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IN AN EVIL MOMENT.

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CHAPTER XVII.

SEARCHING.

The confusion created by Mr. Barr's excited inquiries brought Gregory from his spirit bottle, and Tom Westall from his bed.

"You have had some hand in this," the young surgeon exclaimed, in his rash, impetuous way, addressing Gregory; "but if you have injured one hair of her head your life shall answer for it."

Lily's disappearance had confounded and astonished Gregory, but he turned coldly towards Tom, and said with a sneer:

"Probably Mr. Westall is better acquainted with the young lady's whereabouts than it suits him to say."

"Gregory," said Walter, in that weak, hopeless, helpless tone of his, "has been with me the whole evening. It is some hours since my daughter left us together."

Walter spoke in Gregory's defence, but he had no intention of supporting Gregory's accusation. Confused though he was by the mystery of Lily's flight, he realised distinctly that it was more than improbable that either of these two men had aught to do with it.

It is doubtful whether Tom heard him. Almost before he had finished the passionate threat addressed to Gregory, he was excitedly hurrying over the room, and examining with feverish haste every little article belonging to the one he loved so dearly.

"Why," he cried suddenly, and with intense relief, "there's the dress she wore this evening, and there's her bonnet; she must be in the house. She cannot have left it; and see, there's her cloak."

It had not occurred to Tom that a young lady in Lily's position would have more than one bonnet, and several walking costumes. There was no one there who could speak with any exactness as to the extent of Miss Barr's wardrobe—except the house-maid. And she displayed a knowledge so minute as to be suspicious.

After a careful examination of drawers and cupboards, she declared that the two bonnets and the one hat which her young mistress possessed were all in their usual places; that not one of her dresses had been taken from the room; and that if Lily had really left the building, she had gone without cloak, jacket, or shawl.

Then they echoed Tom's words, and declared that "she must be in the house." Again they searched the premises and the thickly-wooded garden that ran nearly round the pleasant villa. Half an hour after they returned to the dining-room, baffled, despondent, mystified.

They had left her home and ventured into the dark, dark night without covering for head or dress to shield her shoulders, or for her petticoats. Those who knew her, they all there did, cried in their hearts that it was impossible, and yet the evidence before them declared the impossible to be a fact.

Had she been removed by force? This could hardly be, for no hint of a struggle had reached any of their ears, and there were no signs that the house had been surreptitiously entered. Besides it was only a box of a place, and no conscious person could be forcibly removed from it without the struggle arousing the inmates.

Difficult and heartrending as it was to believe that she had gone from them of her own free will, they all realized that there was no other reasonable explanation of her mystery and direful disappearance.

"It's an extraordinary altogether," said Gregory, bothered and sadly troubled. "I cannot make it out at all. However," he added, with a yawn, "I suppose there's nothing to be done to-night. We must wait and see what the morning brings."

Recent luxury had increased Mr. Axon's natural laziness until he had become a complete slave to it. Unless she were to die before her marriage, Lily's departure would mean a loss to him, for Mr. Barr's means would be reduced. It would be better for Gregory were she to marry Tom than to vanish from them altogether. In the former case it was more than certain she would always help her father when he needed her

aid; in the latter who could tell what might happen?

So, we repeat, unless she were dead; unless it were certain that she would die before Tom found her, her disappearance was a most serious thing for Gregory. And yet, though far from being free from agitation, he was perhaps the most calm one there, and certainly the most eager for bed.

"Nothing to be done!" Tom cried, throwing upon Gregory a look of bitterest contempt. "There is everything to be done. Do you think I can tamely wait while she may be in danger? I'll know no sleep till I find her."

He spoke with considerable heat, and as he spoke he tore, rather than took, his great coat from the hall pegs and crushed his hat upon his head.

They followed his quick step. The two servants regarded his manner and his words with evident approbation; Gregory made an effort to throw off his own weariness and lack of energy. Poor Walter, as usual, wrung his hands and looked appealingly from face to face.

"I've heard, sir," said the smart house-maid diffidently, "of young people walking in their sleep."

"Of course," Tom vehemently exclaimed; "what fools we all are not to have thought of it before. The poor girl has had an attack of somnambulism—that explains everything."

Almost before he had finished speaking he had opened the front door; in another minute he was walking as quick as his legs would carry him towards the end of the street that ran into the main thoroughfare.

