the house where his father and I had lived for 20 years and where he'd spent his vacations at Christmas and Easter. But I will say that he was awfully nice—nicer than I ever thought Martin could be.

"Of course, picking him up on the street as we did, he had no clothes but what he stood up in. 'Pray excuse my appearance,' he said; 'in a day or two, no doubt, my things will arrive.' Before we went in to dinner I introduced him to my niece, Sylvia Gallaway, and I'm bound to say his manners were irreproachable. They'd never met before, you know, and I could see that he and Sylvia were at once impressed with each other. But, to cut a long story short—the thing's been going on for three months now, Mr. Valentine—I'm convinced that this man, whoever he is, and although he is the exact image of my son, Martin Benson, is not my Martin. True, he favors him in every respect—face, voice, manner and carriage—but you cannot deceive a mother's heart, you know."

Finney Valentine almost lost his head over this curious narrative. It was foreign to anything that had ever come into his varied experience.

"You say the servants all recognize this man as your son?" he queried.

"Every one," said Mrs. Benson, "and they have been with us for years—Parkes in particular."

"And your niece?"

"She never met him until three months ago. She's not really my niece, you know, only the daughter of a half-sister. But—and here's the funny part of it—I'd always hoped that Martin, my Martin, you understand, would fall in love with Sylvia. Well, that's exactly what has happened; the new man—I can't really call him my son—has completely bewitched Sylvia, and they are as good as engaged!"

"The impudent impostor!" exclaimed Finney Valentine.

"But you must not call him that," quickly interposed Mrs. Benson. "He's really nothing of the kind."

"How's that?" queried Valentine.

"W-e-l-l, it seems that he doesn't know exactly who he is! He claims that he has lost his memory—when or where he doesn't pretend to say—but of one thing we may be sure—the man's a gentleman. Of course it wasn't his fault that Parkes seized him on the sidewalk in front of Beeman's and forced him into my carriage. Parkes insists that he is his young master, Martin Benson, Jr., as do all the other servants. Sylvia takes him at his face value—which is simply nothing. If I say he is my son, Martin Benson, that settles it. But himself, he doesn't know, consequently the young man, whoever he is, is no impostor."

"I should like to speak with Parkes," said Valentine.

"I'll send him here this afternoon," promised Mrs. Benson. "I understand the reason; you may question him freely."

Finney bowed. "And after that," he went on, "I shall probably have to interview the young man himself."

"Oh, I'm sure Martin wouldn't mind," came the quick answer. "You see we have fallen into the habit of calling him Martin, although he says he doesn't believe that's his real name or identity. But you won't be cross or harsh, Mr. Valentine? Promise me," begged the old lady.

"On the contrary," said the inspector, "our one hope of arriving at the truth is to coax it from him by gentle means. And, by the way, Mrs. Benson, I suppose you have a photograph of your son—the real Martin Benson, I mean? Yes? Then please let Parkes bring it when he comes."

The old coachman must have started right back after driving home his mistress. When he presented himself at Valentine's office his first act was to hand over a square envelope, which the former laid to one side. Then he led the old servitor to talking about his finding of the young master.

"'Twas this way sor; I had bin waitin' for th' mistress, an' had just put her in th' coopay whin I sees comin' down th' strate th' very man we'd all bin longin' t' meet. 'Course he was a bit thin about th' gills, an' pale, an' his close was shabby; but 'twas th' la-ad himself, glory be! Afore he cud get away I'd grabbed him be th' ar-rm, an' pushed him inside th' coopay; then I whips up th' hosses for home. Was I sure? Now what sort uv a question do that be? 'Coorse I was sure! Didn't I tache him t' drive his first powny? Sure!"

And old Parkes grew redder than ever in the face at this fool question. So Valentine, seeing that he was hopeless, let him go after writing a brief note to "Martin Benson, Esq.," requesting a call at his earliest convenience "to discuss a matter in which we are both interested."

When Parkes had gone clumping down the tiled corridor Valentine took up the photograph, which was that of a rather good-looking and well-set-up youngster of about four-and-twenty, with clean-shaven features and a devil-may-care look about the eyes.

