

The Mystery of the Vanishing Lady

Miss Neele had checked into the resort hotel alone, listing her home as Cape Town, South Africa, some 8,500 miles to the south. She had arrived without reservations or luggage. She had spent her time quietly reading, playing cards with other guests, and dining and dancing to the nightly live music. Until she caught the eye of the banjo player, who sat in a dark corner of the stage. He gave away nothing. But at the end of his set, he went to the desk and called the authorities. He had recognized her, he said, from a photo in the paper. He understood there was a reward. Detectives from London hurried to the scene and began to question Miss Neele about the disappearance of a woman two hundred and forty miles away.

The missing woman's car, a Morris Cowley, had been found wrecked and abandoned on a steep incline near a chalk quarry called The Silent Pool, a notorious spot where lovers met, secrets were told and where, it was rumored, two children had drowned. Inside the car, police had found a suitcase, a fur coat, and the woman's driver's license. An investigation began. The first clue was that her husband - who had openly been having an affair with a younger woman - had just asked for a divorce, a request the woman had denied. Naturally, this made him, a former fighter pilot and notorious cad, the prime suspect. And if divorce wasn't motive enough, there was this: the missing woman was quite wealthy. But the philandering pilot had an alibi. That night, he had been at a dinner party with his young mistress, a Miss Neele. "My wife had been in a terrible state," he told the Detectives. "Since her mother's recent death, she's been all sorts of mopey and sad. It's been quite depressing, really." He suggested it might have been a suicide. Pronged hooks were tossed on ropes into the water, dragging for a body. But the dredges turned up nothing. The detectives had a murder with no suspects. Or a suicide without a corpse. Or, possibly, a kidnapping without a ransom note. They were baffled, particularly since, in addition to being wealthy, the woman was quite famous. How could she have simply disappeared?

Five hundred policemen were involved in the ensuing search. They alerted the public and offered a reward, certain that someone would recognize the famous victim. The whole affair made a sensational story, setting all of England abuzz. The Surrey Times dubbed it, "The Riddle of Newlands Corner." On-the-scene reports of sniffing hounds and rumors of kidnappers appeared next to artists' renderings of possible disguises that the missing lady might have employed. By the second week, the New York Times - all the way across the Atlantic - ran the story on its front page as fifteen thousand volunteers swept the countryside from Guildford to London. Two airplanes were employed - for the first time ever - in the search. Even Sir Arthur Conan Doyle stepped in, hiring a celebrated medium, to whom he gave one of the woman's gloves. Rumors and red herrings abounded, but the famous woman had simply vanished. Until the banjo player at the resort recognized the hotel guest.

Upon arrival at the Old Swan Hotel Spa, the detectives recognized Miss Neele as well, though she was not the pilot's mistress. They knew that this woman wasn't actually named Neele at all. She could not, she said, explain why she had used that particular name. She couldn't remember her real name or how she had gotten to the hotel. But,

though she didn't know who she was, everyone else did. She was the famous missing woman, safe and sound and happy as a lark, two hundred and forty miles from home, checked in under the name of her rival and dancing the Charleston.

Upon examination, she was diagnosed as being in a fugue state, a state often brought on by stress, wherein a person blacks out while remaining conscious. She would later say, "For 24 hours I wandered in a dream, and then found myself in Harrogate as a well-contented and perfectly happy woman who believed she had just come from South Africa." But when the story hit the papers, few considered the mystery solved. Not only did nobody know who done it, nobody was entirely sure what had been done. Had it simply been a stunt to shame her philandering husband? Had the husband drugged her so that he could declare her insane and steal her money? Or, perhaps that home-wrecker was behind it all. Everyone had a theory, but nobody had a clue.

Once home, the vanished lady quickly regained herself. Within a year she was divorced, and her husband had married the actual Miss Neele. Hoping to restart her life, the mystery woman once again left home all alone. But this time, instead of going north, she went east, taking the Orient Express to Baghdad where she found adventure and, eventually, love. She died at age 85, happily married and more famous than ever. The affair of her vanishing was largely forgotten, even going unmentioned in her autobiography. And so, her disappearance remains a riddle, the only unsolved mystery in the long life and career of Dame Agatha Christie. Anyway, that's the way I heard it.