

# TRAGIC DISAPPEARANCE

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Continued from

## SYNOPSIS.

Chapter I—Maj. Goddard makes unfortunate investments and loses almost entire fortune. His wife's actions at this time lead him to believe she married for money. She had been a poor milliner with whom he had become infatuated. She never allowed him to learn certain things connected with past life.

Chapter II—Arriving home from business Goddard learns his wife has left for city. Missing considerable sum of money from safe of which she knew leads him to conclude she means desertion. Telegram comes asking him to see her at Palace hotel in New York.

Chapter III—Mrs. Goddard formulates plan by which she and Goddard can come into fortune. She will go abroad, while abroad report will come back of her death, he will marry Jeanne who loves him but who has fatal heart trouble and will not live two years; on Jeanne's death she will prove false report of her own death. To this plan the major is brought to reluctantly consent.

Chapter IV—Mrs. Goddard returns to Lyndhurst, but before doing so secures a Mrs. Nolan to go abroad with her as maid and play important part in disappearance act.

Chapter V—Mrs. Nolan, according to arrangement, comes to Lyndhurst to apply for position of maid with Mrs. Goddard, and of course is accepted.

Chapter VI—Blanche is innocently drawn into plot by Mrs. Goddard who tells of foreboding that she will die abroad. Blanche is told that Goddard had loved her before meeting Mrs. Goddard, and Mrs. Goddard knowing of Blanche's affection asks her to marry him should she never return.

Chapter VII—Mrs. Goddard gives her husband London address where she can get letters (addressed to Mrs. Nolan), and gives him key to private box where he can get letters from her.

Chapter VIII—Major goes to boat with his wife, and learns of arrangements she has made for her own comfort on route. She will have the chief stateroom which is somewhat separate from the others. She points out closet both keys to which she has secured. She says if later there is anything he cannot understand, to "think of this closet and its two keys and the puzzle will be solved."

Chapter IX—The third day out Mrs. Goddard attracts attention of boat captain and appears deranged in mind. She says she is always seeing dead bodies floating by in the water.

Chapter X—On evening of eighth day a bad storm arises. At worst of the storm Mrs. Nolan is heard to scream at top of her voice. She points to the water indicating her mistress has jumped overboard. Mrs. Goddard is locked in the closet of her stateroom.

Chapter XI—On reaching Liverpool Mrs. Goddard emerges from closet and is landed in the hazy with the second-class passengers without arousing suspicion.

They saw little of the major that day. He remained in his room. Friends called to offer condolences and letters and telegrams of sympathy piled up on his desk in his study, but he saw no one nor opened any communication. The next day he went to the city, and there in a small hotel where he was unknown to any of the inmates he took up his abode.

He was as nearly insane as a man of sound mind can become. His existence became a routine of mental torture. He spent each day in walking through streets where he was not known. At night he would lie awake till his physical nature would refuse longer to bear the burden his wife had put upon him, and then his strong frame sank under the blessing of sleep.

He realized fully what she was expecting of him, and he hardly knew if he would be equal to carrying out her plans. At the expiration of the first week after the reception of the news a letter arrived in his private letter box on Sixth avenue. He was almost afraid to open it. It seemed like a communication from the dead—or worse, a command from hell. And when he had finally devoured it, and found that Jeanne and Mrs. Nolan were comfortably domiciled in a little furnished villa near Kensington Gardens and really enjoying life in perfect security from detection—even then, I say, he had no more hopeful horizon.

It was the sin of it all that ground his finer nature down into despair, and he was wise enough to know it. However, there was even in Jeanne's letter much of the potent charm which had been since his marriage his directing influence, and he read and re-read the graphic account of her adventures till the awful picture was stamped on his brain. She wrote often, and her epistles were always replete with good humor, her old vivacity and endearing expressions. In that way a month passed. He scarcely spent an hour out of each day at Lyndhurst. Often he went out on an afternoon train and took the next back to New York. The man who had charge of the private letter boxes stared at him curiously every time he came in and with quivering fingers unlocked his box.

