



Library podcast

Virtual Thrilling Tales: The Picture Puzzle by Edward Lucas White

THE PICTURE PUZZLE Transcript

Hello, and welcome to Thrilling Tales: Seattle Public Library's Storytime for Grownups. I'm your reader librarian, David Wright. I hope you are all doing well, and finding interesting things to occupy your time while apart from others.

A couple of weeks ago, I shared a wonderfully spooky story called *The House of the Nightmare*, by Edward Lucas White. This sent me to look up other stories by this obscure writer, and I stumbled upon a story from 1909 that felt timely to me, concerned as it is with the comforting respite and engrossing distraction that many people find during times of anguish or distress, in the working of jigsaw puzzles.

And now, *The Picture Puzzle*, by Edward Lucas White

I

Of course the instinct of the police and detectives was to run down their game. That was natural. They seemed astonished and contemptuous when I urged that all I wanted was my baby; whether the kidnappers were ever caught or not made no difference to me. They kept arguing that unless precautions were taken the criminals would escape and I kept arguing that if they became suspicious of a trap they would keep away and my only chance to recover our little girl would be gone forever. They finally agreed and I believe they kept their promise to me. Helen always felt the other way and maintained that their watchers frightened off whoever was to meet me. Anyhow I waited in vain, waited for hours, waited again the next day and the next and the next. We put advertisements in countless papers, offering rewards and immunity, but never heard anything more.

I pulled myself together in a sort of a way and tried to do my work. My partner and clerks were very kind. I don't believe I ever did anything properly in those days, but no one ever brought any blunder to my attention. If they came across any they set it right for me. And at the office it was not so bad. Trying to work was good for me. It was worse at home and worse at night. I slept hardly at all. Helen, if possible, slept less than I. And she had terrible spasms of sobs that shook the bed. She would try to choke them down, thinking I was asleep and she might wake me. But she never went through a night without at least one frightful paroxysm of tears.

In the daylight she controlled herself better, made a heart-breaking and yet heart-warming effort at her normal cheeriness over the breakfast things, and greeted me beautifully when I came home. But the moment we were alone for the evening she would break down.

I don't know how many days that sort of thing kept up. I sympathized in silence. It was Helen herself who suggested that we must force ourselves to be diverted, somehow. The theater was out of the question. Not merely the sight of a four-year old girl with yellow locks threw Helen into a passion of uncontrollable sobbing, but all sorts of unexpected trifles reminded her of Amy and affected her almost as much. Confined to our home we tried cards, chess and everything else we could think of. They helped her as little as they helped me.

Then one afternoon Helen did not come to greet me. Instead as I came in I heard her call, quite in her natural voice.

"Oh, I'm so glad that is you. Come and help me."

I found her seated at the library table, her back to the door. She had on a pink wrapper and her shoulders had no despondent droop, but a girlish alertness. She barely turned her head as I entered, but her profile showed no signs of recent weeping. Her face was its natural color.

"Come and help me," she repeated. "I can't find the other piece of the boat."

She was absorbed, positively absorbed in a picture puzzle. In forty seconds I was absorbed too. It must have been six minutes before we identified the last piece of the boat. And then we went on with the sky and were still at it when the butler announced dinner.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, over the soup, which Helen really ate.

"Mrs. Allstone brought it," Helen replied, "just before lunch."

I blessed Mrs. Allstone.

Really it seems absurd, but those idiotic jig-saw puzzles were our salvation. They actually took our minds off everything else. At first I dreaded finishing one. No sooner was the last piece in place than I felt a sudden revulsion, a booming of blood in my ears, and the sense of loss and misery rushed over me like a wave of scalding water. And I knew it was worse for Helen.

But after some days each seemed not merely a respite from pain, but a sedative as well. After a two hours' struggle with a fascinating tangle of shapes and colors, we seemed numb to our bereavement and the bitterness of the smart seemed blunted.

