



THE LEAVENWORTH CASE

and impudence. "We are not absolute-ly sure that she's anywhere. But word has come to us that a girl's face be- lieved to be Hannah's, has been seen at the upper window of a certain house in—don't start—R— where a year ago she was in the habit of visit- ing while at the hotel with the Misses Leavenworth. Now it has already been determined that she left New York the night of the murder, the point — Railroad, though for some time we have been unable to ascertain, we consider the matter worth inquiring into."

"But—" "If she is there," went on Mr. Gryse, "she is secreted, kept very close. No one except the informant has ever seen her, nor is there any suspicion among the neighbors of her being in town." "Hannah secreted at a certain house in R—? Whose house?" "Mr. Gryse doowered me with one of his trimmest smiles. "The name of the lady she's with, is given in the communication as Belden; Mrs. Amy Belden."

"Amy Belden the name found writ- ten on a torn envelope by Mr. Claver- ing's servant girl in London?" "Yes." "I made no attempt to conceal my satis- faction. Then we are upon the verge of some discovery; Providence has in- terfered and Eleanor will be saved. But when did you get this word?" "Last night, or rather this morn- ing; Q brought it."

"It was a message then to Q?" "Yes, the result of his molings while in R—, I suppose."

"Who was it signed by?" "A respectable tinsmith who lives next door to Mrs. B."

"And is this the first you know of an Amy Belden living in R—?" "Yes."

"Widow or wife?" "Don't know; don't know anything about her but her name?" "But you have already sent Q to make inquiries?"

"No; the affair is a little too serious for him to manage, that is, I hesitate trusting him alone. A contingency might arise when brains would be use- ful, and though I am not a spy, in the prying sort, he is not equal to great occasions, and might fall just for the lack of a keen mind to direct him."

"In short—" "I wish you to go. Since I cannot be there myself, I know no one else sufficiently up to the affair, to con- duct the enterprise of a successful in- sive. You see it is not enough to find and identify the girl. The present con- dition of things demands that the ar- rest of so important a witness as this, should be kept secret if possible. Now for a man to walk into a strange house in a distant village, find a girl who is secreted there, frighten her, cajole her, force her, as she can, to reveal her hiding-place to a detective's office in New York, and all without the knowledge of the next door neigh- bor if possible, requires judgment, brains, genius. Then the woman who conceals her! She must have her rea- sons for doing so, and they must be known. Altogether the affair is a de- licate one. Do you think you can manage it?"

surrounding villa. Not that I had any intention this time of making even a casual stop at that attractive refuge for New York pleasure-seekers. My intention was rather to seek out our client, Mr. Monell, and from him learn the best manner of approaching Mrs. Belden. To his hospitable mansion, on the road to R—, I hasten- ed, and was so fortunate as to find him driving into town behind his fam- ous rotter Alfred; an encounter, if I may so call it, which struck me as a peculiarly fortunate, giving me, as it did, ample opportunity for a tete-a- tete conversation with him, without imposing upon me the delay which a visit at his house must have necessarily occasioned.

"Well, and how goes the day?" was the exclamation of my friend as the first greetings passed, we drove rapid- ly into town.

"Your part in it goes pretty smooth- ly," returned I, "and thinking I could not fail to win his attention to my affairs till I had satisfied him in re- gard to his own, I told him what I knew concerning his case then pending a subject so prolific of question and answer, that he had driven twice around the town before he remembered that he had a letter to post. As it was so important, he hurriedly admit- ting my delay, we hastened at once to the post-office, where he went in, leaving me outside to watch the rather meager stream of goers and comers who, at that time of day make the post-office a sort of rendezvous. Among these for some reason I especially noted one middle-aged woman, why I cannot say; her appear- ance was anything but remarkable. And yet when she came out with two letters in her hand, one in a large and one in a small envelope, and meet- ing my eye hastily drew them under her shawl, I found myself wondering what was in her letters and who she could be, that the casual glance of a stranger should unconsciously move her to an action so suspicious. But Mr. Monell's reappearance at the same moment, diverted my attention, and in the interest of the conversation that followed, I soon forgot both the wo- man and her letters. For determined that he should have no opportunity to revert to that endless topic, a law case, I exclaimed with the first crack of the whip: "There, I knew you were something wanted to ask you. It is this: Are you acquainted with any one in this town by the name of Belden?"