The major began to disregard his dress; for his neckties were not carefully tied, nor his boots polished, nor his silk hat ironed. He no longer frequented the army of his old regiment, nor his club. He had no desire to meet men he knew.

It was after he had received a letter from Jeanne urging him not to deny any longer in the matter of missing Blanche his wife, owing to the great likelihood of the girl's death, suddenly that he bethought himself that he had neglected his ward very much, considering her solitude in his behalf. He knew the girl was thinking of him, for every time he saw his room at Lyndhurst he sensed a sense of her thoughtfulness in

fresh flowers cut in the conservatory by her own hands.

On this day, when he arrived at Lyndhurst, he went into the library. His father, who had been in his lifetime a distinguished surgeon, had left a good collection of valuable medical works. It was Jeanne's allusion to Blanche's critical condition that caused him to look up a description of her malady. "Aortic aneurism," he murmured, as he ran through the index of a big book. But the finding of the article on the subject, and the colored illustrations of the delicate organs on the point of bursting from the pressure of blood, sickened him.

"It is indeed fatal," he said. "She can't possibly live long, and if I only knew that she would be happier as my wife for the remainder of her life Jeanne might have her wish. It would make Jeanne happier, too, and perhaps she does deserve better luck than to be the wife of a poor man."

Had he been as suspicious and as observant as many detectives he might have noticed that the words "aortic aneurism" had been pressed into the surface of the paper across the text, as if some one had written them with a pencil on a piece of paper resting on the page. The formation of the letters resembled the handwriting of his wife, but he noticed none of these points, and closed the book.

Just then the footman brought in a small parcel and placed it on a table.

"What is that, James?" asked the major.

"A package of medicines for Miss Briscoe, sir."

Goddard went to the table and took the parcel in his hands. Just then Miss Dean entered the room.

"I have been looking for it," she said, indicating the parcel. "Blanche's



"DID YOU WANT TO SEE ME, GUARDIAN?"

medicines gave out last night, and I promised to send them up as soon as they came."

"Is Blanche so very bad off, then?" he asked, his mind full of the grow-some article he had just read.

Miss Dean looked at him steadily. "I think she needs great care and attention, Maj. Goddard," she said, softly. "I wish I could be brave and speak out my mind to you, as I have imagined myself doing a good many times."

"Well, I am sure you may," he returned. "In fact, if it is anything touching my ward's welfare I should want very much to hear it."

"Then it is not a physical disease that is wrong with my dear friend so much as it is—something else."

"Go on, please," said Goddard, mystified.

"She never will get well or be her old self till—pardon me—till you cease to treat her as you do."

"I don't follow you," said the major, slightly embarrassed.

Miss Dean sat down, holding the parcel in her lap.

"I am saying something Blanche would never forgive," she went on, "but you are not blind, Maj. Goddard. You must have known that Blanche's whole life was wrapped up in you before she left school."

The major was looking at a particular figure in the carpet with unnatural steadiness, and he did not raise his eyes.

"Do you think so, Miss Dean?"

"I know it," declared the champion of one woman's rights. "She and I were intimate in school. She knew my heart—I knew hers. I hated you, sir, when I heard you had married a—the woman you did marry, after having led such a confiding young creature as Blanche to believe you were in love with her and spoiled the life entrusted to you. You did this, sir!"

Goddard started. He had never imagined such strong condemnation could come to him from such source. He found himself unable to formulate a reply. Miss Dean, now hot and flushed, continued:

"You might at least treat the poor child decently. She will never get well as long as she frets about you as she is doing. She has hardly slept an hour any night since your mad news

arrived. Don't you see she can't put out the fires you kindled in her heart? If you were happy she might do so, but seeing the man she loves in constant misery is enough to kill any organization as sensitive and delicate as Blanche's. If she could only see you once a day and feel that you look upon her as a friend she would not suffer so, but you are always away."

"I thank you for—speaking so plainly and showing me my duty," stammered Goddard. "I have been very selfish."