Valentine's boast was that he never forgot a face, and the instant he set eyes on the photo he recognized it as representing some one whom he had previously met or seen. But where? After a few moments' hard thinking he suddenly took down a huge scrap-book and rapidly turned its leaves. With a muttered "I thought so!" Valentine laid the likeness of Martin Benson alongside a printed handbill which had been pasted in the volume before him and which bore in its center a hastily executed "half-tone" portrait. The pictures were identical; the most casual observer would have said that both represented the same man. The handbill was an ordinary circular issued by the chief of police in Warimoo, Minn. It was headed in startling black letters: "Murder—Wanted—Five Hundred Dollars Reward," and after describing the physical characteristics of a certain fugitive, went on to state that the sheriff of Candee county would pay the sum named for the arrest of William, alias "Billy" Merwin, who was "wanted" for the wilful murder of an aged citizen named Jacob Windell on such and such a night!

Here was as pretty a puzzle as one could wish! Could it be that the "Billy" Merwin who was wanted and Martin Benson, the young millionaire, were one and the same person? If not, were there two distinct personalities involved? And if so, which one of the "doubles" was being sought for by the Warimoo chief of police?

Valentine sat down and indited a telegram to the official in question, asking for fuller information, and adding "have reason suspect man wanted now in New York." A reply might be expected that same afternoon.

"I CANNOT TELL YOU MY NAME OR WHO OR WHAT I AM, OR WHERE I CAME FROM"

When the putative Martin Benson presented himself immediately after luncheon, the inspector was impressed by his resemblance to the photograph sent by Mrs. Benson, yet by the young fellow's own confession he was not her son. This was the gist of his story, "boiled down" from the answers to Valentine's searching questions:

"I cannot tell you my name or what or who I am or where I came from. This is all I can remember: A few days before old Parkes bottonholed me on Broadway and pushed me into Mrs. Benson's coupe, I had come to myself in a box car somewhere uptown bordering the Hudson river. I was dirty, unshaven, and hungry. To the best of my knowledge I had never been in New York before. I crawled out of the freight car, stumbled down the track, and inquired at a combined boat house and cheap restaurant where I was. Then for the first time I learned that I was in this city. Searching my clothes—which were not ragged or worn—merely dirty—I found a few dollars in bills and silver. Right there I bought something to eat, had a bath, brushed my clothes, walked across town according to directions, got a shave and put up at a cheap hotel for the night. Every moment I hoped that my identity would come back to me. Oh, I ought to have told you that when the barber came to trim my hair he found a place where the hair was matted with dried blood around some sort of a cut or bruise. I wandered all over the city during those few days and nights, but everything was new. I was homeless and nameless! So, you see, when some one identified me, called me by name, and took me to a real home, I was all ready for adoption. My name might be Martin Benson, though the sound thereof awoke not a single responsive memory. But as the days and weeks went by, although Mrs. Benson was kindness itself, and really wanted to recognize me as her own boy, I became convinced that old Parkes had made an ass of himself and misled us all. So I told them all how it was with me, and admitted that to the best of my belief I could be no kin of the Benson family. Still, they begged me to stay on until the mystery was cleared up."

Valentine's final question was, "In your clothes did you find nothing—no papers, watch, trinkets, or trifling personal belongings that suggested anything to your dead memory?"

"Not a thing—neither watch, keys, papers, wallet, or knife—only this curious scrap. From his vest pocket the Man-Without-a-Memory produced the torn half of a playing card—the deuce of diamonds. Across the white space above the "pip" was written clearly, as with an indelible pencil the name "Roby Owen."

"And does that name mean nothing to you?" queried Valentine.

"Not a blessed thing!" confessed the other with a shamefaced laugh. "Maybe I am Roby Owen—but I can't tell—I don't think so—why, I cannot say. Of course," he went on, "you can see that I've had some education; I know books; questions of the day, for instance, interest me; but about myself I'm all in the dark. Sometimes my head feels as if it would crack when I get to thinking—just as if there was something inside there just ready to burst out."