"There is a widow Belden in town; I don't know of any other."

"Is her first name Amy?" "Yes, Mrs. Amy Belden."

"That is the one," said I. "Who is she, what is she, and what is the ex- tent of your acquaintance with her?" "Well," said he, "I cannot conceive why you should be interested in such an antiquated piece of the common- place goodness as she is, but seeing you ask, I have no objection to telling you that she is the very respectable relict of a deceased cabinetmaker of this town; that she lives in a little house down the street there, and that if you have any former old tramp to be lodged ever night, or any destitute family of little ones to be looked after, she is the one to go to. As to knowing her, I know her as I do a dozen other members of our church who live up over the hill. When I see her I speak to her, and that is all. But why in the name of wonder did you ask?"

"Business," said I, "business, Mrs. Belden—don't mention it by the way—has got mixed up in a case of mine, and I felt it due to my curiosity if not to my purse, to find out something about her. And I am not satisfied yet. The fact is I would give some- thing to Monell, for the opportunity of studying this woman's character. Now couldn't you manage to get me in- troduced into her house in some way that would make it possible and prop- er for me to converse with her at my leisure? Business would thank you if you could."

Driving up to a neat white cottage of homely but sufficiently attractive appearance, he stopped.

"This is her house," said he, jump- ing to the ground, "let's go in and see what we can do. As she has no servant, she will come to the door herself, so be ready," said he as he knocked.

I had barely time to observe that the curtains to the window at my left suddenly dropped when the heavy step made itself heard within, and a quick hand threw open the door, and I saw before me the woman whom I had observed at the post-office, and whose address with the letters had struck me as being so peculiar. I re- cognized her at first glance, though she was differently dressed and had evidently passed through some worry or excitement that had altered the ex- pression of her countenance and made her manner what it was not at that time, strained and a trifle uncertain. But I saw no reason for thinking that she remembered me. On the contrary, she directed towards me had nothing but inquiry in it, and when Mr. Monell pushed me forward with the remark, "A friend of mine; in fact my lawyer from New York," she dropped a hurried old-fashioned courtesy whose only expression was a manifest desire to appear sensible of the dis- honor conferred upon her, through the mist of a certain trouble that confused everything about her.

"We have come to ask a favor, Mrs. Belden," said I, "and I don't come in to see my client in a round, hearty voice well calculated to recall a per- son's thoughts into their proper chan- nel. I have heard many times of your cozy home and would like an opportunity to see it. And with a blind disregard to look of surprise and resistance that rose voluntarily into her eyes, he stepped gallantly into the little room whose cheery-red carpet and bright picture-hung walls, showed invitingly through the half-open door at our left.

Finding her premises thus invaded by a sort of French coup d'etat, Mrs. Belden made the best of the situation. Mr. Monell broached the subject of my entertainment there.

"I was never called inhosptable," she commenced, "but everything in such disorder—What time would you like to come?" she suddenly asked.

"I was in hopes I might remain now," replied I; "I have some letters to write and would ask nothing bet- ter than to leave to sit here and write them."

At the word letters I saw her hand go to her pocket in a movement which must have been involuntary, for her countenance did not change and she made the quick reply:

"Well, you may. If you can put up with what I can give you, you shall not be said that I refused you. Mr. Monell is pleased to call a favor." And complete in her recep- tion as she had been in her restat- ution, she gave us a pleasant smile, and ignoring my thanks, bustled off with Mr. Monell to the buggy, where she received my bag and what was doubtless more to her taste, the com- plement of a new hat. I was not more than ever ready to bestow upon her.

"I will see that some room is got ready for you in a very short space of time," she said upon the hall, go up two or three stairs, pause, go up the rest of the flight, pause again and then pass on. I was left on the first floor alone.

XXVIII. A WEIRD EXPERIENCE. The first thing I did was to inspect the room in which I was.

I stopped before a window opening upon the small yard, that ran about the house, and separated it from the one adjoining, when suddenly I let- ticed a row of letters, which as nearly as I could make out, were meant for some word or words, but which ut- terly failed in sense or apparent connection.

