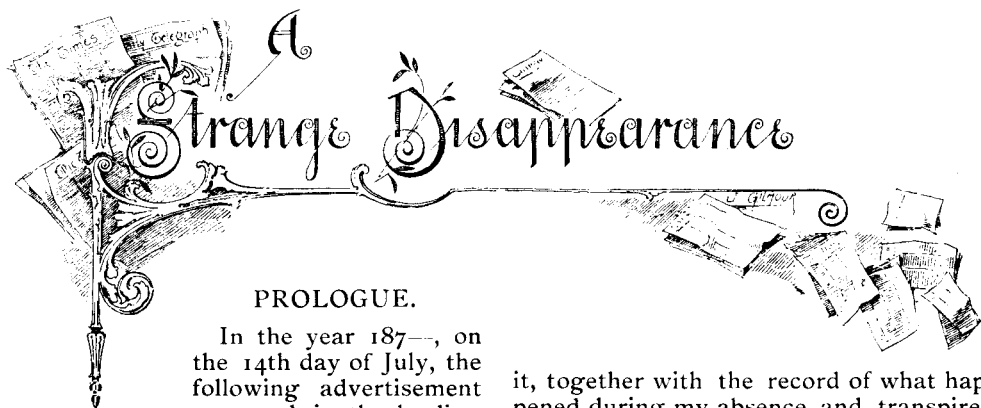




A Strange Disappearance

PROLOGUE.

In the year 187—, on the 14th day of July, the following advertisement appeared in the leading

London papers :—

"Missing from her home, a young lady, tall and slight, chestnut hair, black eyes and expressive features; speaks with a slight foreign accent. A reward of one hundred pounds offered to any one who can give positive information concerning her. Address Z, Post Office, South Audley Street."

A day after the appearance of this advertisement the following words in the Agony column of the *Times* newspaper attracted the attention of a very benignant and natty-looking old gentleman, who was quietly sipping his coffee at breakfast :—

"Well, happy, cared for, explanations in due time, Medora."

Two weeks afterwards, the missing young woman, as suddenly and as quietly as she had left it, returned to her home, number 5 South Audley street. Whether her father upbraided her, received her warmly or coldly, or deemed the explanations of her strange conduct satisfactory or otherwise, was, and has still, remained an impenetrable mystery to the gossips of the neighbourhood.

The scandal the event aroused died a natural death; the sensational leader on the subject, in the daily papers, was curiously commented on and forgotten, and a busy world occupied with its own concerns, soon banished from its memory all traces of this strange disappearance.

THE STORY.

I

I, Medora Arlford, spinster, having hitherto preserved a discreet silence as to the reason of my sudden flight from home during two weeks and wishing to absolve myself from certain aspersions cast at the time, on my fair name and fame, by malevolent gossip; intend now to give the world the truthful and unvarnished history of my escapade, the motives that prompted it, the secret which occasioned

it, together with the record of what happened during my absence and transpired on my return home.

Let me say a few words about myself.

My mother, who was of French birth and descent, died in my infancy. French was therefore my native tongue, and its accent which lingers still in my speech, is due to the French surroundings and education of my early life.

My father always seemed to me somewhat of a self contained, morose man. There was always a cold formality about him that repressed the caressing endearments of his children. The burden of some unexplained secret trouble at all times appeared to oppress him, and affected his manners and conduct. I never attempted to court his sympathy. I never could guess his silent deep-rooted sorrow. But strange to relate, it was all hereafter explained to me in a manner I least expected. And stranger still, my flight from home appertained somewhat to my father's secret.

I was always a dutiful daughter. I respected my father. I managed his house. I attended to his comforts. I tried to solace his weary hours. But all those sweet confidences springing from close sympathy were lacking between us.

What became then of that fount of love common to my sex?

Did it waste its sweetness on the desert air?

Did it grow parched or subside for want of use?

I answer my own questions in a very few words. The tenderness and devotion of my nature were all lavished on my only brother Hector. And to each other we were companions, friends, nay almost like lovers.

Having thus briefly narrated my family surroundings, let me at once proceed to the first circumstance which necessitated my escapade.