

THE SEMI-WEEKLY TELEGRAPH, ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, JULY 25, 1908

THE TURTLE BECK LACE By Robert Van Nostband

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THREE miles at least of the dusty road still lay between Berrien and the hotel. Even now, he knew, the guests must be assembled for luncheon in the cool dining room; he would have been particularly grateful for a pair of wings.

It was his first day in Mountaineville. How was he to know that, though Mountaineville's mornings are always refreshingly cool, its mid-day hours are insufferably hot? And how was he to know that Mountaineville's roads are of a strangely elastic kind that double in length the moment one turns about for home? He was ready to swear that he had already walked twice as many miles coming back as on the outward journey. He was dusty and hungry and thirsty and very tired, for he was not accustomed to such protracted exercises. Today he had been bewitched by the morning breeze; tomorrow he would be wise.

Now, as it chanced, at this spot there was a little lane which led from the highway up over the brow of the hill through a deliciously green wood, and after the endless stretch of dusty road it was seductive indeed to Berrien's eyes. Besides, he knew that somewhere to the eastward was another highway which also led back to the village; the lane must lead to that; and as it could not be any longer or hotter or dustier than the road he was on, he might as well go that way. He would try it.

And that was how the trouble began. For ten minutes he walked up the lane, breathing the young man abruptly into a wide clearing, in the centre of which stood a handsome gray stone villa, with well kept lawns and shady walks and cool summer houses all around it. Obviously he had entered one of the neighborhood's finest estates through its rear entrance, and the only thing to do was to retrace his steps. Not thirty yards from where he stood, however, a young girl and a boy were knocking a ball about a tennis court, and even as Berrien's glance took in the scene the girl espied him and approached him, imparting the information to the boy. Both dropped their rackets and ran toward the intruder, expecting to be professed from the premises without further ado.

"So you are here!" exclaimed the girl, breathlessly. "How did you ever get here by yourself?"

If Berrien had been disturbed a moment since by the knowledge of his intrusion, the warmth of this welcome was more embarrassing still. Some one was expected, and he was mistaken for him; that was evident. So, with as much coolness as he could muster, he removed his hat and said he feared there was some mistake; that he was sure he was not the person they supposed him to be, and that, with their permission, he would now retrace the way that he perceived was private property. All of which explanation fell upon deaf ears.

"Oh, we know who you are, all right," explained the youth, with perfect composure. "You are the detective. But, since it was only three hours ago that you were pledged to your superintendent, we did not expect you here so soon. You made good time."

So that was it. Mr. George Berrien, known within a small horizon as a novelist and magazine writer, was mistaken for these young people for a member of some detective force. It was an honor which did not permit him to accept. "With some show of dignity, as well as of impudence, he declared he was merely a gentleman from New York spending a short vacation in Mountaineville. The explanation produced no more impression than the former one had done.

"Of course, of course," said the boy, indignantly. "We understand." And again the seemed perfectly satisfied with his remarkable penetration. And so did the girl.

"I am sure you must be a splendid detective," she said, with some admiration. "You said about being a gentleman from New York just as though it were true. The superintendent said he would send one of his best men and I see he has kept his word. I do love detective stories; you must tell us some true ones after you have found it."

"Found what?" gasped Berrien.

"Oh, come," said the boy, impatiently. "Are you going to keep that up all afternoon? You carry your little comedy too far. You must know as well as I do that this is my sister Beatrice. There is no earthly use masquerading before us. Keep that trick where it will be of more use to you. What is your name?"

Some contrary fate clearly controlled the situation. Berrien struggled helplessly in its spell for an avenue of escape. If the earth had opened at his feet—but he knew there was no hope for that. He was not one gifted with that agility of thought which is ready for every emergency; his life had not been of the kind to train him thus. He felt like a fly in the coils of a spider's web; each effort to extricate himself but served to entangle him more homesteadly. Still he had not even the presence of mind to take exception to the boy's cool impertinence. Meekly enough he told them his name,

and with a forlorn attempt to be facetious said he hoped that it pleased them.

"Oh, the name is good enough," said Mr. Witherton. "I have heard it before somewhere—can't remember where. No matter about that. I was going to say, we told the superintendent all about it, and he, of course, told you, so you know as much about the business as we do and had better get right to work."

"But I tell you," began Berrien, trying once before his protest.

"I don't blame you," interrupted the girl. "You must not mind him, he is young. I know that you wish to do the work in your own way and without any orders from Will or advice from me. Tell us what you want us to do to help you and we will do it." And the two young men watched their victim expectantly, which only made the latter more uncomfortable. The girl came to the rescue again.

"The superintendent said we were to tell you all about it, more fully than we told him over the telephone," said she, regarding him with some doubt, the puzzle being before her. "I suppose that is what you want now. Well, it was simply this. Last night we went to the dance at the country club and I was dancing with you. When we got home I was too tired to return to it to the safe, so I just left it on my bureau till this morning. It was there when I arose, but it was a little late for breakfast."

"You always are," said the brother cheerfully.

"—and I did not have time to put it away then, so I slipped it into one of the drawers and went down stairs. That is the whole story. And now, who do you suppose took it?"

