

Disappearances

By Elizabeth Gaskell

I am not in the habit of seeing the *Household Words* regularly; but a friend, who lately sent me some of the back numbers, recommended me to read 'all the papers relating to the Detective and Protective Police,' which I accordingly did—not as the generality of readers have done, as they appeared week by week, or with pauses between, but consecutively, as a popular history of the Metropolitan Police; and, as I suppose it may also be considered, a history of the police force in every large town in England. When I had ended these papers, I did not feel disposed to read any others at that time, but preferred falling into a train of reverie and recollection.

First of all I remembered, with a smile, the unexpected manner in which a relation of mine was discovered by an acquaintance, who had mislaid or forgotten Mr B.'s address. Now my dear cousin, Mr B., charming as he is in many points, has the little peculiarity of liking to change his lodgings once every three months on an average, which occasions some bewilderment to his country friends, who have no sooner learnt the 19, Belle Vue Road, Hampstead, than they have to take pains to forget that address, and to remember the 27 ½, Upper Brown Street, Camberwell; and so on, till I would rather learn a page of *Walker's Pronouncing Dictionary*, than try to remember the variety of directions which I have had to put on my letters to Mr B. during the last three years. Last summer it pleased him to remove to a beautiful village not ten miles out of London, where there is a railway station. Thither his friend sought him. (I do not now speak of the following scent there had been through three or four different lodgings, where Mr B. had been residing, before his country friend ascertained that he was now lodging at R—.) He spent the morning in making inquiries as to Mr B.'s whereabouts in the village; but many gentlemen were lodging there for the summer, and neither butcher nor baker could inform him where Mr B. was staying; his letters were unknown at the post-office, which was accounted for by the circumstance of their always being directed to his office in town. At last the country friend sauntered back to the railway-office, and while he waited for the train he made inquiry, as a last resource, of the book-keeper at the station. 'No, sir, I cannot tell you where Mr B. lodges—so many gentlemen go by the trains; but I have no doubt but that the person standing by that pillar can inform you.' The individual to whom he directed the inquirer's attention had the appearance of a tradesman—respectable enough, yet with no pretensions to 'gentility', and had, apparently, no more urgent employment than lazily watching the passengers who came dropping in to the station. However, when he was spoken to, he answered civilly and promptly. 'Mr B.? tall gentleman, with light hair? Yes, sir, I know Mr B. He lodges at No. 8, Morton Villas—has done these three weeks or more; but you'll not find him there, sir, now. He went to town by the eleven o'clock train, and does not usually return until the half-past four train.'

The country friend had no time to lose in returning to the village, to ascertain the truth of this statement. He thanked his informant, and said he would call on Mr B. at his office in town; but before he left R— station, he asked the book-keeper who the person was to whom he had referred him for information as to his friend's place of residence. 'One of the Detective Police, sir,' was the answer. I need hardly say that Mr B., not without a little surprise, confirmed the accuracy of the policeman's report in every particular.

When I heard this anecdote of my cousin and his friend, I thought that there could be no more romances written on the same kind of plot as Caleb Williams; the principal interest of which, to

the superficial reader, consists in the alternation of hope and fear, that the hero may, or may not, escape his pursuer. It is long since I have read the story, and I forget the name of the offended and injured gentleman, whose privacy Caleb has invaded; but I know that his pursuit of Caleb—his detection of the various hiding-places of the latter—his following up of slight clues—all, in fact, depended upon his own energy, sagacity and perseverance. The interest was caused by the struggle of man against man; and the uncertainty as to which would ultimately be successful in his object; the unrelenting pursuer, or the ingenious Caleb, who seeks by every device to conceal himself. Now, in 1851, the offended master would set the Detective Police to work; there would be no doubt as to their success; the only question would be as to the time that would elapse before the hiding-place could be detected, and that could not be a question long. It is no longer a struggle between man and man, but between a vast organized machinery, and a weak, solitary individual; we have no hopes, no fears—only certainty. But if the materials of pursuit and evasion, as long as the chase is confined to England, are taken away from the store-house of the romancer, at any rate we can no more be haunted by the idea of the possibility of mysterious disappearances; and any one who has associated much with those who were alive at the end of the last century, can testify that there was some reason for such fears.

