

David Blanco Laserna

THE MISSING DETECTIVE

SCIENCE
CODE



ANAYA
ENGLISH

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*To Julita and Tito,
for their terrace, their rocking chair
and their mystery novels.*

CHAPTER ONE

A blank mind

It was like waking up from a profound dream, but... it wasn't. He immediately knew there was something wrong. He wasn't wearing his pyjamas or lying in bed. His only pillow was a strong feeling of cold that was so intense that it had left his cheek numb. When he opened his eyes, he found himself lying face down on the snow. He looked around. The wind was shaking a lamp that was hanging from a hook, over his head. The flashes of light were lighting the wooden sign of a wine warehouse, some wine barrels, the trap door to a coal bunker. The bricks on the walls formed the drawing in perspective of a dark alley. From the end of it he could hear the sounds of the city, muffled by the distance: the voices of street vendors, the paperboys delivering the morning newspapers, the hooves of horses on the paving...

“What has happened to me?” he asked himself, “how did I get here?”

There was a little frost on his eyelids. The hand he put on the floor to push himself up was purplish and he

could hardly move his swollen fingers. He guessed that he must have spent about an hour there, lying unconscious on the floor. As he tried to stand up, he felt a growing nausea. Some kind of irresistible force was pulling him back down on the floor, and he had to hold onto a post so as not to fall over.

What were those dark shadows he could see in the snow? He half-closed his eyes to focus them better. Had he dropped a handkerchief on the floor? Maybe a watch? It took him half a minute to realise they were bloodstains. He instinctively touched his neck, were there was a tickling, warm and wet feeling. When he looked at his hand, he found it covered in blood. He slid his fingers upwards, little by little, from the back of his neck and when he touched the crown of his head he felt an intense pain that made him shout.

He was short of breath. "What has happened to me?" He tried to remember, but his mind was as blank as the snow he was stepping on. Panic took over him. "Who am I?" How could he be asking himself that question? And what was even more terrifying: *Why wasn't he able to answer it?* In the fog that surrounded his thoughts he couldn't find a name or a familiar face. He couldn't remember his home, his age or even what he looked like. He spent many minutes with an open mouth. "I don't know who I am, I don't know who I am, *I don't know who I am*". His heart was beating so hard that he could feel his heartbeats in his temples, in his ears and in the veins of his fingers.

He felt like crying. He took a deep breath. What could he do? Who could he ask to help him? He stared at the floor as he tried to calm down. Two trails of footprints surrounded the hole that his body had left in the snow. They

had been made by two different pairs of shoes. He noticed that the footprints of one of the trails were exactly the same size as the worn out soles of his boots. They were his own footprints. The others were footprints of a more elegant type of shoe, with a square toe box. They belonged to someone else. Before becoming unconscious he had been having a conversation with someone. The footprints of the stranger came from the opening to the alley, stopped right at the point where he had fallen and then turned back to go away. The distance between the footprints was shorter on their way to where he was than on their way back. When someone runs, the distance between their footsteps becomes bigger: the stranger had walked up to him at a relaxed pace and had then left in a hurry. Why? He looked at his bloodstained hand. The stranger had hit him by surprise from behind. He may have tried to kill him. But again, he asked himself the same question: Why?

It was starting to snow again, not very heavily yet, but in an hour's time another thick layer of snow would cover the footprints. He didn't have the time to follow both trails. Which one should he follow? His own footprints might lead him home. His attacker's might expose him to dangers that he wasn't even able to imagine. He only hesitated for an instant. The rage and indignation he was feeling led him to trying to catch the mysterious who had run away after leaving him, with his bloodstained head, in a miserable alley.

He slipped on the snow, on his way out, while he pressed his fist against his wound to stop it bleeding. As soon as he got to Dorset Street, he had to face many problems. He didn't have a hat to cover his wounded head. Everyone he crossed in the street, whether they were tall or short, handsome or ugly, fat or thin, they all looked away

and hastened their pace. "I must look terrible", he moaned to himself. He saw his own reflection on the shop window of a tea and coffee shop. He was scared by his cadaveric expression and immediately looked away. But the look was long enough to know he was young. He guessed he must be about fifteen years old.