They all clustered on the doorstep and strove to peer through the darkness and follow his movements. Not one of them accompanied him. Walter was dazed and stupefied; Axon declared, with the air of a martyr, that it was obviously his duty to stay and protect the house—he did not explain what special danger threatened it that night—and the servants were, of course, useless to Tom.

Mr. Axon agreed that the somnambulistic theory was a very reasonable one.

"It would explain everything as Mr. Westall had said," he declared, with more cheerfulness than the occasion warranted.

"People in that state often went out with very little on them. Still, it was very extraordinary, and very sad."

Tom had a particular reason for turning to the left when he rushed from them. To the right the street ended in a large, white, stone house, which stood across the street, surrounded by a broad belt of dark shrubs. There was no thoroughfare at all that way, for the garden at the back of the house ran down to the silent, murky waters of the Regent's Canal.

The other way, as we have already indicated, led into a wide and comparatively busy thoroughfare. In the centre stood an elegant iron pillar decorated with gold, and bearing three brilliant gas lamps. One of these seemed to have been placed for the purpose of illuminating the short street in which Walter had taken his house, pavements and gardens on both sides for nearly halfway down were quite light.

Underneath this central lamp might be found, any night after eleven, and any morning before six, a retailer of hot baked potatoes. He was a sharp, quick-eyed old man. Some years before he had received from the Home Office a reward for giving certain information that ultimately led to the capture of a gang of notorious criminals. This bounty had stimulated his natural keenness to such a degree that he now thought more of watching people than of his more legitimate business. This fact was pretty generally known in the neighborhood; the old man was garrulous, and most of the gentlemen living round about had, at some time, had a conversation with him.

To this man Tom ran with all possible speed. If Lily had passed by that way, he felt certain that this aged amateur detective must have seen her. She had left at the old man's quietest time; when his customer

were few, and he had very little to interrupt his watching.

"No, sir," was the potato merchant's answer, showing Tom a wizened face, and two discoloured angles of teeth. "She ain't passed this way, that I'll swear."

"She had no bonnet on, and no dress," Tom continued excitedly. "Are you quite sure she mightn't have passed you when you were serving a customer?"

"A customer!" the old man repeated contemptuously, with a short, snappy laugh; "d'ya think I ever look at my customers?" He grinned horribly, and his teeth glistened. "No, no, sir, that would be no good at all. No wrong 'uns—thieves, I mean, sir, and such like—come to me. Ever since I broke up the Wolf's gang they've all had too much respect for me to patronise this shop, or to let me slap eyes upon 'em. They call me 'Silas the Slop,' and I'm proud of the name. Look at my customers! When I'm serving a customer my eyes are sharpest on the road. I've known some of 'em give a lad a penny to come and buy tattles, thinking they'd get past me unobserved while I was serving—but no, sir, they can't do it. I'm up to every move o' theirs. Not a wrong 'un can pass this emporium without me seeing 'em!"

"But—" "You're a going to say that the young lady ain't one of that sort. Of course, I know it. But I watches 'em all, good or bad, straight or crooked, and as sure as the stars in heaven are shining down upon us, Miss Barr ain't passed here to-night."

"You know her name!" cried Tom in an amazement even his anxiety could not control, "and yet you are only here late at night."

The old man's eyes glittered. He watched Tom's astonishment with obvious pride. Then in a lower, more confidential voice he said:

"There ain't a soul living round this bit of neighborhood that I don't know—their names—their habits—everything. Ah," he added with much inward unction, "you'd wonder—that you would—you'd wonder." After a pause, during which Tom looked wildly all around him, the old man added, "You may take my word for it, the lady ain't passed this way."

"If Silas says so, you may lay it right, sir," said a voice by their side. Tom turned and saw that a policeman was standing by him.

"And there is no other way to get out of that road," Silas went on, oracularly, not noticing the interruption. "The walls on the backs of them houses on each side are too high for a young girl—leastways a young lady—to climb; and at the other end—at the other end—Ah! at the other end the garden runs down to the canal."

"The canal?" Tom echoed in dismay. "I pray to God that she has not walked into that," and he bounded towards it, followed by the policeman. Old Silas kept his post by the side of his "emporium;" he was satisfied in his own mind that if he deserted it for only a few minutes, all the thieves and rogues in the metropolis would immediately pomenade the pavement in front of it.

Ere the young surgeon had succeeded in entering the grounds belonging to the house at the bottom, he had briefly explained to the policeman the cause of his excitement.

"Well, sir," said the man, "I don't see how she could have very well got through here. Both the gates are locked and the railings are high. If she's got into that garden at all she must have climbed over."