He was about to make a reference to the dread malady which was laying siege to the life of his ward, but, remembering his promise to Jeanne not to speak of it, and fearing Miss Dean's indiscretion, he held his tongue on that point.

"Could I see her now, do you think?" he asked, contritely.

"Yes; let me send her down to you," said Miss Dean, impulsively.

"I shall wait here," he said. And as Miss Dean left the room he decided no longer to try to stem the tide which seemed bearing him, he knew not whither. He walked the floor till Blanche came. Her sweet young face showed the ravages of a tortured spirit, but it now shone with a light of anticipation.

"Did you want to see me, guardian?" As she spoke, she held out her hands. He took them and stood for a moment gravely looking into her eyes.

"You have been unhappy, Blanche?" he said.

"How could I be otherwise, and you—" her voice failed her and she coughed to disclaim that it was due to rising emotion.

"I know I have not done my duty," he said. "But I want to begin, Blanche, would you like to have me stay more at home than I have since—since Jeanne went away?"

"Oh, I wish you would!" she answered, quickly. "You can't imagine how I have worried. You know I could not tell what might have happened to you."

"Blanche," he felt something grasp his heart as he hesitated. It may have been the hand of his conscience—the reviving of his better nature. Then something like the worst form of his recent despair seemed to settle on his brain. He felt that he was groping towards the accomplishment of an unpardonable deed.

"Blanche, if I were to ask you to be my wife, would you consent—could you, knowing how I feel about the—other?"

He felt her soft warm hands grasp his tightly. For a moment she stood with eyes downcast, then she looked up and said frankly:

"If you wished it I should be so glad, for something tells me I could then help you, and to do that is what I am certainly praying for."

"Would you consent to an early marriage?"

"I should want to do as you liked about it."

"Would you not care for what people would say about our haste in such a matter?"

"I should not care at all." She was breathing rapidly. "I should feel that I was acting right."

He hesitated a moment; then he said:

"Will you marry me to-morrow? Rev. Mr. Strothers lives about a mile from here, along the river. Talley can first see him and make the arrangements. Will you drive there in the morning and become my wife?"

"If it is your wish, yes."

He drew her head towards him and for a moment it rested on his shoulder. For an instant a memory of his courtship of her during her school days flashed into his mind and he experienced one of the old thrills which had made him feel so much like a boy again. Then he put her from him.

"Be ready, then, by 11 o'clock," he said. "I shall speak to Talley at once."

When she had left the room, a strange, glorious light in her young face, he began again to walk the floor. He was tingling in every vein. His heart had begun to beat excitedly. He tried to think of Jeanne, the awful disease which was eating Blanche's life away, but he could only feel the pressure of his ward's hands, the warmth of her breath on his face, the depth of her great, trustful eyes.

"Great God! what can this mean?" he exclaimed.

He continued to walk back and forth across the room for half an hour, then he stopped suddenly and rang.

James obeyed the summons.

"Where is Mr. Talley?" he asked.

"In the study, at work, sir." James saluted in military fashion.

"That is all." The major went to the study, where he found his private secretary at work at a typewriter.

"Talley," he began, "you wanted to see me yesterday, I believe?"

"I did, major. I believe the amount you were keeping for me is exactly \$5,000."

"You are right, Talley; that is the amount, and, as I told you, you can get it at any time you wish. All you have to do is to draw the check. I will sign it."

"I have it ready now," said the young man, handing Goddard a slip of paper.

"I hope you are not thinking of leaving me?" said the major, as he signed the check.

"Not that, but I am flatly disobeying your injunctions, major. You have tried to keep me out of speculation, but the temptation is too strong to resist. This check covers all my savings, and yet I am going to put every cent of it into G. N. & W. railway stock."

"Oh, you can't be so foolhardy, Talley!"

"I am at your service, major."

"What if I were to tell you I am going to get married, Talley?"

The secretary stared. The carriage of his typewriting machine, with which he was toying, fell with a sharp click.