We grew fastidious as to manufacture and finish; learned to avoid crude and clumsy products as bores; developed a pronounced taste for pictures neither too soft nor too plain in color-masses; and

became connoisseurs as to cutting, utterly above the obvious and entirely disenchanted with the painfully difficult. We evolved into adepts, quick to recoil from fragments barren of any clue of shape or markings and equally prompt to reject those whose meaning was too definite and insistent. We trod delicately the middle way among segments not one of which was without some clue of outline or tint, and not one of which imparted its message without interrogation, inference and reflection.

Helen used to time herself and try the same puzzle over and over on successive days until she could do it in less than half an hour. She declared that a really good puzzle was interesting the fourth or fifth time and that an especially fine puzzle was diverting if turned face down and put together from the shapes merely, after it had been well learned the other way. I did not enter into the craze to that extent, but sometimes tried her methods for variety.

We really slept, and Helen, though worn and thin, was not abject, not agonized. Her nights passed, if not wholly without tears, yet with only those soft and silent tears, which are more a relief than suffering. With me she was nearly her old self and very brave and patient. She greeted me naturally and we seemed able to go on living.

Then one day she was not at the door to welcome me. I had hardly shut it before I heard her sobbing. I found her again at the library table and over a puzzle. But this time she had just finished it and was bowed over it on the table, shaken all over by her grief.

She lifted her head from her crossed arms, pointed and buried her face in her hands. I understood. The picture I remembered from a magazine of the year before: a Christmas tree with a bevy of children about it and one (we had remarked it at the time) a perfect likeness of our Amy.

As she rocked back and forth, her hands over her eyes, I swept the pieces into their box and put on the lid.

Presently Helen dried her eyes and looked at the table. "Oh! why did you touch it," she wailed. "It was such a comfort to me."

"You did not seem comforted," I retorted. "I thought the contrast: . . ." I stopped.

"You mean the contrast between the Christmas we expected and the Christmas we are going to have?" she queried. "You mean you thought that was too much for me?"

I nodded.

"It wasn't that at all," she averred. "I was crying for joy. That picture was a sign."

"A sign?" I repeated.

“Yes,” she declared, “a sign that we shall get her back in time for Christmas. I’m going to start and get ready right away.”

At first I was glad of the diversion. Helen had the nursery put in order as if she expected Amy the next day, hauled over all the child’s clothes and was in a bustling state of happy expectancy. She went vigorously about her preparation for a Christmas celebration, planned a Christmas Eve dinner for our brothers and sisters and their husbands and wives, and a children’s party afterwards with a big tree and a profusion of goodies and’ gifts.

“You see,” she explained, “everyone will want their own Christmas at home. So shall we, for we’ll just want to gloat over Amy all day. We won’t want them on Christmas any more than they’ll want us. But this way we can all be together and celebrate and rejoice over our good luck.”

She was as elated and convinced as if it was a certainty. For a while her occupation with preparations was good for her, but she was so forehanded that she was ready a week ahead of time and had not a detail left to arrange. I dreaded a reaction, but her artificial exaltation continued unabated. All the more I feared the inevitable disappointment and was genuinely concerned for her reason. The fixed idea that that accidental coincidence was a prophecy and a guarantee dominated her totally. I was really afraid that the shock of the reality might kill her. I did not want to dissipate her happy delusion, but I could not but try to prepare her for the certain blow. I talked cautiously in wide circles around what I wanted and I did not want to say.

II

On December 22nd, I came home early, just after lunch, in fact. Helen met me, at the door, with such a demeanor of suppressed high spirits, happy secrecy and tingling anticipation that for one moment I was certain Amy had been found and was then in the house.

“I’ve something wonderful to show you,” Helen declared, and led me to the library.

There on the table was a picture-puzzle fitted together. She stood and pointed to it with the air of exhibiting a marvel.

I looked at it but could not conjecture the cause of her excitement. The pieces seemed too large, too clumsy and too uniform in outline. It looked a crude and clumsy puzzle, beneath her notice.