His main concerns now was to try not to faint and to try not to lose the track of his own footprints. He noticed that his own walking was leaving footprints of the same depth as the stranger's. Therefore, the person who had attacked him weighed more or less the same as him. Otherwise, his footprints would have been deeper or shallower. He didn't know for how long he had been walking, always looking for his square toe-box footprints in the snow, shivering, with his teeth clicking together until he reached a tall iron gate, and he couldn't walk any further.

He was in an affluent neighbourhood, with broad and well-kept streets. Everywhere he looked he could see a display of majestic mansions of every architectural styles. Between the bars of the gate in front of him there was a puzzling coat of arms. Instead of castles or rampant lions, it had the picture of a prism and a test tube over a field of stars. At the top of the coat of arms there were three big golden capital letters: GKC. He tried pushing the gate, without much hope. To his surprise, it opened with a creak, which scared away a flock of sleepy sparrows. On the other side there was a big lawn esplanade. There were big chestnut trees covered in snow on each side of a winding gravel path that went uphill, leading to an impressive house. Its roof was composed of tens of tiny little roofs, all of them forming what looked like an army of chimneys. Their plumes of smoke got together into an ashy cloud that hung

over the house. Someone had cleared the snow from the path with a shovel, erasing the footprints that he had been following.

While he examined the façade, the young man took air and wondered what the hell he was doing there. An inner voice warned him that putting his head in the lion's mouth. What if his attacker was precisely the owner of that residence? He was still in time to escape from danger. To tell the truth he wasn't in the right conditions to fight even a tiny beetle. He could hardly stand on his feet. The sensation of fear made him feel even colder and he wanted to turn back.

Dickson Carr, the butler of the mansion, heard the doorbell ring while he was polishing a pair of lobster tongs. He checked the pendulum clock in the living room. It was quarter to twelve. He frowned. It certainly was an unexpected visit. He dropped the tongs and the cloth. On his way to the entrance door, he rearranged his uniform and combed his eyebrows with a finger. Dickson received newcomers with a neutral and polite expression that could later evolve quickly into strong rejection or open hospitality.

'Good afternoon,' he said, as he opened the door. 'How can I help you?'

Dickson had asked this question in an automatic way, with his eyes half-open, while his head was still thinking about the scratches that he had found on some of the tongs.

'I'm looking for...'

As the stranger spoke, the butler opened his eyes progressively until they were wide open. In front of him there was a trembling young man with a livid and blood-stained face. The boy couldn't finish the explanation of what he was looking for. He collapsed at his feet like a card castle.

Dickson had served in an infantry regiment during the Indian Mutiny, so he wasn't impressed by the sight of blood. As efficiently as he managed every domestic problem, he pulled the young man up and took him through the air to the nearest room, the billiards room, where he put him on a divan. He asked Miss Marsh to bring some bandage and a washbasin with hot water and soap. After stopping the bleeding, cleaning the wound and calling a doctor, he rearranged his uniform, combed his eyebrows and went to the library to inform Mr Crispin that a little mishap was going to alter the activities they had programmed for the afternoon.

* * *

Before the young man could regain consciousness for a second time, he had to find his way through a foggy dream. He saw himself in a forest, in front of an old witch doctor with ram legs. It was snowing and the witch doctor had cast a spell for his hair to fall at the same pace as the snowflakes. In the blink of an eye, the old man disappeared, and reappeared again, just a few centimetres away from his face. He stretched his knotty and crooked fingers, and held his head with them. He felt a strong pain in the back of his neck. The young man moved violently to try to shake the old man off him, but a pair of very firm hands were holding him.

'He's woken up.'

'I can see that. Stay still! Stay still, kid! *If you don't, I'm going to cut you...* Calm down. We're trying to cure you.'

