

# THE CASE OF THE MISSING LADY

by Agatha Christie

The buzzer on Mr. Blunt's desk—International Detective Agency, Manager, Theodore Blunt—uttered its warning call. Tommy and Tuppence both flew to their respective peepholes which commanded a view of the outer office. There it was Albert's business to delay the prospective client with various artistic devices.

"I will see, sir," he was saying. "But I'm afraid Mr. Blunt is very busy just at present. He is engaged with Scotland Yard on the phone just now."

"I'll wait," said the visitor. "I haven't got a card with me, but my name is Gabriel Stavansson."

The client was a magnificent specimen of manhood, standing over six foot high. His face was bronzed and weather-beaten, and the extraordinary blue of his eyes made an almost startling contrast to the brown skin.

Tommy swiftly made up his mind. He put on his hat, picked up some gloves and opened the door. He paused on the threshold.

"This gentleman is waiting to see you, Mr. Blunt," said Albert.

A quick frown passed over Tommy's face. He took out his watch.

"I am due at the Duke's at a quarter to eleven," he said. Then he looked keenly at the visitor. "I can give you a few minutes if you will come this way."

The latter followed him obediently into the inner office, where Tuppence was sitting demurely with pad and pencil.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Tommy. "Now, sir, perhaps you will state your business? Beyond the fact that it is urgent, that you came here in a taxi, and that you have lately been in the Arctic—or possibly the Antarctic, I know nothing."

The visitor stared at him in amazement.

"But this is marvellous," he cried. "I thought detectives only did such things in books! Your office boy did not even give you my name!"

Tommy sighed deprecatingly.

"Tut, tut, all that was very easy," he said. "The rays of the midnight sun within the Arctic circle have a peculiar action upon the skin—the actinic rays have certain properties. I am writing a little monograph on the subject shortly. But all this is wide of the point. What is it that has brought you to me in such distress of mind?"

"To begin with, Mr. Blunt, my name is Gabriel Stavansson—"

"Ah! of course," said Tommy. "The well-known explorer. You have recently returned from the region of the North Pole, I believe?"

"I landed in England three days ago. A friend who was cruising in northern waters brought me back on his yacht. Otherwise I should not have got back for another fortnight. Now I must tell you, Mr. Blunt, that before I started on this last expedition two years ago, I had the great good fortune to become engaged to Mrs. Maurice Leigh Gordon—"

Tommy interrupted.

"Mrs. Leigh Gordon was, before her marriage—?"

"The Honourable Hermione Crane, second daughter of Lord Lanchester," reeled off Tuppence glibly.

Tommy threw her a glance of admiration.

"Her first husband was killed in the war," added Tuppence.

Gabriel Stavansson nodded.

"That is quite correct. As I was saying, Hermione and I became engaged. I offered, of course, to

give up this expedition, but she wouldn't hear of such a thing—bless her! She's the right kind of woman for an explorer's wife. Well, my first thought on landing was to see Hermione. I sent a telegram from Southampton, and rushed up to town by the first train. I knew that she was living for the time being with an aunt of hers, Lady Susan Clonray, in Pont Street, and I went straight there. To my great disappointment, I found that Hermie was away visiting some friends in Northumberland. Lady Susan was quite nice about it, after getting over her first surprise at seeing me. As I told you, I wasn't expected for another fortnight. She said Hermie would be returning in a few days' time. Then I asked for her address, but the old woman hummed and hawed—said Hermie was staying at one or two different places and that she wasn't quite sure what order she was taking them in. I may as well tell you, Mr. Blunt, that Lady Susan and I have never got on very well. She's one of those fat women with double chins. I loathe fat women—always have—fat women and fat dogs are an abomination unto the Lord—and unfortunately they so often go together! It's an idiosyncrasy of mine, I know—but there it is—I never can get on with a fat woman."

"Fashion agrees with you, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy dryly. "And every one has their own pet aversion—that of the late Lord Roberts was cats."