“Why did you buy it?” I asked.

“I met a peddler on the street,” she answered, “and he was so wretched-looking, I was sorry for him. He was young and thin and looked haggard and consumptive. I looked at him and I suppose I showed my feelings. He said:

“Lady, buy a puzzle. It will help you to your heart’s desire.”

“His words were so odd I bought it, and now just look at what it is.”

I was groping for some foothold upon which to rally my thoughts.

“Let me see the box in which it came,” I asked.

She produced it and I read on the top:

GUGGENHEIM'S DOUBLE PICTURE PUZZLE.
TWO IN ONE.
MOST FOR THE MONEY.
ASK FOR GUGGENHEIM'S

And on the end—

“ASTRAY.
A BREATH OF AIR.
50 CENTS.”

“It's queer,” Helen remarked. “But it is not a double puzzle at all, though the pieces have the same paper on both sides. One side is blank. I suppose this is ASTRAY. Don't you think so?”

“Astray?” I queried, puzzled.

“Oh,” she cried, in a disappointed, disheartened, almost querulous tone. “I thought you would be so much struck with the resemblance. You don't seem to notice it at all. Why even the dress is identical!”

“The dress?” I repeated. “How many times have you done this?”

“Only this once,” she said. “I had just finished it when I heard your key in the lock.”

“I should have thought,” I commented, “that it would have been more interesting to do it face up first.”

“Face up!” She cried. “It is face up.”

Her air of scornful superiority completely shook me out of my sedulous consideration of a moment before.

“Nonsense,” I said, “that's the back of the puzzle. There are no colors there. It's all pink.”

“Pink!” she exclaimed pointing. “Do you call that pink!”

“Certainly it's pink,” I asserted.

“Don’t you see there the white of the old man’s beard,” she queried, pointing again. “And there the black of his boots? And there the red of the little girl’s dress?”

“No,” I declared. “I don’t see anything of the kind. It’s all pink. There isn’t any picture there at all.”

“No picture!” she cried. “Don’t you see the old man leading the child by the hand?”

“No,” I said harshly, “I don’t see any picture and you know I don’t. There isn’t any picture there. I can’t make out what you are driving at. It seems a senseless joke.”

“Joke! I joke!” Helen half whispered. The tears came into her eyes.

“You are cruel,” she said, “and I thought you would be struck by the resemblance.”

I was overwhelmed by a pang of self-reproach, solicitude and terror.

“Resemblance to what?” I asked gently.

“Can’t you see it?” she insisted.

“Tell me,” I pleaded. “Show me just what you want me to notice most.”

“The child,” she said pointing, “is just exactly Amy and the dress is the very red suit she had on when—”

“Dear,” I said, “try to collect yourself. Indeed you only imagine what you tell me. There is no picture on this side of the sections. The whole thing is pink. That is the back of the puzzle.”

“I don’t see how you can say such a thing,” she raged at me. “I can’t make out why you should. What sort of a test are you putting me through? What does it all mean?”

“Will you let me prove to you that this is the back of the puzzle?” I asked.

“If you can,” she said shortly.

I turned the pieces of the puzzle over, keeping them together as much as possible. I succeeded pretty well with the outer pieces and soon had the rectangle in place. The inner pieces were a good deal mixed up, but even before I had fitted them I exclaimed:

“There look at that!”

“Well,” she asked. “What do you expect me to see?”

“What do you see?” I asked in turn.

“I see the back of a puzzle,” she answered.

“Don’t you see those front steps?” I demanded, pointing.

“I don’t see anything,” she asserted, “except green.”

“Do you call that green?” I queried pointing.

“I do,” she declared.

“Don’t you see the brickwork front of the house ?” I insisted, “and the lower part of a window and part of a door. Yes and those front-steps in the corner?”

“I don’t see anything of the kind,” she asseverated. “Any more than you do. What I see is just what you see. It’s the back of the puzzle, all pale green.”

