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XYZ: A Detective Story



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I.

THE MYSTERIOUS RENDEZVOUS

Sometimes in the course of his experience, a detective, while engaged in ferreting out the mystery of one crime, runs inadvertently upon the clue to another. But rarely has this been done in a manner more unexpected or with attendant circumstances of greater interest than in the instance I am now about to relate.

For some time the penetration of certain Washington officials had been baffled by the clever devices of a gang of counterfeiters who had inundated the western portion of Massachusetts with spurious Treasury notes. Some of the best talent of the Secret Service had been expended upon the matter, but with no favorable result, when, one day, notice was received at Washington that a number of suspicious-looking letters, addressed to the simple initials, X. Y. Z., Brandon, Mass., were being daily forwarded through the mails of that region; and it being deemed possible that a clue had at last been offered to the mystery in hand, I was sent northward to investigate.

It was in the middle of June, 1881, and the weather was simply delightful. As I stepped from the cars at Brandon and looked up the long straight street with its double row of maple trees sparkling fresh and beautiful in the noonday sun, I thought I had never seen a prettier village or entered upon any enterprise with a lighter or more hopeful heart.

Intent on my task, I went straight to the post-office, and after coming to an understanding with the postmaster, proceeded at once to look over the mail addressed to the mysterious X. Y. Z.

I found it to consist entirely of letters. They were about a dozen in number, and were, with one exception, similar in general appearance and manner of direction, though inscribed in widely different handwritings, and posted from various New England towns. The exception to which I allude had these few extra words written in the lower left-hand corner of the envelope: "*To be kept till called for.*" As I bundled up the letters preparatory to thrusting them back into the box, I noticed that the latter was the only one in a blue envelope, all the others being in the various shades of cream-color and buff.

"Who is in the habit of calling for these letters?" I asked of the postmaster.

"Well," said he, "I don't know his name. The fact is nobody knows him around here. He usually drives up in a buggy about nightfall, calls for letters addressed to X. Y. Z., and having got them, whips up his horse and is off again before one can say a word."

"Describe him," said I.

"Well, he is very lean and very lank. In appearance he is both green and awkward. His complexion is pale, almost sickly. Were it not for his eye, which is keen and twinkling, I should call him an extremely inoffensive-looking person."

The type was not new to me. "I should like to see him," said I.

"You will have to wait till nightfall, then," returned the postmaster. "He never comes till about dusk. Drop in here, say at seven o'clock, and I will see that you have the opportunity of handing him his mail."

I nodded acquiescence to this and sauntered out of the enclosure devoted to the uses of the post-office. As I did so I ran against a young man who was hurriedly approaching from the other end of the store.

"Your pardon," he cried; and I turned to look at him, so gentlemanly was his tone, and so easy the bow with which he accompanied this simple apology.

He was standing before the window of the post-office, waiting for his mail; a good-looking, well-made young man, of a fine countenance, but with a restless eye, whose alert yet anxious expression I could not but note even in the casual glance I gave him. There appeared to be some difficulty in procuring him his mail, and each minute he was kept waiting seemed to increase his impatience almost beyond the bounds of endurance. I saw him lean forward and gasp out a hurried word to the postmaster, and was idly wondering over his anxiety and its probable causes,

when I heard a hasty exclamation near me, and looking around, saw the postmaster himself beckoning to me from the door of the enclosure. I immediately hastened forward.

"I don't know what it means," he whispered; "but here is a young man, different from any who have been here before, asking for a letter addressed to X. Y. Z."

"A letter?" I repeated.

"Yes, a letter."

"Give him the whole batch and see what he does," I returned, drawing back where I could myself watch the result of my instructions. The postmaster did as I requested. In another moment I saw the young man start with amazement as a dozen letters were put in his hand. "These are not all for me!" he cried, but even as he made the exclamation, drew to one side, and with a look of mingled perplexity and concern, began opening them one after another, his expression deepening to amazement as he glanced at their contents. The one in the blue envelope, however, seemed to awaken quite different emotions. With an unconscious look of relief, he hastily read the short letter it contained, then with a quick gesture, folded it up and thrust it back into the envelope he held, together with the other letters, in his left hand.