"Are you in earnest, Maj. Goddard?"

"Quite in earnest, Talley. I have decided to marry my ward."

"Miss Briscoe?" exclaimed Talley, his face suddenly falling.

"Yes, Miss Briscoe. And we have decided, under existing circumstances, that we will have the affair take place in as quiet a manner as possible. I want you to drive over to Rev. Mr. Strothers at once and see if we may come to his house to-morrow morning. If he consents, then I want you to attend to any other arrangements without delay."

The private secretary had turned quite pale. His eyes were expanded and fixed in a helpless stare on the face of his employer.

"Have you thought over this well, major?" he blurted out, suddenly.

"Why do you ask that?" asked Goddard, suspiciously.

"Pardon me," stammered Talley, "I only thought—but it was not clear to Talley what he thought."

"I do not understand your—your question, Talley," insisted the major.

"You know Miss Briscoe is young," answered the secretary, "and—and she has been so upset over your recent bereavement that I was afraid that, through sympathy and vast interest in you as her father's friend and her benefactor, she might—"

"I see," broke in the major; "you think she may hastily take a step that might be regretted later, but you need not be afraid, Talley. The truth is, Blanche and I once thought of marrying before I met Mrs. Goddard. I think you need have no fears on that score."

"I did not know of that," said the private secretary, his face still set and white. "I beg your pardon. I shall carry out your instructions. I hope you can overlook my remark just now."

"Easily," said the major, "for it shows your interest in me and Blanche is more than skin deep."

When the major had left the room the young man lowered his head to his desk. He heard the major ring and order the horse and cart.

"God have mercy on me! What have I been allowing myself to think about?" he muttered. "I might have known there was something—behind that awful suffering of hers. I ought to have seen that she loved him!"

## CHAPTER XIII.

During that night a light snow began to fall, and as the bridal party left the next morning to be driven to the house of Rev. Mr. Strothers a thin white carpet lay on the earth and fine feathery flakes continued to fall.

The servants had been apprised of the astonishing event and they gathered at the windows which look out upon the drive.

"A very sensible thing for 'em to do," said James. "She is the sort of mistress I want to work for. I should have left the other if she hadn't gone to the bottom of the Atlantic. I haven't lived with the aristocracy for ten years without knowing a sample when I see it. The good Lord has been kind to the major."

"I wish she had waited awhile, just for the looks o' the thing," said Katie, Blanche's favorite maid. "Then she could have had a swell wedding, plenty of presents, and—"

"And give you all her old clothes," sneered James, who was too fat to make use of the major's discarded apparel.

"I get everything I want anyway," was Katie's defense. "It is only because I think she deserves all that any rich young lady has that I object to this kind of a marriage; but if she is only happy, I won't complain."

These gossiping hirelings were at the windows when the returning carriage appeared in sight an hour later. The bride's beautiful face was flushed by the contact with the wind, and she had never looked so happy or moved with so much grace. Talley and Miss Dean had very serious faces as they came up the veranda side by side.

"Well, it is all over," said the major to his bride when they were alone in the luxurious company chamber, where a red fire glowed. He had never been so much a mystery to himself as now. He felt as if he were drunken with delicious memories of their old courtship.

"Yes, I am your wife at last," she said, with a smile. "I am your wife, and I am going to make you happy. I feel it away down in my heart."

"You feel it," he repeated, as if in a dream, and he helped her to take off her cloak. He felt her warm breath on his face. He laid the cloak aside, then drew her into his arms and kissed her. "And so do I, dear girl. And so do I."

At that strange moment Jeanne Goddard and all her evil plans seemed as much removed from his life as if she had never entered it. It was as if the old life had come back to him—the life in which his love had for its object a creature so pure and undefiled that it lifted him up and opened his eyes to spiritual possibilities.

"I was at first afraid you would not consent so soon after—after her death," he said.