Valentine nodded. "Of course there's an answer to all this," he said, "but we must go carefully to work. Recollection may come to you any moment. Meanwhile you just leave the matter in my hands. It'll go hard if we can't find the end of the tangle."

As the young man went out a telegraph messenger came in bearing the answer from Warimoo—and incidentally another surprise. This is the way it read:

"Billy Merwin not wanted. Party assaulted recovered; declines to prosecute."

That very night Finney Valentine took train for the west; somehow he felt sure that the key to the Benson-Merwin Roby-Owen mystery lay in or around that little Minnesota town. And so it proved.

On going straight to the chief of police and introducing himself he learned that William or "Billy" Merwin had been a native of the place, where his father had amassed a fortune in lumber. Billy had been educated in college, but just before graduating the elder Merwin died suddenly, leaving his money to his only son William, but in the care of a trustee named Jacob Windell, who had been the father's partner. But old Windell was crooked—no doubt of that, said the narrator, though no one had ever caught him with the goods.

Young Billy Merwin, after the funeral, wished to go back to college and finish his senior year, but first he wanted to know where he stood financially, and urged Windell to make some sort of a settlement. The trustee put him off on one pretext or another till the hot-headed youngster took to making threats. One night, after dark, Billy went to Jacob Windell's house. Hot words ensued; and it was inferred that in the heat of passion the young man struck the elder and fled, leaving behind him, as he supposed, a corpse. That's what everyone else thought at first, and a warrant was issued for the runaway; also the reward bills were printed and distributed.

But old Jacob pulled through after all, and was still active about his affairs. When he heard what the police had done he swore that Billy had never touched him! So there you were.

Valentine listened to all this very gravely. Then he inquired:

"Do you know anyone named Roby Owen?"

"Sure!" was the answer, "Billy and Roby were chums."

"Then perhaps you can tell me what this means?" queried Valentine, showing the torn deuce of diamonds.

"No, I can't; but no doubt Roby can," said the chief, handing back the bit of pasteboard. "I'll call him." And in response to a telephone message there presently slouched into the office a typical specimen of the village "sport." Roby Owen quickly identified the card and his own signature—it was half of an I. O. U. he had given to Billy Merwin for losses at poker and small sums loaned at various times.

Now all this was very satisfactory to Valentine so far as proving the identity of Mrs. Benson's protege went. But what about her own son? At a venture he showed the chief and Roby Owen that photograph of Martin Benson, saying:

"Do you know who that is?"

"I do," said the chief, and "Cert!" said Owen. "But first," said the chief, "I'll tell you who it isn't! It isn't Billy Merwin! No sir! Looks like him, of course. But that's young Martin—him and Billy was doubles. Unless you stood 'em up side by side, or knew the little peculiarities of each you couldn't tell 'em apart. Lots o' people been fooled that way round here. But that's Martin, all right."

"Martin who?" queried Valentine.

"Jest Martin—that's all the name he ever gave."

"What became of him? Is he here now?"

The Warimoo chief shook his head sorrowfully, implying the worst.

"Let me tell you how it was," he went on: "This Martin boy was a high-roller and a free spender. He had a powerful touring car in which he'd go tearing over the roads like the fiend possessed. Sometimes he'd get Billy to go along—down to St. Paul, for instance—and then they'd have lots o' fun on account of their wonderful resemblance to each other. Well, sir, about the time Billy Merwin skedaddled, this Martin boy vanished also. At first we thought they'd gone off together. But a month ago, when the ice went out of th' river here, some boys fishing off th' highway bridge spotted a motor car bottom up in ten feet o' water. When th' car was raised all that was left of Martin was only fit to bury. Oh, yes, it was Martin all right."

Valentine's logical mind was busy piecing together the bits of the puzzle. All stood out clearly to him now. After striking down old Windell and leaving him for dead, Billy Merwin had probably tried for a quick getaway. Perhaps he had taken Martin into his confidence; perhaps not. Any way it was more than probable that the fugitive had entered the motor and that Martin had "opened her up wide" as was his habit. In the darkness he must have crashed into the bridge masonry, throwing Merwin out insensible, while the man at the wheel went to his death in the icy river, his body pinned under the heavy car.

