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THE ADVENTURE OF JOHNNIE WAVERLY

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You can understand the feelings of a mother,” said Mrs. Waverly for perhaps the sixth time.

She looked appealingly at Poirot. My little friend, always sympathetic to motherhood in distress, gesticulated reassuringly.

“But yes, but yes, I comprehend perfectly. Have faith in Papa Poirot.”

“The police—” began Mr. Waverly.

His wife waved the interruption aside. “I won’t have anything more to do with the police. We trusted to them and look what happened! But I’d heard so much of M. Poirot and the wonderful things he’d done, that I felt he might possibly be able to help us. A mother’s feelings—”

Poirot hastily stemmed the reiteration with an eloquent gesture. Mrs. Waverly’s emotion was obviously genuine, but it assorted strangely with her shrewd, rather hard type of countenance. When I heard later that she was the daughter of a prominent steel manufacturer who had worked his way up in the world from an office boy to his present eminence, I realized that she had inherited many of the paternal qualities.

Mr. Waverly was a big, florid, jovial-looking man. He stood with his legs straddled wide apart and looked the type of the country squire.

“I suppose you know all about this business, M. Poirot?”

The question was almost superfluous. For some days past the papers had

been full of the sensational kidnapping of little Johnnie Waverly, the three-year-old son and heir of Marcus Waverly, Esq., of Waverly Court, Surrey, one of the oldest families in England.

“The main facts I know, of course, but recount to me the whole story, monsieur, I beg of you. And in detail if you please.”

“Well, I suppose the beginning of the whole thing was about ten days ago when I got an anonymous letter—beastly things, anyway—that I couldn’t make head or tail of. The writer had the impudence to demand that I should pay him twenty-five thousand pounds—twenty-five thousand pounds, M. Poirot! Failing my agreement, he threatened to kidnap Johnnie. Of course I threw the thing into the wastepaper basket without more ado. Thought it was some silly joke. Five days later I got another letter. ‘Unless you pay, your son will be kidnapped on the twenty-ninth.’ That was on the twenty-seventh. Ada was worried, but I couldn’t bring myself to treat the matter seriously. Damn it all, we’re in England. Nobody goes about kidnapping children and holding them up to ransom.”

“It is not a common practice, certainly,” said Poirot. “Proceed, monsieur.”

“Well, Ada gave me no peace, so—feeling a bit of a fool—I laid the matter before Scotland Yard. They didn’t seem to take the thing very seriously—inclined to my view that it was some silly joke. On the twenty-eighth I got a third letter. ‘You have not paid. Your son will be taken from you at twelve o’clock noon tomorrow, the twenty-ninth. It will cost you fifty thousand pounds to recover him.’ Up I drove to Scotland Yard again. This time they were more impressed. They inclined to the view that the letters were written by a lunatic, and that in all probability an attempt of some kind would be made at the hour stated. They assured me that they would take all due precautions. Inspector McNeil and a sufficient force would come down to Waverly on the morrow and take charge.

“I went home much relieved in mind. Yet we already had the feeling of being in a state of siege. I gave orders that no stranger was to be admitted, and that no one was to leave the house. The evening passed off without any untoward incident, but on the following morning my wife was seriously unwell. Alarmed by her condition, I sent for Doctor Dakers. Her symptoms appeared to puzzle him. While hesitating to suggest that she had been poisoned, I could see that that was what was in his mind. There was no danger, he assured me, but it

would be a day or two before she would be able to get about again. Returning to my own room, I was startled and amazed to find a note pinned to my pillow. It was in the same handwriting as the others and contained just three words: ‘At twelve o’clock.’

“I admit, M. Poirot, that then I saw red! Someone in the house was in this—one of the servants. I had them all up, blackguarded them right and left. They never split on each other; it was Miss Collins, my wife’s companion, who informed me that she had seen Johnnie’s nurse slip down the drive early that morning. I taxed her with it, and she broke down. She had left the child with the nursery maid and stolen out to meet a friend of hers—a man! Pretty goings on! She denied having pinned the note to my pillow—she may have been speaking the truth, I don’t know. I felt I couldn’t take the risk of the child’s own nurse being in the plot. One of the servants was implicated—of that I was sure. Finally I lost my temper and sacked the whole bunch, nurse and all. I gave them an hour to pack their boxes and get out of the house.”

Mr. Waverly’s face was quite two shades redder as he remembered his just wrath.

“Was not that a little injudicious, monsieur?” suggested Poirot. “For all you know, you might have been playing into the enemy’s hands.”

Mr. Waverly stared at him. “I don’t see that. Send the whole lot packing, that was my idea. I wired to London for a fresh lot to be sent down that evening. In the meantime, there’d be only people I could trust in the house: my wife’s secretary, Miss Collins, and Tredwell, the butler, who has been with me since I was a boy.”

“And this Miss Collins, how long has she been with you?”

“Just a year,” said Mrs. Waverly. “She has been invaluable to me as a secretary-companion, and is also a very efficient housekeeper.”

“The nurse?”

“She has been with me six months. She came to me with excellent references. All the same, I never really liked her, although Johnnie was quite devoted to her.”

“Still, I gather she had already left when the catastrophe occurred. Perhaps, Monsieur Waverly, you will be so kind as to continue.”

Mr. Waverly resumed his narrative.

“Inspector McNeil arrived about ten thirty. The servants had all left by then. He declared himself quite satisfied with the internal arrangements. He had various men posted in the park outside, guarding all the approaches to the house, and he assured me that if the whole thing were not a hoax, we should undoubtedly catch my mysterious correspondent.

“I had Johnnie with me, and he and I and the inspector went together into the room we call the council chamber. The inspector locked the door. There is a big grandfather clock there, and as the hands drew near to twelve I don’t mind confessing that I was as nervous as a cat. There was a whirring sound, and the clock began to strike. I clutched at Johnnie. I had a feeling a man might drop from the skies. The last stroke sounded, and as it did so, there was a great commotion outside—shouting and running. The inspector flung up the window, and a constable came running up.

“ ‘We’ve got him sir,’ he panted. ‘He was sneaking up through the bushes. He’s got a whole dope outfit on him.’

“We hurried out on the terrace where two constables were holding a ruffianly-looking fellow in shabby clothes, who was twisting and turning in a vain endeavour to escape. One of the policemen held out an unrolled parcel which they had wrested from their captive. It contained a pad of cotton wool and a bottle of chloroform. It made my blood boil to see it. There was a note, too, addressed to me. I tore it open. It bore the following words: ‘You should have paid up. To ransom your son will now cost you fifty thousand. In spite of all your precautions he has been abducted on the twenty-ninth as I said.’

“I gave a great laugh, the laugh of relief, but as I did so I heard the hum of a motor and a shout. I turned my head. Racing down the drive towards the south lodge at a furious speed was a low, long grey car. It was the man who drove it who shouted, but that was not what gave me a shock of horror. It was the sight of Johnnie’s flaxen curls. The child was in the car beside him.

“The inspector ripped out an oath. ‘The child was here not a minute ago,’ he cried. His eyes swept over us. We were all there: myself, Tredwell, Miss Collins. ‘When did you last see him, Mr. Waverly?’

“I cast my mind back, trying to remember. When the constable had called us, I had run out with the inspector, forgetting all about Johnnie.

“And then there came a sound that startled us, the chiming of a church clock

from the village. With an exclamation the inspector pulled out his watch. It was exactly twelve o'clock. With one common accord we ran to the council chamber; the clock there marked the hour as ten minutes past. Someone must have deliberately tampered with it, for I have never known it gain or lose before. It is a perfect timekeeper."

Mr. Waverly paused. Poirot smiled to himself and straightened a little mat which the anxious father had pushed askew.

"A pleasing little problem, obscure and charming," murmured Poirot. "I will investigate it for you with pleasure. Truly it was planned *à merveille*."

Mrs. Waverly looked at him reproachfully. "But my boy," she wailed.

Poirot hastily composed his face and looked the picture of earnest sympathy again. "He is safe, madame, he is unharmed. Rest assured, these miscreants will take the greatest care of him. Is he not to them the turkey—no, the goose—that lays the golden eggs?"

"M. Poirot, I'm sure there's only one thing to be done—pay up. I was all against it at first—but now! A mother's feelings—"

"But we have interrupted monsieur in his history," cried Poirot hastily.

"I expect you know the rest pretty well from the papers," said Mr. Waverly. "Of course, Inspector McNeil got on to the telephone immediately. A description of the car and the man was circulated all round, and it looked at first as though everything was going to turn out all right. A car, answering to the description, with a man and a small boy, had passed through various villages, apparently making for London. At one place they had stopped, and it was noticed that the child was crying and obviously afraid of his companion. When Inspector McNeil announced that the car had been stopped and the man and boy detained, I was almost ill with relief. You know the sequel. The boy was not Johnnie, and the man was an ardent motorist, fond of children, who had picked up a small child playing in the streets of Edenswell, a village about fifteen miles from us, and was kindly giving him a ride. Thanks to the cocksure blundering of the police, all traces have disappeared. Had they not persistently followed the wrong car, they might by now have found the boy."

"Calm yourself, monsieur. The police are a brave and intelligent force of men. Their mistake was a very natural one. And altogether it was a clever scheme. As to the man they caught in the grounds, I understand that his defence

has consisted all along of a persistent denial. He declared that the note and parcel were given to him to deliver at Waverly Court. The man who gave them to him handed him a ten-shilling note and promised him another if it were delivered at exactly ten minutes to twelve. He was to approach the house through the grounds and knock at the side door.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” declared Mrs. Waverly hotly. “It’s all a parcel of lies.”

“*En vérité*, it is a thin story,” said Poirot reflectively. “But so far they have not shaken it. I understand, also, that he made a certain accusation?”

His glance interrogated Mr. Waverly. The latter got rather red again.

“The fellow had the impertinence to pretend that he recognized in Tredwell the man who gave him the parcel. ‘Only the bloke has shaved off his moustache.’ Tredwell, who was born on the estate!”

Poirot smiled a little at the country gentleman’s indignation. “Yet you yourself suspect an inmate of the house to have been accessory to the abduction.”

“Yes, but not Tredwell.”

“And you, madame?” asked Poirot, suddenly turning to her.

“It could not have been Tredwell who gave this tramp the letter and parcel— if anybody ever did, which I don’t believe. It was given him at ten o’clock, he says. At ten o’clock Tredwell was with my husband in the smoking room.”

“Were you able to see the face of the man in the car, monsieur? Did it resemble that of Tredwell in any way?”

“It was too far away for me to see his face.”

“Has Tredwell a brother, do you know?”

“He had several, but they are all dead. The last one was killed in the war.”

“I am not yet clear as to the grounds of Waverly Court. The car was heading for the south lodge. Is there another entrance?”

“Yes, what we call the east lodge. It can be seen from the other side of the house.”

“It seems to me strange that nobody saw the car entering the grounds.”

“There is a right of way through, and access to a small chapel. A good many cars pass through. The man must have stopped the car in a convenient place and run up to the house just as the alarm was given and attention attracted

elsewhere.”

“Unless he was already inside the house,” mused Poirot. “Is there any place where he could have hidden?”

“Well, we certainly didn’t make a thorough search of the house beforehand. There seemed no need. I suppose he might have hidden himself somewhere, but who would have let him in?”

“We shall come to that later. One thing at a time—let us be methodical. There is no special hiding place in the house? Waverly Court is an old place, and there are sometimes ‘priests’ holes,’ as they call them.”

“By gad, there *is* a priest’s hole. It opens from one of the panels in the hall.”

“Near the council chamber?”

“Just outside the door.”

“*Voilà!*”

“But nobody knows of its existence except my wife and myself.”

“Tredwell?”

“Well—he might have heard of it.”

“Miss Collins?”

“I have never mentioned it to her.”

Poirot reflected for a minute.

“Well, monsieur, the next thing is for me to come down to Waverly Court. If I arrive this afternoon, will it suit you?”

“Oh, as soon as possible, please, Monsieur Poirot!” cried Mrs. Waverly. “Read this once more.”

She thrust into his hands the last missive from the enemy which had reached the Waverlys that morning and which had sent her posthaste to Poirot. It gave clever and explicit directions for the paying over of the money, and ended with a threat that the boy’s life would pay for any treachery. It was clear that a love of money warred with the essential mother love of Mrs. Waverly, and that the latter was at last gaining the day.

Poirot detained Mrs. Waverly for a minute behind her husband.

“Madame, the truth, if you please. Do you share your husband’s faith in the butler, Tredwell?”

“I have nothing against him, Monsieur Poirot, I cannot see how he can have been concerned in this, but—well, I have never liked him—never!”

“One other thing, madame, can you give me the address of the child’s nurse?”

“149 Netherall Road, Hammersmith. You don’t imagine—”

“Never do I imagine. Only—I employ the little grey cells. And sometimes, just sometimes, I have a little idea.”

Poirot came back to me as the door closed.

“So madame has never liked the butler. It is interesting, that, eh, Hastings?”

I refused to be drawn. Poirot has deceived me so often that I now go warily. There is always a catch somewhere.

After completing an elaborate outdoor toilet, we set off for Netherall Road. We were fortunate enough to find Miss Jessie Withers at home. She was a pleasant-faced woman of thirty-five, capable and superior. I could not believe that she could be mixed up in the affair. She was bitterly resentful of the way she had been dismissed, but admitted that she had been in the wrong. She was engaged to be married to a painter and decorator who happened to be in the neighbourhood, and she had run out to meet him. The thing seemed natural enough. I could not quite understand Poirot. All his questions seemed to me quite irrelevant. They were concerned mainly with the daily routine of her life at Waverly Court. I was frankly bored and glad when Poirot took his departure.

“Kidnapping is an easy job, *mon ami*,” he observed, as he hailed a taxi in the Hammersmith Road and ordered it to drive to Waterloo. “That child could have been abducted with the greatest ease any day for the last three years.”

“I don’t see that that advances us much,” I remarked coldly.

“*Au contraire*, it advances us enormously, but enormously! If you must wear a tie pin, Hastings, at least let it be in the exact centre of your tie. At present it is at least a sixteenth of an inch too much to the right.”

Waverly Court was a fine old place and had recently been restored with taste and care. Mr. Waverly showed us the council chamber, the terrace, and all the various spots connected with the case. Finally, at Poirot’s request, he pressed a spring in the wall, a panel slid aside, and a short passage led us into the priest’s hole.

“You see,” said Waverly. “There is nothing here.”

The tiny room was bare enough, there was not even the mark of a footstep on the floor. I joined Poirot where he was bending attentively over a mark in the

corner.

“What do you make of this, my friend?”

There were four imprints close together.

“A dog,” I cried.

“A very small dog, Hastings.”

“A Pom.”

“Smaller than a Pom.”

“A griffon?” I suggested doubtfully.

“Smaller even than a griffon. A species unknown to the Kennel Club.”

I looked at him. His face was alight with excitement and satisfaction.

“I was right,” he murmured. “I knew I was right. Come, Hastings.”

As we stepped out into the hall and the panel closed behind us, a young lady came out of a door farther down the passage. Mr. Waverly presented her to us.

“Miss Collins.”

Miss Collins was about thirty years of age, brisk and alert in manner. She had fair, rather dull hair, and wore pince-nez.

At Poirot’s request, we passed into a small morning room, and he questioned her closely as to the servants and particularly as to Tredwell. She admitted that she did not like the butler.

“He gives himself airs,” she explained.

They then went into the question of the food eaten by Mrs. Waverly on the night of the 28th. Miss Collins declared that she had partaken of the same dishes upstairs in her sitting room and had felt no ill effects. As she was departing I nudged Poirot.

“The dog,” I whispered.

“Ah, yes, the dog!” He smiled broadly. “Is there a dog kept here by any chance, mademoiselle?”

“There are two retrievers in the kennels outside.”

“No, I mean a small dog, a toy dog.”

“No—nothing of the kind.”

Poirot permitted her to depart. Then, pressing the bell, he remarked to me, “She lies, that Mademoiselle Collins. Possibly I should, also, in her place. Now for the butler.”

Tredwell was a dignified individual. He told his story with perfect aplomb,

and it was essentially the same as that of Mr. Waverly. He admitted that he knew the secret of the priest's hole.

When he finally withdrew, pontifical to the last, I met Poirot's quizzical eyes.

"What do you make of it all, Hastings?"

"What do you?" I parried.

"How cautious you become. Never, never will the grey cells function unless you stimulate them. Ah, but I will not tease you! Let us make our deductions together. What points strike us specially as being difficult?"

"There is one thing that strikes me," I said. "Why did the man who kidnapped the child go out by the south lodge instead of by the east lodge where no one would see him?"

"That is a very good point, Hastings, an excellent one. I will match it with another. Why warn the Waverlys beforehand? Why not simply kidnap the child and hold him to ransom?"

"Because they hoped to get the money without being forced to action."

"Surely it was very unlikely that the money would be paid on a mere threat?"

"Also they wanted to focus attention on twelve o'clock, so that when the tramp man was seized, the other could emerge from his hiding place and get away with the child unnoticed."

"That does not alter the fact that they were making a thing difficult that was perfectly easy. If they do not specify a time or date, nothing would be easier than to wait their chance, and carry off the child in a motor one day when he is out with his nurse."

"Ye—es," I admitted doubtfully.

"In fact, there is a deliberate playing of the farce! Now let us approach the question from another side. Everything goes to show that there was an accomplice inside the house. Point number one, the mysterious poisoning of Mrs. Waverly. Point number two, the letter pinned to the pillow. Point number three, the putting on of the clock ten minutes—all inside jobs. And an additional fact that you may not have noticed. There was no dust in the priest's hole. It had been swept out with a broom.

"Now then, we have four people in the house. We can exclude the nurse, since she could not have swept out the priest's hole, though she could have

attended to the other three points. Four people, Mr. and Mrs. Waverly, Tredwell, the butler, and Miss Collins. We will take Miss Collins first. We have nothing much against her, except that we know very little about her, that she is obviously an intelligent young woman, and that she has only been here a year.”

“She lied about the dog, you said,” I reminded him.

“Ah, yes, the dog.” Poirot gave a peculiar smile. “Now let us pass to Tredwell. There are several suspicious facts against him. For one thing, the tramp declares that it was Tredwell who gave him the parcel in the village.”

“But Tredwell can prove an alibi on that point.”

“Even then, he could have poisoned Mrs. Waverly, pinned the note to the pillow, put on the clock, and swept out the priest’s hole. On the other hand, he has been born and bred in the service of the Waverlys. It seems unlikely in the last degree that he should connive at the abduction of the son of the house. It is not in the picture!”

“Well, then?”

“We must proceed logically—however absurd it may seem. We will briefly consider Mrs. Waverly. But she is rich, the money is hers. It is her money which has restored this impoverished estate. There would be no reason for her to kidnap her son and pay over her money to herself. The husband, no, is in a different position. He has a rich wife. It is not the same thing as being rich himself—in fact I have a little idea that the lady is not very fond of parting with her money, except on a very good pretext. But Mr. Waverly, you can see at once, he is a *bon viveur*.”

“Impossible,” I spluttered.

“Not at all. Who sends away the servants? Mr. Waverly. He can write the notes, drug his wife, put on the hands of the clock, and establish an excellent alibi for his faithful retainer Tredwell. Tredwell has never liked Mrs. Waverly. He is devoted to his master and is willing to obey his orders implicitly. There were three of them in it. Waverly, Tredwell, and some friend of Waverly. That is the mistake the police made, they made no further inquiries about the man who drove the grey car with the wrong child in it. He was the third man. He picks up a child in a village near by, a boy with flaxen curls. He drives in through the east lodge and passes out through the south lodge just at the right moment, waving his hand and shouting. They cannot see his face or the number of the car, so

obviously they cannot see the child's face, either. Then he lays a false trail to London. In the meantime, Tredwell has done his part in arranging for the parcel and note to be delivered by a rough-looking gentleman. His master can provide an alibi in the unlikely case of the man recognizing him, in spite of the false moustache he wore. As for Mr. Waverly, as soon as the hullabaloo occurs outside, and the inspector rushes out, he quickly hides the child in the priest's hole, follows him out. Later in the day, when the inspector is gone and Miss Collins is out of the way, it will be easy enough to drive him off to some safe place in his own car."

"But what about the dog?" I asked. "And Miss Collins lying?"

"That was my little joke. I asked her if there were any toy dogs in the house, and she said no—but doubtless there are some—in the nursery! You see, Mr. Waverly placed some toys in the priest's hole to keep Johnnie amused and quiet."

"M. Poirot—" Mr. Waverly entered the room—"have you discovered anything? Have you any clue to where the boy has been taken?"

Poirot handed him a piece of paper. "Here is the address."

"But this is a blank sheet."

"Because I am waiting for you to write it down for me."

"What the—" Mr. Waverly's face turned purple.

"I know everything, monsieur. I give you twenty-four hours to return the boy. Your ingenuity will be equal to the task of explaining his reappearance. Otherwise, Mrs. Waverly will be informed of the exact sequence of events."

Mr. Waverly sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. "He is with my old nurse, ten miles away. He is happy and well cared for."

"I have no doubt of that. If I did not believe you to be a good father at heart, I should not be willing to give you another chance."

"The scandal—"

"Exactly. Your name is an old and honoured one. Do not jeopardize it again. Good evening, Mr. Waverly. Ah, by the way, one word of advice. Always sweep in the corners!"