"I felt that it was my right to have you now," said Blanche, frankly. "She told me how she had deliberately beguiled you from me when she discovered that you loved me. The night before she sailed she confessed she had resorted to every trick and artifice within her power to make you cast me aside."

"She told you that?" the major exclaimed.

"Yes, and not only that, but she said she had some sort of presentiment that she was going to die abroad, and said if anything did happen to her, she hoped I would marry you. Oh, I've tried to regret her death—to feel sorry for her at being taken away in the midst of such sins, but I cannot. She even told me—oh, I can't tell you what else she said. It makes me almost hate her memory."

"Please go on," said the major.

"She confessed that she was unhappy with you—that she wanted to get away from you—that she married you simply for your money."

"I suspected that," said the major, dreamily.

It seemed so wonderful to him that he could now calmly contemplate Jeanne's shallow faithlessness without the pangs such thoughts had always caused him. Was it because he really loved his ward and that he had never loved Jeanne—that his passion for her had been only a base infatuation which had already taken wings?

He could not answer these questions, he could only wonder at the strange exultation which was swelling in his breast—the boundless enthusiasm over the thought that he was loved by the beautiful young creature before him. He lost sight of the wrong he had done her. She had only a short while to live—that time, he told himself, should constitute his life and hers; beyond that brief period he could not reckon.

"You have suffered?" he heard himself murmuring.

"Ever since that awful day when you introduced me to her in the drawing-room. I had never dreamed that God intended you for anyone but me. You had been my whole life, and even afterwards, when I saw the hold she had on you, I could not keep from suffering. The pain, the loss was with me night and day. I hated her; I despised myself. I planned a thousand times to leave, but I could not tear myself away, because I saw your soul in danger. I saw her day by day leading you downward instead of upward, as I had dreamt of doing. I knew how charitable you had been before your marriage—how many poor people you had helped, and I saw her drawing you away from such impulses by her sharp, heartless ridicule."

"And now that she is no longer—no longer—here?" Goddard could not pronounce the word which lay on his tongue like a weight.

"Now that she is out of our way I shall pray God to help me exercise a better influence over you."

"You have always done that," he said. "Do with me as you will. I am a very bad man, Blanche; a very wicked man. If you knew me as I am you would despise me for my wickedness, as you despised her for hers."

"You never had a fault till she crossed your path, dear guardian, and nothing you have done since is going to count." She spoke lightly, and smiled as she laid her head on his shoulder.

The next day was Sunday, and as Miss Dean had gone home, they drove alone to the village, about two miles distant, to attend church. Blanche had never looked so well. The crisp air brought the blood into her cheeks and blew her hair into a froth of gold about her eyes and brow.

"Perhaps we ought not to drive so far," he said, solicitously as they were entering the carriage. "Do you think Dr. Fleming would approve of it?"

"He said outdoor exercise was what I needed most," answered Blanche. "Don't worry about me; the medicine he prescribed is making me strong again. Did you notice the breakfast I ate? I was ashamed of my appetite."

He was silent a moment as they drove along, then he gravely said:

"I want you to go to a good physician to-morrow and ask his advice. It has been some time since you saw Dr. Fleming."

"Oh, don't begin that," said Blanche, pretending to pout. "I am getting along beautifully."

"But I—I want—you must see a doctor," he stammered. "I shall feel better now to know that everything is being done that should be done for you."

"You talk as if I were going to die," said the girl. "Why, I've just begun to live."

For a moment he looked confused. He could not reveal his real fears, and yet he was now deeply troubled about her condition.

"Of course, it isn't anything serious," he said; "but still to please me you will let me send for Dr. Fraleigh."

"No, I don't know him, and I don't like to make new acquaintances. Besides, Dr. Fleming is coming to New York in about ten days. I promised



HE SAT STARING AT THE WORDS FOR SEVERAL MINUTES.

faithfully to see him when he returned."

"How do you know he is coming?" asked the major, in surprise.

"I had a note from him yesterday. He explained that he was coming to New York earlier than he expected, owing to a sudden change in his plans."