She must have left the road either at this end or the other," Tom declared impatiently, in an agony of fear. "Besides," he added, "how do we know how long these gates have been locked?"

By this time another policeman had joined them, and very soon they had roused one of the servants of the house.

The gates had been locked for some hours—long before it was possible for Lily to have left her house. Nevertheless they searched the grounds carefully more than once; and they examined the banks of the canal for some distance in both directions. No sign or trace of her could they discover.

It was arranged that as soon as day broke the canal should be dragged. All that night, and far into the next, Tom continued his weary search; tramping the streets, visiting police-stations, questioning those whose calling took them about the London highways at night, and still no news of Lily. The mystery which surrounded her disappearance increased his anxiety and his grief. Even the detectives had such faith in old Silas

as to believe that she could not have passed him unperceived; and those who dragged the canal were quite sure that her poor body was not there. Perplexed and beaten—not yet conquered though, for he would devote his life to the unravelling of this heart-rending enigma—Tom was the prey to the most distressing emotions that ever assailed upon the human soul. Sometimes he thought that he had gone a little mad; strangers, who observed his wild look, and his unceasing agitation, considered him very far gone indeed. But Tom had not lost his reason—unlike to be in the world, but not of it; to be possessed by one overwhelming grief, one over-owering purpose, be insanity. He was keen and vigilant, and full of energy in all plans for the discovery of his dear love.

A few days had greatly changed him. His impetuosity had changed to irritability, his joyous moods never came now.

On the fifth day after Lily's disappearance he received tidings of her from her father's solicitor that blanched his hair a snowier white, and almost drove hope from his heart.

CHAPTER XVIII.

STRANGE NEWS.

Rewards had been offered for the recovery of Lily; bills upon the walls and advertisements in the newspapers described her appearance, and the date on which she had vanished, yet, notwithstanding this publicity, Mr. Wicks—Walter's solicitor—heard nothing of the matter until some days afterwards. It was curious, too, that they had not gone to him in their trouble, but it happened in this way. One of the detectives whom Tom consulted advised him to employ a sharp firm of lawyers, and supplied him with the name of one that was, he declared, the "best in London." Walter, in his agitated, helpless state, forgot all about his own legal adviser; and Mr. Wicks' name was not likely, under the circumstances, to occur to Tom.

"Good gracious me!" cried Mr. Wicks, when some one pointed out the advertisement to him; "disappeared has she? Well who would have thought it? Just five days ago, and this is the first I've heard of it. Wonderful!"

Mr. Wicks was a fussy, fidgety, little man, with a scared look and a bluish complexion. He called his solitary clerk to him, and in his quick, nervous way demanded the reason why the advertisement had not been shown him earlier. The dilapidated clerk had the best of answers; he had not seen it himself. Then Mr. Wicks wanted to know where the deuce his eyes were—the man looked furtively round the room as though he had dropped them somewhere—and what the devil he did for his money; to which last question the fellow was obviously puzzled to reply.

"Come," Mr. Wicks went on, "don't stand there as if you'd got a month to do a day's work in. Fetch me my hat and coat. I'll go to Mr. Barr's house at once." With much haste and excitement Mr. Wicks arranged his papers upon his desk preparatory to shutting and locking it up.

When he was ready to start, the clerk placed his finger on the advertisement, and said abruptly:

"Did you see that?"

"What?"

Mr. Wicks adjusted his eyeglasses and read the concluding lines of the announcement to which his familiar pointed:

"Information to be given to Inspector Jennings, F.C. Scotland yard, or to Messrs. Shriver, Picer, and Stabbs, Craig's-court, W.C."

Mr. Wicks let the paper fall and looked at his clerk; the clerk took a prodigious pinch of snuff and looked at his employer.

"Shriver, Picer, and Stabbs," the little lawyer repeated. "Very good, very good indeed; and that's my reward for studying Mr. Walter Barr's eccentricities all these years. Marl, take off my coat; hang up my hat; place my umbrella in the stand."

"I thought so," said Marl. "Shriver, Picer, and Stabbs," he continued in a tone of withering contempt; "it's the best joke I've heard for many a day."

Mr. Wicks resumed his seat at his desk and wrote a short note.

"Marl, can you spare half an hour or so?"

"Might," answered Marl, doubtfully.

"Take a cab to Mr. Barr's house—here's the address; give him this letter, and bring him back with you."

Marl nodded his head and shuffled from the room. An hour later, Tom Westall burst into it, crying impetuously: