

The Vanishing Lady

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There was the story—told me some years ago as a true copy of a leaf from the dread secret archives of the Paris police—of the woman who disappeared during the World Exposition as suddenly, as completely, and as inexplicably as did Dorothy Arnold ten years later from the sidewalks of New York.

As I first heard the story, it began with the arrival from Marseilles of an Englishwoman and her young, inexperienced daughter, a girl of seventeen or thereabouts. The mother was the frail, pretty widow of an English officer who had been stationed in India, and the two had just come from Bombay, bound for home. In the knowledge that, after reaching there, she would soon have to cross to Paris to sign some papers affecting her husband's estate, she decided at the last minute to shift her passage to a Marseilles steamer, and, by going direct to Paris, look up the lawyers there and finish her business before crossing the Channel to settle forever and a day in the Warwickshire village where she was born.

Paris was so tumultuously crowded for the Exposition that they counted themselves fortunate when the cocher deposited them at the Crillon, and they learned that their precautionary telegram from Marseilles had miraculously caught a room on the wing—a double room with a fine, spacious sitting-room looking out on the Place de la Concorde. I could wish that they had wired one of those less magnificent caravansaries, if only that I might revel again in such a name as the Hotel of Jacob and of England, or, better still, the Hotel of the Universe and of Portugal. But, as the story reached me, it was to the Crillon that they went.

The long windows of their sitting-room gave on a narrow, stone-railed balcony and were half-shrouded in heavy curtains of plum-colored velvet. As again and again the girl later on had occasion to describe the look of that room when first she saw it, the walls were papered in old rose. A high-backed sofa, an oval satinwood table, a mantel with an ormolu clock that had run down—these also she recalled.

The girl was the more relieved that there would be no need of a house-to-house search for rooms, for the mother had seemed unendurably exhausted from the long train ride,

and was now of such a color that the girl's first idea was to call the house physician, hoping fervently that he spoke English, for neither she nor her mother spoke any French at all.

The doctor, when he came—a dusty, smelly little man with a wrinkled face lost in a thicket of whiskers, and a reassuring Legion of Honor ribbon in the buttonhole of his lapel—did speak a little English. After a long, grave look and a few questions put to the tired woman on the bed in the shaded room, he called the girl into the sitting-room and told her frankly that her mother's condition was serious; that it was out of the question for them to think of going on to England next day; that on the morrow she might better be moved to a hospital, etc., etc.

All these things he would attend to. In the meantime he wanted the girl to go at once to his home and fetch him a medicine that his wife would give her. It could not be as quickly prepared in any chemist's. Unfortunately, he lived on the other side of Paris and had no telephone, and with all Paris en fête it would be perilous to rely on any messenger. Indeed, it would be a saving of time and worry if she could go, armed with a note to his wife he was even then scribbling in French at a desk in the sitting-room. In the lobby below, the manager of the hotel, after an excited colloquy with the doctor, took charge of her most sympathetically, himself putting her into a sapin and, as far as she could judge, volubly directing the driver how to reach a certain house in the Rue Val du Grace, near the Observatoire.

It was then that the girl's agony began, for the ramshackle victoria crawled through the festive streets and, as she afterwards realized, more often than not crawled in the wrong direction. The house in the Rue Val du Grace seemed to stand at the other end of the world, when the carriage came at last to a halt in front of it. The girl grew old in the time which passed before any answer came to her ring at the bell. The doctor's wife, when finally she appeared, read his note again and again, then with much muttering and rattling of keys stationed the girl in an airless waiting room and left her there so long that she was weeping for very desperation, before the medicine was found, wrapped, and turned over to her.

A hundred times during that wait she rose and started for the door, determined to stay no longer but to run back empty-handed through the streets to her mother's bedside. A thousand times in the wretched weeks that followed she loathed herself for not having obeyed that impulse. But always there was the feeling that having come so far and

having waited so long, she must not leave without the medicine just for lack of the strength of will to stick it out a little longer—perhaps only a few minutes longer.

Then the snail's pace trip back to the Right Bank was another nightmare, and it ended only when, at the cocher's mulish determination to deliver her to some hotel in the Place Vendôme, she leaped to the street and in sheer terror appealed for help to a passing young man whose alien tweeds and boots told her he was a compatriot of hers.

He was still standing guard beside her five minutes later when, at long last, she arrived at the desk of the Crillon and called for her key, only to have the very clerk who had handed her a pen to register with that morning look at her without recognition and blandly ask, "Whom does Mademoiselle wish to see?" At that a cold fear clutched her heart, a sudden surrender to a panic that she had fought back as preposterous when first it visited her as she sat and twisted her handkerchief in the waiting room of the doctor's office on the Left Bank; a panic born when, after the doctor had casually told her he had no telephone, she heard the fretful ringing of its bell on the other side of his walnut door.

This then was the predicament of the young English girl as she stood there at the desk of the hotel in Paris—a stranger in the city and a stranger to its bewildering tongue. She had arrived that morning from India and had left her ailing mother in charge of the house physician while she went out in quest of medicine for her—a quest in which, through a malignant conspiracy between perverse circumstances and apparently motiveless passers-by, she had lost four hours.

But now with the bottle of medicine clutched in her hand, she reached the hotel at last, only to be stared down by the clerk at the desk, only to have the very man who had shown them their rooms with such a flourish that morning now gaze at her opaquely as though she were some slightly demented creature demanding admission to someone else's apartment.

But, no, Mam'zelle must be mistaken. Was it not at some other hotel she was descended? Two more clerks came fluttering into the conference. They all eyed her without a flicker of recognition. Did Mam'zelle say her room was No. 342? Ah, but 342 was occupied by M. Quelquechose. Yes, a French client of long standing. He had been occupying it these past two weeks and more. Ah, no, it would be impossible to disturb him. All this while the lobby, full of hurrying, polyglot strangers, reeled around her.

She demanded the registration slips only to find in that day's docket no sign of the one she herself had filled out that morning on their arrival, the while her tired mother leaned

against the desk and told her how. And even as the clerk now shuffled the papers before her eyes, the stupefying bloodstone which she had noticed on his ring-finger when he handed her the pen five hours before, winked at her in confirmation.

From then on she came only upon closed doors. The same house physician who had hustled her off on her tragic wild-goose chase across Paris protested now with all the shrugs and gestures of his people that he had dispatched her on no such errand, that he had never been summoned to attend her mother, that he had never seen her before in all his life. The same hotel manager who had so sympathetically helped her into the carriage when she set forth on her fruitless mission, denied her now as flatly and somehow managed to do it with the same sympathetic solicitude, suggesting that Mam'zelle must be tired, that she should let them provide another chamber where she might repose herself until such time as she could recollect at what hotel she really belonged, or until some inquiries should bring in news of where her mother and her luggage were, if—

For always there was in his ever polite voice the unspoken reservation that the whole mystery might be a thing of her own disordered invention. Then, and in the destroying days that followed, she was only too keenly aware that these evasive people—the personnel of the hotel, the attachés of the embassy, the reporters of the Paris Herald, the officials at the Sûreté—were each and every one behaving as if she had lost her wits. Indeed there were times when she felt that all Paris was rolling its eyes behind her back and significantly tapping its forehead.

Her only aid and comfort was the aforesaid Englishman who, because a lovely lady in distress had come up to him in the street and implored his help, elected thereafter to believe her against all the evidence which so impressed the rest of Paris. He proved a pillar of stubborn strength because he was some sort of well-born junior secretary at the British Embassy with influence enough to keep her agony from gathering dust in the official pigeon-holes.

His faith in her needed to be unreasoning because there slowly formed in his mind a suspicion that for some unimaginable reason all these people—the hotel attendants and even the police—were part of a plot to conceal the means whereby the missing woman's disappearance had been effected. This suspicion deepened when, after a day's delay, he succeeded in forcing an inspection of Room 342 and found that there was no detail of its furnishing which had not been altered from the one etched into the girl's memory.

It remained for him to prove the mechanism of that plot and to guess at its invisible motive—a motive strong enough to enlist all Paris in the silent obliteration of a woman of no importance, moreover a woman who, as far as her daughter knew, had not an enemy in the world. It was the purchased confession of one of the paper-hangers, who had worked all night in the hurried transformation of Room 342, that started the unraveling of the mystery.