He could recognise the smell of iodine. A pair of hands with very firm fingers were manipulating his head. The back of his neck felt as cold as ice. They had shaved it. In the po-

sition that he was in, with his cranium immobilised, he had an oblique perspective of the room, well lit by a gas lamp that was hanging from the ceiling. He noticed there was a wash-basin on a table, with a sponge sticking out of it. Next to it there was a reel of surgical thread. They were sowing up his wound. A smiley face with a big curly moustache that looked like the handles of a bicycle entered his visual field.

‘I am doctor Nathan Thorndyke,’ the owner of the moustache introduced himself. ‘I have shaved part of your head to clean your wound, disinfect it and stitch it up. I’ve just given you the last stitches and now I’m going to bandage your head.’

His profound voice combined the authority and the automatic cordiality that doctors usually have. The young man let the doctor do what he had to do. He was lying on a canopy bed, with his legs covered with a pile of blankets.

The height of the mattress and the scent of the sheets made him realise he wasn’t at home. It was a puzzling feeling of certainty, because he didn’t even have the remotest idea of what his house was like. He then remembered his horrendous awakening in the alley, the anguish of not knowing who he was. He experienced a sudden glimmer of hope. He was remembering! If his memory had been able to go back to the moment of the accident, could it go even further back in the past?

‘Are you all right?’

He turned his neck slowly and saw a second individual, an old man who was holding a kerosene lamp over his head to illumine the bandaging operation, which he was watching with a critical attitude.

‘I’ve got a terrible headache,’ he admitted while he clenched his teeth.

‘That’s normal,’ doctor Thorndyke said, reassuringly.
‘Really?’

‘It’s normal when someone has cracked your head open. But don’t worry, nothing has come out of it. What’s your name, young man?’

He instinctively tried to answer. However, something stopped him from doing so. It was on the tip of his tongue, but it wouldn’t come out. Did his name begin with J? With H? With S? Joseph? Bell? Fletcher? The answer couldn’t have been erased from his memory, even if it insisted on remaining out of his reach. His memories had sunk like a galleon does under the weight of its treasures. And they refused to come back afloat. After making the effort for one minute, he gave up.

‘I don’t know.’

‘That’s all right.’ The old man tried to calm him down with an encouraging smile. ‘My name’s Gideon Keith Crispin. I’m the owner of this house. Do you remember what happened to you?’

‘No, I can’t remember that either.’

‘Do you know where you are?’ Doctor Thorndyke took over, while he delicately adjusted the last end of the bandage. ‘What city?’

‘In York?’

‘No, you are in London. In one of the most affluent neighbourhoods, by the way.’ Thorndyke looked at Gideon mockingly. ‘Do you know the address of anyone in your family? Do you know what your father does for a living?’

The young man made an even bigger effort than before to remember. Finally, he dropped his head on the pillow, with his forehead full of sweat.

‘No, I don’t.’

‘What’s my name?’ the doctor asked.

‘Doctor Thorndyke. And this gentleman is Mr Gideon Keith Crispin.’

The doctor smiled, pleased with the answer.

‘We aren’t doing so badly. Can you follow the movements of my finger? Very good. Now try to touch your left cheek with your right hand. That’s it. What’s our Serene Highness’s name?’

‘Victoria.’

‘Well, don’t worry. You’re suffering from retrograde posttraumatic amnesia. You will remember everything that happens to you from now onwards. If you’re interested in the part of your history that happened before, the normal thing would be for you to start to progressively recover your memory in the next few hours. Although it could take weeks.’

The young man bit his lips:

‘And could it be forever?’

Thorndyke started to pick up the reel of thread, a surgical needle and the bottle of iodine.

‘We doctors usually base ourselves on probability, and the most probable thing is that you will recover your memory in a few hours’ time.’

‘Can I ask you another question?’

‘We’ve asked you many,’ Thorndyke smiled, pinching his moustache. ‘It seems fair to me. Go ahead.’

‘After having examined the wound, how do you think it was made?’

The doctor thought about the question for a few seconds.

‘I think I know where you’re heading. You want to know if it happened by accident. If, for instance, a roof tile

fell on you or if you lost your balance and hit yourself against something on the floor,' he denied it by shaking his head with a grave expression. 'I would say someone hit you from behind, from top to bottom, heavily, but with a not very heavy object. Not very sharp either. When I cleaned your wound I found wooden splinters... I would bet it was a club or a stake.'

The doctor closed his briefcase and went to pick up his coat, which he had left on the back of an armchair.

'Well, it's been a pleasure. Good luck with your memory... I hope you like your memories when they come back.'

He slightly bowed his head as a way to say goodbye. Gideon went with the doctor to the corridor, softly closing the door behind them. On the bedside table there was a glass of water. The young man drank it at once, jumped out of bed and walked on his tiptoes to the door. He put the brim of the glass on the wooden plank, and put his ear on the base of the glass. On the other side, Mr Crispin and doctor Thorndyke were whispering, but the surface of the glass could pick up their words and amplified them to make them clear enough.

'And what are the... formalities of this case?'

'As soon as he gets out of here I need to talk to the sergeant on duty and write a report.'

'And then...'

'They will call him to take a statement from him...'

'Which, given the circumstances, will not be very long.'

'Well, no, it doesn't look as if he has a lot to say. The normal thing would be that while they carry out an investigation they kept him under house arrest, but, as he isn't

able to say what his home address is, he will probably end up in a prison cell.'

'What a pity, Thorndyke, what a pity. Just at Christmas time. And you say that the best thing to do...'

'...in these cases is to let him rest as much as he can. The less anxiety he experiences, the better.'

'The prison doesn't seem a very relaxing kind of place.'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

'I would prefer a health resort, but the precepts of medicine are very different from those of the law.'

Mr Crispin took a moment for some thoughtful silence.

'He may be in danger too. If they have attacked him once, they could do it again... He's defenceless without his memory,' he coughed before continuing. 'And what if we don't tell the authorities about it and let him stay here for a few days? Until he is able to manage on his own.'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

'That's a very kind thing for you to do, providing that you...'

'You have not come here today. I opened the door to him, I cleaned his wound, I bandaged him, and on my own responsibility I let him stay.'

Nathan Thorndyke picked up his hat from a hanger on the wall and put it on with an astute expression.

'I see that we understand each other well. And as I haven't been here, I'd better leave as soon as possible.'

Mr Crispin shook his hand.

'Thank you, Thorndyke.'

'You're welcome, Gideon. We've already done our good deed of the year. Merry Christmas!'

The young man returned to his bed, walking unsteadily. A few seconds after, Mr Crispin opened the door carefully. The light that came in from the corridor let him see the peculiar looks that his host had. Mr Gideon Keith Crispin was so bony and small that he looked like a ventriloquist puppet that someone had taken out from a drawer. His prominent eye sockets and cheeks gave him a chimpanzee-like air, which was further accentuated by his stooping back, his long little arms and his short height. He protected his bald head with a red velvet cap, from which there were some white, long and thin hairs coming out, which flew about him whenever he moved. He was wearing a pair of red checked trousers and an extravagant mustard coloured waistcoat, and was holding a walking stick.

‘Do you remember me?’ he asked mockingly.

The young man nodded. Gideon rolled up his trousers and sat down on a corner of the bed. The mattress gave very little under his weight.

‘I wanted to tell you that I’ve got a proposal for you. Let’s see what you think. You can stay in my home for as long as you need, until your wound is healed, or you recover your memory or until you feel strong enough to face the world again. Without any time limitations, without any pressures. If you want to leave tomorrow, well, you can leave tomorrow. If you prefer to wait for a month, well, you wait for a month.’

The young man got a lump in his throat. After all the anguish and abandonment he had felt in the last few hours, that old man’s kindness disarmed him completely. He felt a strong desire to embrace him, but in the 19th century, men simply didn’t embrace each other. To express their affection, they patted each other on the back. But this was



something that the young man didn't feel strong enough to do, and that Mr Crispin probably wouldn't resist.

'Thank you,' he said with a trembling voice.

'There's no need to say that,' Mr Crispin nodded with satisfaction. 'As soon as I leave the room I'll talk to everyone so that when you get up you won't have to give explanations to everyone. They are very nice people, you'll see. There are usually very few of us here: Mr Dickson, the butler; Mrs Marsh, the maid, and Mrs Sayers, the cook. However, you have come to visit us at a special time and we have four guests.'

'Members of your family who have come over to spend Christmas with you?'

'No, not at all. I am the last Crispin. A very old mummy without any descendants. The only family I have left is two aunts, two old bags, even older than me, who live in Cornwall.' Gideon opened his eyes very widely as if everything in this world caused him great surprise. 'I'm also what newspapers call an eccentric millionaire. Which means I inherited a fortune and I don't spend it the way most journalists would want me to.'

The young man smiled.

'And what do you spend it on?'

'I like science, you see?' Mr Crispin lowered his voice, as if this were an embarrassing confession. 'When I was your age I wanted to be a chemist, an astronomer, a mathematician, all at the same time, but I haven't been able to finish any degree course. I'm terrible at studying! I dreamt of discovering a planet, or a new kind of beetle or of proving the theorem of Crispin... Well, in the end I managed to do these things, but in my own way. I fund universities, museums, laboratories... If you look for my name in a scientific book,

you will find it at the beginning, on the acknowledgements page. My latest initiative has been to set up a competition for young investigators. I've invited the four finalists to stay here at my home for three weeks. I've organised some meetings with great scientists. They have met Charles Darwin and James Clerk Maxwell. They have been able to do some experimenting in my laboratory and spend the night in my astronomical observatory. Tomorrow we will announce the name of the winner, who will receive a grant of fifty pounds.

Gideon noticed the signs of fatigue on the young man's face, who was making a titanic effort not to fall asleep.

'I'm sorry, there's only one thing that I like more than science: talking all the time.'

He got up from the bed and turned off the gas tap. The only source of light left was the kerosene lamp he was holding.

'One last thing: until you remember your real name, we'll have to call you some way.' After thinking for a few seconds, he could see in his eyes a sparkle of sudden inspiration. 'How about "Nemo"?'

'Nemo? Like the captain from *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*?'

'That's right! So you have read the book.'

'So it seems,' the young man answered, a little perplexed.

'Jules Verne is my favourite author. *Nemo* means "Nobody". He was an Indian prince and that bandage that our friend Thorndyke has put around your head makes look like a true maharaja. It's perfect.'

The young man didn't feel like arguing. Besides, he couldn't deny that it seemed a practical idea.

‘All right. Until I can find a better alternative, my name will be Nemo.’

‘All right then, young Nemo. Consider yourself at home. When you wake up, you will have Mrs Sayers’s plum cake waiting for you. Even if you can’t remember how the others tasted, you can take my word on this: it will be the most exquisite one you will have ever tried.’

Nemo nodded and, on board of his own personal *Nautilus*, he sank into a profound sleep.

A young man, aged fifteen, regains consciousness in an alley in London, in 1873. He's got a wound on the back of his head and can't remember anything about his past. Although he shows an extraordinary ability for deduction and is able to find out everything about other people, his own identity remains a mystery to him. With a blank mind, he will have to solve an unsolvable problem: an assassin has threatened to kill multimillionaire Gideon K. Crispin. Crispin locks up himself in the safest room in his house, with a policeman guarding the door and another one, in the garden, keeping an eye on the only window. In spite of all precautions, someone will manage to enter without being seen, shoot at him and disappear.

Also, in this book you will find:

- A short biography of Marie Curie
- The hidden forces of atoms
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