

# Story of the Vanishing Patient

By Elia W. Peattie

There had always been strange stories about the house, but it was a sensible, comfortable sort of a neighborhood, and people took pains to say to one another that there was nothing in these tales -- of course not! Absolutely nothing! How could there be? It was a matter of common remark, however, that considering the amount of money the Nethertons had spent on the place, it was curious they lived there so little. They were nearly always away, -- up North in the summer and down South in the winter, and over to Paris or London now and then, -- and when they did come home it was only to entertain a number of guests from the city. The place was either plunged in gloom or gayety. The old gardener who kept house by himself in the cottage at the back of the yard had things much his own way by far the greater part of the time.

Dr. Block and his wife lived next door to the Nethertons, and he and his wife, who were so absurd as to be very happy in each other's company, had the benefit of the beautiful yard. They walked there mornings when the leaves were silvered with dew, and evenings they sat beside the lily pond and listened for the whip-poor-will. The doctor's wife moved her room over to that side of the house which commanded a view of the yard, and thus made the honeysuckles and laurel and clematis and all the masses of tossing greenery her own. Sitting there day after day with her sewing, she speculated about the mystery which hung impalpably yet undeniably over the house.

It happened one night when she and her husband had gone to their room, and were congratulating themselves on the fact that he had no very sick patients and was likely to enjoy a good night's rest, that a ring came at the door.

"If it's any one wanting you to leave home," warned his wife, "you must tell them you are all worn out. You've been disturbed every night this week, and it's too much!"

The young physician went downstairs. At the door stood a man whom he had never seen before.

"My wife is lying very ill next door," said the stranger, "so ill that I fear she will not live till morning. Will you please come to her at once?"

"Next door?" cried the physician. "I didn't know the Nethertons were home!"

"Please hasten," begged the man. "I must go back to her. Follow as quickly as you can."

The doctor went back upstairs to complete his toilet.

"How absurd," protested his wife when she heard the story. "There is no one at the Nethertons'. I sit where I can see the front door, and no one can enter without my knowing it, and I have been sewing by the window all day. If there were any one in the house, the gardener would have the porch lantern lighted. It is some plot. Some one has designs on you. You must not go."

But he went. As he left the room his wife placed a revolver in his pocket.

The great porch of the mansion was dark, but the physician made out that the door was open, and he entered. A feeble light came from the bronze lamp at the turn of the stairs, and by it he found his way, his feet sinking noiselessly in the rich carpets. At the head of the stairs the man met him. The doctor thought himself a tall man, but the stranger topped him by half a head. He motioned the physician to follow him, and the two went down the hall to the front room. The place was flushed with a rose-colored glow from several lamps. On a silken couch, in the midst

of pillows, lay a woman dying with consumption. She was like a lily, white, shapely, graceful, with feeble yet charming movements. She looked at the doctor appealingly, then, seeing in his eyes the involuntary verdict that her hour was at hand, she turned toward her companion with a glance of anguish. Dr. Block asked a few questions. The man answered them, the woman remaining silent. The physician administered something stimulating, and then wrote a prescription which he placed on the mantel-shelf.

"The drug store is closed to-night," he said, "and I fear the druggist has gone home. You can have the prescription filled the first thing in the morning, and I will be over before breakfast."

After that, there was no reason why he should not have gone home. Yet, oddly enough, he preferred to stay. Nor was it professional anxiety that prompted this delay. He longed to watch those mysterious persons, who, almost oblivious of his presence, were speaking their mortal farewells in their glances, which were impassioned and of unutterable sadness.

He sat as if fascinated. He watched the glitter of rings on the woman's long, white hands, he noted the waving of light hair about her temples, he observed the details of her gown of soft white silk which fell about her in voluminous folds. Now and then the man gave her of the stimulant which the doctor had provided; sometimes he bathed her face with water. Once he paced the floor for a moment till a motion of her hand quieted him.

After a time, feeling that it would be more sensible and considerate of him to leave, the doctor made his way home. His wife was awake, impatient to hear of his experiences. She listened to his tale in silence, and when he had finished she turned her face to the wall and made no comment.

"You seem to be ill, my dear," he said. "You have a chill. You are shivering."

"I have no chill," she replied sharply. "But I -- well, you may leave the light burning."

The next morning before breakfast the doctor crossed the dewy sward to the Netherton house. The front door was locked, and no one answered to his repeated ringings. The old gardener chanced to be cutting the grass near at hand, and he came running up.

"What you ringin' that door-bell for, doctor?" said he. "The folks ain't come home yet. There ain't nobody there."

"Yes, there is, Jim. I was called here last night. A man came for me to attend his wife. They must both have fallen asleep that the bell is not answered. I wouldn't be surprised to find her dead, as a matter of fact. She was a desperately sick woman. Perhaps she is dead and something has happened to him. You have the key to the door, Jim. Let me in."

But the old man was shaking in every limb, and refused to do as he was bid.

"Don't you never go in there, doctor," whispered he, with chattering teeth. "Don't you go for to 'tend no one. You jus' come tell me when you sent for that way. No, I ain't goin' in, doctor, nohow. It ain't part of my duties to go in. That's been stipulated by Mr. Netherton. It's my business to look after the garden."

Argument was useless. Dr. Block took the bunch of keys from the old man's pocket and himself unlocked the front door and entered. He mounted the steps and made his way to the upper room. There was no evidence of occupancy. The place was silent, and, so far as living creature went, vacant. The dust lay over everything. It covered the delicate damask of the sofa where he had seen the dying woman. It rested on the pillows. The place smelled musty and evil, as if it had not been used for a long time. The lamps of the room held not a drop of oil.

But on the mantel-shelf was the prescription which the doctor had written the night before. He read it, folded it, and put it in his pocket.

As he locked the outside door the old gardener came running to him.

“Don’t you never go up there again, will you?” he pleaded, “not unless you see all the Nethertons home and I come for you myself. You won’t, doctor?”

“No,” said the doctor.

When he told his wife she kissed him, and said:

“Next time when I tell you to stay at home, you must stay!”