"Mind you, I'm not saying that Lady Susan isn't a perfectly charming woman—she may be, but I've never taken to her. I've always felt, deep down, that she disapproved of our engagement, and I feel sure that she would influence Hermie against me if that were possible. I'm telling you this for what it's worth. Count it out as prejudice if you like. Well, to go on with my story, I'm the kind of obstinate brute who likes his own way. I didn't leave Pont Street until I'd got out of her the names and addresses of the people Hermie was likely to be staying with. Then I took the mail train north."

"You are, I perceive, a man of action, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy, smiling.

"The thing came upon me like a bombshell. Mr. Blunt, none of these people had seen a sign of Hermie. Of the three houses, only one had been expecting her—Lady Susan must have made a bloomer over the other two—and she had put off her visit there at the last moment by telegram. I returned post haste to London, of course, and went straight to Lady Susan. I will do her the justice to say that she seemed upset. She admitted that she had no idea where Hermie could be. All the same, she strongly negatived any idea of going to the police. She pointed out that Hermie was not a silly young girl, but an independent woman who had always been in the habit of making her own plans. She was probably carrying out some idea of her own.

"I thought it quite likely that Hermie didn't want to report all her movements to Lady Susan. But I was still worried. I had that queer feeling one gets when something is wrong. I was just leaving when a telegram was brought to Lady Susan. She read it with an expression of relief and handed it to me. It ran as follows: *"Changed my plans. Just off to Monte Carlo for a week.—Hermie."*

Tommy held out his hand.

"You have got the telegram with you?"

"No, I haven't. But it was handed in at Maldon, Surrey. I noticed that at the time, because it struck me as odd. What should Hermie be doing at Maldon. She'd no friends there that I had ever heard of."

"You didn't think of rushing off to Monte Carlo in the same way that you had rushed north?"

"I thought of it, of course. But I decided against it. You see, Mr. Blunt, whilst Lady Susan seemed quite satisfied by that telegram, I wasn't. It struck me as odd that she should always telegraph, not write. A line or two in her own handwriting would have set all my fears at rest. But anyone can sign a telegram 'Hermie.' The more I thought it over, the more uneasy I got. In the end I went down to Maldon. That was yesterday afternoon. It's a fair-sized place—good links there and all that—two hotels. I inquired everywhere I could think of, but there wasn't a sign that Hermie had ever been there. Coming back in the train I read your advertisement and I thought I'd put it up to you. If Hermie has really gone off to Monte Carlo, I don't want to set the police on her track and make a scandal, but I'm not going to be sent off on a wild goose chase myself. I stay here in London, in case—in case there's been foul play of any kind."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully.

"What do you suspect exactly?"

"I don't know. But I feel there's something wrong."

With a quick movement, Stavansson took a case from his pocket and laid it open before them.

"That is Hermione," he said. "I will leave it with you."

The photograph represented a tall, willowy woman, no longer in her first youth, but with a charming frank smile and lovely eyes.

"Now, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy, "there is nothing you have omitted to tell me?"

"Nothing whatever."

"No detail, however small?"

"I don't think so."

Tommy sighed.

"That makes the task harder," he observed. "You must often have noticed, Mr. Stavansson, in reading of crime, how one small detail is all the great detective needs to set him on the track. I may say that this case presents some unusual features. I have, I think, partially solved it already, but time will show."

He picked up a violin which lay on the table and drew the bow once or twice across the strings. Tuppence ground her teeth, and even the explorer blanched. The performer laid the instrument down again.

"A few chords from Mosgovskensky," he murmured. "Leave me your address, Mr. Stavansson, and I will report progress to you."

As the visitor left the office, Tuppence grabbed the violin, and putting it in the cupboard turned the key in the lock.

"If you must be Sherlock Holmes," she observed, "I'll get you a nice little syringe and a bottle labelled cocaine, but for God's sake leave that violin alone. If that nice explorer man hadn't been as simple as a child, he'd have seen through you. Are you going on with the Sherlock Holmes touch?"

"I flatter myself that I have carried it through very well so far," said Tommy with some complacency. "The deductions were good, weren't they? I had to risk the taxi. After all, it's the only sensible way of getting to this place."

"It's lucky I had just read the bit about his engagement in this morning's *Daily Mirror*," remarked Tuppence.

"Yes, that looked well for the efficiency of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. This is decidedly a Sherlock Holmes case. Even you cannot have failed to notice the similarity between it and the disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax."