When I was a child, I was sometimes permitted to accompany a relation to drink tea with a very clever old lady, of one hundred and twenty—or, so I thought then; I now think she, perhaps, was only about seventy. She was lively, and intelligent, and had seen and known much that was worth narrating. She was a cousin of the Sneyds, the family whence Mr Edgeworth took two of his wives; had known Major André; had mixed in the Old Whig Society that the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire and 'Buff and Blue Mrs Crewe' gathered round them; her father had been one of the early patrons of the lovely Miss Linley. I name these facts to show that she was too intelligent and cultivated by association, as well as by natural powers, to lend an over-easy credence to the marvellous; and yet I have heard her relate stories of disappearances which haunted my imagination longer than any tale of wonder. One of her stories was this:—Her father's estate lay in Shropshire, and his park-gates opened right on to a scattered village of which he was landlord. The houses formed a straggling irregular street—here a garden, next a gable-end of a farm, there a row of cottages and so on. Now, at the end house or cottage lived a very respectable man and his wife. They were well known in the village, and were esteemed for the patient attention which they paid to the husband's father, a paralytic old man. In winter, his chair was near the fire; in summer, they carried him out into the open space in front of the house to bask in the sunshine, and to receive what placid amusement he could from watching the little passings to and fro of the villagers. He could not move from his bed to his chair without help. One hot and sultry June day, all the village turned out to the hay-fields. Only the very old and the very young remained.

The old father of whom I have spoken was carried out to bask in the sunshine that afternoon as usual, and his son and daughter-in-law went to the hay-making. But when they came home in the early evening, their paralysed father had disappeared—was gone! and from that day forwards, nothing more was ever heard of him. The old lady, who told this story, said with the quietness that always marked the simplicity of her narration, that every inquiry which her father could make was made, and that it could never be accounted for. No one had observed any stranger in the village; no small household robbery, to which the old man might have been supposed an obstacle, had been committed in his son's dwelling that afternoon. The son and daughter-in-law (noted too for their attention to the helpless father) had been a-field among all the neighbours the

whole of the time. In short, it never was accounted for; and left a painful impression on many minds.

I will answer for it, the Detective Police would have ascertained every fact relating to it in a week.

This story from its mystery was painful, but had no consequences to make it tragical. The next which I shall tell (and although traditionary, these anecdotes of disappearances which I relate in this paper are correctly repeated, and were believed by my informants to be strictly true), had consequences, and melancholy ones too. The scene of it is in a little country-town, surrounded by the estates of several gentlemen of large property. About a hundred years ago there lived in this small town an attorney, with his mother and sister. He was agent for one of the squires near, and received rents for him on stated days, which of course were well known. He went at these times to a small public-house, perhaps five miles from —, where the tenants met him, paid their rents and were entertained at dinner afterwards. One night he did not return from this festivity. He never returned. The gentleman whose agent he was, employed the Dogberrys of the time to find him, and the missing cash; the mother, whose support and comfort he was, sought him with all the perseverance of faithful love. But he never returned; and by-and-by the rumour spread that he must have gone abroad with the money; his mother heard the whispers all around her, and could not disprove it; and so her heart broke, and she died. Years after, I think as many as fifty, the well-to-do butcher and grazier of — died; but, before his death, he confessed that he had waylaid Mr — on the heath close to the town, almost within call of his own house, intending only to rob him, but meeting with more resistance than he anticipated, had been provoked to stab him; and had buried him that very night deep under the loose sand of the heath. There his skeleton was found; but too late for his poor mother to know that his fame was cleared. His sister, too, was dead, unmarried, for no one liked the possibilities which might arise from being connected with the family. None cared if he was guilty or innocent now.

If our Detective Police had only been in existence!