"There must be another X. Y. Z.," said he, approaching the window of the post-office and handing back all the letters he had received, with the exception of the one in the blue envelope, which with a quick movement he had separated from the rest and thrust into his coat-pocket. "I can lay claim to none of

these." And with a repetition of his easy bow he turned away and hurriedly quitted the store, followed by the eyes of clerks and customers, to whom he was evidently as much of a stranger as he was to me. Without hesitation I went to the door and looked after him. He was just crossing the street to the tavern on the other side of the way. I saw him enter, felt that he was safe to remain there for a few minutes, and conscious of the great opportunity awaiting me, hastened back to the postmaster.

"Well," cried I, in secret exultation, "our plan has worked admirably. Let me see the letters. As they have been opened, and through no fault of ours, a peep at them now in the cause of justice will harm none but the guilty."

The postmaster demurred, but I soon overcame his scruples; and taking down the letters once more, hastily investigated their contents. I own that I was considerably disappointed at the result. In fact, I found nothing that pointed toward the counterfeiters; only in each letter a written address, together with fifty cents' worth of stamps.

"Some common fraud," I exclaimed. "One of those cheap affairs where, for fifty cents enclosed, a piece of information calculated to insure fortune to the recipient is promised by return of mail."

And disgusted with the whole affair I bundled up the letters, and was about to replace them in the box for the third time when I discovered that it still held a folded paper. Drawing this out, I opened it and started in fresh amazement. If I was not very much

mistaken in the appearance of the letter in the blue envelope which I had seen the young man read with so much interest, this was certainly it. But how came it here? Had I not seen him thrust it back into its envelope and afterward put envelope and all into his pocket? But here was no envelope, and here was the letter. By what freak of necromancy had it been transferred from its legitimate quarters to this spot? I could not imagine. Suddenly I remembered that his hand had been full of the other letters when he put, or endeavored to put, this special one back into its envelope, and however unaccountable it may seem, it must be that from haste or agitation he had only succeeded in thrusting it between two letters instead of into the envelope, as he supposed. Whether or not this explanation be true, there was no doubt about my luck being in the ascendant. Mastering my satisfaction, I read these lines written in what appeared to be a disguised hand.

"All goes well. The time has come; every thing is in train, and success is certain. Be in the shrubbery at the northeast corner of the grounds at 9 P.M. precisely; you will be given a mask and such other means as are necessary to insure you the accomplishment of the end you have in view. He cannot hold out against a surprise. The word, by which you will know your friends, is
Counterfeit."

"Ah, ha!" thought I, "this is more like it." And moved by a sudden impulse, I hastily copied the letter into my memorandum-book, and then returning to the original, scratched out with my

penknife the word northeast and carefully substituting that of southwest put the letter back into the box, in the hope that when he came to consult the envelope in his pocket (as he would be sure to do sooner or later) he would miss its contents and return to the post-office in search of it.

Nor was I mistaken. I had scarcely accomplished my task, when he reëntered the store, asked to see the letters he had returned, and finding amongst them the one he had lost, disappeared with it back to the tavern. "If he is surprised to read southwest this time instead of northeast, he will think his memory played him false in the first instance," cried I, in inward comment over my last doubtful stroke of policy; and turning to the postmaster, I asked him what place there was in the vicinity which could be said to possess grounds and a shrubbery.

"There is but one," he returned, "Mr. Benson's. All the rest of the folks are too poor to indulge in any such gimcracks."

"And who is Mr. Benson?"