Dazed by the blow on his head—Valentine recalled the story of the scar—and robbed of his memory, Billy Merwin had probably wandered back to town and in the railroad yard crawled into a friendly freight car, from whence he emerged perhaps a week later in New York, half-starved, dazed and very hungry.

The summary pleased the great elucidator, but to make sure he now acquainted the chief with all the facts that had come to him from Mrs. Benson, Parkes, and the Man-Without-a-Memory.

"No doubt you are right about Martin Benson," Valentine ended. "It will pretty nigh break his mother's heart, but she'll have to know the truth sometime, and I think she's half prepared for the worst.

"But what about the other one; am I justified in telling him who he is?"

"Here's how it shapes up to me," said the Warimoo chief. "The man who had that deuce of diamonds in his pocket with the half of Roby Owen's I. O. U. on it is the sure-enough Billy Merwin, for my money! You go back and hail him by that name and see if it don't work out as I say. You only need a word or two in these loss-of-memory cases anyway. And if that don't work, fetch him out here to me and I'll throw a scare into him that'll bring him to his senses!"

Finney Valentine went back east with the fateful deuce of diamonds in his pocket. The sound of his rightful name was enough to restore Billy Merwin to his identity; he was able to confirm the story of the deuce of diamonds and of his friendship with Martin Benson without prompting thereafter. Six months later, having come into his property, he and Sylvia Gallaway were married.

CHANTECLER IN A TRAGEDY

Work of a Chicken That "Ain't Got No Sense When He Gits Mad."

Certain Pittsburg sports, in observance of a time-honored custom, had prepared to celebrate Thanksgiving day with an old-fashioned cock fight, the scene of activities to be in Perrysville avenue. From far and near gathered the flower of the fighting fraternity and brought with them the flower of the game chickens in the land.

But the Humane society learned of the affair and promptly adjusted the lid.

A certain attorney looked forward to entering some of his imported silver duckwings in the lists and was a bit down in the mouth when the fight was called off. On Thanksgiving morning he met an old negro carrying a sack over his shoulder, and suspecting it contained a bird of blood royal, he accosted him and asked where he was going.

"Oh, I'se jest goin' down here in Perrysville street to give dis ole fowl o' mine some 'musement."

"But the fight has been called off. If you come up to my house I'll show you a real bird, and also how he'll clean up that squab you've got."

"All right, suh, I'll go along, but I sho' don't like to do it. Dis here bird's got a pow'ful bad temper ,and if he gits mad I can't hold 'im off dem chickens of yourn. He is suttenly one dang'us rooster when he gits riled."

"That's all right, you bring him along."

Uncle Davie gave the sack an affectionate touch and went with the attorney to his home. One of the finest in his pen was put in the pit with the mongrel, and in a few minutes one of the finest blooded fighting birds in this section perished in the lists.

Uncle Davie reached down, restored his warrior to the sack and turned to go.

"I sho' hates dat, suh, but dis ole chicken ain't go no sense when he gits mad."—Pittsburg Gazette-Times.

He Compromised.

The 30 passengers in the street car were sitting very quietly, as is sometimes the case, when the man with the loud voice on him remarked:

"I hope and trust everybody will have a good dinner today. Yes, I hope that even the convicts in prison will. I believe they do give them extra dinners on holidays. Am I right or wrong about it?"

All looked at him, but no one answered, and after the car had gone another block or two he rose up and went out to get off. He was followed by a man who demanded:

"What did you want to make such a crack as that for?"

"What is it?"

"Why, talking about convict dinners. And furthermore, you looked right at me, as if I had been there myself."

"But, my friend—"

"Oh, yes you did, and you want to go a little slow or you'll get into trouble. I want you to understand, sir, that while I got $60,000 of the bank's money I compromised for $45,000, and know nothing whatever about convicts' dinners!"

Might Help.

"Why don't you wear glasses, Mr. Jinx?"

"And why should I wear glasses, little man?"

"Ma says your wife is always throwing dust in your eyes."