I had been feverishly putting together the last pieces as she spoke. I could not believe my eyes and, as the last piece fitted in, was struck with amazement.

The picture showed an old red-brick house, with brown blinds, all open. The top of the front steps was included in the lower right hand corner, most of the front door above them, all of one window on its level, and the side of another. Above appeared all of one of the second floor windows, and parts of those to right and left of it. The other windows were closed, but the sash of the middle one was raised and from it leaned a little girl, a child with frowzy hair, a dirty face and wearing a blue and white check frock. The child was a perfect likeness of our lost Amy, supposing she had been starved and neglected. I was so affected that I was afraid I should faint. I was positively husky when I asked

“Don’t you see that?”

“I see Nile green,” she maintained. “The same as you see.”

I swept the pieces into the box.

“We are neither of us well,” I said.

“I should think you must be deranged to behave so,” she snapped, “and it is no wonder I am not well the way you treat me.”

“How could I know what you wanted me to see?” I began.

“Wanted you to see!” she cried. “You keep it up? You pretend you didn’t see it, after all? Oh! I have no patience with you.”

She burst into tears, fled upstairs and I heard her slam and lock our bedroom door.

I put that puzzle together again and the likeness of that hungry, filthy child in the picture to our Amy made my heart ache.

I found a stout box, cut two pieces of straw-board just the shape of the puzzle and a trifle larger, laid one on top of it and slid the other under it. Then I tied it together with string and wrapped it in paper and tied the whole.

I put the box in my overcoat pocket and went out carrying the flat parcel.

I walked round to MacIntyre’s.

I told him the whole story and showed him the puzzle.

“Do you want the truth?” he asked.

“Just that,” I said.

“Well,” he reported. “You are as overstrung as she is and the same way. There is absolutely no picture on either side of this. One side is solid green and the other solid pink.”

“How about the coincidence of the names on the box?” I interjected. “One suited what I saw, one what she said she saw.”

“Let’s look at the box,” he suggested.

He looked at it on all sides.

“There’s not a letter on it,” he announced. “Except ‘picture puzzle’ on top and ‘50 cents’ on the end.”

“I don’t feel insane,” I declared.

“You aren’t,” he reassured me. “Nor in any danger of being insane. Let me look you over.”

He felt my pulse, looked at my tongue, examined both eyes with his ophthalmoscope, and took a drop of my blood.

“I’ll report further,” he said, “in confirmation tomorrow. You’re all right, or nearly so, and you’ll soon be really all right. All you need is a little rest. Don’t worry about this idea of your wife’s, humor her. There

won't be any terrible consequences. After Christmas go to Florida or somewhere for a week or so. And don't exert yourself from now till after that change."

When I reached home, I went down into the cellar, threw that puzzle and its box into the furnace and stood and watched it burn to ashes.

III

When I came upstairs from the furnace Helen met me as if nothing had happened. By one of her sudden revulsions of mood she was even more gracious than usual, and was at dinner altogether charming. She did not refer to our quarrel or to the puzzle.

The next morning over our breakfast we were both opening our mail. I had told her that I should not go to the office until after Christmas and that I wanted her to arrange for a little tour that would please her. I had phoned to the office not to expect me until after New Year's.

My mail contained nothing of moment.

Helen looked up from her's with an expression curiously mingled of disappointment, concern and a pleased smile.

"It is so fortunate you have nothing to do," she said. "I spent four whole days choosing toys and favors and found most of those I selected at Bleich's. They were to have been delivered day before yesterday but they did not come. I telephoned yesterday and they said they would try to trace them. Here is a letter saying that the whole lot was missent out to Roundwood. You noticed that Roundwood station burned Monday night. They were all burnt up. Now I'll have to go and find more like them. You can go with me."

I went.

The two days were a strange mixture of sensations and emotions.

Helen had picked over Bleich's stock pretty carefully and could duplicate from it few of the burned articles, could find acceptable substitutes for fewer. There followed an exhausting pursuit of the unattainable through a bewildering series of toy-shops and department-stores. We spent most of our time at counters and much of the remainder in a taxicab.