"Well, he is Mr. Benson, the richest man in these parts and the least liked as I take it. He came here from Boston two years ago and built a house fit for a king to live in. Why, nobody knows, for he seems to take no pleasure in it. His children do though, and that is all he cares for I suppose. Young Mr. Benson especially seems to be never tired of walking about the grounds, looking at the trees and tying up the vines. Miss Carrie is different; all she wants is company. But little of that has her father ever allowed her till this very day. He seems to think nobody is good enough

to sit down in his parlors; and yet he don't sit there himself, the strange man! but is always shut up in his library or some other out-of-the-way place."

"A busy man?"

"I suppose so, but no one ever sees any thing he does."

"Writes, perhaps?"

"I don't know; he never talks about himself."

"How did he get his money?"

"That we don't know. It seems to accumulate without his help or interference. When he came here he was called rich, but to-day he is said to be worth three times what he was then."

"Perhaps he speculates?"

"If he does, it must be through his son, for he never leaves home himself."

"Has two children, you say?"

"Yes, a son and a daughter: a famous young man, the son; not so much liked, perhaps, as universally respected. He is too severe and reticent to be a favorite, but no one ever found him doing any thing unworthy of himself. He is the pride of the county, and if he were a bit suaver in manner might have been in Congress at this minute."

"How old?"

"Thirty, I should say."

"And the girl?"

"Twenty-five, perhaps."

"A mother living?"

"No; there were some strange stories of her having died a year or so before they came here, under circumstances of a somewhat distressing nature, but they themselves say nothing about it."

"It seems to me they don't say much about any thing."

"That's just it; they are the most reserved people you ever saw. It isn't from them we have heard there is another son floating somewhere about the world. They never speak of him, and what's more, they never write to him; as who should know better than myself?"

An interruption here occurred, and I took the opportunity to saunter out into the crowd of idlers always to be found hanging around a country store at mail-time. My purpose was, as you may conceive, to pick up any stray bits of information that might be floating about concerning these Bensons. Not that I had as yet discovered any thing definite connecting this respectable family with the gang of counterfeiters upon whose track I had been placed; but business is business, and no clue, however slight or unpromising in its nature, is to be neglected when the way is as dark as that which lay before me. With an easy smile, therefore, calculated to allay apprehension and awaken confidence, I took my stand among these loungers. But I soon found that I need do nothing to start the wheel of gossip on the subject of the Bensons. It was already going, and that with a force and spirit that almost took my breath away.

"A fancy ball!" were the first words I heard. "The Bensons give a fancy ball, when they never had three persons at a time in

their house before!"

"Yes, and what's more, they are going to have folks over from Clayton and Lawrence and Hollowell and devil knows where. It's to be a smash up, a regular fandango, with masks and all that kind of nonsense."

"They say Miss Carrie teased her father till he had to give in in self-defence. It's her birthday or something like that, and she *would* have a party."

"But such a party! who ever heard the like in a respectable town like this! It's wicked, that's what I call it, downright wicked to cover up the face God has given you and go strutting around in clothes a Christian man might well think borrowed from the Evil One if he had to wear them in any decent company. All wrong, I say, all wrong, and I am astonished at Mr. Benson. To keep his doors shut as he has, and then to open them in a burst to all sorts of folly. We are not invited at our house."

"Nor we, nor we," shouted some half dozen.

"And I don't know of any one in this town who is," cried a burly man, presumably a butcher by trade. "We are not good enough for the Bensons. They say he is even going to be mean enough to shut the gates and not let a soul inside who hasn't a ticket. And they are going to light up the grounds too!"

"We can peep through the fence."

"Much we will see that way. If you had said climb it –"

"We can't climb it. Big John is going to be there and Tom Henshaw. They mean to keep their good times to themselves,

just as they have kept every thing else. It's a queer set they are anyway, and the less we have to do with them the better."

"I should like to see Hartley Benson in masquerade costume, I would."

"Oh, he won't wear any of the fol-de-rol; he's too dignified." And with that there fell a sudden hush over the crowd, for which I was at a loss to account, till, upon looking up, I saw approaching on horseback, a young man in whom I had no difficulty in recognizing the subject of the last remark.