This last is hardly a story of unaccounted-for disappearance. It is only unaccounted for in one generation. But disappearances never to be accounted for on any supposition are not uncommon, among the traditions of the last century. I have heard (and I think I have read it in one of the earlier numbers of *Chambers's Journal*), of a marriage which took place in Lincolnshire about the year 1750. It was not then *de rigueur* that the happy couple should set out on a wedding journey; but instead, they and their friends had a merry jovial dinner at the house of either bride or groom; and in this instance the whole party adjourned to the bridegroom's residence, and dispersed, some to ramble in the garden, some to rest in the house until the dinner-hour. The bridegroom, it is to be supposed, was with his bride, when he was suddenly summoned away by a domestic, who said that a stranger wished to speak to him; and henceforward he was never seen more. The same tradition hangs about an old deserted Welsh Hall standing in a wood near Festiniog; there, too, the bridegroom was sent for to give audience to a stranger on his wedding-day, and disappeared from the face of the earth from that time; but there, they tell in addition, that the bride lived long,—that she passed her three-score years and ten, but that daily during all those years, while there was light of sun or moon to lighten the earth, she sat watching,—watching at one particular window which commanded a view of the approach to the house. Her whole faculties, her whole mental powers, became absorbed in that weary watching; long before she died, she was childish, and only conscious of one wish—to sit in that long high window, and watch the road, along which he might come. She was as faithful as Evangeline, if pensive and inglorious.

That these two similar stories of disappearance on a wedding-day 'obtained', as the French say, shows us that anything which adds to our facility of communication, and organization of means, adds to our security of life. Only let a bridegroom try to disappear from an untamed *Katherine* of a bride, and he will soon be brought home, like a recreant coward, overtaken by the electric telegraph, and clutched back to his fate by a detective policeman.

Two more stories of disappearance, and I have done. I will give you the last in date first, because it is the most melancholy; and we will wind up cheerfully (after a fashion). Some time between 1820 and 1830, there lived in North Shields a respectable old woman, and her son, who was trying to struggle into sufficient knowledge of medicine, to go out as ship-surgeon in a Baltic vessel, and perhaps in this manner to earn money enough to spend a session in Edinburgh. He was furthered in all his plans by the late benevolent Dr G—, of that town. I believe the usual premium was not required in his case; the young man did many useful errands and offices which a finer young gentleman would have considered beneath him; and he resided with his mother in one of the alleys (or 'chares',) which lead down from the main street of North Shields to the river. Dr G— had been with a patient all night, and left her very early on a winter's morning to return home to bed; but first he stepped down to his apprentice's home, and bade him get up, and follow him to his own house, where some medicine was to be mixed, and then taken to the lady. Accordingly the poor lad came, prepared the dose and set off with it some time between five and six on a winter's morning. He was never seen again. Dr G— waited, thinking he was at his mother's house; she waited, considering that he had gone to his day's work. And meanwhile, as people remembered afterwards, the small vessel bound to Edinburgh sailed out of port. The mother expected him back her whole life long; but some years afterwards occurred the discoveries of the Hare and Burke horrors, and people seemed to gain a dark glimpse at his fate; but I never heard that it was fully ascertained, or indeed more than surmised. I ought to add that all who knew him spoke emphatically as to his steadiness of purpose, and conduct, so as to render it improbable in the highest degree that he had run off to sea, or suddenly changed his plan of life in any way.

My last story is one of a disappearance which was accounted for after many years. There is a considerable street in Manchester leading from the centre of the town to some of the suburbs. This street is called at one part Garratt, and afterwards, where it emerges into gentility and, comparatively, country, Brook Street. It derives its former name from an old black-and-white hail of the time of Richard the Third, or thereabouts, to judge from the style of building; they have closed in what is left of the old hall now; but a few years since this old house was visible from the main road; it stood low on some vacant ground, and appeared to be half in ruins. I believe it was occupied by several poor families who rented tenements in the tumble-down dwelling. But formerly it was Gerard Hall, (what a difference between Gerard and Garratt!) and was surrounded by a park with a clear brook running through it, with pleasant fish-ponds, (the name of these was preserved until very lately, on a street near,) orchards, dovecotes, and similar appurtenances to the manor-houses of former days. I am almost sure that the family to whom it belonged were Mosleys, probably a branch of the tree of the lord of the Manor of Manchester. Any topographical work of the last century relating to their district would give the name of the last proprietor of the old stock, and it is to him that my story refers.