The unwilling audience heaved a sigh of relief. All through the brief recital he had been ready to take to his heels; it was a fine thing indeed to stand here and listen to a story not intended for his ears! But it was not so bad, then, after all. There had merely been some thing stolen, and there was no particular harm in his knowing it. He felt a trifle less contemptible. But as to who had taken it—whatsoever the missing article might be—he could, of course, offer not the slightest explanation. As they had told him what it was—and they had studiously refrained from telling him and all he knew was that it was something that a young woman could wear to a dance and that would fit into a bureau drawer, which was not sufficient information to warrant a professional opinion. Berrien suspected that he was looking more foolish than ever, and since he had not the slightest idea what the missing article was, he gathered his wits for one more attempt to break through the web.

It was not to be. Miss Beatrice drew him deeper into the meshes.

"How stupid of me!" she said. "Of course the next thing you want to do is to question the servant. To Berrien, the room; that is the way they always do in the stories. You detectives are so clever."

And solemnly she led the way across the lawn and into the house. Into the cool library they went, the girl and her captive and the unwilling and question-brother, and immediately the inspection began.

Housekeeper, maids, stablemen, gardeners, filed awkwardly into the room, each told what they knew—which was nothing. But they corroborated each other beautifully, and left no ground for suspicion against any of their number. To Berrien still superlatively uncomfortable, but beginning to feel a growing interest in the case so unceremoniously thrust into his hands, there was no clue here. With more hope he followed his guides up the stairs.

The girl opened a door and the three passed into the chamber. It was large and light and airy and tastefully furnished and decorated. Two French windows opened on the roof of the veranda, and midway between them stood the bureau from which "it" had been taken four hours ago. But who drew to the shambles there here? Berrien glanced shamefully around the room and walked to the window. And then spontaneously there came into his mind an idea—a real detective idea, worthy of any of the famous sleuths of history or of fiction. An active man might climb to that veranda roof by the help of one of the supporting pillars, and once there, what was to prevent him from walking into the room through the low window and taking whatever he wanted. This could easily have been done while the family was at breakfast. Another and more careful glance along the roof, and behold! there were clear marks of large boots on the dusty tin. Berrien's triumph was complete.

"What do you think now?" asked Miss Beatrice.

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"They certainly were," said the boy, solemnly. "By the time that yesterday afternoon. I wouldn't waste much time on him if I were you." And he grinned provokingly at Berrien's complete discomfiture.

"You cannot think of anything else?" asked the girl, eagerly, but not unkindly. It was evident that the last article was exceedingly dear to her and that she was exceeding anxious to recover it.

But Berrien could think of nothing else. And his abortive triumph being over, he was once more anxious only to escape. He would go straight back to the hotel, and the first train that left the Mountaineville depot, without bothering to question why it was a detective. He mumbled something about thinking it over and led the way down the stairs and out across the lawn.

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"Why, no. What use could he himself have for it? But he could sell it, couldn't he?" demanded the girl, regarding the detective suspiciously. "Why do you ask such foolish questions?"

Berrien accepted the reproach meekly, as he was compelled to do, only venturing to suggest that he was not a thief. He immediately heard the man sank back appalled. For the name belonged to a man who owned half the country, and the village was his own! And the son would be unapt to steal from his friend's house what he could buy every day in the year, no matter what it was. This was a very foolish besides. And Berrien expressed his thoughts to the girl without any conscious humor. And as in all Mountaineville and its neighboring country Berrien had found none other such could he be far wrong in supposing that the suspicious character was the thief for whom he was supposed to be searching?

A few minutes before he had felt a great kindness toward the man, but now he was now at least inclined to be angry. He had felt a great kindness toward the man, but now he was now at least inclined to be angry. He had felt a great kindness toward the man, but now he was now at least inclined to be angry.

He was a sullen fellow, this slovenly gentleman. He might have feared that he had been empty of a vital position in his glass, so intently did he watch every movement. The young man noted his boorishness. He put his hand into his pocket by chance and felt there the crisp new bill which young Mr. Witherton had given him the first day of the case. In an instant he had pressed it into the hand of the slovenly gentleman, and the man seemed embarrassed and Berrien walked across the room where were some matches to light his cigar. The man had vanished like a figure in a dream.

Miss Beatrice was again on the veranda, and Berrien again sat himself at her feet. The girl was dressed in no tennis costume now, and Berrien, whose feet were not athletic, was charmed with the change. And he knew instinctively that the change was not in the gown alone; she might romp with the boys in the morning, but he knew she would not be less quick to feel the spell of the summer twilight.

Far away the low sunlight lay on the mountain tops. The tiny strings of river grew dull and gray. A light mist spread low down over the lawns and the woods. Cricket and katydid joined in their evening chorus; otherwise the world was solemnly still.

"Have you any discovered any things?" asked Beatrice, in a low voice.

"No," said the man. "I have not. No—I am sorry—but does it matter much at a time like this? Look at the light on those mountain tops and the purple shade here, and the river, and the evening star. Isn't it beautiful—beautiful?"

"Yes," said the girl, dreamily. "I have sat and watched the sunset, and have never grown tired of it, and have always felt the same."

"Of course," said the man. "Who has not?"

"Yes, but you, a police—I should say a detective, aren't you rather strange?" She did not finish and Berrien had nothing to say. The two sat in silence

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(Continued on page 5.)