What could they mean? Idly I be- gan to read them backward, when— But try for yourself, reader, and judge what my surprise must have been at the result! Elate at the discovery thus made, I sat down to write my letters. I had barely finished them, when Mrs. Belden came in with the announce- ment that supper was ready. "As for your room," said she, "I have pre- pared my own for your use, thinking it would be more convenient for you to be on the first floor." And throw- ing open a door at my side, she dis- played a small, but comfortable room, in which I could dimly see a bed, an immense bureau and a shadowy look- ing-glass in a dark old-fashioned re- framed.

"I live in very primitive fashion," resumed she, leading the way into the dining-room, "but I mean to be com- fortable and make others so."

"I should say that you amply suc- ceeded," I rejoined with an appreci- ative glance at her well-laid board.

She smiled, and I felt that I had paved the way to her good graces, in a way that would yet redound to my advantage.

Once again seated with Mrs. Belden at the table, I caught her in the act of setting it down on the table.

"I made up my mind to wait a rea- sonable length of time for what she had to say, and then if she did not speak, make an endeavor on my own part to get at her secret."

The avowal was nearer than I expected, and different, and brought its own train of consequences with it.

"You are a lawyer, I believe," she began, taking down her knitting work with a forced display of industry.

"Yes," said I, "that is my profes- sion."

"Perhaps you may be willing, then, to give me some advice. The truth is, I am in a very curious predicament; one from which I don't know how to es- cape, and yet which demands im- mediate attention. Should like to tell you about it, may I?"

"You may; I shall be only too happy to give you any advice in my power."

She drew in her breath with a sort of vague relief, though her forehead did not lose its frown.

"I can all be said in a few words. I have in my possession a package of papers which were entrusted to me by two ladies, with the understanding that I should neither return nor de- stroy them, without the full cogni- zance and expressed desire of both parties, given in person or writing. That they were to remain in my hands till then, and that nothing or nobody should extort them from me."

"That is easy understood," said I, "for she stopped."

"But now comes word from one of the ladies, the one, too, most interest- ed in the matter, that for certain reasons, the immediate destruction of those pa- pers is necessary to her peace and safety."

"And do you want to know what your duty is in that case?"

"Yes," replied she, tremulously. "I rose, I could not help it, and a flood of conjectures rushing in a tumult over me."

"It is to hold on to the papers like grim death, till released from your guardianship, by means to which you have pledged yourself."

"Is that your opinion as a lawyer?"

"Yes, and as a man. Once pledged in that way, you have no choice. It would be a betrayal of trust to yield to the solicitations of a party, who you have undertaken to return to both. The fact, that grief or loss might fol- low your retention of these papers, does not release you from your bond. You have nothing to do with that; be- sides you are by no means sure that the representations of the so-called in- terested party are true. You might be doing a greater wrong by destroying in this way what is manifestly con- sidered of value to them both than by preserving the papers intact, according to compact."

"But the circumstances? Circum- stances alter cases, and in short, it seems to me that the wishes of the one most interested ought to be regard- ed, especially as there is an estrange- ment between these ladies, which may hinder the other's consent from ever being obtained."

"No," said I, "two wrongs never make a right; nor are we at liberty to do an act of justice at the expense of an injustice. The papers must be preserved, Mrs. Belden."

Her head sank very despondently; evidently it had been her wish to please the interested party. Law is very hard," she said, "very hard."

"This is not only my duty," I re- marked, "suppose the honor and hap- piness of the other party depended upon the preservation of the papers, where would your duty be then?"

"A contract is a contract," said I, "and cannot be tampered with. Hav-

ing accepted the trust and given your word, you are obliged to fulfill to the letter all its conditions. It would be a breach of trust for you to return or to destroy the papers without the mu- tual consent necessary."

An expression of great gloom settled slowly over her features. "I suppose you are right," said she, and became silent.

Watching her, I thought to myself, "If I were Mr. Gryse, or even Q, I would never leave this seat till I had probed this matter to the bottom, and turned who the parties are, and where these precious papers are hidden, that seem to be of so much importance."

But being neither, I could only keep her talking upon the subject until she served as a guinea pig for further in- sult; and then, as there was no further intention of asking her some ques- tion, when my attention was attracted by the figure of a woman coming out of the back door of the neighboring house, which in general dilapidation and uncouthness of bearing was a per- fect type of the style of tramp of whom we had been talking at the supper table. Gnawing a crust which she threw away as she reached the street, she trudged down the path, her scanty dress, piteous in its rags and soil, flap- ping in the keen spring wind, and revealing ragged shoes red with the mud of the highway.

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