By the time the story reached me, it had lost all its content of grief and become as unemotional as an anagram. Indeed, a few years ago it was a kind of circulating parlor game and one was challenged to guess what had happened to the vanished lady. Perhaps you yourself have already surmised that the doctor had recognized the woman's ailment as a case of the black plague smuggled in from India; that his first instinctive step, designed only to give time for spiriting her out of the threatened hotel, had, when she died that afternoon, widened into a conspiracy on the part of the police to suppress, at all costs to this one girl, an obituary notice which, had it ever leaked out, would have emptied Paris overnight and spread ruin across a city that had gambled heavily on the great Exposition for which its gates were even then thrown wide.

The story of this girl's ordeal long seemed to me one of the great nightmares of real life and I was, therefore, the more taken aback one day to have its historicity faintly impaired by my discovering its essence in a novel called *The End of Her Honeymoon* which the incomparable Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes wrote as long ago as 1913. Then I find myself wondering if she unearthed it in the archives of the Paris police or whether she spun its mystery out of her own macabre fancy, making from whole cloth a tale of such felicitous invention that, like Stockton's *The Lady or the Tiger* or Anatole France's *The Procurator of Judea*, it had moved from land to land with the seven-league-boots of folk-music and so been told and retold at hearths the world around by people who had never read it anywhere.

Footnote: The story of "The Vanishing Lady" is a fair specimen of folklore in the making. For such a story to travel round the world by word of mouth, it is necessary that each teller of it must believe it true, and it is a common practice for the artless teller to seek to impart that belief to his listeners by affecting kinship, or at least a life-long intimacy, with the protagonist of the adventure related. In my entertaining, desultory, and (with one exception) fruitless researches into the origin of twenty such world-girdling tales, I have often challenged one of these straw-man authorities, only to have it vanish as utterly as did the ailing lady from the Place de la Concorde. In the case of this

story, which was used not only by Mrs. Belloc-Lowndes but by Lawrence Rising in a later novel called *She Who Was Helena Cass*, I can report that it is a favorite, seemingly, with old ladies on shipboard, those rootless widows who wear buttoned shoes with cloth tops and whose families, with ill-concealed delight, persuade them to do a good deal of traveling. The story will be whispered as gospel truth from steamer-chair to steamer-chair, with such shakings of the head and such Lord-have-mercy casting up of pious glances that it seems ever new, and, with that air about it, gets submitted so regularly to the fiction magazines that it has threaded many an editorial head with untimely silver. One day I received word of its having been published as a news story in the London Daily Mail as early as 1911, the bare facts substantiated by affidavits from attachés of the British Embassy in Paris. Here, I said with relief, is the end of my quest, only to have Richard Henry Little point out in the Chicago Tribune that the entire story had been dashed off by Karl Harriman one hot summer night in 1889 to fill a vacant column in the next morning's issue of the Detroit Free Press. Closing in on my quarry, I called upon the blushing Harriman to tell me whether he had invented the story or, like the rest of us, heard it somewhere in his travels. He said he could not remember. Thereupon I felt free to consider the question still open, for, without wishing to reflect on the fecundity of his imagination, I beg leave to doubt if any man could invent a tale like "The Vanishing Lady" and thereafter forget that he had done so.

"The Vanishing Lady" is a characteristic Woolcott performance—part connoisseur's appreciation, part detective work, part fond self-portrait of the author as incorrigible raconteur. The horror at the story's core is genuine and precisely rendered: a girl alone in a foreign city, stripped of language, stripped of her mother, stripped finally of her own verifiable existence, while a cheerful cosmopolitan conspiracy erases every trace of her reality. Woolcott lingers long enough in the sitting-room of the Crillon—the plum velvet, the ormolu clock, the bloodstone ring—to make the subsequent erasure of that room viscerally disturbing, and the detail of the telephone ringing behind the doctor's door, planted quietly and only glossed in retrospect, is the essay's one genuinely literary flourish.

What gives the piece its particular texture is Woolcott's refusal to leave it there. He pivots, with barely a pause, from nightmare to parlor game to folklore scholarship, tracing the story's promiscuous life across novels, newspapers, steamer decks, and editorial slush piles with the genial obsessiveness of a man who prefers the hunt to the quarry. The final image—Harriman

unable to remember whether he invented the tale or merely heard it—is perfectly chosen: the story has become so thoroughly a creature of retelling that even its putative author cannot locate himself inside it. For Woolcott, this is not deflation but vindication; the measure of a great tale is precisely its power to outlive its origins.