"Do you expect to find Mrs. Leigh Gordon's body in a coffin?"

"Logically, history should repeat itself. Actually—well, what do you think?"

"Well," said Tuppence. "The most obvious explanation seems to be that for some reason or other, Hermy, as he calls her, is afraid to meet her fiancé, and that Lady Susan is backing her up. In fact, to put it bluntly, she's come a cropper of some kind, and has got the wind up about it."

"That occurred to me also," said Tommy. "But I thought we'd better make pretty certain before suggesting that explanation to a man like Stavansson. What about a run down to Maldon, old thing? And it would do no harm to take some golf clubs with us."

Tuppence agreeing, the International Detective Agency was left in the charge of Albert.

Maldon, though a well-known residential place, did not cover a large area. Tommy and Tuppence, making every possible inquiry that ingenuity could suggest, nevertheless drew a complete blank. It was as they were returning to London that a brilliant idea occurred to Tuppence.

"Tommy, why did they put Maldon, Surrey, on the telegram?"

"Because Maldon is in Surrey, idiot."

"Idiot yourself—I don't mean that. If you get a telegram from—Hastings, say, or Torquay, they don't put the county after it. But from Richmond, they do put Richmond, Surrey. That's because there are two Richmonds."

Tommy, who was driving, slowed up.

"Tuppence," he said affectionately, "your idea is not so dusty. Let us make inquiries at yonder post office."

They drew up before a small building in the middle of a village street. A very few minutes sufficed to elicit the information that there were two Maldons. Maldon, Surrey, and Maldon, Sussex, the latter, a tiny hamlet but possessed of a telegraph office.

"That's it," said Tuppence excitedly. "Stavansson knew Maldon was in Surrey, so he hardly

looked at the word beginning with S after Maldon.”

“Tomorrow,” said Tommy, “we’ll have a look at Maldon, Sussex.”

Maldon, Sussex, was a very different proposition to its Surrey namesake. It was four miles from a railway station, possessed two public houses, two small shops, a post and telegraph office combined with a sweet and picture postcard business, and about seven small cottages. Tuppence took on the shops whilst Tommy betook himself to the Cock and Sparrow. They met half an hour later.

“Well?” said Tuppence.

“Quite good beer,” said Tommy, “but no information.”

“You’d better try the King’s Head,” said Tuppence. “I’m going back to the post office. There’s a sour old woman there, but I heard them yell to her that dinner was ready.”

She returned to the place and began examining postcards. A fresh-faced girl, still munching, came out of the back room.

“I’d like these, please,” said Tuppence. “And do you mind waiting whilst I just look over these comic ones?”

She sorted through a packet, talking as she did so.

“I’m ever so disappointed you couldn’t tell me my sister’s address. She’s staying near here and I’ve lost her letter. Leigh Gordon, her name is.”

The girl shook her head.

“I don’t remember it. And we don’t get many letters through here either—so I probably should if I’d seen it on a letter. Apart from the Grange, there isn’t many big houses round about.”

“What is the Grange?” asked Tuppence. “Who does it belong to?”

“Dr. Horrison has it. It’s turned into a nursing home now. Nerve cases mostly, I believe. Ladies that come down for rest cures, and all that sort of thing. Well, it’s quiet enough down here, heaven knows.” She giggled.

Tuppence hastily selected a few cards and paid for them.

“That’s Doctor Horrison’s car coming along now,” exclaimed the girl.

Tuppence hurried to the shop door. A small two-seater was passing. At the wheel was a tall dark man with a neat black beard and a powerful unpleasant face. The car went straight on down the street. Tuppence saw Tommy crossing the road towards her.

“Tommy, I believe I’ve got it. Doctor Horrison’s nursing home.”

“I heard about it at the King’s Head, and I thought there might be something in it. But if she’s had a nervous breakdown or anything of that sort, her aunt and her friends would know about it surely.”

“Ye-es. I didn’t mean that. Tommy, did you see that man in the two-seater?”

“Unpleasant-looking brute, yes.”

“That was Doctor Horrison.”

Tommy whistled.