In a way it was very trying. I did not mind the smells and bad air and other mere physical discomforts. But the mental strain continually intensified. Helen's confidence that Amy would be re stored to us was steadily waning and her outward exhibition of it was becoming more and more artificial, and consciously sustained, and more and more of an effort. She was coming to foresee, in spite of herself, that our Christmas celebration would be a most terrible mockery of our bereavement. She

was forcing herself not to confess it to herself and not to show it to me. The strain told on her. It told on me to watch it, to see the inevitable crash coming nearer and nearer and to try to put away from myself the pictures of her collapse, of her probable loss of reason, of her possible death, which my imagination kept thrusting before me.

On the other hand Helen was to all appearance, if one had no prevision by which to read her, her most charming self. Her manner to shop-girls and other sales-people was a delight to watch. Her little speeches to me were full of her girlish whimsicality and unexpectedness. Her good will towards all the world, her resolution that everything must come right and would come right haloed her in a sort of aureole of romance. Our lunches were ideal hours, full of the atmosphere of courtship, of lovemaking, of exquisite companionship. In spite of my forebodings, I caught the contagion of the Christmas shopping crowds; in spite of her self-deception Helen reveled in it. The purpose to make as many people as possible as happy as might be irradiated Helen with the light of fairyland; her resolve to be happy herself in spite of everything made her a sort of fairy queen. I found myself less and less anxious and more and more almost expectant. I knew Helen was looking for Amy every instant. I found myself in the same state of mind.

Our lunch on Christmas Eve was a strange blend of artificiality and genuine exhilaration. After it we had but one purchase to make.

“We are in no hurry,” Helen said. “Let’s take a horse-hansom for old sake’s sake.”

In it we were like boy and girl together until the jeweler’s was reached.

There gloom, in spite of us, settled down over our hopes and feelings. Helen walked to the hansom like a gray ghost. Like the whisper of some far-off stranger I, heard myself order the driver to take us home.

In the hansom we sat silent, looking straight in front of us at nothing. I stole a glance at Helen and saw a tear in the corner of her eye. I sat choking.

All at once she seized my hand.

“Look!” she exclaimed, “Look!”

I looked where she pointed, but discerned nothing to account for her excitement.

“What is it?” I queried.

“The old man!” she exclaimed.

“What old man?” I asked bewildered.

“The old man on the puzzle,” she told me. “The old man who was leading Amy.”

Then I was sure she was demented. To humor her I asked:

“The Old man with the brown coat?”

“Yes,” she said eagerly. “The Old man with the long gray hair over his collar.”

“With the walking stick?” I inquired.

“Yes,” she answered. “With the crooked walking stick.”

I saw him too! This was no figment of Helen’s imagination.

It was absurd of course, but my eagerness caught fire from hers. I credited the absurdity. In what sort of vision it mattered not she had seen an old man like this leading our lost Amy.

I spoke to the driver, pointed out to him the old man, told him to follow him without attracting his attention and offered him anything he asked to keep him in sight.

Helen became possessed with the idea that we should lose sight of the old man in the crowds. Nothing would do but we must get out and follow him on foot. I remonstrated that we were much more likely to lose sight of him that way, and still more likely to attract his notice, which would be worse than losing him. She insisted and I told the man to keep us in view.

A weary walk we had, though most of it was mere strolling after a tottering figure or loitering about shops he entered.

It was near dusk and full time for us to be at home when he began to walk fast. So fast he drew away from us in spite of us. He turned a corner a half a square ahead of us. When we turned into that street he was nowhere to be seen.

Helen was ready to faint with disappointment. With no hope of helping her, but some instinctive idea of postponing the evil moment I urged her to walk on, saying that perhaps we might see him. About the middle of the square I suddenly stood still.

“What is the matter?” Helen asked.

“The house!” I said.

“What house?” she queried.