Straight, slight, elegant in appearance, but with an undoubted reserve of manner apparent even at a distance, he rode up to where I stood, and casting a slight glance around, bowed almost imperceptibly, and alighted. A boy caught the bridle of his horse, and Mr. Benson, without a word or further look, passed quickly into the office, leaving a silence behind him that was not disturbed till he returned with what was evidently his noonday mail. Remounting his horse, he stopped a moment to speak to a man who had just come up, and I seized the opportunity to study his face. I did not like it. It was handsome without doubt; the features were regular, the complexion fair, the expression gentlemanly if not commanding; but I did not like it. It was too impenetrable perhaps; and to a detective anxious to probe a man for his motives, this is ever a most fatal defect. His smile was without sunshine; his glance was an inquiry, a rebuke, a sarcasm, every thing but a revelation. As he rode away he carried with him the thought of all, yet I doubt if the admiration he undoubtedly

inspired, was in a single case mixed with any warmer feeling than that of pride in a fellow townsman they could not understand. "Ice," thought I; "ice in all but its transparency!" So much for Benson the son.

The ball was to take place that very night; and the knowledge of this fact threw a different light over the letter I had read. The word *mask* had no longer any special significance, neither the word *counterfeit*, and yet such was the tenor of the note itself, and such the exaggerated nature of its phrases, I could not but feel that some plot of a reprehensible if not criminal nature was in the process of formation, which, as a rising young detective engaged in a mysterious and elusive search, it behooved me to know. And moved by this consideration, I turned to a new leaf in my memorandum-book, and put down in black and white the following facts thus summarily collected:

"A mysterious family with a secret.

"Rich, but with no visible means of wealth.

"Secluded, with no apparent reason for the same.

"A father who is a hermit.

"A son who is impenetrable.

"A daughter whose tastes are seldom gratified.

"The strange fact of a ball being given by this family after years of reserve and non-intercourse with their neighbors.

"The still stranger fact of it being a masquerade, a style of entertainment which, from its novelty and the opportunities it affords, makes this departure from ordinary rules seem marked

and startling.

"The discovery of a letter appointing a rendezvous between two persons of the male sex, in the grounds of the party giving this ball, in which the opportunities afforded by a masquerade are to be used for forwarding some long-cherished scheme."

At the bottom of this I wrote a deduction:

"Some connection between one or more members of this family giving the ball, and the person called to the rendezvous; the entertainment being used as a blind if not as a means."

It was now four o'clock, five hours before the time of rendezvous. How should I employ the interval? A glance at the livery-stable hard by, determined me. Procuring a horse, I rode out on the road toward Mr. Benson's, for the purpose of reconnoitring the grounds; but as I proceeded I was seized by an intense desire to penetrate into the midst of this peculiar household, and judge for myself whether it was worth while to cherish any further suspicions in regard to this family. But how to effect such an entrance? What excuse could I give for my intrusion that would be likely to serve me on a day of such tumult and preoccupation? I looked up and down the road as if for inspiration. It did not come. Meanwhile, the huge trees that surrounded the house had loomed in sight, and presently the beauties of lawn and parterre began to appear beyond the high iron fence, through which I could catch now and then short glimpses of hurrying forms, as lanterns were hung on the trees and all things put in readiness for the evening's entertainment.

Suddenly a thought struck me. If Mr. Benson was the man they said, he was not engaged in any of these arrangements. Mr. Benson was a hermit. Now what could I say that would interest a hermit? I racked my brains; a single idea came. It was daring in its nature, but what of that! The gate must be passed, Mr. Benson must be seen – or so my adventurous curiosity decided, – and to do it, something must be ventured. Taking out my card, which was simply inscribed with my name, I wrote on it, "*Business private and immediate,*" and assuming my most gentlemanly and inoffensive manner, rode calmly through the gate to the front of the house. If I had been on foot I doubt if I would have been allowed to pass by the servant lounging about in that region, but the horse carried me through in more senses than one, and almost before I realized it, I found myself pausing before the portico, in full view of a dozen or more busy men and boys.

Imitating the manner of Mr. Benson at the post-office, I jumped from my horse and threw the bridle to the boy nearest me. Instantly and before I could take a step, a servant issued from the open door, and with an expression of anxiety somewhat surprising under the circumstances, took his stand before me in a way to hinder my advance.

"Mr. Benson does not receive visitors to-day," said he.

"I am not a visitor," replied I; "I have business with Mr. Benson," and I handed him my card, which he looked at with a doubtful expression.

"Mr. Benson's commands are not to be disobeyed," persisted

the man. "My master sees no one to-day."

"But this is an exceptional case," I urged, my curiosity rising at this unexpected opposition. "My business is important and concerns him. He cannot refuse to see me."

The servant shook his head with what appeared to me to be an unnecessary expression of alarm, but nevertheless retreated a step, allowing me to enter. "I will call Mr. Hartley," cried he.

But that was just what I did not wish. It was Benson the father I had come to see, and I was not to be baffled in this way.

"Mr. Hartley won't do," said I, in my lowest but most determined accents. "If Mr. Benson is not ill, I must beg to be admitted to his presence." And stepping inside the small reception room at my right, I sat down on the first chair I came to.

The man stood for a moment confounded at my pertinacity, then with a last scrutinizing look, that took in every detail of my person and apparel, drew slowly off, shaking his head and murmuring to himself.

Meanwhile the mingled splendor and elegance of my surroundings were slowly making their impression upon me. The hall by which I had entered was spacious and imposing; the room in which I sat, a model of beauty in design and finish. I was allowing myself the luxury of studying its pictures and numerous works of art, when the sound of voices reached my ear from the next room. A man and woman were conversing there in smothered tones, but my senses are very acute, and I had no difficulty in overhearing what was said.

"Oh, what an exciting day this has been!" cried the female voice. "I have wanted to ask you a dozen times what you think of it all. Will he succeed this time? Has he the nerve to embrace his opportunity, or what is more, the tact to make one? Failure now would be fatal. Father – "

"Hush!" broke in the other voice, in a masculine tone of repressed intensity. "Do not forget that success depends upon your prudence. One whisper of what you are about, and the whole scheme is destroyed."

"I will be careful; only do you think that all is going well and as we planned it?"

"It will not be my fault if it does not," was the reply, uttered with an accent so sinister I was conscious of a violent surprise when, in the next instant, the other, with a burst of affectionate fervor, cried in an ardent tone:

"Oh, how good you are, and what a comfort you are to me!"

I was just pondering over the incongruity thus presented, when the servant returned with my card.

"Mr. Benson wishes to know the nature of your business," said he, in a voice I was uncomfortably conscious must penetrate to the next room and awake its inmates to a knowledge of my proximity.

"Let me have the card," said I; and taking it, I added to my words the simple phrase, "*On behalf of the Constable of the town,*" remembering I had heard the postmaster say this position was held by his brother. "There," said I, "carry that back to your

master."

The servant took the card, glanced down at the words I had written, started and hastily drew back. "You had better come," said he, leading the way into the hall.

I was only too glad to comply; in fact, escape from that room seemed imperative. But just as I was crossing the threshold, a sudden, quick cry, half joyful, half fearful, rose behind me, and turning, I met the eyes of a young lady peering upon me from a lifted *portière*, with an expression of mingled terror and longing that would have astonished me greatly, if it had not instantly disappeared at the first sight of my face.

"Pardon me," she exclaimed, drawing back with an embarrassed movement into the room from which she had emerged. But soon recovering herself, she stepped hastily forward, and ignoring me, said to the servant at my side: "Jonas, who is this gentleman, and where are you taking him?"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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