I will go to see him, if you insist on it, but I know he will tell me I have taken enough of his tonics."

"Well, that will do," said Goddard, reluctantly. He thought of the crimson pictures in the medical book he had consulted, and his heart sank. After all, his new-found happiness was only to end in her death, and then—Goddard's meditations about Blanche always stopped there. He had shut his real wife out of his thoughts as men who are striving for better things shut out the memory of past evil deeds and associations.

That night when the house was still and he found himself alone in his study he forced himself to the task of communicating with Jeanne. And as I can in no better way reveal the workings of his heart, I shall reproduce the letter word for word.

In beginning it he wrote "Dear Jeanne," but there he stopped abruptly, and sat staring at the words for several minutes, then he tore the sheet into small bits and let them flutter through his fingers. His letter began simply as follows:

"Well, I have at last done your bidding. I was a madman. I confess that—the very flames of hell had scorched my brain. I have committed an unspeakable crime against the noblest creature that God ever gave life to. You will be surprised perhaps to find that I have changed so quickly, and really I have changed completely. The scales have fallen from my sight. I feel like a man who has been hypnotized and wakes to find he has murdered his best friend. I despise myself as no mortal ever despised himself before. I now know that my passion for you was the blindest, most insane infatuation that ever dragged the soul of a man from an atmosphere of hope down into the mire of hellish despondency. I now know that my love for my ward was the only pure love I have ever experienced. Yes, I loved her when I met you, and I love her now with all the tortured soul within me. I have wronged her as no man ever wronged a pure, unsuspecting woman, but as her life will be of such short duration, if I can prevent it she shall never know of the stain I have put upon her fair name. While she lives I shall lavish all the tenderness of my soul on her, praying to God that I may in that way atone a little—very little—for my crime against her. How could I tell her that you are alive, and that I am not her legal husband?"

"I would not write to you now, but for the fact that it is due to you to know the stand I have taken, and you must know (thoroughly understand each other in regard to Blanche's fortune. As God is my judge I do not want her money, and as God is my judge I shall never lay your covetous hands upon me. I can send you take precautions to see that, at her death, the money shall go to her blood relative. As to you, I shall never willingly see you again, not as long as I am alive. I shall do it. Any letter you write me will be returned to you unopened. Do your worst. If you wish to publish to the world that you and I met, and I love her now with all my heart, I shall confess to it. I shall do it in your scheme. As much as I love you, I am as guilty as you because I am a major. Herewith I enclose a draft payable to Mrs. Nolan; it is all the money I can send you now. I am about to enter into a speculation in railway stock and if it turns out well I shall send you more money. You are my wife and I shall provide for you as well as my own means will allow, but of Blanche's money you nor I shall ever have one penny. I shall try to get means out of my own resources to keep you quiet at least as long as Blanche lives, but you need not look to me for large remittances. I am not exactly under your thumb; your threats of exposure will not frighten me. I am desperate. I want Blanche to know what I am. I cannot face her pure eyes and know that I am as vile as the deepest dyed convict. The sooner you make the whole thing known the better I shall be pleased."

"ROWLAND GODDARD."

Mrs. Nolan was standing in the doorway of the little gray brick cottage when the postman handed this communication to her. Recognizing the handwriting she took it unopened to Mrs. Goddard, who was restlessly walking in the little, high-walled garden in the rear of the house.

"Ah," she exclaimed, "he has written!"

"Yes, it is from him," said the angular woman, approaching slowly.

Mrs. Goddard tore open the envelope. She had hardly read a dozen lines before she uttered a little scream, and then, with quivering hands and expanding eyes, she continued to read.

"What is the matter?" asked Mrs. Nolan.

"Matter enough," answered Mrs. Goddard, clenching her hands and grating her teeth together. "Matter enough. He has married the girl, but has already—already fallen in love with her, and now he wants to throw me over."

"Didn't you expect that?" asked Mrs. Nolan, whose innate dislike for her mistress often fostered opposition to her plans.

"It was the last thing I did expect—the very last."