“Shifty looking beggar. What do you say about it, Tuppence? Shall we go and have a look at the Grange?”

They found the place at last, a big rambling house, surrounded by deserted grounds, with a swift mill stream running behind the house.

“Dismal sort of abode,” said Tommy. “It gives me the creeps, Tuppence. You know, I’ve a feeling this is going to turn out a far more serious matter than we thought at first.”

“Oh, don’t. If only we are in time. That woman’s in some awful danger; I feel it in my bones.”

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you.”

“I can’t help it. I mistrust that man. What shall we do? I think it would be a good plan if I went and rang the bell alone first and asked boldly for Mrs. Leigh Gordon just to see what answer I get. Because, after all, it may be perfectly fair and aboveboard.”

Tuppence carried out her plan. The door was opened almost immediately by a manservant with an impassive face.

“I want to see Mrs. Leigh Gordon, if she is well enough to see me.”

She fancied that there was a momentary flicker of the man’s eyelashes, but he answered readily enough.

“There is no one of that name here, madam.”

"Oh, surely. This is Doctor Horrison's place, The Grange, is it not?"

"Yes, madam, but there is nobody of the name of Mrs. Leigh Gordon here."

Baffled, Tuppence was forced to withdraw and hold a further consultation with Tommy outside the gate.

"Perhaps he was speaking the truth. After all, we don't *know*."

"He wasn't. He was lying. I'm sure of it."

"Wait until the doctor comes back," said Tommy. "Then I'll pass myself off as a journalist anxious to discuss his new system of rest cure with him. That will give me a chance of getting inside and studying the geography of the place."

The doctor returned about half an hour later. Tommy gave him about five minutes, then he in turn marched up to the front door. But he too returned baffled.

"The doctor was engaged and couldn't be disturbed. And he never sees journalists. Tuppence, you're right. There's something fishy about this place. It's ideally situated—miles from anywhere. Any mortal thing could go on here, and no one would ever know."

"Come on," said Tuppence, with determination.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to climb over the wall and see if I can't get up to the house quietly without being seen."

"Right. I'm with you."

The garden was somewhat overgrown and afforded a multitude of cover. Tommy and Tuppence managed to reach the back of the house unobserved.

Here there was a wide terrace with some crumbling steps leading down from it. In the middle some french windows opened on to the terrace, but they dared not step out into the open, and the windows where they were crouching were too high for them to be able to look in. It did not seem as though their reconnaissance would be much use, when suddenly Tuppence tightened her grasp of Tommy's arm.

Someone was speaking in the room close to them. The window was open and the fragment of conversation came clearly to their ears.

"Come in, come in, and shut the door," said a man's voice irritably. "A lady came about an hour ago, you said, and asked for Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

Tuppence recognised the answering voice as that of the impassive manservant.

"Yes, sir."

"You said she wasn't here, of course?"

"Of course, sir."

"And now this journalist fellow," fumed the other.

He came suddenly to the window, throwing up the sash, and the two outside, peering through a screen of bushes, recognised Dr. Horrison.

"It's the woman I mind most about," continued the doctor. "What did she look like?"

"Young, good-looking, and very smartly dressed, sir."

Tommy nudged Tuppence in the ribs.

"Exactly," said the doctor between his teeth, "as I feared. Some friend of the Leigh Gordon woman's. It's getting very difficult. I shall have to take steps—"

He left the sentence unfinished. Tommy and Tuppence heard the door close. There was silence.

Gingerly Tommy led the retreat. When they had reached a little clearing not far away, but out of earshot from the house, he spoke.

"Tuppence, old thing, this is getting serious. They mean mischief. I think we ought to get back to town at once and see Stavansson."

To his surprise Tuppence shook her head.

"We must stay down here. Didn't you hear him say he was going to take steps—That might mean anything."

"The worst of it is we've hardly got a case to go to the police on."

"Listen, Tommy. Why not ring up Stavansson from the village? I'll stay around here."

"Perhaps that is the best plan," agreed her husband. "But I say—Tuppence—"

"Well?"

"Take care of yourself—won't you?"

"Of course I shall, you silly old thing. Cut along."

It was some two hours later that Tommy returned. He found Tuppence awaiting him near the gate.