Many years ago there lived in Manchester two old maiden ladies, of high respectability. All their lives had been spent in the town, and they were fond of relating the changes which had taken place within their recollection, which extended back to seventy or eighty years from the present time. They knew much of its traditionary history from their father, as well; who, with his

father before him, had been respectable attorneys in Manchester, during the greater part of the last century: they were, also, agents for several of the county families, who, driven from their old possessions by the enlargement of the town, found some compensation in the increased value of any land which they might choose to sell. Consequently the Messrs S—, father and son, were conveyancers in good repute, and acquainted with several secret pieces of family history, one of which related to Garratt Hall.

The owner of this estate, some time in the first half of the last century, married young; he and his wife had several children, and lived together in a quiet state of happiness for many years. At last, business of some kind took the husband up to London; a week's journey in those days. He wrote and announced his arrival; I do not think he ever wrote again. He seemed to be swallowed up in the abyss of the metropolis, for no friend (and the lady had many and powerful friends) could ever ascertain for her what had become of him; the prevalent idea was that he had been attacked by some of the street-robbers who prowled about in those days, that he had resisted, and had been murdered. His wife gradually gave up all hopes of seeing him again, and devoted herself to the care of her children; and so they went on, tranquilly enough, until the heir came of age, when certain deeds were necessary before he could legally take possession of the property. These deeds Mr S— (the family lawyer) stated had been given up by him into the missing gentleman's keeping just before the last mysterious journey to London, with which I think they were in some way concerned. It was possible that they were still in existence; some one in London might have them in possession, and be either conscious or unconscious of their importance. At any rate, Mr S—'s advice to his client was that he should put an advertisement in the London papers, worded so skilfully that any one who might hold the important documents should understand to what it referred, and no one else. This was accordingly done; and although repeated at intervals for some time, it met with no success. But at last a mysterious answer was sent; to the effect that the deeds were in existence, and should be given up; but only on certain conditions, and to the heir himself. The young man, in consequence, went up to London, and adjourned, according to directions, to an old house in Barbican, where he was told by a man, apparently awaiting him, that he must submit to be blindfolded, and must follow his guidance. He was taken through several long passages before he left the house; at the termination of one of these he was put into a sedan-chair, and carried about for an hour or more; he always reported that there were many turnings, and that he imagined he was set down finally not very far from his starting point.

When his eyes were unbandaged, he was in a decent sitting-room, with tokens of family occupation lying about. A middle-aged gentleman entered, and told him that, until a certain time had elapsed (which should be indicated to him in a particular way, but of which the length was not then named), he must swear to secrecy as to the means by which he obtained possession of the deeds. This oath was taken; and then the gentleman, not without some emotion, acknowledged himself to be the missing father of the heir. It seems that he had fallen in love with a damsel, a friend of the person with whom he lodged. To this young woman he had represented himself as unmarried; she listened willingly to his wooing, and her father, who was a shopkeeper in the City, was not averse to the match, as the Lancashire squire had a goodly presence, and many similar qualities, which the shopkeeper thought might be acceptable to his customers. The bargain was struck; the descendant of a knightly race married the only daughter of the City shopkeeper, and became a junior partner in the business. He told his son that he had never repented the step he had taken; that his lowly-born wife was sweet, docile and affectionate; that his family by her was large; and that he and they were thriving and happy. He inquired after

his first (or rather, I should say, his true) wife with friendly affection; approved of what she had done with regard to his estate, and the education of his children; but said that he considered he was dead to her, as she was to him. When he really died he promised that a particular message, the nature of which he specified, should be sent to his son at Garratt; until then they would not hear more of each other; for it was of no use attempting to trace him under his incognito, even if the oath did not render such an attempt forbidden. I dare say the youth had no great desire to trace out the father, who had been one in name only. He returned to Lancashire; took possession of the property at Manchester; and many years elapsed before he received the mysterious intimation of his father's real death. After that, he named the particulars connected with the recovery of the title-deeds to Mr S., and one or two intimate friends. When the family became extinct, or removed from Garratt, it became no longer any very closely kept secret, and I was told the tale of the disappearance by Miss S., the aged daughter of the family agent.

Once more, let me say I am thankful I live in the days of the Detective Police; if I am murdered, or commit bigamy, at any rate my friends will have the comfort of knowing all about it.