“The house in the puzzle picture,” I explained. “The house where I saw Amy at the window.”

Of course she had not seen any house on the puzzle, but she caught at the last straw of hope.

It was a poor neighborhood of crowded tenements, not quite a slum, yet dirty and unkempt and full of poor folks.

The house door was shut, I could find no sign of any bell. I knocked. No one answered. I tried the door. It was not fastened and we entered a dirty hallway, cold and damp and smelling repulsively. A fat woman stuck her head out of a door and jabbered at us in an unknown tongue. A man with a fez came from the back of the hallway and was equally unintelligible.

“Does nobody here speak English?” I asked.

The answer was as incomprehensible as before.

I made to go up the stairs.

The man, and the woman, who was now standing before her door, both chattered at once, but neither made any attempt to stop me. They waved vaguely explanatory, deprecating hands towards the blackness of the stairway. We went up.

On the second floor landing we saw just the old man we had been following.

He stared at us when I spoke to him.

“Son-in-law,” he said, “son-in-law.”

He called and a door opened. An oldish woman answered him in apparently the same jargon. Behind was a young woman holding a baby.

“What is it?” she asked with a great deal of accent but intelligibly.

Three or four children held on by her skirts.

Behind her I saw a little girl in a blue-check dress.

Helen screamed.

IV

The people turned out to be refugees from the settlement about the sacked German Mission at Dekhargan near Tabriz, Christianized Persians, such ignorant villagers that they had never thought or had been incapable of reporting their find to the police, so ignorant that they knew nothing of

rewards or advertisements, such simple-hearted folk that they had shared their narrow quarters and scanty fare with the unknown waif their grandfather had found wandering alone, after dark, months before.

Amy, when we had leisure to ask questions and hear her experiences, declared they had treated her as they treated their own children. She could give no description of her kidnappers except that the woman had on a hat with roses in it and the man had a little yellow mustache. She could not tell how long they had kept her nor why they had left her to wander in the streets at night.

It needed no common language, far less any legal proof, to convince Amy's hosts that she belonged to us. I had a pocket full of Christmas money, new five and ten dollar gold pieces and bright silver quarters for the servants and children. I filled the old grandfather's hands and plainly overwhelmed him. They all jabbered at us, blessings, if I judged the tone right. I tried to tell the young woman we should see them again in a day or two and I gave her a card to make sure.

I told the cabman to stop the first taxicab he should see empty. In the hansom we hugged Amy alternately and hugged each other.

Once in the taxicab we were home in half an hour; more, much more than half an hour late. Helen whisked Amy in by the servants' door and flew upstairs with her by the back way. I faced a perturbed and anxious parlorful of interrogative relatives and in-laws.

"You'll know before many minutes," I said, "why we were both out and are in late. Helen will want to surprise you and I'll say nothing to spoil the effect."

Nothing I could have said would have spoiled the effect because they would not have believed me. As it was Helen came in sooner than I could have thought possible, looking her best and accurately playing the formal hostess with a feeble attempt at a surprise in store.

The dinner was a great success, with much laughter and high spirits, everybody carried away by Helen's sallies and everybody amazed that she could be so gay.

"I cannot understand," Paul's wife whispered to me, "how she can ever get through the party. It would kill me in her place."

"It won't kill her," I said confidently. "You may be sure of that."

The children had arrived to the number of more than thirty and only the inevitably late Amstelhuysens had not come. Helen announced that she would not wait for them.

"The tree is lighted," she said. "We'll have the doors thrown open and go in."



We were all gathered in the front parlor. The twins panted in at the last instant. The grown-ups were pulling motto-crackers and the children were throwing confetti. The doors opened, the tree filled all the back of the room. The candles blazed and twinkled. And in front of it, in a simple little white dress, with a fairy's wand in her hand, tipped with a silver star, clean, healthy-looking and full of spirits was Amy, the fairy of the hour.

The End.

Thank you for listening. Please join us again next week, for another Thrilling Tale.