"Well?"

"I couldn't get on to Stavansson. Then I tried Lady Susan. She was out too. Then I thought of ringing up old Brady. I asked him to look up Horrison in the Medical Directory or whatever the thing calls itself."

"Well, what did Dr. Brady say?"

"Oh, he knew the name at once. Horrison was once a *bona fide* doctor, but he came a cropper of some kind. Brady called him a most unscrupulous quack, and said he, personally, wouldn't be surprised at anything. The question is, what are we to do now?"

"We must stay here," said Tuppence instantly. "I've a feeling they mean something to happen tonight. By the way, a gardener has been clipping ivy round the house. Tommy, *I saw where he put the ladder.*"

"Good for you, Tuppence," said her husband appreciatively. "Then tonight—"

"As soon as it's dark—"

"We shall see—"

"What we shall see."

Tommy took his turn at watching the house whilst Tuppence went to the village and had some food.

Then she returned and they took up the vigil together. At nine o'clock they decided that it was dark enough to commence operations. They were now able to circle round the house in perfect freedom. Suddenly Tuppence clutched Tommy by the arm.

"Listen."

The sound she had heard came again, borne faintly on the night air. It was the moan of a woman in pain. Tuppence pointed upward to a window on the first floor.

"It came from that room," she whispered.

Again that low moan rent the stillness of the night.

The two listeners decided to put their original plan into action. Tuppence led the way to where she had seen the gardener put the ladder. Between them they carried it to the side of the house from which they had heard the moaning. All the blinds of the ground floor rooms were drawn, but this particular window upstairs was unshuttered.

Tommy put the ladder as noiselessly as possible against the side of the house.

"I'll go up," whispered Tuppence. "You stay below. I don't mind climbing ladders and you can steady it better than I could. And in case the doctor should come round the corner you'd be able to deal with him and I shouldn't."

Nimble Tuppence swarmed up the ladder and raised her head cautiously to look in at the window. Then she ducked it swiftly, but after a minute or two brought it very slowly up again. She stayed there for about five minutes. Then she descended again.

"It's her," she said breathlessly and ungrammatically. "But, oh, Tommy, it's horrible. She's lying there in bed, moaning, and turning to and fro—and just as I got there a woman dressed as a nurse came in. She bent over her and injected something in her arm and then went away again. What shall we do?"

"Is she conscious?"

"I think so. I'm almost sure she is. I fancy she may be strapped to the bed. I'm going up again, and if I can I'm going to get into that room."

"I say, Tuppence—"

"If I'm in any sort of danger, I'll yell for you. So long."

Avoiding further argument Tuppence hurried up the ladder again. Tommy saw her try the window, then noiselessly push up the sash. Another second and she had disappeared inside.

And now an agonising time came for Tommy. He could hear nothing at first. Tuppence and Mrs. Leigh Gordon must be talking in whispers if they were talking at all. Presently he did hear a low murmur of voices and drew a breath of relief. But suddenly the voices stopped. Dead silence.

Tommy strained his ears. Nothing. What could they be doing?

Suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Come on," said Tuppence's voice out of the darkness.

"Tuppence! How did you get here?"

"Through the front door. Let's get out of this."

"Get out of this?"

"That's what I said."

"But—Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

In a tone of indescribable bitterness Tuppence replied:

"Getting thin!"

Tommy looked at her, suspecting irony.

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Getting thin. Slinkiness. Reduction of weight. Didn't you hear Stavansson say he hated fat women? In the two years he's been away, his Hermy has put on weight. Got a panic when she knew he was coming back and rushed off to do this new treatment of Dr. Horrison's. It's injections of some sort, and he makes a deadly secret of it, and charges through the nose. I dare say he *is* a quack—but he's a damned successful one! Stavansson comes home a fortnight too soon, when she's only beginning the treatment. Lady Susan has been sworn to secrecy and plays up. And we come down here and make blithering idiots of ourselves!"

Tommy drew a deep breath.

"I believe, Watson," he said with dignity, "that there is a very good concert at the Queen's Hall tomorrow. We shall be in plenty of time for it. And you will oblige me by not placing this case upon your records. It has absolutely *no* distinctive features."